School-based Reading Specialists in Newfoundland and Labrador: Optimally positioned to lead change

By Tracy Critch and Jeanne Sinclair

Abstract: *This qualitative study focused on the literacy leadership of School-based Reading Specialists (SbRSs) in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Research on reading specialists is scant, particularly in Canada. Studies completed thus far agree that the role is not clearly defined, and more research is needed. This study aimed to understand the experiences and perspectives of the participants through an examination of leadership, specifically how reading specialists describe and position themselves as instructional leaders. Thirteen SbRSs participated in two virtual focus groups in October and November 2023 to discuss their experiences. The focus groups' discussions were structured around three research questions: What evidence is there that reading specialists view themselves as literacy leaders? What do they perceive as potentially supporting their leadership? What do they perceive as potential barriers to their leadership? The conversations were analyzed using deductive and inductive coding, looking for themes.*

Reading specialists have been situated in educational settings for quite some time but are a newer concept in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) schools. The Education Action Plan (2018) and the Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes (2017) made many recommendations to improve the NL education system, including creating School-based Reading Specialist (SbRS) positions in K-6 schools. While many studies can be found regarding the role of SbRSs, a limited number are completed in Canada, and none exist specific to NL. This study, drawn from the first author's thesis work, focuses on how NL SbRSs perceive their role to be defined, as well as the successes and challenges they experience as literacy leaders in their schools.

Though the SbRS role has been around for some time in Canada and longer internationally, there continues to be wide variation in application and responsibilities. Reading specialist, literacy coach, literacy specialist, and instructional coach refer to teacher leadership positions intended to improve student achievement. With overlap in the descriptions of these roles, they are sometimes confused and often used interchangeably (Fougère, 2014; Liu et al., 2021; Lynch & Alsop, 2007; Lynch & Fergusen, 2010; Marsh et al., 2012; Mraz et al., 2008; Prezyna et al., 2017; Toll, 2014; Brieske-Ulenski & VanAllen, 2019).

This study takes place at a challenging time for schools in NL. Day-to-day difficulties are overwhelming teachers. In the 2022 PISA (Program for Student International Assessment) reading results, NL ranked nearly the lowest in Canada (Imbeau, 2023). The score decline since 2018 was the highest decline of all Canadian provinces. While COVID certainly is a factor, the

average drop in scores worldwide was 10 points; in Canada, it was 13 points, whereas NL had a 34-point drop. In addition, mental health, behaviour, and violence are an increasing concern. The NL Teachers' Union reported a 29% increase in reported violent incidents in schools in one year and began a media campaign to bring attention to the issue (Kennedy, 2024). The day-to-day reality of school is likely quite different than the general public imagines, making teaching arduous.

As a NL-based SbRS, the first author is deeply interested in what is happening in the field. Her goal is to amplify the voices of SbRSs from across the province and provide an in-depth account of what is happening on the ground, with the hope the findings can inform the future of this role and contribute to improving reading in NL. The second author is a professor of education who is invested in the continued evolution of education systems to support all learners in meeting and exceeding their potential.

Study background

In 2015, Bean and colleagues surveyed 2531 literacy specialists on their roles and responsibilities. The results informed the revision of the International Literacy Association's (2018) definitions of reading specialist and literacy coach, which were evolving into distinct roles. However, regardless of the titles and the intended focus, the lines between the two continue to blur and overlap in policy and practice (Calo et al., 2015; Toll, 2014; Woodward & Talbert-Johnson, 2009). With the evolution of the role, leadership has emerged as an essential aspect for all literacy-focused specialists, and preparing them for leadership should be given attention (Bean et al., 2015).

Research has identified common challenges experienced by reading specialists in achieving their potential. One common theme is a lack of a clear definition. This can present challenges when establishing this new role. Lynch and Fergusen found that coaches themselves reported "not knowing what a coach is" (2010, p. 211). Additional challenges they reported included teacher resistance, lack of time, support from administration and access to resources. Similarly, after years of working with literacy coaches, Toll (2018) identified persistent challenges: administrators' understanding of coaching, training, and adequate time. Difficulties stemming from policies, school leadership and school culture can also add challenges (Ulenski & Van Allen, 2019).

The school's context and culture must be considered to fully understand how these roles function (Lowenhaupt et al., 2014; Poekert et al., 2016). Context includes but is not limited to space, culture, history, roles, relationships, policies, race, gender, socioeconomic factors, assessment, curriculum, leadership, and personalities in the school. This intricate web is unique to each school, so the experience of one coach can be quite different from another because of context

(Fougère, 2014). Atteberry and Bryk (2011) refer to the "realities of school life creeping in" (p. 365), creating a discrepancy between what we expect of literacy coaching and what actually happens.

