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Specialists, Coaches, Coordinators, Oh My!
Looking Back and Looking Forward on the
Roles and Responsibilities of Specialized Literacy Professionals

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The Critical and Complex Work of Specialized Literacy Professionals

When we think about adult professional work in schools, the role of the classroom teacher looms large. From the one-room schoolhouses of the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States, to modern comprehensive high schools filled with thousands of students, *teachers* have been the single constant across a wide variety of school structures. Research has made clear that teacher quality is one of the most significant factors in determining student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Recently the RAND Corporation (2018) made the statement that “Teachers matter more to student achievement than any other aspect of schooling” (para. 2). This notion certainly maps onto the lived experiences of those who have spent their careers working in PreK-12 education—teachers are the heart of all schools.

Notwithstanding the truly important roles that teachers play, we have witnessed the proliferation of a variety of other critical professional roles in schools over the past hundred years generally, and the past 30 years specifically. Teaching students to read, understand, and write complex text within and across disciplines is one of the most important purposes of school. Given this fundamental purpose—creating a literate citizenry—then there are arguably several other crucial adult professional roles that must be considered when looking across the educational landscape.

Reading/literacy specialists, literacy coaches, and literacy coordinators are three interconnected (yet distinct) roles that have emerged slowly across the 20th and 21st centuries in the United States. While these roles may not feature prominently in the public’s consciousness about schooling, they are essential to the everyday work and success of many teachers and students. However, the field of education has been slow to define and evaluate these relatively new and supportive roles in schools.

A quick search using Google Scholar (see Figure 1) shows a rough estimate of articles and books that focus at least in part on the work of reading and literacy specialists, literacy coaches, and literacy coordinators published between 1990 and 2018. Note that much of this writing has focused on *defining roles*, describing and understanding the work of these adult professionals in schools.

Search Term	Found in Text	Found in Title
Reading Specialist	14,800 texts	111 texts
Literacy Specialist	3040 texts	18 texts
Literacy Coach	5,850 texts	100 texts
Literacy Coordinator	2,420 texts	4 texts

Figure 1. Google Scholar results for specialized literacy professional search terms

While some quantitative work has emerged evaluating the impact of roles such as coaching on student literacy achievement (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010), there is still a great deal more work to be done in order to clarify the causal chain of events from the work of specialists, coaches, and coordinators to improved teaching practices and ultimately to improved student literacy outcomes. While there is growing evidence to suggest that these roles all positively influence teachers and students, a lack of a robust causal research base has given policymakers at state and district levels room to slash funds for these roles when budgets become tight.

And so, as we approach the end of the second decade of the 21st century, we find ourselves at a unique and interesting time to *look backward* and *forward* at the roles of literacy specialists, coaches, and coordinators. We find ourselves at a time when the International Literacy Association (ILA), arguably the organization best-positioned to define and guide these

roles in the field, has issued a revised document providing the clearest role definitions to date. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Specialized Literacy Professionals 2017* (2018) defines each of the three aforementioned roles, how they overlap, and how they differ from one another. Moreover, ILA offers a relatively new, overarching term—*specialized literacy professionals*—to describe the work of all professionals in schools who specifically support literacy instructional work. This document has widespread implications for how to prepare, support, and evaluate the work of specialized literacy professionals.

Therefore, in this paper, for the 50th anniversary of the Massachusetts Reading Association, we have endeavored to *look backward* and *look forward* at the evolving roles of specialized literacy professionals (SLPs). First, we *look backward* by reviewing some of the history of these roles in the United States over the 20th and 21st centuries. Next, we *look forward* by explaining how the new ILA 2017 Standards define and support the preparation and work of SLPs today, as we near the end of the second decade of the 21st century. Finally, we contextualize current and future SLP work by sharing some of our own recent research on the roles and responsibilities of SLPs in K-12 schools across the state of Pennsylvania. This small research window reinforces earlier findings about SLPs and suggests a few perennial lessons.

