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## Elementary Principals' Knowledge of and Expectations for Specialized Literacy Professionals

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## **Elementary Principals Knowledge and Understanding of Specialized Literacy Professionals**

### **Introduction**

In the past, specialized literacy professionals have been called remedial reading teacher, reading supervisor, reading specialist, literacy coach, and interventionist, among other titles. Currently, the International Literacy Association (2017) recommends the use of “specialized literacy professional” as a title to recognize the various roles and responsibilities involved in the literacy specialist position including reading/literacy specialists, literacy coach, and school coordinator/supervisor. Previously, the emphasis of specialized literacy professionals was on remediating and supporting students with reading difficulties (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014), often in a small group setting. Presently, specialized literacy professionals fulfill a much wider range of roles and responsibilities (International Literacy Association, 2017).

The role of specialized literacy professionals has changed over time due to several factors (Bean et al., 2015), including Title I, Reading First, and Response to Intervention. Because of those changes, it has become important for specialized literacy professionals and administrators to understand the different roles these specialized literacy professionals play in the school setting (Bean et al., 2015) and how to use those roles to most effectively address the literacy development of students. Specifically, the redefined role of the specialized literacy professional in the public school setting has caused changes to daily classroom literacy instruction and practice. As a result, the role of the specialized literacy professional is now one of a leader, teacher, diagnostician, colleague, and agent of change (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014). These changes have impacted the various tasks the specialized literacy professionals perform in the school setting, which may lead to confusion and frustration among specialized literacy professionals (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003), and variability in job descriptions (International Reading Association, 2004).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The ILA (2017) has created several editions of *Standards for Specialized Literacy Professionals*, which detail the knowledge and skills related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and leadership that specialized literacy professionals need. The ILA (2017) Standards can be used by teacher preparation programs preparing specialized literacy programs as well as by school districts when employing and evaluating specialized literacy professionals. The standards detail the different roles the specialized literacy professional can play in the school setting, though usually individual districts ultimately decide how the specialized literacy professional will be used.

Even though professional organizations, such as the ILA, have provided guidelines, some research shows that many in the field of education are unaware of the guidelines or choose to disregard them (Hathaway, Martin, & Mraz, 2016). For example, research conducted by Hathaway, Martin, and Mraz (2016) found that in a district that did not publicize the job descriptions of their literacy coaches, local administrators ignored the guidance provided by professional organizations, such as the ILA.

Research by Bean et al. (2003) shows that although principals value the presence of specialized literacy professionals as they contribute to the success of a literacy program and fulfill a multitude of tasks, principals differ in their views on which roles are of most importance. Some principals see the most value in the instructional role, while others promote the role of the specialized literacy professional as a person who can provide resources and instructional leadership to general education teachers (Bean et al, 2002). Ultimately, local administrators determine the role specialized literacy professionals play within the school setting (Hathaway et al., 2016). Principals who understand the specialized literacy professional role can establish a climate in a building or district that allows and encourages collaborative work between the specialized literacy professional and other stakeholders (Bean et al., 2003).

Little research has been done related to the elementary principal's understanding of the roles specialized literacy professionals can fulfill. Understanding the elementary principals'

understanding is important as learning to read is the focus of teachers at the elementary level. Additionally, there is a lack of research related to the elementary principal's understanding of current roles specialized literacy professionals can play in the school setting, related to the recommendations by the International Literacy Association's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017*.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This mixed-methods study explored elementary principals' knowledge and expectations of elementary specialized literacy professionals and how those expectations compared to the International Literacy Association's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017*. The researcher sought to gain a better understanding of how elementary principals perceive the specialized literacy professionals' role in comparison to the recommendations of the ILA (2017) and how elementary principals determine how the specialized literacy professional functions at the elementary level.

