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STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS, READING EDUCATION, AND PRINCIPALS: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE THROUGH INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP*

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Abstract

Principals are held accountable for achievement results of students on state-mandated assessments. Special needs students who struggle with literacy can impact the pass rates on these assessments. This study identifies how reading is taught to special needs students in both self-contained and inclusion settings at the secondary level in one school district; determines how school leaders may or may not be facilitating this process; and identifies ways school leaders can more effectively facilitate special education reading programs and processes.

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Los directores son tenidos responsable para resultados de logro de estudiantes en evaluaciones estado-puestos bajo el mandato. Especial necesita a estudiantes que luchan con capacidad de leer y escribir pueden impresionar las tasas de paso en estas evaluaciones. Este estudio identifica cómo leer es enseñado a estudiantes especiales de necesidades en ambos independiente y ajustes de inclusión en el nivel secundario en un distrito de la escuela; determina cómo líderes de escuela pueden o no pueden estar facilitando este proceso; e identifica maneras educan a líderes pueden más facilita efectivamente la educación especial que lee programas y procesos.

NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suministra como información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

2 Introduction

The current emphasis on accountability in K-12 public education has not only resulted in additional pressures and recommendations for educators, it has also redefined the role of the building principal (Blumberg & Greenfield, 1986; Brewer, 2001; Cooley & Shen, 2003; DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004; King, 2002; Tirozzi, 2001). While the concept of accountability has long been a hallmark of education, principal accountability has historically encompassed a more general approach of maintaining a safe setting for children, fostering strong relationships with teachers, and exhibiting sound budgeting practices (Cooley & Shen, 2003). The emphasis today, however, has shifted from holding building administrators accountable for how funds and other resources are used, to accountability for student achievement outcomes (Elmore, Abelman, & Fuhrman, 1996). It is essential that leaders recognize how to do this and be able to plan accordingly to meet diverse learner needs. For example, when the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law as the No Child Left Behind Act in January 2002, the revised legislation resulted in higher expectations for school districts to ensure proficient levels of student achievement (O'Donnell & White, 2005). For principals, the related mandates and regulations called for a renewed focus on instructional leadership, as the expectations regarding achievement for all students were raised to significantly higher levels (McLeod, D'Amico, & Protheroe, 2003).

While school principals in the 21st century are expected to fill a multitude of roles, the primary responsibility of today's principal is to facilitate effective teaching and learning with an overall objective of enhancing student achievement (Boscardin, 2005; McLeod, D'Amico, & Protheroe, 2003). Research supports the notion that, over a period of time, instructional leadership on the part of the principal has been identified as a contributing factor to higher student achievement (Guskey, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2000; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). In an attempt to become more proficient in the area of instructional leadership, principals are using student achievement data on a more frequent basis to make decisions regarding instruction, develop staff development programs with a greater focus on effective instructional strategies, and rethinking traditional approaches to teacher evaluation and school planning processes (O'Donnell & White, 2005).

Despite such efforts to positively impact student achievement, many principals, particularly at the secondary level, are finding that significant deficiencies in students' literacy skills are resulting in poor student performance on mandated statewide assessments (Cooley & Shen, 2003). In an era where principals are being held accountable for student achievement results on state-mandated assessments, it is becoming more evident that concerns regarding the literacy needs of adolescent students are impacting student pass rates on more than just the English portion of these assessments. For example, reading deficits are also cited as a cause for some students' inability to pass core area tests such as science, history and mathematics (Rasinski & Padak, 2005). In a public school environment of high-stakes testing, where high school graduation can be dependent upon the successful completion of statewide assessments, addressing the learning needs of today's struggling adolescent readers is an area that is beginning to draw more attention from educational leaders (National Institute, 2002; Rand Reading Study Group, 2002; Salinger, 2003).

While principals are struggling to transform themselves into better instructional leaders in the area of reading in hope that this will lead to improvements in all core subject areas, the increasing number of special needs students further complicates the task. It is imperative leaders have the requisite knowledge base to effectively plan to meet the needs of these students. *First*, school leaders must determine how best to support the special needs population of students in their buildings. The climate created by principals influences the success of all special education programs. In fact, administrator support of special education teachers is viewed as imperative in stopping the wave of teachers leaving the profession within five years of earning their teaching degree (Otto, & Mitylene, 2005). Administrators must have knowledge of special education issues, policies, instructional practices, curriculum, and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) to effectively lead by example in regard to students with special needs.

Second, principals must determine how the reading needs of students with special needs can best be met – whether it is through inclusion, self-contained instruction, packaged programs that specifically target special populations, or mainstream strategies implemented with additional time – in essence their planning and instructional practices must include choosing content, curriculum materials, instructional strategies, and modification strategies that complement one another, that follow Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and that lead to student success. An unsuitable match of materials and instructional strategies will result in a poorly implemented plan of action, causing students with disabilities to be less successful (Kameenui, 1991). It is vital for school leaders to set the example for the values and beliefs that are encompassed in the school's inclusive mission by modeling support among the faculty.

Therefore, the purpose of this project was tri-fold: to identify how reading is taught to special needs students in both self-contained and inclusion settings at the secondary level in one school district (including the identification of both strengths and weaknesses); to determine how school leaders may or may not be facilitating this process (from the viewpoint of both special education teachers and building leaders); and to identify ways in which school leaders can more effectively plan and facilitate special education reading programs and processes. The paper presents current literature on: struggling adolescent readers; special needs students; best practice in reading leadership; findings of the study; and implications for practice in public education (K-12) as the role of the principal continues to emerge from manager to instructional leader.