Looking Back: Change as Constant

Over time, there have been several shifts in the role of reading specialist. In this section, we discuss these four major shifts and how they affected the roles and responsibilities of reading specialists.

The Remedial Reading Role

One of the first articles about the role of reading specialists was written in 1940 by E. W. Dolch who called for employing *remedial reading specialists* to work with students who were experiencing difficulties with reading. These professionals were to be responsible for identifying the causes of reading problems and then plan instruction to provide for the unique needs of their students. As Dolch stated, all schools would benefit from the presence of remedial reading specialists, and he encouraged teachers interested in helping struggling students learn to read to gain the knowledge necessary for this role. Sound familiar? Although some of the language in the article is dated (e.g., “handicapped students”), the notions expressed by Dolch were prescient as they described to a great extent the role of reading specialists in schools for the next 30 years or so, and especially after the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965). This remedial role was implemented in multiple ways, but generally specialists taught in either pull-out or in-class contexts.

The pull-out version. Given the overwhelming concern about the numbers of students of poverty who were not learning to read, Congress passed the ESEA Act, which funded a large-scale, federally funded program to provide *supplemental* support to students identified as economically deprived. What made sense at the time was that funds would be restricted—only eligible students would receive this instruction. Moreover, the instruction would be offered by teachers who were prepared to work with this population of students and would be supplemental to the instruction students received in their classrooms. This prompted an overwhelming need for certified reading specialists who could provide this type of instruction. These teachers were often called Title I teachers or reading specialists, and they provided what was called *remedial reading instruction*, generally in pullout settings. Such settings ensured that the materials and approaches used by these specialists were restricted only to those students who left their classrooms for

specialized services. Generally, materials and instructional approaches were not shared with classroom teachers.

Since 1965, billions of dollars have been spent in implementing this large-scale program. However, the results of large-scale evaluation studies over time indicated only modest impact on student achievement overall (Borman, & D'Agostino, 2001; Kennedy, Birman, & Demaline, 1986). Title I, in the early years, served as a funding stream with much variability in local programming, and little emphasis on its services as an integral component of whole-school improvement. Researchers speculated that there were various causes for the lack of impact. In this paper, we focus on those factors related to the ways in which reading specialists functioned.

First, given the highly restricted nature of the pull-out instruction, and the general lack of communication with classroom teachers, the instruction provided in the pull-out settings was not necessarily congruent with what students were receiving in their classroom settings (Allington, 1986; Allington & Shake, 1986; Walp & Walmsley, 1989). Title I teachers often lacked knowledge about the instruction students were receiving in their classrooms, and they did not share their own instruction either. Generally speaking, the students identified for Title I instruction were least likely to handle this type of fragmented instruction. Furthermore, some classroom teachers assumed they had no responsibility for teaching these students to read, even though the instruction provided by the specialists was identified as supplemental.

Another concern was voiced by classroom teachers who had difficulty dealing with the disruption of the pullout programs. Their concerns are illustrated in this excerpt from an article published in a teachers' organization newsletter: "They slip in and out with such frequency that I rarely have my whole class together for any length of time on any given day . . . I teach in bits and pieces to parts of the whole" (Anonymous, 1986).

The push-in version. Changes were made in ESEA legislation in 1988, calling for additional communication among reading specialists, classroom teachers, and special educators, with greater emphasis on instruction occurring in the classrooms of students receiving Title I services. Moreover, reading specialists were encouraged to share their materials and approaches with classroom teachers. Although this change seemed to be a positive one, it too created problems for both reading specialists and classroom teachers. Neither group was prepared for this change, and many reading specialists were confused about how they should function in another professional's classroom. Some found themselves serving as aides.

During this time, schools with large numbers of eligible Title I students were permitted to apply to be *school-wide programs*, that is, rather than targeting specific students only, all students in such a school were eligible to receive the services of reading specialists, enabling the classroom teachers and reading specialists to work together to improve instruction for all students.