In order to make the most of the specialized literacy professional position, all stakeholders need to understand this complex role as it is possible that schools may not be using specialized literacy professionals in the most effective ways as determined by the ILA. Without understanding the different roles specialized literacy professionals can play in the elementary school as recommended by the ILA (2017), principals may not be using these specially trained individuals to their potential. A better understanding of what roles are currently being fulfilled as perceived by elementary principals will help learn what responsibilities are being missed that could be effective in improving the literacy development of students. Information from this study contributes to the knowledge that can promote improved usage of the specialized literacy professional position at the elementary level.

### **Research Questions**

This study addressed two questions related to how elementary principals perceive the current roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals.

1. How do elementary principals view the current roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals?
2. What factors influence how elementary principals determine the roles and responsibilities the specialized literacy professional will fulfill in the elementary setting?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Responsibilities of the Specialized Literacy Professional**

Specialized literacy professionals assume many different responsibilities in a school, depending on the needs of the students and teachers within the district or building (International Reading Association, 2000). Responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals can be broken down into several categories: Instruction, diagnosis and assessment, and leadership. All of the responsibilities fulfilled by a specialized literacy professional contribute to the improvement of student learning (International Reading Association, 2000).

One area of responsibility for specialized literacy professionals is assessment. Assessment is a method of gathering data on which specialized literacy professionals can base evaluative or decisions about student needs and progress (Bean, 2015). Specialized literacy professionals have specific knowledge of diagnosis and assessment that is needed for developing, implementing, and evaluating literacy programs and planning instruction for individual students (International Reading Association, 2000).

Specialized literacy professionals administer and interpret literacy assessments. Assessments given can provide information about the strengths and needs of individual students, which can be used by the classroom teacher and specialized personnel to plan effective instruction (International Reading Association, 2000). Reviewing and analyzing data are another aspect of the specialized literacy professional role. Specialized literacy professionals analyze the data, apply to instruction, and share with teachers and administrators (Bean, 2015). In addition, specialized literacy professionals also assist in the development and coordination of building or district wide literacy assessments (International Reading Association, 2000). This could also

include the development and implementation of assessment tools (International Reading Association, 2000).

Another area of responsibility of specialized literacy professionals is instruction, including planning and collaborating with teachers. These specialized literacy professionals also support classroom instruction in addition to providing specialized support to students who are struggling to read (International Reading Association, 2000). Instruction could occur in the classroom, allowing coordinated instructional approaches to be used. In addition, instruction could occur in a separate location, providing individualized or specialized instruction (International Reading Association, 2000).

A third area of responsibility for the specialized literacy professional is leadership. Leadership responsibilities of the specialized literacy professional include support for student learning and support for students including assessment and instruction (Bean, 2015). Specialized literacy professionals are also asked to help lead and facilitate school change including developing curriculum, selecting and developing materials, writing grants, working with specialized professionals, and working with administration (Bean, 2015). At times, the leadership role may be an informal one (Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003). Specialized literacy professionals may also help to develop and coordinate literacy programs, plan and deliver staff development and provide resources to parents, teachers, and administrators (International Reading Association, 2000). Supporting families and communities is another responsibility for specialized literacy professionals. This includes involving parents and families, facilitating partnerships with the community, and serving as an advocate for students and families (Bean, 2015).

### **Roles of the Specialized Literacy Professional**

The roles of specialized literacy professionals in the public school setting have changed greatly over time (International Literacy Association, 2015). Titles have ranged from remedial reading teacher, reading supervisor, reading specialist, literacy coach, and interventionist with each position being slightly different in the role played within the school. Currently, specialized

literacy professionals fulfill a wide range of roles and responsibilities, more so than ever before (International Literacy Association, 2015).

One of the roles of the specialized literacy professional is a literacy teacher or literacy specialist. A specialized literacy professional identified as a literacy specialist is an educator who has extensive training in the area of literacy and is responsible for the literacy performance of students in general as well as struggling readers (Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, & Wallis, 2002). The primary role of a specialized literacy professional identified as a literacy specialist is instructional, working with students who are having difficulty progressing as a reader or writer (International Literacy Association, 2015). Additionally, literacy specialists may support classroom teachers by providing ideas and resources related to assessment and instruction. They may also assume basic coaching responsibilities where they model lessons or strategies, problem-solve with teachers, and facilitate discussions. Titles may vary by district to include reading specialist, literacy specialist, interventionist, or reading teacher (International Literacy Association, 2015).