It is human nature to try to make sense of our world, particularly with change. Organizational theorist Karl Weick (2012) developed a sensemaking theory, highlighting the collective process of how we make sense of uncertainty within organizations (Helm Mills et al., 2010). Sensemaking involves change, enactment, selection and retention of ideas, practices, and beliefs and can be applied to understanding systemic change in schools. Teachers need to make sense of policy changes that disrupt their usual operations. They organize new information by enacting or "living" the new policy and, through this process, come to terms with and work through the change. The ongoing nature of making sense of change happens within a social context. Organizations are social, contain power structures and norms, and have defined roles which impact sensemaking. Those in power can influence what will be determined important by managing access to information (Gavey, 1989). This was seen in research by Coburn (2001) on reading initiatives whereby principals controlled information given to teachers about new reading policy initiatives, resulting in their influence over teachers' sensemaking.

Teachers move educational policy change forward. When given the opportunity, the potential of teacher leaders to support and drive change is tremendous and was referred to by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) as "waking a sleeping giant" with "unlimited potential in making a real difference" (p. 109). Attention to their experiences and sensemaking is vital to understanding an initiative's success or lack thereof (Luttenburg et al., 2013). SbRSs' perceptions provide insight into their identity, experience, and contexts as they aim to establish themselves as literacy leaders.

Methodology

Study setting and recruitment

Over the past thirty years, education in NL has undergone many changes. In 1998, the denominational system with 27 school boards changed to a non-denominational system operating under eleven boards, with a Department of Education governing body. In 2004, there was a reduction to five boards, which were further reduced to one English and one French board in 2013. In 2024, the boards were dissolved, and the Department of Education assumed school administration.

The Education Action Plan (2018) introduced the SbRS position in NL schools, which was rolled out in phases. Phase One began in 2018, with approximately 40 schools phased in each year over the subsequent five years. SbRSs from Phase One and Phase Two schools were recruited. Principals were contacted for permission to invite the SbRS to the study. Once permission was granted, recruitment documents were emailed to the school secretary to forward to the SbRS.

Thirteen SbRSs representing all regions of the province, rural and urban schools, and full and part-time positions with various role combinations agreed to participate.

Participants

The following table outlines the various positions held by the SBRSs and their responses to the question, "Do you feel like a leader in your school?"

SbRS	Do you feel like a leader?	Role Combinations
RS1	Yes	PT SbRS + Teacher Librarian
RS2	Yes	PT SbRS + Teacher Librarian
RS3	No	PT SbRS + Instructional Resource Teacher
RS4	Yes	PT SbRS + Instructional Resource Teacher
RS5	No	PT SbRS + Teacher Librarian & Teaching
RS6	Yes	PT SbRS + Administration & Teaching
RS7	Yes	PT SbRS + Administration, Teacher Librarian & Teaching s
RS8	No	FT SbRS
RS9	Yes and no	FT SbRS
RS10	Yes	FT SbRS
RS11	Yes	FT SbRS
RS12	Yes	FT SbRS
RS13	Yes	FT SbRS

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data was collected through virtual focus groups. Turney and Pocknee (2005) recommend virtual focus groups to access hard-to-reach populations. SbRS are spread throughout the province, making in-person data collection impossible. Through online focus groups, reading specialists in remote locations had equal access to participation. The thirteen participants were split into smaller groups based on similar positions, and each took part in two focus group sessions held in October and November 2023. Open-ended questions directed the conversation. The conversational nature of focus groups was intended to parallel the discourse of

sensemaking. Sessions were recorded and transcribed on a secure Webex server and deidentified for analysis. Transcriptions were reviewed and revised for accuracy.

Data analysis followed the five-step process articulated by Bingham (2023). First, data were organized and coded by focus group and participant attributes (Saldaña, 2021). Then, data were sorted into large categories using an a priori deductive scheme according to the research questions (i.e., excerpts pertaining to topics of leadership, supports, and challenges). In alignment with Bingham (2023), within these categories, open initial codes were created, defined and developed. The open codes were modelled on Saldaña's (2021) initial coding process, which suggests the researcher remains open to all possible theoretical interpretations. These open codes were then organized by commonalities and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) across different participant attributes (full-time, part-time, etc.) and collapsed into a smaller number of themes. The final phase of analysis further inductively probed to understand the conditions associated with different manifestations of the theme, the actions and strategies SbRSs took in relation to leadership, and outcomes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

While many factors impact the leadership development of SbRSs, this article examines part-time (PT) and full-time (FT), the combination of roles, and feedback received within the school context.