A Dual Role

Given this emphasis on an *in-class* model of instruction, reading specialists found that a key aspect of their position was being able to work effectively with adults, a new and necessary set of skills. In 1981, Bean and Wilson, in their book, *Effecting Change in School Reading Programs: The Resource Role*, emphasized the importance of specialists having the leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills that would enable them to work effectively with their colleagues. Universities preparing reading specialists began to incorporate experiences in their programs that addressed these leadership skills. In 1998, Snow, Burns, and Griffin, in their landmark text, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, strengthened this emphasis on

the dual role of reading specialists; that is, specialists should both provide direct instruction to students and also support teacher learning to ensure quality classroom instruction.

Given these changes in the role, and ongoing concern about what and how reading specialists were functioning in schools, in the late 1990s, the International Reading Association (now the International Literacy Association) appointed a commission to investigate the ways in which reading specialists across the country functioned in schools. The research of that commission resulted in the following findings: (a) reading specialists have multiple responsibilities; (b) most reading specialists worked collaboratively with teachers, serving as a resource to them, and (c) according to principals, reading specialists were viewed as having an important role in schools (Quatroche, Bean, & Hamilton, 2001; Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, & Wallis, 2002; Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003). These papers supported the IRA Position Statement on the Role of the Reading Specialist (IRA, 2000), which identified three important aspects of the role: Diagnosis and Assessment, Instruction, and Leadership.

The Interventionist Role

In 2004, Response to Intervention (RtI), an initiative which emerged from the reauthorization of IDEA (IDEA, 2004) created implications for the design of reading instruction in schools. The goal of RtI was to reduce the number of students identified for special education by providing early identification of needs and immediate intervention. Such instruction called for a multilevel model for differentiation (i.e., a tiered framework) and identified the key role of interventionists to provide additional and specialized instruction, beyond what students received from their classroom teachers. And many reading specialists again found themselves spending extensive amounts of time providing direct instruction to students. At the same time, given the

call for a coordinated approach to instruction, and the presence of a leadership team composed of many different professionals (e.g., reading specialists, coaches, teachers, principals, special educators) there was much evidence of collaboration and shared leadership (Bean & Lilienstein, 2012). Reading specialists were often involved in more informal coaching, providing resources and support to teachers, while coaches had a more formal role, not only coaching, but often working closely with principals to lead efforts to develop, implement, and evaluate a coordinated literacy program.

The Coaching Role

Although many reading specialists during the 1980s through the 1990s were responsible for working collaboratively with teachers, often serving as a resource to them, it was the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA, P.L. 17-110) and its programmatic arm, Reading First, that highlighted the need for ongoing, job-embedded, professional learning for teachers. Professionals, known as reading coaches, were hired by schools receiving Reading First funds; and given that there were few programs preparing these professionals, reading specialists were often assigned to function in this new and different role. Again, given the newness of this role, schools found themselves struggling to define exactly what these professionals should be doing, and thus, there was great variation in how these coaches functioned in schools. In 2006, an IRA survey of over 1,000 literacy coaches found that these coaches spent only 2-4 hours per week observing, modeling, and talking with teachers (Roller, 2006). Deussen, Coskie, Robinson, & Autio, 2007) found great variation in how coaches in Reading First schools allocated their time. On average, coaches spent only 28% of their time working with teachers, although they had been asked to spend 60-80% of their time in classroom-related activities. Bean, Draper, Hall,

Vandermolen, and Zigmond (2010) in their interviews with 20 Reading First coaches also found great variability in how coaches allocated their time and, furthermore, a significantly greater percentage of students scoring at proficiency in schools where coaches spent more time working with teachers. Obviously, there was a need for additional preparation and ongoing professional learning to assist coaches in succeeding in their roles. This was true across all K-12 grade levels given an increased emphasis on coaching in secondary schools. This emphasis occurred in part because of the Common Core State Standards (NGA/CCSSO, 2010), and its focus on literacy in all of the disciplines. Many secondary schools employed coaches to support teachers as they grappled with the rigorous expectations of these standards in their respective disciplines.