3 Struggling Adolescent Readers

In the period from 1994 to 2004, significant advances were made in understanding the skills primary-grade children must acquire in order to develop beginning reading skills. These advances were due in part to the emphasis placed on early intervention strategies. Despite this fact, many students reach upper elementary grades and secondary settings without having acquired the necessary skills and strategies to become successful independent readers (Roe, 2004).

In 1999, the International Reading Association (IRA) brought long-overdue attention to the needs of struggling adolescent readers. In a published position statement on the topic, the IRA highlighted the neglect of adolescent literacy by schools, policymakers, and the public, and called for widespread efforts to support continued development of adolescents as readers and writers (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Ryucik, 1999). The Commission of Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association declared:

3.1

Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed. (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Ryucik, 1999, p. 3)

As the literacy demands of adolescents have increased from what was expected in the past and during students' elementary school years, an increasing number of secondary students are having difficulty reading

due to deficits in decoding, fluency, and comprehension (Rasinski & Padak, 2005). Compounding the problem is the fact that when students do arrive at the secondary school setting with reading deficits, many teachers are not teaching students the alphabetic principles of *how* to read. For example, struggling readers often arrive at the secondary level with deficits in phonological skills and fluency. While many secondary teachers provide instruction in how to use reading to learn subject matter in a given discipline, teachers at this level typically do not spend a great deal of time reviewing such fundamentals as phonological awareness. It is generally understood that students in the secondary grades are *reading to learn* as opposed to *learning to read* (Roe, 2004).

In many instances, students who still experience difficulty reading by the time they enter the middle grades are considered nonreaders. In fact, many states use the number of students who cannot read by grade three as one way to predict how much prison space will be needed in the future. Unfortunately for students that struggle with reading, the achievement gap often continues to widen in secondary school – students with deficits avoid the practice, while students who enjoy reading read more. As a result of this occurrence, poor readers are exposed to fewer words and have less general word knowledge, develop poorer self-images as learners, and have less motivation to learn as they become older (Apel & Swank, 1999).

An example of this gap in achievement between readers who struggle and developmental readers was highlighted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress' (NAEP) findings in 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). The report emphasized the fact that, while stronger readers are making progress, poorer readers are actually getting weaker. In order to reverse this trend and gap in achievement in reading between struggling adolescent readers and developmental readers, educators, both teachers and administrators, need to be equipped with the tools, strategies, and knowledge to attack the problem (Ivey, 2002). In addition, parents need to have an understanding of steps that can be taken in the home to build readiness skills prior to reading.

If adolescents with deficiencies in literacy skills are to become stronger readers, secondary educators must also realize that reading development is a continuum that begins in the preschool years and then extends into adolescence and adulthood (Witkowski, 2002). While most children appear to demonstrate mastery of basic reading and writing skills by the time they are in the fourth or fifth grade, there still remains a great deal to be learned from secondary students about the array of literacy skills needed to be successful at the next level (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000). For example, even strong adolescent readers will need to learn how to interact with and comprehend the more difficult selections and literacy demands that they will encounter during their middle and high school years.

4 Special Needs Students

Many special education teachers at the secondary level believe that by the time students reach the secondary level, they should have the ability to read. However, poor readers as a group exhibit weaknesses in phonological processing and word recognition speed and accuracy, at any age (Shankweiler et al., 1995). Students with special needs are unable to decode or word call; therefore, they have difficulty in attempting to comprehend materials that are presented at a higher level. When an individual's reading comprehension is more impaired than his or her listening comprehension, inaccurate and slow word recognition is the most likely cause (Shankweiler et al., 1999). Students with special needs must be provided with a variety of multisensory opportunities to experience materials they are attempting to master. To complicate matters, the older student has not practiced reading and avoids reading because it is taxing, slow, and frustrating (Ackerman & Dyckman, 1996; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Instruction must be delivered in an explicit, intense, and systematic way.

Recent reports indicate that the proportion of students entering middle and secondary programs without a basic competency in reading is growing (Hock, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). In addition, an estimated 80% of students with learning disabilities and students with emotional disorders have reading deficits (Gibb & Wilder, 2002). Fortunately, educators are becoming more aggressive in their efforts to address the literacy needs of secondary students whose skill sets have not enabled them to meet the challenging literacy demands placed on secondary level students. Becoming a

successful reader at the secondary level for these students will require, among other things, ongoing support, differentiated instruction, an allotment of time above and beyond the traditional 45 to 50 minute class period (Ivey, 2002), and participatory support from teachers and building leaders.

5 Best Practices in Reading Leadership

Effective reading instruction includes a shared vision, competent teachers, a wide variety of instructional resources, the professional development of teachers, adequate resources, assessment practices, time that is flexible for student learning, and opportunities for parent education (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Lickeig, Parnell, & Ellis, 1995; Sanacore, 1997). Many of these components rely heavily on those in building leadership positions such as the principal. According to Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996), principals have indirect effects on the reading achievement of students through the actions they take to shape school climates that support reading. Further, the effects of principal leadership tend to occur through directed and meaningful efforts to influence others who are more directly involved with students on a daily basis (Boyan, 1988; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Heck et al., 1990; Leithwood et al., 1990).

