Literacy definer: The role of the reading specialist in problem solving
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Abstract

Two recent changes in federal law have made an impact on reading instruction in the United States, particularly for students for whom learning to read is difficult. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed into law in 2002, requires that all students meet an achievement standard in reading by the year 2014. NCLB also recognizes that reading specialists are highly qualified to instruct students who struggle with reading, even if those students have been identified as having a learning disability. In addition, with the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004, a new method of identifying students with learning disabilities is recommended. This preferred method of identification is called Response to Intervention (RTI). Students are identified as requiring special education services after their lack of response to evidence-based instruction in reading has been documented. The process through which the instructional practices are documented and monitored is called Problem Solving. This study was a qualitative investigation of the role of the reading specialist in the Problem Solving model.

Participants in this grounded theory study included reading specialists employed by one of five large K-12 school districts implementing Problem Solving. Questionnaires were sent to 207 reading specialists in the Prairie West Consortium. The responses to the questionnaires were examined, and those responding to the questionnaires were offered the opportunity to participate in an interview with the investigator. Follow-up interviews with 10 individual reading specialists were conducted. Through an examination of data including the responses to the questionnaires, interview transcripts, and handouts from Problem Solving training meetings, a theory was developed regarding the role of the reading specialist in Problem Solving.

Because of his or her unique professional preparation, the expertise of the reading specialist was found to be essential to successful implementation of Problem Solving. Findings indicated that it is the reading specialist who can identify the research-based instructional strategies most beneficial to students who struggle with reading. Through collaboration with other professionals on the Problem Solving team, the reading specialist can help create a vision for the model in his or her district or school. The reading specialist can also assist his or her team in considering the student's story in conjunction with assessment data, including curriculum-based measurement. The study concludes with implications for practice and future research.