

# **TOWARDS A PROFILE OF THE JAMAICAN LITERACY SPECIALIST**

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## **Introduction**

Jamaican policy makers have prioritized literacy improvement as a matter of urgency within the educational milieu. This has become even more intense during the past decade with initiatives being mandated and implemented to promote this cause. One such initiative is the establishment of literacy research and development centres in two teacher-training colleges with a prime mandate to prepare a special group of teachers to extend literacy improvement efforts in Jamaican schools. While there has been some degree of controversy over the official title of these teachers in training, the name “literacy specialists” has been commonly used to describe the trainees. Studies have been commissioned within the Jamaican context to look at literacy and the Jamaican literacy milieu (e.g., Bryan and Mitchell 1998). However, a study to create a coherent profile of the literacy specialist has not been undertaken. This article is seen as an initial step in providing this profile. Its purpose is fourfold: it explores the literature on literacy specialists; attempts to create a profile of these specialists for Jamaican schools based on the views of selected stakeholders; seeks to position the literacy specialists within the context of the literature and the realities of the Jamaican situation; and explores the implication of such a profile for literacy programmes in Jamaican teachers’ colleges and literacy centres. This presentation will also include a discussion on the origins of the literacy specialist programmes in Jamaica.

## **Methodology**

In moving closer towards a profile of the Jamaican literacy specialist, the exploratory nature of the study suggested the use of multiple data sources and different modalities of data collection and analysis. The writers used document analysis and stakeholder interviews as primary data sources. A detailed comparative analysis of the International Reading Association’s profile provided the springboard for in-depth analysis of the current Jamaican initiative to prepare literacy specialists. Stakeholder interviews included literacy specialists in training, college lecturers, classroom teachers, and school principals associated with Jamaican primary schools. Purposive selection of respondents was necessary as targeting information-rich respondents was crucial to the process (Berg 2003). Collegial cross-examination of the data yielded the themes highlighted below and, ultimately, the profile of the Jamaican literacy specialist.

## **Background**

The literature is replete with descriptions of “reading specialists” within the North American context. However, a search for the term “literacy specialists” did not reveal the existence of any professional with such a title within international contexts. Policymakers and eminent educators in Jamaica have, nonetheless, embraced the term “literacy specialist” since it reflects a more encompassing view

concerning developing individuals who are prepared for lifelong learning within a variety of contexts and meeting a multiplicity of challenges in an ever-changing world (Ministry of Education and Culture 1998). However, while the term “literacy specialist” is the generally accepted title within the Jamaican context, an examination of the profile of the reading specialists formulated by our counterparts in the North should illuminate the generally accepted profiles of this select group of professionals.

The International Reading Association (IRA), by special charter in their position statement on the roles of the reading specialist, describes a reading specialist as

a professional with advanced preparation and experience in reading who has responsibility for the literacy performance of readers in general and of struggling readers in particular. Such individuals may work at one or more of the following levels—early childhood, elementary, middle, secondary or adult learners—and in various settings... (IRA 2000, p. 100)

To elaborate, the IRA insists on postgraduate qualifications as required by their State Education bodies and clear demonstration of the proficiencies listed in the Standards for Reading Professionals. It is expected that training at the postgraduate level provides the specialist with the knowledge needed to give expert instruction, assessment and leadership—all important steps to realizing the vision of all children reading. Reading specialists are thus seen as supporting classroom teachers. They should be able to implement an effective reading programme and with their specialized knowledge they should be able to meet the reading developmental needs of students.

Reading specialists are also seen as working with content area teachers in a number of ways. These include assisting with effective library strategies and textbook use. One particularly important function is that of motivating students and helping them become independent learners.

Another key role—that of assessing students’ strengths and weaknesses—is also highlighted. Specifically, reading specialists should be able to indicate precisely the areas in which students need help and to plan appropriate lessons to address these needs. They should also be able to help teachers learn how to administer and interpret assessments.