In recent years, the International Reading Association (IRA) has facilitated efforts to bring attention to the literacy needs of the struggling adolescent reader. For example, the IRA's Commission on Adolescent Literacy (CAL) completed a study that examined best practices for programs developed to promote literary growth for adolescents. The CAL study recommended seven principles as a foundation for best practices in adolescent literacy (Moore et al., 1999):

1. Adolescents deserve access to a wide variety of reading material that they can and want to read.
2. Adolescents deserve instruction that builds both the skill and desire to read increasingly complex materials.
3. Adolescents deserve assessment that shows them their strengths as well as their needs and that guides their teachers to design instruction that will best help them grow as readers.
4. Adolescents deserve expert teachers who model and provide explicit instruction in reading comprehension and study strategies across the curriculum.
5. Adolescents deserve reading specialists who assist individual students having difficulty learning how to read.
6. Adolescents deserve teachers who understand the complexities of individual adolescent readers, respect their differences, and respond to their characteristics.
7. Adolescents deserve homes, communities, and a nation that will support their efforts to achieve advanced levels of literacy and provide the support necessary for them to succeed.

All of the principles above can be facilitated by strong principal leadership. However, one of the most effective is the practice of utilizing data to make instructional decisions. Data, such as pretest scores on a given assessment, are often used in education to place students in programs or to evaluate a particular program. Data, however, are not used as frequently by teachers to profile a student's strengths and weaknesses in an effort to tailor instruction for the learner at the individual level. Using data to make instructional decisions at the student level will bring about greater gains in developing literacy skills (Allington, 2001). And, because data analysis is often a trouble area for teachers, principals can promote the practice by providing professional development for teachers in data analysis and working with teachers to analyze data and use it to drive instruction. Addressing this issue as it relates to students with disabilities, an IRA (2000) resolution stated:

5.1

The International Reading Association believes that students in special education deserve reading assessments that provide sound information to the teacher, pupil, and family and that can be used to guide and improve instruction and learning. Assessments used for this purpose should include a variety of measures that accurately reveal a student's strengths and weaknesses with the multiple processes of reading. (p. 1)

Another key practice essential to meeting the CAL principles above is the hiring (or creation of) expert teachers who are knowledgeable in special education practices, reading instruction, and differentiated instruction. Principals must ask: Are teachers implementing the available research on how to teach comprehension and vocabulary strategies that are known to be effective in accelerating students' subject matter learning?; Do teachers know how to adapt strategies so that they are responsive to all students' social and intellectual growth?; Are teachers using assessments to individualize instruction?; and How am I (as the building leader) acting as an instructional resource and model? Answers to these questions have implications for researchers, policymakers, and school administrators seeking to implement best practices in the classroom for struggling adolescent readers (Alvermann, 2000) with special needs.

According to Sherman and Crum (2006), principals with personal, action-oriented core beliefs about how students can best be served in the area of reading facilitate student success. They serve as instructional leaders and are catalysts for student achievement in reading by: personalizing reading instruction to the needs of their individual schools and students; encouraging a balanced approach to reading instruction requiring that remedial instruction be supplemental to classroom instruction whenever possible so that time spent on reading in the classroom is preserved; allowing for the flexible grouping of students for reading instruction and insisting on collective responsibility; taking responsibility for data collection; shaping successful reading instruction with minimal funding; and establishing home and community connections.

As literacy demands of students with special needs have increased over the years, the role of the building principal has become increasingly important. School leaders have the ability to affect many areas that can increase reading achievement in students with special needs. Principals must implement reading programs designed for the *specific groups* they are targeting. These reading programs need to be research based and focus on mastery of materials to ensure student success. No program should be implemented on the basis of one-size fits all model. Interventions, chosen to allow student progress, must match the students' level of reading development, because each stage of growth requires a special focus (Curtis & Longo, 1999).

6 Planning for Instructional Change

Public concern, in particular from community and business leaders, has been expressed in recent years regarding high school graduates who do not have basic literacy skills required for entry-level jobs (Leech & Fulton, 2008). Gains in literacy scores and reading competencies are not achieved overnight and require substantive planning at every academic level, rather than just the early schooling years. Reading gains can be made at every level, rather than just at the elementary level where much of the existent literature focuses on. In a study by Scroggins and Powers (2004) it was found that a concentrated, well-thought out district-wide change initiative focusing on reading resulted in fewer students in need of state reading plans and improvement in internal district reading assessments at schools across the district by more than 5 percentage points.

Principals are expected to be knowledgeable and competent instructional leaders. It is critical that school leaders understand how to enact meaningful change within the building to support the instructional needs of a diverse student body. It is significant, therefore, that principals become skilled in a model of shared decision making and planning that leads to change and improvement in student performance. According to Leech & Fulton (2008) the twenty-first century "schools will develop the ability to cultivate synergistic creativity through learning networks. As schools move toward becoming learning organizations, they will foster an environment which is capacity building and rich in experimentation and risk-taking" (p. 641).

Innovative learning environments where students and staff feel comfortable to take risks must be led by principals who are able to implement new strategies to assist with increasing student achievement. It is imperative that planning underlie all change. Without a thoughtful, intentional, and meaningful planning process, there will be inconsistencies in delivery (Scroggins & Powers, 2004). External policy changes such as No Child Left Behind or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act often serve as the impetus for planning within a district. Other times, new research on best practices or an internal needs assessment may drive comprehensive planning for change. In either case, it is crucial that administrators use a rational approach that encompasses a variety of stakeholders and leads to a shared vision (Beach & Lindahl, 2007;

Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Leech & Fulton, 2008).