Another role of the specialized literacy professional is that of a literacy coach. Working with teachers and facilitating school improvement in literacy is the primary role of the literacy coach (International Literacy Association, 2015). In coaching, the focus is on improving the quality of classroom instruction and supporting teachers in their instruction (Bean, Draper, Hall, Vandermolten, & Zigmond, 2010). Literacy coaches may support individual or small groups of teachers in the improvement of literacy instruction in the classroom and may also have responsibilities that influence school-wide literacy programs (International Literacy Association, 2015).

A shift from the role of the literacy specialist to one of a literacy coach, with more focus on professional development and leadership, gained momentum in the early 2000's with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and its programming arm of Reading First (International Literacy Association, 2015). Reading First is a federally funded program that recommends targeted instruction for Kindergarten to third-grade students with low reading achievement (Walpole &

Blamey, 2008). In addition, Reading First recommended the employment of literacy coaches in districts in order to support teachers in the implementation of reading instruction that was evidence-based (International Literacy Association, 2015).

Unfortunately, economic struggles and the decline of resources has led to a decrease in the number of literacy coaches employed in public schools (Bean, Dole, Nelson, Belcastro, & Zigmond, 2015). Schools have been creative in how to fund literacy coach positions, including shifting responsibilities of literacy specialists or asking teacher leaders to work with their peers to improve literacy instruction (Steinbacher-Reed & Powers, 2011).

Specialized literacy professionals may also fulfill the role of a reading supervisor, often with responsibilities beyond working with students. Leading, coordinating, and evaluating the literacy programs in schools are all major responsibilities of the reading supervisor (International Literacy Association, 2015). For example, specialized literacy professionals functioning as reading supervisors may lead efforts to develop and implement a literacy program, select materials, collaborate with parents and the community to increase literacy efforts, write and manage proposals for various grants, and work with school leaders as part of change efforts (International Literacy Association, 2015). In addition, people serving in reading supervisor positions may be in a supervisory role, as part of teacher performance evaluations (International Literacy Association, 2015).

### **Standards for Specialized Literacy Professionals**

For over 60 years, the ILA has been a leader in literacy (International Literacy Association, 2018). The mission of the ILA is “to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers with the resources they need to make literacy accessible for all” (International Literacy Association, 2018, p. XV). Through work with their members and affiliates, the ILA develops Standards that “define the roles and practices of the literacy profession and develop a vision for a more literate society” (International Literacy Association, 2018, p. XV).



The ILA has been issuing standards for preparing specialized literacy professionals for several decades (Kern, 2011) with the goal of providing a framework for colleges and universities who prepare specialized literacy professionals to assist in making decisions about programming (Kern et al., 2018). The Standards detail what specialized literacy professionals know and should be able to do in the school setting (International Literacy Association, 2018), while providing a description of what is expected in the field of those serving in specialized literacy positions that can be used by districts to assist in decision making about the development of literacy support programs and hiring practices for specialized literacy professionals (Kern et al., 2018).

In 2018, the ILA released *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* to replace the previous version from 2010. The 2017 Standards were developed by literacy experts to “synthesize findings from contemporary research about evidence-based practices in curriculum, instruction, assessment, leadership, and evaluation” (International Literacy Association, 2018, p. 2). New standards were created because of how much changed in the area of literacy since the development of the 2010 standards. The 2017 standards reflect a broader skill set and processes that constitute literacy including oral language, writing, digital literacy, and visual literacy (International Literacy Association, 2018).

The 2017 Standards address nine literacy-related roles falling under the categories of specialized literacy professionals (reading/literacy specialist, literacy coach, literacy coordinator/supervisor), classroom teachers (pre-K/primary, elementary/intermediate, middle/high school), principals, teacher educators, and literacy partners. While each role has a specific set of standards, all fall under seven general categories, each detailing competencies related to the main topic that specialized literacy professionals should be able to demonstrate in the school setting (International Literacy Association, 2018). Specific competencies under each standard varies according to the role being addressed.

