
May 1971

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Recommended Citation

Lofft, James H. (1971) "Why Change the Role of Teacher to Specialist?," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol5/iss2/3>

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Why Change the Role of Teacher to Specialist?

by James H. Lofft

What is there about a telephone call that makes it take priority over any other commitment or engagement? The instinct to answer a telephone call is almost a command.

The telephone is ringing presently. Specialists trained in reading wish more people were as compulsive to consider answering the call of change. However, some are not considering to answer the call of change because they are not aware of the advantages that would take place.

A recent doctoral dissertation by Wallace Messer includes data which reading specialists should consider. Only 9% of Michigan's remedial reading teachers act in their primary mode as consultants to teachers. Of the remaining 91%, he found 88% continue to be involved with small group or individual instruction outside of the classroom and with 2% as clinicians and 1% provided instruction within the classroom. This was among the 75% of the school districts whose remedial reading programs were funded by the state.¹ After considering this as a foundation of valuable evidence, a question follows — Why should the role of a remedial reading teacher be changed to a reading specialist or consultant who works for teachers and with only a few remedial cases?

More Students Reached

First, how many children are reached if the remedial reading teacher role is maintained? As a premise it is known the legal caseload limit is 50 remedial reading pupils and to be practical 50 can be too much.

Imagine one remedial reading teacher assigned to serve two buildings with a total pupil enrollment of 1200 and of this amount, 300 pupils are 2 years or more below grade level. This remedial reading teacher could not serve all 300 who might qualify but only 50 pupils. Therefore, the remedial reading teacher in this example would be reaching only about 1 out of 6 of those pupils who qualify. Hence, not many remedial pupils would be reached if the role of a remedial reading teacher is maintained.

The Total Program Served

Secondly, why should not this reading specialist be involved in the total reading program with his or her training? In its proper perspective, remedial reading is only a part of developmental reading. Being involved with only remedial reading is serving just part of the total school reading program.

Need for Training

The third reason for this change is new teachers need to be more knowledgeable in the teaching of reading and the reading consultant or specialist can fill this void. A specialist may present pre- and in-service training as well as classroom demonstrations to new teachers if the role is altered.

¹Wallace S. Messer "An Analysis of the Effects of the Michigan Remedial Reading Act of 1966 Upon the Remedial Reading Programs and the Qualifications of Remedial Reading Teachers." Unpublished Ed. D. dissertation, Wayne State University, 1970.

Evidence of this lack of training in the teaching of reading is the Middle Cities Elementary Survey of new teachers. This survey reported about graduates from a School of Education in Michigan. Amazingly, 61.6% of the new teachers were without any semester hours in a reading methods course; 11.4% had from one to two semester hours and 33.5% had three to four semester hours. This increase might be due to the demand of one state university requiring all elementary teachers to take a reading methods course.

Equally amazing, 48.7% of the new teachers were without any semester hours in a Language Arts Method Course; 8.5% had one to two semester hours and an increase to 16.5% have three to four semester hours. Again, this increase is probably due to one or two universities requiring the course.

Hence, much pre-service and in-service with demonstrations should be done. School districts cannot wait for the universities. They must take the lead themselves!

New Materials

Today's market of new reading material is greater than ever as one can tell by observing professional journals. New approaches continually flood the market, some old with new labels, some unresearched, some with only promises but all requiring critical evaluation. Only with specialized personnel may proper selection be accomplished.

Proper Use of Materials

If a specialist is properly supplied with materials, he is able to make them quickly available to classroom teachers at teachable moments and may recommend appropriate materials. Equally true, he can assist teach-

ers and principals in organizing a class for the proper implementation of these materials.

Evaluation of Materials and Approaches

New materials and approaches lead to new developments where research is expected. Too frequently current research findings only go as far as the specialists; when the findings should actually be applied in the classroom. Classroom teachers welcome hearing of new findings which give them a sense of adventure in the teaching of reading. Enjoyment is found through discussions and interpretations of various findings. Moreover, research may be initiated if the specialist observes an example of a creative technique employed by a teacher and assists her with specific plans and procedures for conducting action research. When this happens an attitudinal change can result which may become as important as the findings themselves, because some self-examination occurs.

All Teachers Reading Teachers

Lastly, one must believe reading is a process rather than a subject. As a process it is a thread common to most disciplines and it weaves its way throughout the entire curriculum. Does it not follow that all teachers need to know how to meet its demands?

In the beginning, it was mentioned that the telephone was ringing. It is still ringing. The caller is Mr. Change. Can you answer the call?

(James Lofft is a Reading Consultant with the Taylor Public Schools.)