Since 2000, there has been much research about questions related to the role of the reading specialist and the literacy coach: Are they distinct? What are the overlaps? How should they be prepared? What impact do they have on classroom practices and student learning? In 2014, Galloway and Lesaux, in their synthesis of the roles of the reading specialist, again highlighted the fact that these professionals had multiple roles that required them to assume a leadership position in the school. At the same time, a second national study (Bean et al., 2015) was conducted to investigate the differences between these various roles. The results of this 2015 study revealed that there were distinct role groups which included those who worked primarily with students (interventionists and reading specialists), with teachers (coaches), and those who led or developed literacy programs (coordinators/supervisors). This research led to a new position statement by the renamed International Literacy Association (ILA) about the distinctions between and among three specific roles: the reading/literacy specialist, the literacy coach, and the literacy coordinator/supervisor (ILA, 2015a). The term, “specialized literacy professionals” was coined and served as an umbrella term to describe the roles. This position

statement and its accompanying research brief (ILA, 2015b) were used to guide the development of the *ILA Standards 2017* (ILA, 2018).

Looking Forward: The Work is More Complex and Important Than Ever Before

New Names and New Standards: The ILA 2017 Standards

Now that we've taken a *look back*, let's begin to *look forward* by briefly examining the new ILA 2017 Standards. The names, or titles, of *reading/literacy specialist*, *literacy coach*, and *literacy coordinator* are often used interchangeably in schools and districts, yet the job descriptions and preparation for each role require markedly different and often overlapping responsibilities. *Standards 2017* writers examined the research on the present-day SLP roles, including the findings described in *The Multiple Roles of School-Based Specialized Literacy Professionals* Research Brief (ILA, 2015b) and related Position Statement (ILA, 2015a). *Standards 2017* has "sharpened the terminology" as recommended by Galloway and Lesaux (2014, p. 524), by describing each role and setting distinct standards for the preparation of reading/literacy specialists, literacy coaches, and literacy coordinators. The reading/literacy specialist standards focus on an instructional role, while maintaining an emphasis on the need for collaborative work with colleagues and administrators. Literacy coach standards place primary emphasis on working with teachers in schools. Finally, literacy coordinator standards emphasize districtwide leadership of literacy programs (Bean & Kern, 2018).

Outlining the Five Key Shifts in the ILA 2017 Standards

Current specialized literacy professionals, those preparing to enter the PK-12 education profession in one of these roles, and literacy teacher educators will be interested to know the five key shifts in *Standards 2017*. First, *Standards 2017* comprise all aspects of literacy—reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing—rather than the reading-only focus in *Standards 2010* (IRA, 2010). Preparing to teach literacy requires a depth and breadth of knowledge on literacy foundations, skills and strategies. Second, specialized literacy professionals today must not only understand and be able to teach colleagues about a range of systematic and explicit interventions based on individual student needs, but they also must know how to critically examine and implement literacy curricula and instructional methods, including literacy practices across the disciplines. The third key shift involves the ever-increasing importance of assessment and evaluation in schools and districts today. Specialized literacy professionals must be adept at selecting, administering, analyzing, and sharing literacy assessment data to inform instruction. Advocating for diverse learners and equitable education policies and practices is the fourth key shift in *Standards 2017*. Specialized literacy professionals are in a key role to influence access to excellent and equitable literacy education to meet the diverse needs of children and youth today. The fifth key shift—digital literacy—requires SLPs to develop their own professional digital literacy knowledge, skills, and strategies and those of their students and colleagues. Providing student access to quality digital and traditional texts, teaching safe and ethical use of online materials, and knowing how to establish a socially, emotionally and physically safe classroom environment in school and virtually are all necessary for 21st century SLPs. Ultimately, based on decades of research, the *Standards 2017* represent perhaps the clearest demarcation to date of the various roles and responsibilities of SLPs in the field, including recommendations for how best to prepare and support such professionals.