Kern, et al. (2018) details the specifics of each of the seven standards covered in the ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017*. The focus of standard 1 is the

foundational knowledge specialized literacy professionals should have and be able to use in their position, including theoretical, historical, conceptual, and evidence-based foundations of reading, writing, language and the role of the specialized literacy professional. Next, standard 2 addresses curriculum and instruction and the specialized literacy professionals' ability to design appropriate literacy-related curricula to meet the needs of students, implement small group instruction, and collaborate with classroom teachers to do the same.

Assessment and evaluation are the topics for standard 3, detailing the specialized literacy professionals' ability to select and use various assessment tools for different purposes and assist classroom teachers and other stakeholders in their understanding of assessment results. Additionally, standard 4 addresses diversity and equity and the specialized literacy professionals' knowledge of diverse learners and equity as well as advocating for inclusive environments (Kern, et al., 2018).

Standard 5 focuses on learners and the literacy environment and the specialized literacy professionals' ability to meet the needs of all learners, promote a literacy focused learning environment, while collaborating with colleagues (Kern et al., 2018). Next, standard 6 deals with professional learning and leadership, applying their knowledge to facilitate and lead colleagues (Kern et al., 2018). Finally, standard 7 is practicum and clinical experiences and is appropriate for those in the specialized literacy professional role.

### **Administrative perceptions about the role of specialized literacy professionals**

Principals value the presence of specialized literacy professionals as they contribute to the success of a literacy program and see a multitude of tasks fulfilled by specialized literacy professionals (Bean et al., 2003). However, principals differ in their view of the importance in the role of specialized literacy professionals. Some principals see the most value in the instructional role that specialized literacy professionals play while others promote the role of the specialized literacy professional as a person who can provide resources and instructional leadership to general education teachers (Bean et al., 2002).

The perspectives held by administrators and specialized literacy professionals may be more coherent in high performing schools (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014). Principals in schools that are high performing reported having a shared vision for the role of the specialized literacy professional (Matsumura, Garnier, & Resnick, 2010; Matsumura, Sartoris, Bickel & Garnier, 2009; Walpole & Blamey, 2008). Principals in schools that are not high performing may determine the role of the specialized literacy professional without outside input (Matsumura, et al., 2010; Matsumura et al., 2009; Mraz, Algozzine, & Watson, 2008).

A study done by Prezyna, Garrison, Lockte, and Gold (2017) examined how the role of the specialized literacy professional is defined by the principal. The study found that principal leadership is important in defining the specialized literacy professional's role (Prezyna, et al., 2017). The researchers concluded that having clearly defined roles could be linked to positive satisfaction of the specialized literacy professional while not having a defined role could cause role conflict for the specialized literacy professional (Prezyna, et al., 2017). Finally, the study concluded that principals should be responsible for defining and communicating the role of the specialized literacy professional (Prezyna, et al., 2017). This study did not directly reference ILA standards.

Administrators who understand the specialized literacy professional role can establish a climate in a building or district that allows and encourages collaborative work between the specialized literacy professionals and other stakeholders (Bean et al., 2003). It is recommended that the school leader should provide a concrete description of the role the specialized literacy professional should play in the school, using guidelines and recommendations from professional organizations such as the ILA and the National Council of Teachers of English (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014). To do this, it would be helpful to understand elementary principals current understanding of the roles specialized literacy professionals are prepared to fill in the school setting.

## Methods

### Research Methodology and Design

A mixed-methods approach was used for this study, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data to allow a deeper understanding of the principals' view of the role of the specialized literacy professional and what factors impact how the role is determined (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015). A quantitative approach was chosen for portions of this research to allow data related to the elementary principals' knowledge and expectations of the roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals to be collected and analyzed according to the ILA (2017) standards. Specifically, survey data was used to obtain data to help determine specialized literacy professionals' roles in the school setting from the perspective of the elementary principal and how it compares to current standards from the International Literacy Association. The use of a survey allowed for the collection of data from a broader number of participants. The qualitative portion deepened the understanding of the quantitative data.