7 Design of the Study

The school system chosen for the study has historically experienced a high percentage of special education students, as compared to the national average. Although a central coordinating office for special education was created in the school system over two decades ago, there has been no centralized framework for the schools to work with special education students. Each school building has traditionally been able to design the type of programs implemented within, following certain parameters based on the identified goals of the IEP and identified disability (or disabilities) of the students. Program design includes, but is not limited to, design of the least restricted educational setting, instructional presentation, and types of reading programs offered. Additionally, compounding the variability amongst the ten schools, have been the individuals ultimately responsible for the supervision and coordination of the building special education programs. This has included the principal, the assistant principal, a combination of other administrators, central office coordinators, and lead special education teachers in the building.

The special education reading program has suffered due to the incongruencies between the individual schools within the district. A new centralized office position, based out of the school district's special education office, was created to bring alignment to the special education programs based on researched best practices in special education reading. At the start of the 2006-2007 school year, a working definition of remedial reading for special needs children (two or more years behind grade level in reading) was put in place by this individual to begin the promotion of uniformity in reading programs and best practice implementation.

This research project evolved out of the need to implement effective best reading practices in the secondary schools within the identified district. The special education reading specialist had an immediate need to survey all special education reading providers and the building administrators to identify the precise reading activities and supervisory practices that were occurring in the building. Prior to this attempt, there had not been any comprehensive effort to survey administrators and special education staff on the types of reading programs being used throughout the division, the method of instruction (inclusion, pull-out, etc...), or the supervisory practices of administrators.

Surveys were developed in a collaborative manner between the researchers, who both hold expertise in the areas of reading education, leadership development, and research design, and the special education reading specialist in the district. A survey design was selected based on its ability to provide a numeric description of the trends, attitudes, and demographics of the district population (Creswell, 2003). The design provided for a rapid turnaround in data collection, while allowing for stratification of the district respondents according to position held (principal, assistant principal, special education teacher). Care was taken during construction of the instrument to ensure that the items have content validity. The questions for the survey were based upon a review of the literature and an analysis of specific needs for special education reading in the school district and linked through a table of specifications. Items reflect the following domains: reading programs in use; reading instruction practiced; understandings of remedial reading; and leadership behavior. The questions, located in Appendix A, included both standardized, multiple choice options – because the reduction of variation is designed to curtail bias (Rossman & Rallis, 1998) and open response options – to allow for freedom in response when possible (Patton, 1990). Questions in the first three domains were standard across interview respondents while questions in the fourth domain were role-specific (i.e. teacher, assistant principal, principal). The primary research questions were: How is reading taught to special education students?; What is the understanding of remedial reading programs and instruction?; and What is the role of school leaders in facilitating the successful remedial reading instruction? An online survey tool was utilized; participants were sent an email soliciting their participation. Responses were managed and tabulated with an internet survey software program.

The respondents were from an urban school district located in the southeast region of the United States. The district is comprised of approximately 25,000 students, of which, 15.6% are identified as having special needs. Of one hundred and twenty-two special education teachers surveyed, 41 responded, providing a 34%

response rate. Half of the ten principals surveyed responded, providing a 50% response rate, and eight out of 29 assistant principals responded providing a 28% response rate. The overall response rate for the entire survey population was 34%.

Data interpretation was informed by an inductive approach to sense-making (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and while survey responses were tabulated as descriptive statistics, meaning was constructed by allowing themes to emerge from similar responses. Findings reported from the surveys are bound to the school district where the survey was distributed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) for the purposes of this research project because of 1) the unique nature of single-district research and the programs implemented and enacted within and 2) the context-bound nature of qualitative research. Further, findings are specific to participants and it is recognized that themes that emerged during analysis are particular to the participants and district. However, despite the limitations of this project, it contributes to the field by extending academic knowledge of leadership practice in reading education for special education students, reading programs in use for special education populations and practical knowledge applicable to districts and universities that wish to strengthen leadership preparation in the areas of reading and special education leadership.

8 Findings

A comparison between respondent groups – special education teachers, assistant principals, and principals – indicates a great deal of variation in regard to the understanding of remedial reading and the actual practice of instructing remedial reading students. Results also demonstrate variety in the perception of needs of special education students as well as in the amount and manner of leadership support. Findings were grouped into the following themes: remedial reading instruction; understanding and sense-making; and leadership behavior.

8.1 Remedial Reading Instruction

While all of the assistant principals and four of the five principals indicated there was a special education reading program currently in place in their buildings, fewer special education teachers (26 of 41) believed this to be true. Although nearly 73% of the survey population believed a program was in place, over a quarter of the population did not hold this belief – the majority of whom were the individuals slated to teach the special education reading program, indicating a disconnect between belief and practice as well as between administrator and teacher.

According to survey responses, the school system has four identified reading programs specifically used for the secondary special needs students (programs will remain unidentified for district confidentiality) (see Table 1). Although these four are the only programs that are supposed (i.e. have district approval) to be used within the secondary school setting for students with special needs (in addition to using the regular education curriculum with or without appropriate accommodations), results indicate divergence from this central office mandate. All of the secondary schools in the division should be using, based upon the identified needs of the individual students in the schools, all four reading programs. However, though several of the administrators were aware of the mandated programs in general, they were not aware of how these programs were in practice in their buildings. Although all four programs should be in use within the buildings, and no other programs besides the regular curriculum (modified or not), should be used in the schools, there were marked inconsistencies between respondents. All respondent categories identified at least one additional non-district approved reading program being used with the special needs students.

Number of respondents identifying the type(s) of special education reading programs

currently in use within their buildings.

