

Remedial Reading Teachers to Reading Specialists: The Evolution of a Profession and its Necessary Personality Traits

Savannah Sage Maydew

The role of reading specialists, historically referred to as remedial reading teachers, has undergone a profound evolution over the past several decades. This transformation reflects shifting educational policies, advancements in research, and the increasing complexity of literacy instruction. The work of Hurt et al. (1975) serves as a foundational lens for exploring the personality traits essential to this profession. By contextualizing their findings within modern educational frameworks, this article examines how these traits have evolved to meet the demands of contemporary teaching environments.

This article is intended for a diverse audience, including classroom teachers seeking to enhance their understanding of literacy intervention, reading specialists aiming to refine their professional practice, and policymakers invested in shaping educational policies that support literacy development. By providing insights into historical milestones, critical personality traits, and the expanded roles of reading specialists, this study seeks to inform and empower stakeholders committed to advancing literacy education. Collaboration, adaptability, and leadership are central themes, reflecting the multifaceted responsibilities of reading specialists in modern educational contexts.

Original Authorship Context

The work of Hurt et al. (1975) emerged from a uniquely collaborative effort during a pivotal time in educational research. At the time, David Hurt, a Ph.D. candidate with interests in counselor education, collaborated with Elnora O. Roane, Earline M. Simms, and Dr. Leo M. Schell, all accomplished scholars with expertise in inclusive reading programs, student teaching, and literacy education. This collaboration brought together diverse perspectives, including those of men and women and individuals from different racial backgrounds, a notable achievement in the post-civil rights era.

This context underscores the forward-thinking nature of their research, which not only addressed the traits necessary for effective remedial reading instruction but also exemplified the value of inclusivity and diverse expertise in advancing educational scholarship. Their unified approach laid the foundation for understanding the interpersonal traits essential to supporting diverse learners, a principle that remains critical in modern literacy intervention.

Summary of Work

As the authors of the original research article were no doubt aware, teachers, regardless of content, have always been required to wear many hats. The hat of content knowledge and core competencies likely come to mind first for the public. The truth of the matter is that while content knowledge is undoubtedly important, there are many other requisite dispositions that teachers must have to be successful. This is especially true when considering the traits needed by teachers that work with students in a reading intervention capacity.

Hurt et al. (1975) collectively sought an answer to the question: What personality traits are needed by remedial reading teachers? They collected survey data from (then) active remedial reading teachers across the state of Kansas, only including data pertaining to personality traits excluding content knowledge and/or competencies. The response categories that were generated after collecting this data were as follows: understanding and acceptance, patience, flexibility, supportive, creative, rapport and friendly, enthusiastic, interest or concern, loving, tactful, happy, trustworthy, and good listener (Hurt et al., 1975).

Upon reading through the qualitative data collected in the survey, there were several teacher response comments that I felt were particularly poignant and still very relevant:

“Tolerance and sensitivity of children whose economic, social, and language backgrounds are less than ideal.”

“Accept failure, not defeat.”

“Warm and affectionate.”

“Personal enthusiasm for books and reading.”

“Love of children and love of teaching.”

“Ability to relate to all...and accept constructive criticism.”

“Be happy, positive, and honest.” (Hurt et al., 1975, p. 3)

These reading teachers demonstrated an awareness of the requisite soft skills that correlate with and directly impact remedial reading instruction. It is necessary to acknowledge that I, personally, would not remove any of these qualities from the list of personality traits needed by modern reading interventionists. However, due to the evolution of the landscape of reading intervention, it may be necessary to add a few, which I will outline later in this article. Essentially, the original authors were able to condense their aggregate list of personality trait categories into “The Big 5” which were understanding/acceptance, patience, flexible, supportive, and rapport/friendly. Hurt et al. (1975) conclude their work with a proposed recommendation for remedial reading teachers to participate in active self-reflection on the traits outlined in the survey data to identify any potential areas of growth to ensure they were “teaching *children* as well as teaching *reading*” (p. 4).

Historical Context

Prior to the writing of the aforementioned article, several legislative measures had taken place which had a direct impact on remedial reading teachers and instruction. For example, in 1960 a new certification system was put in place. Teachers had to now be qualified to provide remedial reading instruction through a certification process. In modern education, this is certainly not a

novel concept, however from a historical perspective this was a major shift in the professional development of reading teachers.