The survey included personal demographic information, school demographic information, and position information. Next, the survey included forced choice and Likert scale style questions in addition to open-ended questions to provide information as to what the specialized literacy professional role entails, as understood by the principal. The survey also included several open-ended response questions, allowing the principals to explain how they use the ILA Standards when determining roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals. Additionally, the survey provided principals an opportunity to briefly explain what factors are taken into consideration when determining how the specialized literacy professional functions in the building. Additional follow up interviews with open-ended questions allowed principals to provide more in-depth follow-up responses, provide additional information about a response, and elaborate or explain their responses (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015).

## **Sampling and Participants**

This study was conducted in the Northeastern United States. This study utilized both purposive and snowball sampling methods. In purposive sampling, the researcher uses his or her judgment to select a sample that will provide the data they need (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015). In this case, the researcher purposely recruited elementary principals of schools who have specialized literacy professionals. The researcher invited 345 elementary principals from 66 school districts and 261 elementary schools (grades K-8) in seven counties to participate by sending requests via email. In addition to purposive sampling, snowball sampling was also used where participants were asked to share the survey request with other elementary principals who have specialized literacy professionals working in their buildings to increase the sample size.

## **Instrumentation**

For this research, an online survey using Google Forms was used to collect information from elementary principals and was collected just one time, with the survey being open for four weeks. The survey used a Likert scale with open and closed questions. The survey was used to gather information on the principal's perception of how the specialized literacy professional in their building function. An option to provide follow up information by participating in an interview was also included. Those principals who indicated interest in a follow-up interview were contacted by the researcher following completion of the survey collection.

**Survey.** This study used an adapted electronic survey (Bean et al., 2015) administered through Google Forms to collect information on specialized literacy professionals' roles and responsibilities from the perspective of the principal. This original survey created by Bean et al. (2015) was distributed to ILA members. For this study, the survey was modified to focus on principals instead of specialized literacy professionals. For example, the original survey was completed by the specialized literacy professional while this study was completed by elementary principals. Secondly, questions related to Standard 4 focused on diversity and equity were added to the modified survey as the original did not address this standard. Questions added asked how

often specialized literacy professionals advocate for an inclusive environment, acknowledge and value diversity, and advocate for equity. Finally, two open-ended questions related to the principals' use of IILA Standards and how roles and responsibilities are determined were added as the original survey did not include any open-ended questions. Specifically, elementary principals were asked how they use the ILA Standards in their role as a building leader and how the roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals were determined in their building.

Additionally, this survey focused on roles related to standards 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, which relates to roles and responsibilities of the specialized literacy professionals. Standards 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 relate to instruction, assessment, literacy environment, diversity and equity, and professional learning and leadership to be collected. Questions from the original survey (Bean et al., 2015) related to standard 1 and 7 were not included. Standard 1 focuses on foundational knowledge specialized literacy professionals should have and be able to use related to the theoretical, historical, conceptual, and evidence-based foundations of reading, writing, language, and the role of the specialized literacy professional (Kern et al., 2018). Standard 7 outlines the expectations for practicum and clinical experiences of specialized literacy professionals.

Questions included were grouped according to specific standards from the ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017*. A Likert-type scale of a 1 to 4 was used for each question. The rating was as follows: 4 (always), 3 (frequently), 2 (at times/seldom), and 1(never). The original survey asked specialized literacy professionals to rate various responsibilities based on the amount of time spent on each task. Questions related to demographics included drop-down menus or options for participants to select. Demographic questions asked included position, school/building, and specialized literacy professional position(s) in their building. Two open-ended questions allowed participants to briefly share how they use the ILA Standards in their school and what factors are considered when determining

how the specialized literacy professional functions. A final question asked participants for interest in a follow-up interview to indicate interest by including their name and email address.