Illustrating the Present and Future of SLP Work with Recent Survey and Interview Data

In order to *look ahead* even further and gain an accurate and comprehensive understanding of how SLPs function in schools today, we have spent the last two years engaged in a multiphase research study. The three-phase study included: 1) a survey of K-12 schools' principals to investigate their perceptions of the SLPs' work in the schools (Bean, Swan Dagen, Ippolito & Kern, 2018); 2) a survey of SLPs identified by the principals to determine how they themselves viewed their roles; and 3) interviews with a subset of surveyed SLPs to gain in-depth information about their roles and challenges. The participating schools, located in Pennsylvania, received five years of federal funding to improve literacy outcomes through a statewide Striving Readers Grant. As part of each school's comprehensive plan, funds were available to hire literacy coaches or other specialized literacy professionals.

Recognizing how busy principals are, in Phase 1, we designed a 32-item survey which took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The results of this short survey elicited a variety of data about the school's literacy program and key personnel. We analyzed the results from 103 K-12 schools, representing 68 primary/elementary schools and 35 middle/high schools. Given the longstanding lack of SLPs at the middle and high school, we were particularly pleased to have so many principals in that grade band represented. Overall, we learned that proportionally, the primary/elementary schools employed more reading specialists while the middle/high schools employed more literacy coaches. Because of grant funding, both primary/elementary and middle/high school principals reported having more than one type of specialized literacy professional on staff—meaning for some, they had both a reading specialist and literacy coach.

In this survey, we asked principals about their perception of how frequently (often, sometimes, rarely, never) the school’s reading/literacy specialists and literacy coaches engaged in nine specific activities critical to the position (e.g., assessing students, working with the principal, providing professional learning for groups of teachers, supporting teachers in the academic disciplines). Across the 103 schools, there were statistically significant differences between three activities. Reading specialists engaged with instruction more frequently than literacy coaches, and literacy coaches engaged more often with co-planning/co-teaching and helping teachers understand data.

We also asked the principals to identify the three SLP activities they considered to be most important for supporting the literacy programs in their schools (see Table 1). The principals responded that *assessing students* (59%) and *instructing students* (88%) were important activities for reading/literacy specialists, and that *coaching teachers* (77%) and *providing professional learning opportunities for groups of teachers* (60%) were most important for literacy coaches. Across both SLP types, there was one activity principals reported as most important for both roles: *helping teachers use and understand data*. Sixty-two percent of principals identified this activity as important for reading/literacy specialists, and 57% reported this as an important activity for literacy coaches. We consider this to be a prime example of productive overlap between roles, as we view this activity as a clear-cut leadership responsibility.

Phase 1	Activity	%
Reading/literacy specialists	Instructing students	88
	Helping teachers use and understand data	62
	Assessing student	59
Literacy coaches	Coaching teachers	77
	Providing professional learning opportunities for groups of teachers	60
	Helping teachers use and understand data	57

Table 1. Activities identified as “most important” by 103 school principals for each SLP type

Notably, the principals reported that reading/literacy specialists and literacy coaches were engaged in very similar activities regardless of whether they were in primary/elementary or middle/secondary schools. Finally, the principals reported that their SLPs did have an influence on each school’s literacy program, raising student achievement, improving instructional practice, and creating a culture of collaboration and improvement.

While we appreciated what we learned from principals, we felt it important to hear directly from the SLPs. Anticipating this, we asked principals to provide the name and contact information for one SLP in each school who we could contact directly. Recognizing the SLPs were just as busy as principals, we created a short 25-item survey (about 10 minutes to complete) based on findings from the principal survey. A survey link was sent to 48 SLPs, and 30 completed the survey for a 63% return rate. At the time we surveyed this group (spring 2018), the Striving Readers funding cycle had ended.