	Special Educators	Assistant Principals	Principals
Reading Program 1	5	0	0
Reading Program 2	2	2	0
Reading Program 3	2	0	0
Reading Program 4	20	2	2
None	12	0	1
Other Programs Identified	11	5	2

Table 1

*respondents were able to select more than one program and identify other programs in the survey

Similar inconsistencies in programmatic expectations via central office mandates and the realities within the buildings were noted when respondents were asked about special education remedial reading instruction in the inclusion and self-contained settings. There was particular divergence in agreement according to roles held at the time (see Table 2). In addition, there was a great deal of confusion surrounding the notion of using alternative (non-district approved) methods to teach reading. According to district policy, students should be instructed with one of the four approved methods for teaching reading in either inclusion or self-contained settings. However, many responses indicated that, in actuality, while not only were other programs being employed, there was a misunderstanding of the differences between programs and methods that *teach reading* and programs that *support or serve as supplements* to or incentives for reading (i.e. Accelerated Reader, Sustained Silent Reading).

Misunderstandings were also revealed in regard to the differences between reading *settings* and reading *programs*. For example, when asked about other types of reading *programs* in the building, responses ranged from: “the reading program is offered as an elective and students in this class go every other day;” to “kids having difficulties are being pulled into a small group setting;” to “we don’t teach reading. The students are already expected to know how to read in the inclusion setting.” Obviously, the inconsistency of these comments demonstrates that there is confusion between what constitutes a program and what constitutes program format and delivery. Clearly, Accelerated Reader (AR) is not a method for *teaching* reading just as small group instruction is not a program for teaching reading.

Number of respondents identifying how reading is taught to students in the inclusion setting.

	Special Educators	Assistant Principals	Principals
Regular education program	14	4	2
Accommodations in the classroom	28	4	4
Modified regular education program	6	1	1
Remedial program	2	4	0
Other	12	3	1

Table 2

*respondents were able to select more than one program and identify other programs in the survey

Number of respondents identifying how reading is taught to students in the self-contained setting.

	Special Educators	Assistant Principals	Principals
Regular education program	6	3	2
Accommodations in the classroom	27	5	5
Modified regular education program	11	2	1
Remedial program	7	2	0
Other	8	4	0

Table 3

*respondents were able to select more than one program and identify other programs in the survey

8.2 Understanding and Sense Making

As indicated earlier, the school division developed a working definition of remedial reading for special needs students before project implementation. Prior to the survey (approximately one month), all special educators and administrators were provided with this definition by district administrators. Out of the 41 special education teachers who responded to the survey, only two offered definitions that mirrored that of the division's. Three out of the seven assistant principals and two out of the four principals who responded gave definitions that were in alignment with that of the division. Definitions given on the survey for remedial reading include:

Special Educators:

8.2.1

“Simplifying vocabulary for comprehension via lower level reading materials;” “[The use of] materials to help up enrich student’s reading levels;”

“Reviewing information that has been previously learned or introducing new information at a rate that a special education child could keep up with. It also means going over and beyond the norm to ensure that the student is successful in what has been taught;” and “Remediating and teaching skills.”

Assistant Principals:

8.2.2

“Opportunities to develop and enrich comprehension and vocabulary through differentiated instruction;”

“Meeting students at the level they are on - in order to provide successful reading experiences, in order to build confidence and reading skills;” and

“Assistance with comprehension, phonics, word meaning, study strategies and speed.”

Principals:

8.2.3

“Students are pulled out of regular classes and put into a resource class with a teacher to assist them with reading skills. We also have a Reading Coach that goes into the classroom to assist teachers with teaching reading strategies;”

“Providing the student reading instruction at his level;” and

“Building his/her skills so that the reading level increases.”

Clearly, the definitions given above indicate confusion on many different levels in regard to an understanding of remedial reading. Some respondents talk around the definition (and never quite offer one), some speak more to processes of instruction, and some indicate an understanding that differentiated instruction is needed. However, not apparent in any of the above definitions are (an awareness of) the five components of effective reading programs: phonemic awareness; phonics; vocabulary development; reading fluency; and reading comprehension. Good reading instruction is comprised of the same components regardless of the student population.

When asked whether their individual definitions of remedial reading were actually in practice in their buildings, 23 of the 41 special education teachers responded affirmatively. All eight of the assistant principals and three of the principals believed their definitions were currently being enacted. So, despite the numerous definitions and astounding misunderstandings that abounded, the majority of survey respondents believed their definitions played out in practice!

When asked to identify strengths of the special education reading programs in their schools, assistant principals indicated general satisfaction with the allowance for individual student needs to be met; often in a small group or one-to-one setting. However, two of the principals indicated they could not identify even one strength! Building leaders, aware of their own dissatisfaction with the special education reading program had, apparently, not taken steps to promote improvement. Further, twenty-one of the forty-one special education teachers failed to be able to identify any strengths in the programs offered in their buildings either. In fact, several wrote that there were no programs for which to identify strengths! One teacher expressed her frustration in this way:

8.2.4

I feel that we do not have any strengths right now. The people that need to be part of the solution (like teachers) are not being used effectively. Instead, we are being stressed to teach SOL content and not reading. However, the students can't read the SOL content. There needs to be a paradigm shift.

The few things that were cited as strengths varied from respondent to respondent, and included "meeting the individualized needs of the learners," "a focus on comprehension," "accommodations are made," and "skill repetition." One teacher wrote,

8.2.5

The teachers really work very hard to help students feel confident in what they are doing. They work with the students both individually and collectively to meet their needs. Teachers are patient and offer a lot of support both mentally and educationally.

So, while this teacher certainly had positive comments to share, she was unable to voice strengths specifically related to the reading programs in place at her school.