This level of support for and collaboration with classroom teachers is expected to extend to the area of leadership. Reading specialists are, therefore, expected to be a resource—consultant as it were—for ideas, strategies and material. In other words, they are expected to lead in the area of professional development for classroom teachers. Conducting professional development workshops, modelling strategies or techniques for teachers, giving demonstration lessons or teaching collaboratively with the classroom teacher are some of the specific tasks they are called upon to manage. In addition to this, reading specialists should be able to source funding for literacy programmes. Possessing knowledge of various funding agencies, they should be capable of writing proposals in order to attract funding.

A key aspect of literacy development in schools is the home/school relation. Because it is so important that parents support the work done in schools and cooperate with the classroom teacher in building literacy skills, the IRA document also focuses on the function of reading specialists in building parent/teacher relationships. Specifically, reading specialists are also seen as needed to help parents

understand the reading programme. In effect, the document defines reading specialists as “change agents” who function to reform the total school environment in its delivery of effective reading programmes.

There is no doubt that functions of the reading specialists, as listed by the document, indicate the standards at which such professionals should operate. And with reading specialists operating at those standards, it follows then that reading achievement will improve with them on staff.

The roles of the reading specialists are clearly diverse and complex. Quatroche et al (2001) summarize these IRA guidelines of the roles of the reading specialist as those which relate to:

- assessment and instruction
- professional development to include the sharing of current research findings with staff members
- collegial support, and
- interpreting the reading programme to parents and the wider community.

In addition, Quatroche et al (2001) in their review of research on reading specialists elaborate on these roles. In looking at the reading specialist in Title 1 programmes (i.e. programmes supported by the US federal government to improve the literacy and math performance in schools) they note that there has been a shift in the role of reading specialists from being instructors to all students while focusing on remedial instruction, to that of being specialists working collaboratively with classroom teachers.

Interestingly, Quatroche et al identify the role of reading specialists through having major stakeholders define it. So, citing a study done by Barclay and Thistewaite (1992), they indicate that reading specialists viewed themselves as primarily responsible for instruction. To this were added the tasks of formal assessment, communicating with teachers and parents, and organizing and administering school reading programmes. From their point of view, the professional development of staff was also cited as another important responsibility. The view of Administrators, on the other hand, focused mainly on two roles— diagnostic testing in reading and the provision of remedial instruction. Classroom teachers, in different contexts, differed in their expectations. So, middle and secondary teachers wanted the reading specialist as a resource person or a consultant; elementary teachers saw them as support persons.

With each stakeholder having different demands and expectations of the reading specialist, and with reading specialists having their own views on how they should operate, it becomes increasingly urgent that the role(s) of the reading specialist be clarified. Perhaps one of the most important roles for the reading specialist is that of student advocate. Quatroche et al state that some reading specialists view enhancing student self-esteem and motivating students to learn as an important responsibility.

Surprisingly, the IRA position statement does not elaborate on this, nor do Quatroche et al, even as they cite Hamilton’s (1993) study which documents the practices of two exemplary reading specialists and conclude that these specialists were most effective in a student advocate role. Hamilton indicates that the advocacy role resulted from the specialists’ attitudes to their students which included a strong conviction that they could succeed. Yet such a role is fundamental, as Fader (1972) discusses. Based on

his work with students perceived to be non-readers or lacking interest in reading, he also concludes that the teachers' attitude and relationship with students is paramount to their success. The impact of student advocacy on students' literacy achievement needs to be studied further as it has serious implications for the role of the reading specialist.

The role of the reading specialist is also determined by context. Quatroche et al (2001) in their discussion of different classroom models of instruction (in-class and pull-out model) note that different expectations were created. With the pull-out model, reading specialists functioned as specialists providing remedial instruction to students with reading difficulties. The in-class model, however, required the specialists to operate in a multi-tasked way. Not only were they expected to assume many of the tasks of the classroom teacher but they also had the responsibility of functioning as consultant and as a resource person.