Educational Policy

Building upon this historical foundation, shifts in educational policy further redefined the roles and expectations of reading specialists, beginning with the implementation of Title I. Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was designed for the sole purpose of funding public school programming which targeted equal access to core and supplemental reading instruction. Title 1 is still an integral part of modern-day public education and is a vital piece of funding for education in lower socio-economic areas. After Title 1 was formed, many were optimistic that this funding would then eliminate the reading gaps present in the United States by being able to adequately train teachers to meet student needs. Kincaid (1967) stated, “Title 1 suddenly provided us with millions to help us do a better job with our neglected students” (p. 307). This funding also acknowledged that, “No school program can be any better than the teachers who are responsible for it” (Kincaid, 1967, p. 307).

Equally important—properly evaluating the context of the publication in review—there were at that time two optimistic assumptions about special reading programs. The first being that this specialized reading instruction would dramatically improve the reading ability of the students which it served. The second being that these dramatic gains and improvements would be sustained after completing the intervention program (Evans, 1972). It is rather easy to see how the work Hurt et al. completed with their study proved to be very timely and relevant for the population of reading teachers in the year 1975.

Evans (1972) further illustrates the pressure related to evaluating the efficacy of reading intervention programs by stating, “Present remedial programs must be evaluated, and new ones planned on the premise that the instruction provided is appropriate to outcomes—that the skills taught lead to improved reading ability rather than to increased performance only in skills materials” (p. 114). The work of Hurt et al. seemed to acknowledge the importance of soft skills in the profession as well as establish the relevance of cultivating interpersonal traits in meeting the needs of students in reading intervention programs; that, in essence these traits were integral in serving students.

Of particular importance in the historical context of reading intervention was the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002. United States’ students continued to show a lack of reading achievement when compared to that of other developed nations around the world. The federal government created NCLB to enforce state standards, as well as standardize testing to monitor student progress toward meeting those standards.

Quickly, it was determined there was a need to define the term and criteria more clearly for specific learning disabilities. Shortly after NCLB, the year 2004 brought about additional restructuring of reading intervention as Response to Intervention (RTI) moved to the forefront of educational policy and practice. Response to Intervention reemphasizes No Child Left Behind’s (NCLB) statement that a learning disability cannot be diagnosed or assigned as a result of a lack of appropriate reading instruction. At the time, there was an increasing level of concern

regarding the overrepresentation of minority populations receiving special education services (James, 2004). RTI was designed to make this process more student driven and can be summarized in the following steps: Step 1) Universal literacy screening; Step 2) Use of scientifically valid interventions; Step 3) Progress monitoring assessment and data evaluation; Step 4) Individualize interventions for students who continue to struggle; Step 5) Professional process and discussion to determine eligibility for special education services (Mesmer & Mesmer, 2009).

At the heart of RTI is a focus on instruction. James (2004) provides the following rationale for the proposed utilization of RTI:

The emphasis of RTI is to focus on providing more effective instruction by encouraging earlier intervention for students experiencing difficulty learning to read. The assumption is that this will prevent some students from being identified as learning disabled by providing intervention as concerns emerge. (p. 2)

Mesmer and Mesmer (2009) indicate this shift in the intervention and identification approach can be described as supporting learners instead of simply sorting learners.

More recently, RTI has seen an evolution as the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support intervention framework has become the primary approach to reading intervention. Contextually speaking, there has been a continued prevalence of United States' students underperforming in literacy tasks in comparison to other developed countries. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was developed in response to this perceived deficit. "On December 10, 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law...ESSA replaced its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act as the federal education law governing the United States' K-12 public educator policy" (Schaffer, 2022, p. 2).

ESSA aims to close literacy gaps while also realigning efforts to address the needs of student populations that remain underserved. ESSA then made the recommendations that public school districts shift their intervention framework to MTSS. MTSS differs slightly from RTI because it encompasses additional facets of student considerations (e.g., social emotional health, behavioral needs). In other words, RTI is viewed as one of the systemic service delivery models that falls under the MTSS umbrella (Schaffer, 2022).

Personality Traits

Taking into consideration all of the aforementioned historical context, the modern reading interventionist's necessary personality traits are very much in line with the categories outlined in the work completed by Hurt et al. (1975). As a reading specialist, I can personally attest to the requisite soft skills that contribute to the success of students. Bates and Morgan (2018) state, "Soft skills, often known as interpersonal skills, are sometimes hard to define. They are more intangible than content or technical knowledge and can be difficult to assess" (p. 412). These traits—though hard to define and admittedly intangible—should not be excluded from the conversation surrounding the efficacy of reading interventionists. They form the foundation for creating a supportive learning environment that fosters student success.