The SLPs completing this survey provided us with more detailed information on their educational backgrounds, roles, and responsibilities. The SLPs identified with a variety of role types including teacher (n=4), reading/literacy specialist (n=7), literacy coach (n=7), literacy coordinator (n=2), administrator (n=1), and some combination of multiple SLP roles (n=9). Their years’ experience in their current position ranged: one year (n=5), 2-5 years (n=13), 6-10 years (n=6), and greater than 10 years (n=6). When reporting on highest level of education, 25 of 30 SLPs indicated having earned a Master’s degree and one SLP with a doctorate. The SLPs in this population have also earned advanced certification with 20 of 30 certificated reading specialists and three with literacy coaching certification. The SLPS also reported additional ancillary

certifications: English Learner certification, dyslexia certification, and principal credentials.

When asked about a formal job description, 21 of 30 SLPs indicated their school provided them with a formal job description. In addition to the expected responsibilities of the SLP role, some indicated being assigned to responsibilities not typical of their position type (e.g., gifted education, library/media). All 30 SLPs reported having classroom teaching experience, a qualification that ILA has advocated for those fulfilling reading specialists/literacy coaching positions (ILA, 2018; Frost & Bean, 2006).

The SLPs who worked directly with students, mainly reading/literacy specialists and some literacy coaches, did so through pull-out instruction (n=8), in-class instruction (n=3) and a combination of both (n=4). The SLPs who reported working often with teachers, mainly literacy coaches and some reading/literacy specialists and coordinators, did so through multiple pathways including co-planning with individuals (n=13), co-teaching with individuals (n=13), engaging in observations and debriefing with individuals (n=12), and working with teams of teachers (n=14). Eight SLPs indicated they worked equally with individual teachers and groups of teachers. In sum, these SLPs are educated, experienced, and engaged in a variety of responsibilities, with both teachers and students.

In this second phase, one objective was to corroborate the Phase 1 (principal) findings regarding frequency of engagement in key activities. While creating the new survey, the findings from Phase 1 guided our revisions, and the nine activities were expanded to 19 activities organized thematically as follows: work with students, work with teachers and work with schools/systems. These thematic headings were not visible to the SLPs. When we presented this list of 19 items, we asked SLPs to indicate frequency using four descriptors: often, sometimes, rarely, or never. Results from the SLPs corroborated principals' original perceptions of the

specialists’ work. The table below summarizes the percentages of the 30 SLPs (specialists, coaches, and coordinators combined) who reported engaging in activities either “often” or “sometimes.” This table displays the six (out of 19 possible) activities that the principals originally identified as most important in Phase 1. As evident, the SLPs are engaged frequently in the activities deemed most important by the principal.

Phase 2	Often/Sometimes	% of SLPs
	Helping teachers use and understand data	100%
	Assessing students	86%
	Coaching teachers (groups)	85%
	Providing professional learning opportunities for groups of teachers	85%
	Coaching teachers (individuals)	81%
	Instructing students	76%

Table 2. Activities reported often/sometimes by SLPs

Principals identified specific areas for each SLP role with only *helping teachers use and understand data* as a commonality of both reading/literacy specialists and literacy coaches. Every SLP in this second phase indicated that data analysis is something they do as part their work. A high percentage of the SLPs also indicated they assessed students, coached peers, and engaged in professional learning with teachers. This suggests that many SLPs are embracing the activities deemed most important by their principal, regardless of position and title.