The shift then to more in-class instruction requires that reading specialists function as collaborative consultants (Jaeger 1996, Henwood 2003). In this role, they serve as resource persons to teachers and parents. They identify reading problems, suggest instructional strategies and plan lessons with the classroom teachers. Jaeger (1996), therefore, argues for the preparation of reading specialists as effective consultants, especially in light of the complexity of that role. To fulfil this role, she points out the importance of keeping the needs of the teachers and students as a priority. She insists that this includes accepting the perspective of those with whom one consults. The danger here lies, however, in not admitting the necessity of a different perspective that the reading specialist may bring to the teaching/learning process.

With the collaborative model, the reading specialist will also offer staff development but will use another approach. Staff development becomes on-going, as the specialists, using their specialized knowledge of reading, work with classroom teachers to identify problems and plan lessons together.

Clearly, reading specialists have to be specially trained for this role. It requires applying their knowledge of and experience in reading, yet coupling that with respect for colleagues' differing perspectives and subject positions, even as gaps in their knowledge of reading are addressed.

The literature also emphasizes the leadership role that reading specialists must play. In fact, Lambert declares that "the notion of shared leadership best describes the role of the reading specialist" (Lambert 1998, quoted in Bean et al, 2000). Whether their role is as resource persons, coordinators of reading programmes, liaison between teachers and parents, assessors, or instructors, Bean et al maintain that they function as leaders in these areas. It is thus imperative, as they all argue that reading specialists are prepared not only to function in the key areas of instruction, assessment, and leadership, but also in how to work collaboratively and how to be effective student advocates.

## **Literacy Initiatives in Other Nations**

The term “literacy specialists” does not readily emerge in the literature related to literacy development in other countries. However, approaches to literacy development internationally are significant to the current exploration. Of interest is the recent British National Literacy Framework designed to raise declining literacy scores in schools. Their approach, as indicated in the Framework, is more centralized, where the curriculum dictates content, and the specificities of literacy instruction are carefully scripted and mandated for use in classrooms. The Framework, which emphasizes phonics as a route to literacy improvement, has earned the criticism of limiting teacher creativity and minimizing teacher efficacy (Burgess Macey 1999; Manzo 1998).

The Joint Board of Teacher Education in the Caribbean (2001) compare the efforts at literacy development in the Caribbean to those of developed countries. The achievements have been highly rated. However, five mitigating factors to literacy development have been cited. These include:

1. tensions between current financial provisions and the new demands of the twenty-first century (e.g., technology and pedagogical shifts)
2. the absence of an effective vehicle for sharing literacy innovations among Caribbean counterparts
3. correlation between poverty in the home and the level of parental inputs in preparing children to meet the challenges of literacy development
4. a linguistic milieu where the convergence of languages based on colonial and post-colonial experiences has created complex language situations in Caribbean countries
5. an official language in these countries, English, which is often at best a second language for most pupils entering the formal education system.

Consequently, despite the best efforts of Caribbean territories, literacy improvement remains a major challenge. Hence, literacy improvement initiatives constantly emerge to address the situation. The literacy specialist programme in Jamaica provides an example of such initiatives.

### **The Origins of a Literacy Specialist Programme in Jamaica**

The paucity of research on literacy teacher practice and preparation in Jamaica has been a source of scholarly concern (Lambert and Hayden 1997). However, there is consensus that there are issues surrounding literacy improvement in Jamaica that need to be addressed at all levels of the Jamaican educational system. In a study exploring teacher educators’ beliefs and practices in preparing reading teachers, Hayden and Lambert (1998) concluded:

There are no easy solutions to the conundrums concerning the teaching of reading. However, if the teaching of reading engages a community of stakeholders in meaningful and creative ways, we may move a step closer in finding solutions . . . within the Jamaican context.

The commissioning of literacy centres with the chief purpose of preparing literacy specialists is the result of such stakeholder engagement. Creating an operational description of the role and image of these

specialists, though an elusive pursuit, is a necessary one. Exploring the perspectives of stakeholders through document analysis and interviews is a necessary first step in this process.