Collaboration remains a cornerstone of modern literacy education. Modern reading specialists must work closely with general education teachers, fellow interventionists, and administrators to design and implement effective interventions. Adaptability is equally essential, as no two students respond to interventions in the same way. Leadership is also critical, as reading specialists are often tasked with coaching teachers and leading professional development sessions to foster school-wide improvements in literacy outcomes.

Modern Lenses. While the foundational traits identified by Hurt et al. (1975) remain relevant, examining these characteristics through a modern lens reveals how they have evolved to meet contemporary educational challenges. For example, the trait of understanding and acceptance, as identified by Hurt et al. (1975), is now deeply embedded in the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) within daily curriculum and intervention experiences. Tracey and Morrow (2017) put it this way: “Affective lenses on reading suggest that educators must consider, and address as needed, students’ emotional needs as prerequisites for supporting and advancing their literacy abilities” (p. 246). To achieve the ultimate goal of producing confident and effective readers, educators must first establish meaningful relationships with students, treating them as individuals with unique needs and strengths.

This understanding and acceptance also include recognizing personal educator bias when working with students. Educators must engage in critical self-reflection to identify and address these biases, whether conscious or unconscious, and maintain vigilance in planning instruction and analyzing data. Supporting students through their challenges, celebrating their growth, and treating them with the utmost respect were core components of the profession in the 1970s, and they remain integral today.

Another trait highlighted by Hurt et al. (1975) that resonates with today’s educational landscape is the ability to be flexible. As Tomlinson (2014) stated, “A one-size-fits-all activity is unlikely to help either struggling or grade-level learners come to own important ideas, nor will it extend the understanding of students with great knowledge and skill in the area” (p. 133). This remains true in modern practice, as each student responds uniquely to interventions. Flexibility and creativity are therefore essential to tailoring instruction to meet diverse student needs.

Moreover, verbal and non-verbal communication play a critical role in the interactions between reading interventionists and students. Hurt et al. (1975) observed:

The teacher develops rapport with the students by reinforcing non-verbal behavior with verbal behavior. He searches and finds some measure of success and achievement in the students’ work, and he lets the students know that he is proud of them. (p. 4)

Recognizing body language and using positive reinforcement are vital strategies for engaging students who may already feel frustration or resistance toward literacy tasks. Building rapport not only fosters confidence but also creates a foundation of trust that is crucial for effective teaching.

Landscape Shifts. While many traits outlined in the original study remain relevant, several key differences have emerged in the current landscape of reading intervention. Chief among these is the shift in terminology used to describe the field. The term “remedial reading teachers” has largely been replaced with “reading interventionists” or “reading specialists,” reflecting a broader, more holistic view of literacy instruction. Scholars such as Allington (2002) and Moats (2009) note that this shift stems from efforts to move away from deficit-focused language, which often carried negative connotations, toward terms that emphasize proactive and comprehensive support for literacy development. This change is further supported by the International Literacy Association Reading Specialist Standards (2017), which highlight the evolving roles of literacy professionals in addressing diverse student needs through evidence-based practices, collaborative leadership, and advocacy for equity. Similarly, the preference for “literacy” over “reading” reflects an acknowledgment of the full spectrum of communication skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—that are essential for academic and life success (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). These shifts underscore the profession’s ongoing commitment to inclusivity and the multidimensional nature of literacy education.

Certification requirements have also evolved. When Hurt et al. (1975) conducted their study, reading specialists needed two years of successful classroom teaching and 12 hours of graduate coursework in reading. Today, educators can pursue various pathways to certification, including reading/literacy endorsements, specialized certificates (e.g., in dyslexia), and formal reading specialist licenses obtained through graduate programs and standardized exams. These changes underscore the increasing professionalization of the field.

Another important difference to acknowledge is the advancement in brain research from the time of the source material’s publication. As technology improves, researchers continue to learn more about how the brain functions when completing literacy tasks. As such, collective knowledge and understanding of certain specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, has dramatically improved. Arming educators with this knowledge has created more shifts in the way reading intervention is viewed, and in many states this knowledge has led to additional legislation mandating the manner with which these students are supported in both general education classrooms and intervention-based settings.