Reliability and validity of the original survey by Rita Bean (Bean et al., 2015) were reviewed by experts in the field. Since the original survey was modified for this research study, the revised survey used in this study has been peer-reviewed by other specialized literacy professionals and was piloted with local elementary principals.

**Interview.** An interview protocol developed by the researcher was used to gather additional information from elementary principals in order to confirm data from the survey. The interview consisted of four open-ended questions about the role of the specialized literacy professional in the principal's school, how the roles and responsibilities were established, thoughts on the current role, and potential changes to the role. Depending on the responses from the principals, the 14 principal interviews were completed in person or on the phone one month after the survey closed and took between 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

With IRB approval, survey requests were sent to 345 elementary principals via email. The email described the research, asked for participation, and included a link to the survey. Participants were asked to complete the survey within a given four-week window. After the survey window closed, a total of 36 (10.4% respondent rate) survey responses were downloaded from the electronic survey site and analyzed. Twenty participants who indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview were contacted by the researcher. A total of 14 out of 20 replied to the researcher; Of the 14 participants, four completed an interview in person, and 10 were on the phone. Participants were given the option of reviewing the transcription for accuracy following completion of the interview.

## **Data Analysis**

Both the survey completed by the principal and follow up interviews were designed to gather information on the principal's perspective of the current roles of the specialized literacy professional at the elementary level. Data from the survey included personal demographic information, school demographic information, and position information as well as responses to the questionnaire. Information from the interviews allowed for deeper responses and more detailed information about the principal's understanding of the role of the specialized literacy professional, how the roles are determined, and what changes the principal might like to see in the specialized literacy professionals' role in his or her elementary school.

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to run quantitative testing and data analysis on information from the survey and responses were summarized. A summary of results included total size of sample and total percentage of returns for principals. The percentage of the total sample responding for each item was tabulated. The total number of respondents who chose each alternative for each question was included. Cross tabulation was used to compare across categories. Data collected was analyzed to respond to each research question.

Data collected through the open-ended questions on the survey and the follow up interviews were reviewed and analyzed following Creswell's (2007) "Data Analysis Spiral." Data were analyzed throughout the collection process, allowing for additional follow up. Common topics from the interviews and survey responses, related to responsibilities, how roles are established, and desired changes were identified, color-coded, and classified according to themes and data were interpreted by reviewing codes and themes and moving to the larger meaning of what can be learned from the data. Next, the researcher related coding and data collected to specific research questions in order to develop themes specific to the questions. Data from the interviews were used to provide additional insight into survey responses and to learn more about the principals' perceptions of the roles of the specialized literacy professionals and how the role is



established. The interview provided participants an opportunity to expand upon and explain their survey responses.

## **Results**

### **Participants' Demographic Characteristics**

The survey addressed position, school/building, and specialized literacy professional position related demographic questions about each participant. Of the 36 survey participants, 31 (86%) indicated they were a principal while 5 (14%) said they were assistant principals. Participating principals and assistant principals had various levels of experience as an administrator with 11 (31%) indicating 0-2 years of experience in their current role and 13 (36%) with 3-5 years in their current role. Additionally, 4 (11%) indicated 6-8 years and 9-12 years of experience while 1 (3%) had 13 -15 years in their current role. Finally, 3 (8%) indicated 16-20 years of experience.

### **Findings**

Two findings emerged from the data of this study that could potentially improve the elementary principals use of the specialized literacy professional position. The first finding revealed that elementary principals consider the role of specialized literacy professionals to be one of a teacher-leader, which has evolved over the years. A second finding showed principals' lack familiarity with ILA Standards, nor do they use the Standards when determining the specialized literacy professional's roles and responsibilities.

One finding identified as a result of reviewing survey data and interview transcripts is that the elementary principal considers the role of the specialized literacy professional to be one of a teacher-leader, which has evolved over the years. While principals identified the roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals related to student support, teacher support, and working with data, principals ultimately view their role as one of a teacher-leader. Participants interviewed were asked if they consider their specialized literacy professional to be a teacher, leader, or supervisor. All interview participants identified responsibilities related to instruction as

well as leaders and coaches. Of the principals interviewed, 11 (79%) considered their specialized literacy professional to be a teacher-leader, leader, or trainer.