In 1999 through the mandates of the Chief Education Officer for Jamaica, literacy centres were earmarked for two teacher training colleges in rural Jamaica. This mandate was in partial fulfillment of the Ministry of Education's (2000) strategic objective [Green Paper–1999]: "To devise and support initiatives striving towards literacy for all, in order to extend personal opportunities and contribute to national development . . ." The stated purposes of the centres were:

1. Improvement of existing pre-service literacy programmes and establishment of an advanced Literacy Studies Programme
2. Development of the Colleges' capacity to provide in-service training and consultative services to primary school teachers
3. Development of the Colleges' capacity to undertake action research in primary schools
4. The graduation of students with advanced training in Literacy Studies and preparing them to deliver the primary school curriculum using the integrated approach. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2000)

In a meeting of stakeholders including teacher educators, Government officials, and Joint Board of Teacher Education (JBTE– the local teacher certification agency) representatives, a new programme known as Literacy Studies was formulated. During this meeting to outline the training programme for literacy specialists, a definition of literacy studies was created.

Literacy Studies is a programme of pedagogical pursuits involving reading, writing, and related skills. This programme is designed to engage teachers in the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to empower students in accessing opportunities for individual and national growth. Data emerging from studies indicate that the majority of students were unable to access these opportunities because of inadequate literacy skills. In addition, a baseline study of pre and inservice teachers revealed that they were not cognizant of, nor confident that they had the pedagogical skills necessary for implementing the required literacy instruction. Against the background of these findings two teacher-training institutions have been mandated to meet the necessary requirements to be Literacy Centres of Excellence within the Jamaican teacher education context. (JBTE, 1999)

An initial attempt at creating a profile of the literacy specialist stated that the following would be the desired standards.

### ***Qualifications***

The literacy specialist should:

- love books and reading
- understand the physical and emotional development of children and how these affect reading development

- be aware of the importance of creating an environment that promotes literacy activities
- be knowledgeable in current literacy research or trends in literacy teaching and learning
- show enthusiasm for literature and be a model of acceptable literacy behaviours
- have a heightened sense of accountability.

### ***Assessment***

The literacy specialist should assess by

- utilizing a variety of assessment strategies
- demonstrating flexibility in the use of assessment strategies.

### ***Instruction***

The instruction practices should include:

- the ability to design suitable materials and strategies to enhance reading and writing
- focusing on developing literacy in the cognitive and affective domains
- finding creative ways of individualizing literacy instruction
- keeping abreast with current technology
- a willingness to experiment with new strategies.

### ***Professional Development***

In addition, the literacy specialist should be a resource person for other colleagues who need to find new strategies for dealing with their students' reading difficulties (JBTE, 1999).

Since the initial meeting that agreed on the aforementioned attributes of the literacy specialist, no further attention has been given to developing this profile. Furthermore, the perspectives of literacy specialists, school principals, and teachers in training were not elicited in creating this initial profile. In addition to highlighting the views of the stakeholders present at the meeting, the current research also engages these stakeholders who were not included in the initial process. The following section highlights the views of preservice literacy specialists, school principals, and teachers on the profile of the literacy specialists.

### **Preservice Literacy Specialists' Views**

In focus group interviews conducted in Jamaica among student teachers in all three years of the literacy specialist programme, different views emerged on the role of the literacy specialists. Chief among these attributes mentioned were creativity, the ability to provide individualized reading instruction, and a penchant for reading and sharing children's literature.

### **Creativity**

Preservice teachers highlighted the importance of creativity within the Jamaican literacy milieu. According to one respondent

a literacy teacher has got to be very creative—you are responsible for finding ways of helping your students to learn—you have to put together whatever to help them.

Another student teacher indicated that

we need to be flexible and very creative, very patient, understanding, learn to use what materials we have—be creative in making our own, based on what reading problems they have so far. We just have to be creative and flexible.

The emphasis on creativity is not surprising, since student teachers constantly referred to the shortage of literacy instruction materials in Jamaican schools. One student referred to her preparation for final year teaching practice:

The school that I am at . . . I realize that in the resource centre there is not an adequate number of books. In other resource centres in the rural areas, too, there is need for a lot more materials and the Ministry needs to look at this. There is not an adequate number of books for us to work with when we go out there so there, is the possibility that we even have to go out there with our own books in order to teach.