The role of a reading specialist or reading interventionist in the school community has expanded to include leadership responsibilities. These often consist of coaching conversations with general classroom teachers, working to collect and analyze school-wide data, and designing and delivering professional development. Many responsibilities require the skill of facilitating constructive conversations with other professionals. Bates and Morgan (2014) describe it this way, “Constructive conversations do not mean providing a right answer. Instead, those conversations can support teachers with the means to consider an instructional practice or decisions in a new light” (p. 414). This underscores the need for strong collaborative and leadership skills among modern reading specialists.

Collaboration and adaptability also play a significant role in addressing evolving educational priorities. For example, reading specialists must navigate advancements in brain research, shifts in educational policy, and increased expectations for differentiation. By maintaining flexibility in their approaches, specialists can better meet the diverse needs of their students and their schools.

A final, albeit important difference to consider when reading the source material is the evolution of the term differentiation. Differentiation is also not a new concept. That being said, it has also been catapulted to the forefront of educational theory, pedagogy, and programming. It is no longer only the specialists in a building whose job it is to differentiate their content and teaching practices. Differentiation is now an expectation in the general education classroom for all age levels and content areas. Wormeli (2018) describes differentiation in the following way, “Differentiated instruction is a collection of best practices strategically employed to maximize students’ learning, including giving them the tools to handle undifferentiated experiences” (p. 5).

The goal is to think beyond the immediate impact of differentiating a classroom activity or assignment, to equip them with both strategies and confidence to approach tasks outside of the school day. The following analogy may also prove useful, “Just as we let students use their prescribed eyeglasses to read materials in our classrooms, giving them a fair opportunity to see, we can offer fair support for learning in many ways” (Wormeli, 2018, p. 8). This principle reflects a shift from immediate instructional outcomes to long-term skill development, equipping students with strategies and confidence to navigate challenges both in and out of the classroom.

Enduring and Evolving Traits of Reading Specialists

Modern perspectives on reading specialists emphasize a blend of technical knowledge and interpersonal traits critical to student success. Bean and Goatley (2021) identify the following characteristics as most important: teaching ability, knowledge of reading instruction, sensitivity to children with reading difficulties, knowledge of assessment, ability and willingness to fill an advocacy role, ability to work with adults, knowledge of reading research, lifelong learning, ability to provide professional development, ability to articulate reading philosophy, and energy. While some of these characteristics lean more heavily on content knowledge, many parallel the personality traits illustrated in the work of Hurt et al. (1975), such as flexibility, rapport, and understanding.

Sensitivity to children with reading difficulties, for example, underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing individual needs. This fosters both academic growth and emotional security. Similarly, the ability and willingness to fill an advocacy role reflect the expanding responsibilities of modern reading specialists, as they increasingly act as leaders and collaborators within their school communities.

The relational connection between teachers and students remains a central pillar of effective literacy instruction. Wormeli (2018) emphasizes, “Good teachers are productive, but they are also invested in relationships. A teaching technique without personal connection is just a static strategy; it has no meaning” (p. 11). This perspective reinforces Hurt et al.’s (1975) emphasis on traits such as rapport and understanding, which are essential for building trust and fostering a supportive learning environment.

Tracey and Morrow (2017) provide further insight into high-quality teacher-student relationships, stating:

Characteristics associated with high-quality teacher-student relationships and increased academic performance include a student's sense that the teacher understands and cares about him or her as a person; the student's perception that he or she is supported and respected by the teacher; an overall positive feeling between the teacher and student; and, a student's sense that he or she is physically and emotionally safe with the teacher. (p. 246)

Modern reading specialists often build these relationships through personalized strategies, such as one-on-one conferencing, individualized reading plans, or integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into literacy instruction. These practices ensure students feel valued and supported, creating a foundation for academic success.

As the profession continues to evolve, the advocacy and support offered by reading specialists remain as impactful as ever. In today's educational landscape, these traits extend beyond the classroom, encompassing leadership and collaboration with colleagues. In a rapidly changing educational landscape, these traits not only remain central but also expand to include advocacy and leadership, underscoring the enduring human element in literacy education.

Limitations

Due to the nature of this reflective review, there are limitations that should be acknowledged. First, I am but one reading specialist among many. Therefore, my experiences and perspectives may not resonate with the entire literacy community. However, I am confident that a majority will connect with many elements of this review, as the themes discussed reflect broader trends in literacy education.

Second, this review has been constructed utilizing a more historical research methods approach. While this method provides valuable insights into long-term trends and the evolution of professional traits, it may limit the replicability of findings in contemporary settings. Additionally, the formulation of this research has been strongly guided by my own personal experiences in the reading world, which may introduce some subjectivity. Despite these limitations, the findings presented are grounded in established literature and are likely to inform broader discussions in the field.