When asked about determining how the specialized literacy professional functions in the elementary building, 12 (86%) principals interviewed noted that the role has changed over the years. The use of data and increases and changes in student needs and instructional delivery methods were identified as reasons for changes in the role. Additionally, participants indicated there are more students in need of support and the role has shifted from reading teacher to more of an interventionist. Instructionally, more grades are supported by the specialized literacy professional now than in previous years with changes in instructional delivery methods, schedules, and materials used. Finally, the specialized literacy professional is now a more collaborative position with a teacher/leader role that has become a resource and support to classroom teachers from the data collected in this study.

Principal 1 noted that changes had to occur due to changing student demographics of the district and the inability to continue to do the same things that have always been done and get the same results. When interviewed, the principal stated, "We're seeing a difference in kids and we need to be able to change the way that we address that because what always worked is not working anymore." Additionally, Principal 1 shared how there is a need to change to better meet the needs of students, fill in gaps, and better help students to be successful.

When interviewed, Principal 4 addressed the changing role of the specialized literacy professional as he shared that 10 years ago, the role of the specialized literacy professional was considered a teacher whereas in recent times they are a leader. This leader shared that when he began at his building, the specialized literacy professionals' role was to work with groups of students in first and second grade, with no support for intermediate grades. Now, specialized literacy professionals in this building work with students in all grade levels and support teachers. He states "It took a while, but now I think that the culture is that the teachers realize the reading specialists are here for all the kids in the building and it's not territorial or just first and second

grade support.” Additionally, Principal 7 stated that the role of the specialized literacy professional “looks drastically different now than it did years ago.”

According to data collected in this study, the building principal is 100% responsible for determining what the specialized literacy professional does on a daily basis, at times in collaboration with other district staff. While the principal is responsible for determining the roles and responsibilities of the specialized literacy professional and evaluating their performance, an additional finding that emerged as a result of the study is that the ILA (2017) Standards are not used to guide the roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals. Over half (55%) of the principals surveyed lacked familiarity with the ILA Standards. Of the 16 (44%) familiar with the ILA Standards, participants were then asked how they use those Standards in their current role leading a building. Three principals surveyed indicated familiarity with the ILA Standards but said they do not use them in their current position. Additionally, four principals who indicated familiarity with the ILA Standard’s said they use the standards as teaching standards, or standards to tell the teacher what the student should know and be able to do. This is not the intended use of the standards. Nine principals who said they are familiar with the standards indicated they use those standards as a resource to review when interviewing specialized literacy professionals, to help define the role of the specialized literacy professional, and to guide evaluation and growth of the specialized literacy professionals.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study examined how the elementary principals perceive the specialized literacy professionals’ role in comparison to the recommendations of the ILA (2017) and how elementary principals determine how the specialized literacy professional functions at the elementary level. In order to make the most of the specialized literacy professional position, all stakeholders need to understand this complex role as it is possible that schools may not be using specialized literacy professionals in the most effective ways as determined by the ILA. Without understanding the different roles specialized literacy professionals can play in the elementary school as

recommended by the ILA (2017), principals may not be using these specially trained individuals to their potential. A better understanding of what roles are currently being fulfilled as perceived by elementary principals will help learn what responsibilities are being missed that could be effective in improving the literacy development of students. Information from this study contributes to the knowledge that can promote improved usage of the specialized literacy professional position at the elementary level.

This study addressed two questions related to how elementary principals perceive the current roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals. The first research question was how do elementary principals view the current roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals? The second research question was what factors influence how elementary principals determine the roles and responsibilities the specialized literacy professional will fulfill in the elementary setting?