Creativity is presented as a necessary attribute for specialists in North America as well. However, unlike the justification presented by the Jamaican student teachers which focuses on the paucity of materials, motivation for this creativity in North America seems to be based on a desire to add to existing curriculum and support materials.

### **Ability to Provide Individualized Reading Instruction**

Literacy specialists in training identified inadequate emphasis on individualized attention as a severe problem in Jamaican schools. Therefore, the literacy specialist was seen as one who would be able to redress this situation. One student teacher stated:

When I went on 2nd year teaching practice what I noticed was that the students in my class lacked individual attention. Enough attention wasn't given to each student and they had severe reading problems. Ninety-seven percent of my class were not even reading at the pre-primary level and it was a grade two class. I think that was largely attributable to the fact that enough attention wasn't given to each student. The teacher just taught the lesson and that was it. She didn't make sure that each student really grasped the concept . . .

However, another student teacher highlighted the circumstances that militated against individualized instruction: "With the large classes, it is difficult to meet the needs of every student." Despite the



problems of large classes, the importance of providing individual attention cannot be underestimated. A respondent summarized the need for individual attention as follows:

You have to know the child individually in order to impart knowledge or whatever, because there are some children who have the ability to learn but because of their socioeconomic status they tend to drop back and have this lack of self-esteem, so sometimes we have to know the child individually in order to teach and meet their needs.

The concern for individualized attention is also discussed in the literature on the role of the specialist in North America. This concern, however, appears more in the context of whether instruction should be done in class or in pull-out sessions. There is also a shift away from the pull-out session there though it allows for more individualized attention. The disadvantage of the pull-out sessions relates mainly to the way such students are perceived as they often feel “singled out” and labelled as “slow”.

### **Penchant for Reading and Sharing Children’s Literature**

The need to include literature as an important feature of literacy development activities was underscored by prospective literacy specialists. According to one respondent :

They have to . . . want to impress the importance of literature on their students. I believe that that person also needs to be somebody who understands the importance of literature in its widest sense, who appreciates not just things that are said to be adult literature but children’s literature as well. They have to be able to appreciate literature on a whole.

Another student teacher highlighted the value of children’s literature in her individual tutoring experience:

. . . my child that I am studying—she is very shy and quiet. I’ve never seen her smile and I was wondering—what can I do for this child? And I queried with some of my colleagues and I got some ideas to use drawings and stuff and share books with her and she was coming on. You could see that little pleasant look on her face and today when she came to the centre and we shared the stories with her she actually laughed, and for me that’s an accomplishment in a sense because we used the literature . . .

Specialists in training placed great value on their course in children’s literature. Generally, they viewed sharing literature with children as an essential role of the literacy specialist.

This role of the literacy specialist was not highlighted in the North American context. Perhaps it was simply assumed that this would be part of the qualifications of any such specialist. It is, however, a role that needs to be emphasized, as reading specialists cannot pass on a love of literature if they themselves do not share such a relation to the subject. Given also the immediacy and appeal of television, movies and video games, it becomes even more urgent that students be encouraged to find pleasure in the written word.

Conversations with specialists in training highlighted several necessary attributes for the literacy specialist. In addition to the attributes identified above, other assessment and instructional competencies were presented as essential attributes.

### **School Principals' and Inservice Teachers' Views on the Profile of the Literacy Specialist**

This group not only shared views similar to those mentioned before about the literacy specialist, but also highlighted a number of other characteristics which they believed were necessary for the effective teaching of reading and, therefore, would inform the profile of the literacy specialist.