Third, this review also reflects a specific educational context, primarily situated within the United States. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of practices and perspectives in literacy instruction across global settings. Recognizing these contextual boundaries highlights the need for future research to explore how these traits are applied in varied educational environments.

As a future research endeavor, I would like to replicate the survey research methodology presented in the article to further compare qualitative data between the modern era of reading intervention and the source material. Expanding this research to include diverse geographic and cultural contexts could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving traits and roles of reading specialists. Additionally, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods could enhance the generalizability and depth of these findings.

Conclusion

Reading interventionists must wear several hats, some of which are new to the profession and reflect the evolving literacy trends and needs of our public schools. While the foundational content knowledge required of reading specialists remains critical, their success is increasingly tied to interpersonal skills that enable them to build meaningful relationships with students. These relationships are at the heart of effective literacy instruction.

In the modern educational arena, reading interventionists must also collaborate regularly with fellow staff members and demonstrate a willingness to lead within their school communities. The "Big 5" traits identified by Hurt et al. (1975)—understanding/acceptance, patience, flexibility, supportiveness, and rapport/friendliness—remain as relevant today as they were decades ago. However, shifts in educational policy and the expanded roles of reading specialists necessitate the addition of collaborative skills, a commitment to lifelong learning, and a readiness to lead as essential traits for modern practitioners.

These traits not only support students in achieving literacy success but also empower educators to lead and innovate in an ever-changing educational landscape. Change and adaptation are hallmarks of reflective practice, and as the role of reading specialists continues to evolve, so too will the list of essential personality traits. As educational landscapes shift, fostering adaptability, collaboration, and leadership will ensure that reading specialists remain pivotal to advancing literacy education and meeting the needs of students and schools alike.

Looking forward, continued exploration of these traits will be essential for shaping effective policies and professional development programs that empower reading specialists to thrive in their roles. By prioritizing these evolving traits, we can ensure that reading specialists continue to meet the challenges of tomorrow while upholding their critical role in shaping the literacy futures of students.

References

- Allington, R. L. (2002). Research on reading/learning disability interventions. In A. E. Farstrup & S. J. Samuels (Eds.), *What research has to say about reading instruction* (3rd ed., pp. 261–290). International Reading Association. <https://doi.org/10.1598/0872071774.11>
- Bates, C. C., & Morgan, D. N. (2018). Literacy leadership: The importance of soft skills. *The Reading Teacher*, 72(3), 412-415. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26632707>
- Bean, R. M., & Goatley, V. J. (2021). *The literacy specialist: Leadership and coaching for the classroom, school, and community* (4th ed.). Guilford Press.
- Evans, H. M. (1972). Remedial reading in secondary schools: Still a matter of faith. *Journal of Reading*, 16(2), 111-114. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40010250>
- Hurt, D., Roane, E., Simms, E., & Schell, L. (1975). Personality traits needed by remedial reading teachers. *Educational Considerations*, 2(3), 2-3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2102>
- International Literacy Association. (2017). *Standards for the preparation of literacy professionals 2017*. Literacy Worldwide. Retrieved from <http://literacyworldwide.org/standards>

- James, F. (2004, December 5). *Response to intervention in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. International Reading Association.
https://www.casponline.org/pdfs/pdfs/031706_1.pdf
- Kincaid, G. L. (1967). A Title 1 short course for reading teachers. *The Reading Teacher*, 20(4), 307-312. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20195734>
- Mesmer, E. M., & Mesmer, H. A., (2009). Response to Intervention (RTI): What teachers of reading need to know. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(4), 280-290.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27699692>
- Moats, L. (2009). Still wanted: Teachers with knowledge of language. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 42(5), 387–391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022219409338735>
- Schaffer, G. A. (2022). *Multi-tiered systems of support: A practical guide to preventative practice*. SAGE Publications.
- Tomlinson, C. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners* (2nd ed.). ASCD.
- Tracey, D., & Morrow, L. (2017). *Lenses on reading: An introduction to theories and models* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Wormeli, R. (2018). *Fair isn't always equal: Assessment and grading in the differentiated classroom* (2nd ed.). Stenhouse Publishers.

Savannah Sage Maydew (sthomp10@emporia.edu) is a licensed elementary educator and reading specialist in Kansas. She currently serves as an elementary education literacy methods instructor at The Teachers College of Emporia State University in Emporia, KS, and is pursuing her Ph.D. at Kansas State University in Manhattan, KS.