8.3 Leadership Behavior

Understandings of self-reported leadership behavior related to the success of special education reading programs in the district indicated a great deal of confusion as well. When principals were asked, as building leaders, how they help guide the remedial reading program for special education students in their buildings, only three discussed how they helped to guide the remedial reading program. In fact, one principal indicated there was "no special program" for remedial reading students at the school. For the most part, principals stated that they provided monetary resources, made current reading research available, modeled reading strategies for teachers, and worked closely with the special and regular education teachers to design and monitor strategies. None were really able to identify or describe exactly *how* they worked closely with teachers and students to facilitate reading instruction.

When asked to discuss the instructional issues they are held responsible for in the area of special education remedial reading programs, four of the assistant principals highlighted instructional practices; defined as supervising and supporting the program and teachers as well as ensuring components are implemented. So,

while it is clear that the assistant principals were involved, on some level, in the supervision of programs and teachers, specific actions were not elaborated upon. One additional assistant principal mentioned providing “funding to enact programs at all levels” while yet another relayed having absolutely no duties in the area of special education remedial reading leadership.

Special education teachers were asked to identify how they felt their principals and assistant principals helped to guide remedial reading programs. Twenty-four were either unsure of how the administration provided programmatic guidance or stated that their administrators did not provide guidance to the special education program at all. The remaining respondents spoke positively about the level of guidance provided to the program and stated that administrators provided guidance and support as needed. One teacher spoke to an administrative presence in the operations of the special education program and stated, “The principal offers a chance for teachers to meet on a regular basis. We [also] have people that come and give workshops that enable us to always strive for excellence.” Another mentioned that the administrators in the building are “intimately involved and support reading for all students. The curriculum in our building exemplifies this.” Again, while several positive comments were made in regard to building leadership, respondents had difficulty describing how these things actually play out in school buildings.

Survey respondents identified many different services they would like to receive from their administrators to better support the remedial reading programs in their buildings; three of which are major themes: (1) instructional support; (2) program redesign; and (3) supplies. Many of the teachers spoke to the need for more direct supervision and observations of classroom instruction. Feedback and accountability were reoccurring requests from the teachers. Quasi-administrators, in the form of reading coaches, were also identified as an area of need by special education teachers.

Program design was another area of concern for teachers. A general consensus from the respondents who indicated more administrative support was needed highlighted inconsistencies in the interpretation and implementation of the special education reading programs. Another concern that resonated with the teachers was the need to readdress the programs in place and modify them to be more specific to individual needs. One teacher stated,

8.3.1

We need a specific program that is available that goes from K - adulthood. I am not a big fan of the (Name) program. It is not designed for a mixture of abilities in one class setting. For example, if a class is mixed with non-readers (for instance, those with dyslexia), and students only a couple of grade levels below, the pace of the class is compromised. We need a program that is individualized as well. This allows for realistic pacing and differentiation.

The findings show numerous inconsistencies between perceptions of practice and what is actually occurring with both the delivery and supervision of remedial reading instruction. Clearly, there is a lack of understanding by leaders as to how to effectively guide the special education remedial reading program. Their actions and behaviors indicate a disconnect between espoused and actual leadership practices, which result in programmatic disparities and disconnect within their buildings.

9 Discussion and Implications for Instructional Leadership Practice

Public school principals face a long list of challenges: creating safe learning environments; retaining and recruiting highly qualified staff; addressing concerns presented by aging facilities; leading and monitoring the instruction of all students – the list of expectations is unending. High on their list of responsibilities is the challenge to serve in the role of instructional leader (Cooley & Shen, 2003; O'Donnell & White, 2005). While today's principals are expected to fulfill a large number of roles, the primary responsibility in this era of high-stakes accountability is to facilitate and enhance student achievement.

In an age of accountability, student achievement is measured by progress toward meeting specific benchmarks on end-of-year statewide assessments that are designed to measure students' mastery of state standards in core subject areas (i.e., English, math, science, and history). As principals work toward improving student

achievement in an effort to meet both state and federal criteria, it is becoming more evident that deficiencies in literacy skills, particularly at the secondary level, are proving to be a barrier for a large percentage of students whose districts' goals include proficient scores for all students on all statewide assessments (Rasinski & Padak, 2005). As a result of such poor student performance, there exist a number of implications for practice among educational leaders and planning for substantive change in district and school literacy practices.

First, while there has been a greater focus in recent years on the literacy needs of adolescents, school divisions must ensure that principals and classroom teachers in all subject areas are knowledgeable of the research surrounding struggling adolescent readers. For example, science and history teachers who are versed in the use of effective strategies for increasing students' vocabularies will increase the opportunities for students in these classes to retain content specific material. In addition, it is critical that principals either have firsthand knowledge of research-based strategies to address this growing population of students, or that they are prepared to call on others for assistance as administrators develop plans to address a school's staff development needs. As indicated by findings in this study, confusion (for all survey respondents) surrounds what special education remedial reading programs are promoted in the district, how these programs should be enacted, what specific differences exist between programs, what differences exist between programs that *teach* reading and *support* or supplement good reading instruction, what the differences are between reading *settings* and reading *programs*, what the differences are between the *content* of a reading program and the *delivery*, and what a general definition of remedial reading might be. Clearly, in the district studied, as well as in other districts, secondary teachers and administrators need explicit instruction in the teaching of reading and meeting the special needs of remedial students. A key component of the overall plan for improving literacy, then, must also include clear communication of expectations and follow-up to the instruction provided to district staff in the form of coaching and observations. It is clear that for change to be successful, organizations have to clearly communicate and create a culture of change that is supported with resources (Beach & Lindahl, 2007; Hambright & Diamantes, 2004; Leech & Fulton, 2008).