#### ***Positive Attitude Towards the Learner***

Principals and teachers, even as they acknowledged the importance of specialized training in reading, focused on the teachers' attitude to their students. Of prime importance for them was a teacher's keen interest in students. Teachers who cared for the students would make the time to know them, the activities they engaged in, the issues or problems they faced, their strengths, as well as their weakness. It is probably easy to minimize the effect of a caring teacher, but this group insisted on it as the basis for successful teaching. They, therefore, believed that it should be part of the training for literacy specialists. In addition to this, they felt that having high expectations of the students was also necessary; they believed that some teachers doomed their students to failure because of their low expectations. "Him can't read" often sealed a student's fate.

To support this is an observation made at a recent National Reading Conference (December 4–7, 2003, Miami, Florida). As many researchers in reading shared their reading programmes and projects, it was noted that their achievement of success with their student population was the result not only of the particular programme being explored but also of the researchers' vested interest in students' success. Their attention to, and their expectations of, the students signalled to the students that they could achieve the desired reading level.

Discussion of student advocacy is included in the literature on the role of the reading specialist in North America. We note, however, that it does not appear to occupy a significant space in the general review of the reading specialists' role, though a number of researchers have indicated its far-reaching effect on student achievement.

#### ***Good Models of Readers***

High on the list of desirable traits for the profile was that these teachers should be readers themselves. They would, therefore, model reading as a pleasurable activity. Reading would be presented as more than an opportunity for learning reading skills but as an end in itself. "Real reading" was what they were advocating. As the preservice teachers had indicated, these literacy specialists would themselves know and value literature. They would have experienced its importance in developing the imagination and one's creativity, and in helping one to understand self and society; they too would have discovered the beauty of the sounds, sight and rhythm of words: qualities that they could transfer to their students.

Moreover, as one teacher asserted, “they must have knowledge of children’s literature and authors; they must know what books are best suited for different developmental stages.”

### ***Basic Knowledge of the Literacy Situation in Jamaica***

A number of administrators felt that the literacy specialist must be well-informed about the literacy situation in Jamaica and must have a passion for changing the national literacy average. Such a person would have a genuine interest in helping students learn to read.

Awareness of the global literacy context in which the specialists work, which is the point being made by some administrators in Jamaica, is not a stated characteristic of the reading specialist in the general literature reviewed. Within the North American context researchers appear to be focused on particular local needs. This is clearly important but it does limit the necessary exchange of ideas and an expanded vision. Moreover, building consensus across borders and pooling our energies will create a critical mass of reading specialists that can only impact positively on all our efforts to realize the vision of all children as readers.

### ***Sound Knowledge of Different Learning Styles***

Children have different learning styles as one teacher explained:

Up to age seven, my son couldn’t read. After I took him to a [name deleted for ethical reasons] Special Unit, there was a marked improvement. Through the use of the computer my son learnt to read. Now he’ll stay up late reading and writing stories on the computer.

Literacy specialists should, therefore, be trained to recognize the different learning styles of their students and respond appropriately. This they will be able to do if they have been introduced to a variety of strategies. Another teacher also specified that an effective literacy specialist would, “approach the teaching of reading from different points of entry—music, art, craft, etc”.

The use of technology in reading was continually emphasized. Teachers felt that the literacy specialist should know how to and should use technology in the reading class. That, they believed, was a key factor in getting students to appreciate reading as they were usually motivated to learn by modern technology. The use of technology was also another approach that may best suit some students. Foremost was the use of the computer. Computer literacy was seen as necessary for the profile so that computer-assisted reading could form part of the general reading programme.

### ***Specialized Knowledge in Instruction and Assessment***

The IRA position statement refers directly to the level of the qualifications that a reading specialist should possess. It is expected that, given their function, they would be required to have specialized knowledge in instruction and assessment, which they felt could only be provided through postgraduate qualifications in reading. Though general, short-term courses and reading workshops were acknowledged as helpful in equipping teachers to teach reading, it was explicitly stated that such preparation was very limited.

In the Jamaican situation there is no requirement that literacy specialists should have postgraduate qualifications. In fact, many literacy specialists operating in the schools have only initial professional training—a three-year teaching diploma. There is thus some anxiety about the uneven level of knowledge in instruction and assessment as reflected in the principals' and teachers' comments on the role of the literacy specialist.