When prompted to elaborate on the nuances of their position, the SLPs’ descriptions supported their frequency reporting and included instances of working both with students and teachers, and serving as an advocate for their school’s students. Below are two representative statements:

I oversee student reading support in Grades K-3, provide small group support (push in & pull out models) daily with research-based intensive intervention programs. I conduct progress monitoring assessments weekly, universal screeners, and benchmark assessments. I coordinate small groups for pull-out and push-in aide support and provide them with instructional materials. I also monitor their students' progress. I conduct professional development sessions and collaborate with K-3 Grade Level teachers. I am also a member of the MTSS Team and the SAP Team. I also run the Snack Pack Program to assure students don't go hungry on the weekends. I run the Targeted Title I Program in our school to assure we meet all the federal guidelines for the funding. ~Reading/literacy specialist

I work to improve literacy and learning for all students and support professional growth for all educators. I am involved in various efforts such as curriculum development and implementation; data collection, reporting, and analysis; one-on-one coaching with classroom teachers to improve student learning; small group professional development; reading incentive programs; developing and maintaining family and community partnerships. ~Literacy coach

Recognizing the limitations of survey research, we wanted to learn more about the daily work of the SLPs, their influence on their school's literacy program, how their responsibilities are distributed, and the challenges they face. We are currently and actively reaching out to the SLPs to interview them individually, as we embark on Phase 3 of this multi-pronged study.

In all, this multi-phase research project suggests that the formal titles for these SLP positions don't necessarily explain exactly how they are expected to perform in schools. The SLP roles in Pennsylvania are multifaceted and perhaps indicative of SLP work nationwide: there is overlap in the responsibilities regardless of title; SLPs are engaged in multiple roles; and all SLP positions include degrees of informal leadership responsibilities within the school

context. Principals in these schools believe the SLP role is influential to the school's literacy programs, and importantly, they are acutely aware and appreciative of the work of their SLPs.

We still have much to learn about each of the SLP roles enacted in the field, if we wish to more clearly delineate the skills and knowledge these professionals need to be effective in their positions. The ILA *Standards 2017* recommendations, and the distinctions between and among the three roles of specialist, coach, and coordinator provide some direction for those preparing these professionals and for the schools who employ them. At the same time, given the unique contexts in which these professionals work, schools will need to develop their own context-specific job descriptions and offer professional learning and leadership opportunities to support SLPs to work effectively in the schools.

What Have We Learned?

Over the past 80 years we have learned an enormous amount about the influence that educational policies have had on the evolution of the role of the reading specialist. These policies have often been an impetus for research, both large- and small-scale, and for recommendations about how the role and preparation for the role must be changed so that instruction for these struggling students can be improved. As we *look backward* and consider where we have been, and *look forward* to where we might be go next, several key points can be highlighted.

1. Given the influence of national and state educational policy on the roles of specialized literacy professionals, there is a need for educators, especially those who serve in SLP roles, to be aware of various policy issues and to serve as advocates for what we believe and understand are the most effective ways to use the services of these specialists. Such

advocacy is required also by our state and national literacy associations who can more broadly disseminate current information and serve in key advocacy roles.

2. Throughout the years, ongoing research studies have helped us understand what individuals serving in SLP roles are being asked to do, their perceptions about their responsibilities, the challenges they face, and the impact they have on both teaching practices and student literacy learning. Research must continue to explore SLP work; and specifically, we need to periodically replicate previous studies to determine whether and when SLP roles shift.
3. Finally, our summary leads us to conclude that the role of specialized literacy professionals—and especially reading/literacy specialists—will almost certainly *always be changing*, given new demands and challenges in society and in education. Further, educators who work as SLPs will always tend to play multiple roles, dependent on the nature of the context in which they serve. They will need to adapt to changing times, the changing nature of the students and teachers with whom they work, and changing educational expectations.

As we *look forward* to the next decades of literacy instructional work and related professional learning in schools, we are certain that there is a place for SLPs in both day-to-day teaching and learning and in leadership roles. We must all continue to advocate for the research and policies needed to continue supporting these critical roles in our schools—on behalf of creating a literate and engaged citizenry.

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