A second implication for practice is that the primary focus now at the secondary level is acquisition of content and not acquisition of literacy skills (Roe, 2004). Many principals and teachers in the middle grades, for example, now place a great deal of emphasis on the mastery of various essential skill items that have been identified in each grade level, within each core content area. A result of such concentrated efforts on learning specific content for end-of-year assessments has been a decrease in the number of middle school teachers teaching reading. For example, many middle schools have abandoned the practice of teaming in an effort to afford teachers the opportunity to become content specialists by teaching four to five classes a day of the same subject. A two-person team in Grade 6 might have been required by a principal to join another two-person team, creating a four-person team where each teacher is responsible for teaching one of the four core content areas. While one of the goals of utilizing four-person teams is to enable teachers to become experts in one subject area, this particular team configuration does so often at the expense of reducing the time during the day allotted for instruction in the area of language arts. For instance, a typical rotation on a four-person team configures the instructional periods during a school day in such a way that students receive an equal allocation of time for science, math, social studies and English. Therefore, students taught within this particular model receive anywhere from 45 to 50 minutes a day of instruction in English. With science teachers and social studies teachers now spending large portions of their time teaching and reviewing the essential skills for their content areas, as opposed to reinforcing reading skills, we must ask whether 50 minutes of English a day is an ample amount of time to address the needs of struggling adolescent readers? Districts and administrators must consider the external impact of legislation resulting in high-stakes testing, while planning for personnel and curriculum needs in a way that continues the efforts toward reading and writing across the curriculum.

A third implication for principals is that a large number of adolescents who have been identified as having a disability have been found to have significant deficiencies in the area of reading (Gibb & Wilder, 2002). In an era of accountability where all students are being held accountable for their learning, this fact presents important challenges for schools both in planning and in practice. For example, some parents of students with disabilities set a goal for their children of earning a standard high school diploma. In

today's high-stakes environment, students with disabilities are often required to take and pass many of the same statewide assessments as their regular education peers if they too are to earn a standard high school diploma. Coupled with the fact that many students with disabilities struggle with reading is the reality that lesson pacing in many self contained classrooms serving this student population lags behind pacing found in regular education settings (Boscardin, 2005). As a result, students with disabilities are not always exposed to all of the essential skills within a given curriculum during the course of a school year. Thus, this student population often winds up being held accountable for material on end-of-year assessments that they were either never exposed to or provided a sufficient amount of time to demonstrate mastery during the school year.

Principals serve as the instructional leaders of the building and, thus, set the tone for student achievement. In order to help learners with special needs succeed, they must be willing to take a more active and well thought out role in the special education program and ensure best reading practices occur. It is no longer sufficient to delegate instructional leadership tasks, as has been a common practice in the past. By working collaboratively with other building administrators, the building's special educators, and district supervisors, principals can ensure that effective and comprehensive reading programs are in place.

Grounded in a review of the literature and in the findings from the study reported, several recommendations can be made that are directly applicable to leadership practice. Recommendations for principals include:

9.1

(1) Develop small learning communities within the school buildings where teachers work collaboratively to develop lesson plans that meet the varying needs of all learners.

(2) Institute faculty best practices learning groups. These study groups should focus on research-based instructional practices and strategies and how to implement these into daily teaching practices.

(3) Require all instructional personnel to participate in on-going professional development to facilitate the improvement of reading instructional skills. Although students in the secondary grades are expected to know how to read, too often students are lacking the requisite reading skills to effectively master the content. Secondary-level teacher preparatory programs do not generally focus on how to teach students to read, as that skill is assumed to have been learned in the elementary grades.

(4) Ensure through effective communication that all staff members have a clear understanding of the shared vision and long range plan of the school and expectations for implementation of specific programs.

Finally, school districts must do a better job with the professional development of current teachers and administrators just as universities must do a better job of preparing future teachers and leaders to take on instructional leadership roles. The fact that, in the current study, respondents relayed the choice to, many times, use reading programs not approved by the district, may indicate dissatisfaction and a realization that current program are not working. This illustrates a need for the district to engage in suitable and systematic planning that includes the vision and knowledge of all stakeholders. One-size-fits-all programs cannot live up to the standard of meeting all needs for all students. More flexibility must be in place for teachers and leaders to be able to make educated decisions about what programs to use with individual students. Further, packaged programs are not often the answer to solving the reading deficiencies of students. No packaged program can take the place of sound instruction founded in the five, research-driven, components of an effective reading program: phonemic awareness; phonics; vocabulary development; reading fluency; and reading comprehension. Teachers and administrators, particularly those in secondary settings because they do not often receive this information in preparation programs as elementary educators do, must have explicit instruction in the teaching of reading. Students can not independently learn content until they can read with a basic level of fluency.

10 Conclusion

The current emphasis on accountability in K-12 public education has redefined the role of the school principal (Brewer, 2001; Cooley & Shen, 2003; DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004; King, 2002; Tirozzi, 2001). While many of the job responsibilities for principals have not changed, the emerging role of the principal as instructional leader is now more prevalent and meaningful than ever before. As a result, the primary responsibility of today's principal is to plan for and facilitate effective teaching and learning in an environment where student achievement scores on mandated statewide assessments either meet or exceed benchmarks set at the state and federal levels via the No Child Left Behind Act.