Some teachers in a high school spoke about the need for direct instruction in reading even at that level. The specialist would not only be able to assess reading but would also be able to teach the necessary skills. One very experienced teacher noted that too often teachers only tested instead of teaching the skills necessary for reading and comprehension. These comments indicate not only the expectation of how specialists should function but are also reflecting on what obtains in some places.

Given the many factors that contribute to students' reluctance to read or to their illiteracy, literacy specialists, it was argued, need to be prepared so that they can readily identify them. Of particular concern was the need to diagnose special learning difficulties or physical disabilities that would affect students learning to read, such as vision or hearing problems. The role of the specialist here clearly includes aspects of teaching usually associated with that of a special educator.

Additionally, literacy specialists should have a systematic approach to the teaching of reading, including clear assessment plans and progress charts. Not only do these comments address the matter of instruction and assessment, but suggested here is the notion that these specialists should know that they are accountable for the success or failure of their reading programmes to various stakeholders. In effect, they need to understand that they are a key factor in the success or failure rate of their reading students. The matter of teacher accountability is a valid expectation. It is not an expectation that was included in the discussion by North American researchers. Yet it is a matter that merits much attention, especially in situations where labelling underachieving students as "dumb" frees the teachers from their responsibility.

One radical idea that was proposed by staff for grade 7 students at a new high school was for literacy specialists to function like primary school teachers, that is, they would teach not only reading but most of the other subjects in the curriculum. Teachers at the primary level also wanted literacy specialists to function in subject areas other than Reading. This, they felt, would allow for integration of subjects and reinforcement of reading skills across the curriculum. Even as they recognized the need for special classes for children who cannot read, they were concerned about the problem of "image" in the upper grades. They wondered if the literacy specialist would be equipped to deal with older students who resist learning to read because they are afraid to acknowledge their illiteracy before their peers.

In the North American context there is a strong movement towards collaborative work—reading specialists collaborating with classroom teachers or content area teachers. Such a model has many merits and would address some of the issues raised above.

### ***Fostering Parental and Community Involvement***

This introduces another critical factor—the relation of the literacy specialist to parents and to the community in general. All principals and teachers interviewed advocated strongly that the role of the literacy specialist should include that of building bridges between the schools and parents. They are expected to motivate and help parents understand their role as “cooperating teachers”. Specifically, they should be taught to devise programmes and conduct workshops for parents so that they, in turn, can reinforce reading skills taught at school. One teacher expressed this emphatically:

The literacy specialist should be able to get parents involved. They need to tell parents what kind of support they need to give in terms of their child’s education. In former days parents were using education to get the child out of colonial fixed job situations, like that of domestic jobs. Some of the parents have had the benefit of education but are not using it now for the benefit of their children. Instead they’re focusing on “bashment” things—material things to glorify themselves.

In the North American situation, some teachers are focusing on parent involvement using a number of strategies (e.g. Parents’ Evening with Readers’ Theatre) and finding that parents’ involvement has a significant impact on students’ learning to read. It is based on the fact that some students come from homes where there are few books, where there is no parent to read to them, that teachers want the role of the literacy specialist to include the “instruction” of parents.

### A Comparison of Profiles—North American and Jamaican

A comparison of the profiles of the North American reading specialist and the Jamaican literacy specialist is instructive (see table). It is evident that the roles and expectations of both sets of teachers are similar. The major difference in the profiles is in the area of qualifications at the point of entry into teaching. Jamaican literacy specialists are not required to have graduate qualifications. However, we must recognize that progress has been made in this area as most of our teachers in the classroom currently have a teachers’ diploma.