Although the participants in this study indicated that they see the evolving role of the specialized literacy professional as one of a teacher-leader, a significant finding that emerged from the data was that principals in this study were not familiar with International Literacy Standards, nor are they used to guide the specialized literacy professional's roles and responsibilities. This study's findings partially align with Hathaway, Martin, and Mraz's (2016) assertion that even though professional organizations have provided guidelines like standards research shows that many in the field of education are unaware of the guidelines or choose to disregard them. While not directly related to the ILA Standards, the research by Hathaway, et al. (2016) supports this study's findings, in that people in the field of education are unaware of the guidelines or choose to disregard them. In this case, the people in this field are elementary principals. This was supported by the findings that elementary principals in this study were mostly unaware of what the ILA's Standards were and if they were aware, the majority did not use those Standards as a guide to understanding the roles and responsibilities the specialized literacy professional could fulfill in their building. Additionally, no participant in this study referenced any

professional organization as a factor in determining the roles and responsibilities of the specialized literacy professional.

Data collected in this study shows that the building principal is 100% responsible for determining what the specialized literacy professional does on a daily basis, at times in collaboration with other district staff. It also showed that the majority of principals are ultimately responsible for determining the roles and responsibilities of the specialized literacy professional and for evaluating their performance.

Findings from research by Bean, Swan, and Knaub (2003) found that administrators who understand the role of the specialized literacy professional can establish a climate that allows and encourages collaborative work between the specialized literacy professional and other stakeholders. While not directly related to the elementary principals lacking knowledge of the ILA's Standards, this supports the need for why principals need to have a solid understanding of the roles and responsibilities specialized literacy professionals can fulfill in the school setting.

As the person who determines the roles and evaluates the performance of the specialized literacy professional, it would be beneficial for principals to understand the training specialized literacy professionals receive as part of their educational programming, which is detailed by the standards. It is important for elementary principals to understand the training provided to specialized literacy professionals and the various roles they can fulfill in the elementary setting so this position can be used in the most effective and efficient manner to best meet the literacy needs of students and teachers. It is recommended that elementary principals be exposed to the ILA Standards and these standards be referred to when determining roles and responsibilities of specialized literacy professionals. Additionally, the Standards can be used to assist the principal with the evaluation and growth of specialized literacy professionals. This training could be provided by upper level district administration or through principal preparation programs.

This study's findings also provide potential implications for principal preparation programs. Principal preparation programs could introduce the ILA Standards as part of course work and

discuss how the Standards could be used to help develop positions. This idea could also go beyond just specialized literacy professionals and the ILA Standards to include various professional organizations that offer guidelines about specialized positions in education.

With so many roles that specialized literacy professionals can fulfill in the elementary setting, having a common understanding and expectation of the position amongst building principals, specialized literacy professionals, classroom teachers, and families is essential. Elementary principals should consider whether all stakeholders understand what the role of the specialized literacy professional is in their school. The principal should determine how those roles and responsibilities, set by the principal individually or at the district level, are communicated to teachers, parents, the community, and upper level district administration to ensure that there are similar expectations of the specialized literacy professional from all. This would also help to make sure different stakeholders have a common understanding and consistent expectations of the specialized literacy professional and are not expecting too much from the person in this position. This could be done through training and professional development for the classroom teachers and administration, informing stakeholders as to what the specialized literacy professional does.

Having an updated, current job description for the role would be of value to principals, specialized literacy professionals and classroom teachers as it would provide information on the roles and responsibilities of the person in this position. The job description could detail the general roles and responsibilities of the specialized literacy professional. This could be done collaboratively with administration and specialized literacy professionals, using the ILA's Standards for guidance.

Two findings emerged from the data of this study that could potentially improve the elementary principals use of the specialized literacy professional position. The first finding revealed that elementary principals consider the role of specialized literacy professionals to be one of a teacher-leader, which has evolved over the years. This implies that specialized literacy professionals have the potential to help lead positive change in instructional practices throughout

a school. A second finding showed principals' lack familiarity with ILA Standards, nor do they use the Standards when determining the specialized literacy professional's roles and responsibilities. This finding underscores the importance of educating principals regarding the possible roles and responsibilities specialized literacy professionals can take to fully utilize their skills as teacher leaders within schools.

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