One of the significant challenges for secondary principals regarding student achievement is the difficult task of improving the literacy skills of struggling adolescent readers who arrive at this level lacking the skills necessary to be successful in an environment which primarily focuses on the of learning content material. Realizing the need to address the issues surrounding struggling adolescent readers, educational leaders, policymakers and organizations such as the International Reading Association are now bringing more attention to this particular student population (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Ryucik, 1999; Roe, 2004). In an era where graduation from high school can be dependent upon the successful completion of statewide assessments, it is imperative that the needs of struggling adolescent readers are addressed through the identification of best practices and sound programs that will enhance students' literacy skills and that such programs be included in both district and school level strategic planning endeavors. Such efforts could ultimately have a significant and positive impact on students' performances on mandated state assessments in all core content areas.

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11.1 Appendix A: Special Education Reading Survey - Teachers, Assistant Principals, and Principals of Students with Special Needs

Special Education Reading Survey - Teachers of Students With Special Needs and Assistant Principals of Teachers of Students

You have been chosen to complete this survey because you are a teacher of students with special needs. Please take the time to complete this survey, as it will be used for professional development opportunities for the special education reading program and future efforts focusing on students with special needs. We value your feedback and seek your voice. Please answer all questions and, if possible, provide comments and further explanation when provided space. Please complete the survey by October 6, 2006. Your questionnaire is anonymous and the results will be tallied and then discarded. Thank you for your assistance in this important matter. This survey is sponsored by XXX and endorsed by XXX.

1. Is your building using a remedial reading program or programs for special education?

Yes - No

2. Which remedial reading programs are being used in your building?

- Reading Program #1
- Reading Program #2
- Reading Program #3
- Reading Program #4
- None
- Other (please specify)

3. How is reading taught to inclusion students in your building

- A regular education reading program is being used.
- Accommodations are being used in the classroom.
- A modified regular education reading program is being used.
- A remedial reading program is being used in the classroom.
- Other (please specify)

4. How is reading taught to students in a self-contained setting?

- A regular education reading program is being used.
- Accommodations are being used in the classroom.
- A modified regular education reading program is being used.
- A remedial reading program is being used in the classroom.
- Other (please specify)

5. What is your definition of remedial reading?

6. Is your definition of remedial reading occurring in your school building right now?

7. What do you see as areas of strength in your special education reading program?

8. How does your principal and/or assistant principal help guide your remedial reading program.

9. What type of assistance from your building level administrators would you like to receive in addition to services already being provided to assist you in teaching the remedial reading program?

Special Education Reading Survey - Assistant Principals of Teachers of Students

You have been chosen to complete this survey because you are an assistant principal of special education teachers. Please take the time to complete this survey, as it will be used for professional development opportunities for the special education reading program and future efforts focusing on students with special needs. We value your feedback and seek your voice. Please answer all questions and, if possible, provide comments and further explanation when provided space. Please complete the survey by October 6, 2006. Your questionnaire is anonymous and the results will be tallied and then discarded. Thank you for your assistance in this important matter. This survey is sponsored by XXX and endorsed by XXX.

1. Is your building using a remedial reading program or programs for special education?

Yes - No

2. Which remedial reading programs are being used in your building?

- Reading Program #1
- Reading Program #2
- Reading Program #3
- Reading Program #4
- None
- Other (please specify)

3. How is reading taught to inclusion students in your building

- A regular education reading program is being used.
- Accommodations are being used in the classroom.
- A modified regular education reading program is being used.
- A remedial reading program is being used in the classroom.
- Other (please specify)

4. How is reading taught to students in a self-contained setting?

- A regular education reading program is being used.
- Accommodations are being used in the classroom.
- A modified regular education reading program is being used.
- A remedial reading program is being used in the classroom.
- Other (please specify)

5. What is your definition of remedial reading?

6. Is your definition of remedial reading occurring in your school building right now?

7. What do you see as areas of strength in your special education reading program?

8. Are there any instructional issues in the area of the special education remedial reading programs that you are responsible for?

Special Education Reading Survey - Principals of Teachers of Students With Special Needs

You have been chosen to complete this survey because you are principal of teachers of students with special needs. Please take the time to complete this survey, as it will be used for professional development opportunities for the special education reading program and future efforts focusing on students with special needs. We value your feedback and seek your voice. Please answer all questions and, if possible, provide comments and further explanation when provided space. Please complete the survey by October 6, 2006. Your questionnaire is anonymous and the results will be tallied and then discarded. Thank you for your assistance in this important matter. This survey is sponsored by XXX and endorsed by XXX.

1. Is your building using a remedial reading program or programs for special education?

- Yes - No

2. Which remedial reading programs are being used in your building?

- Reading Program #1

- Reading program #2
- Reading program #3
- Reading Program #4
- None
- Other, Please Specify

3. How is reading taught to inclusion students in your building

- A regular education reading program is being used.
- Accommodations are being used in the classroom.
- A modified regular education reading program is being used.
- A regular education reading program is being used.
- A remedial reading program is being used in the classroom.
- Other (please specify)

4. How is reading taught to students in a self-contained setting?

- A regular education reading program is being used.
- Accommodations are being used in the classroom.
- A modified regular education reading program is being used.
- A regular education reading program is being used.
- A remedial reading program is being used in the classroom.
- Other (please specify)

5. What is your definition of remedial reading?

6. Is your definition of remedial reading occurring in your school building right now?

7. What do you see as areas of strength in your special education reading program?

8. As the building level instructional leader, how do you help guide the remedial reading program for special education students?