**Table: A Comparison of profiles—North American and Jamaican**

<b>Attributes</b>	<b>IRA &amp; North American</b>	<b>Jamaican (Current)</b>
Roles	Leadership Instruction Diagnosis and Assessment	Leadership Instruction Diagnosis and Assessment Materials Creation – (as priority) Literacy (including English Language) model
Qualifications	Appropriate graduate education credentials (advanced professional training)	Three-year teaching diploma (initial professional training)
Experience	Prior classroom experience	No prior classroom experience

Deployment	Grades 1–12, Private reading clinics, adult@literacy, community@tutoring centers	Primary schools (proposed)
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The profiles also indicate another major difference—while the North American system requires prior classroom experience the Jamaican system does not. In the Jamaican situation, teacher trainees, however, do receive three months of classroom experience in year 3 of their college course. This follows the mainly introductory three-week period of teaching practice in year 2. Clearly, there is a decided advantage to specialists having prior classroom experience. What needs to be seriously considered is the advantage that may accrue if teachers currently in the system are the ones targeted for training as literacy specialists. Alternatively, a period of internship to allow for necessary classroom experience may be advisable.

As the profile of the literacy specialist is being considered, it is imperative that existing reading programmes at the colleges be examined. A prominent Jamaican teachers college has for many years been training reading specialists for the secondary schools. Their programme is comparable to the existing literacy studies at the literacy centres. The programme also includes courses in comprehension strategies, the physiology and psychology of reading, the evaluation and production of materials as well as the administration of reading. Not included are courses in children’s literature and literacy research. However, these students participate in an adolescent literature course. Student teachers in both programmes are thus being trained as literacy specialists, though for different age groups. The Head of Reading at the teachers college pointed out, that “the secondary programme is geared towards providing a broad foundation on which to build graduate or post-graduate work.” In other words, these reading specialist graduates would be qualified to pursue graduate studies in literacy. The similarity of the core of both the primary and secondary programmes is evident. Therefore, serious consideration needs to be given to the ways in which they can function separately, as well as complement each other, so that the needs of the nation are best served.

Currently, the primary student teacher at the colleges receives a total of 90 hours of reading instruction and has the choice of pursuing an elective in advanced reading—a 90-hour course. They are also taught children’s literature, which is offered as part of the language arts methodology course. With this foundation, these teachers should be able to provide meaningful reading classes in the primary school, but they do not fit the profile as literacy specialists. In order to fit this profile these students would need more in-depth knowledge of literacy. Clearly the level and depth of teacher preparation, i.e. reading courses studied, is also a factor in determining the profile of the literacy specialist.

## Conclusion

Stakeholders view literacy specialists as those who have received special training in literacy instruction. Equipped with a variety of reading strategies, they are able to respond effectively to students’ different learning styles. Capable too of using modern technology and other creative approaches to the teaching

of literacy, they are able to motivate their students to read and write well. Moreover, they are trained to diagnose learning difficulties and/or physical disabilities which impair reading and writing performance. Additionally, these teachers are themselves readers; they have a keen interest in reading and in literature, and know the value of literature for children. For them reading is a pleasurable activity, one which they wish to share with their students. Trained as well to teach other subjects apart from reading, they are able to introduce literacy in different content areas. Furthermore, these teachers will recognize the necessity of having the parents as co-workers and so be able to design programmes and activities that will enlist their help. And at the centre of all this is caring for the students—paying attention to their interests, their problems, their strengths as well as their weakness, that is, knowing them.

The descriptions offered by the literature and various stakeholders provide consensus on the following points:

- The presence of the Jamaican literacy specialist from early childhood to adult education is a necessity.
- The tasks of the literacy specialists are complex and varied yet the ultimate goal is literacy improvement.
- Literacy specialists should be highly qualified, experienced, and possess a high degree of literacy competencies.

While there are many concerns surrounding the training and functions of the specialists, ultimately it is the difference that the specialist makes in developing the child's competencies that really matter.

Perhaps the most agreed on point in this inquiry was that the role of being a literacy specialist in the current Jamaican milieu is a very challenging one.

As we move towards deciding the profile of literary specialists, what will prove most valuable is the contribution by key stakeholders in the field—that of principals, vice-principals and teachers. And, therefore, as we take into account from varying sources the many attributes of the literacy specialist, we have to acknowledge the importance of their views.

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