Part-time and full-time SbRSs

Seven participants held PT SbRS roles. The PT role is often allocated in small schools; indeed, some PT SbRS work in schools serving as few as 49 students. While both FT and PT SbRSs report uncertainty in their role and feeling pulled in many directions, PT SbRS report this has more impact. FT SbRSs can focus on one role and hone their skills without distraction or interruption by other duties. PT SbRSs are pulled in many directions and have multiple responsibilities to balance. One PT SbRS shared, "It's really hard to focus and get the kids all the stuff they need when you're being pulled in multiple directions. The ideal situation would be that it would be your only job" (RS1).

Allocation and role configuration impacted PT SbRSs' management of demands. The role could be 25% or 50% and combined with administration (principal or assistant principal), instructional resource teacher (IRT, works with students with exceptionalities), teacher-librarian (TL, oversees the library learning commons and offers cross-curricular learning activities), and classroom teaching.

The time allocated to the SbRS position impacts what they can accomplish and their leadership development. A 25% position does not translate into considerable time, and other demands

encroach on what little time there is. RS4 stated, “If I had to write down for the district what I've been spending my time doing it's probably less than 25% SbRS because we're just short in other areas.” SbRSs with 25% allocation feel it is difficult to accomplish things and that they haven’t had much impact. RS7 stated, “A quarter-time or half-time SbRS is not going to make those changes.” The dynamics of the combination of roles further impacted participants’ perception of their literacy leadership, as discussed below.

Retaining SbRSs in PT positions is also more challenging, which makes it harder to develop leadership over time. More turnover was seen in the PT positions compared to the FT positions, with two-thirds of FT participants working in the same role since the outset, while this was true for less than one-third of PT participants.

PT SbRS combined with IRT Position

Two PT SbRS had roles combined with IRT. RS3, who had been in the role for less than a year, was uncertain of their time allocation and therefore applied a 50/50 split. When asked directly if they felt like a literacy leader in their school, this individual reported, “I feel like I’m sort of limited.” RS4 has been 25% SbRS and 75% IRT since 2018 and reported “Yes” to the question of feeling like a leader in their school.

At the time of data collection, RS3 had only been in the position for two months. Within that time, they reported building relationships with teachers by introducing themselves, explaining the role configuration, asking if there were students of concern they could help, introducing programs they would like to implement, and establishing a relationship with the Speech and Language Pathologist, all potentially contributing to leadership. RS3 felt welcomed in classrooms and supported by staff. In contradiction, however, RS3 reported pushback on some suggestions they had made, which they found surprising. Past practice in this school was push-in inclusion, so RS3 was requested to work with students in the classroom during instructional time, which they did not feel was effective: “I feel like my time could be better served if I had built a rapport with some of these other students and worked a little more one-on-one or within small groups.” They felt at the “teacher’s mercy” in the classroom because teachers have “their own plan.” RS3 felt they had to help with classroom concerns but believed “the underlying issue of not having reading skills or writing skills or whatever it is. Those aren't going to be fixed [through push-in instruction].”

Not having the capacity to work with students outside the class, combined with experiences within the classroom, contributed to RS3’s lack of a sense of leadership. RS3 tried reconciling conflicting demands and expectations: “It's a lot of learning. This is what the district requires, and this is what my principal recommends. Here's what I feel should happen. But what's the best decision overall?” RS3 found it difficult to reconcile their framework of what is needed to be

successful with school reality. Factors contradicting their frame of reference created barriers to RS3's leadership identity.

Since RS3 was recently hired, they lacked the opportunity to attend a large group training as RS4 attended in 2018. SbRSs, who have been in the role since the initial roll-out, commented on how the group training in St. John's had been encouraging, supportive, and an opportunity to network and connect with other SbRSs. The value was tremendous, referred to by RS12 as: "a huge safety net." Without that training, newly hired SbRSs largely have to figure it out alone. Newly hired RS3 said, "There was no guidance," and instead of being given a clear role, RS3 was asked by their administrator, "What kinds of things [do] you want to do?" While being asked such questions and having autonomy may be empowering, without a common vision and supportive network, making the role one's own is not simple. Operating within unknown parameters or those that do not align with one's frame of reference is difficult.

RS4, a 75% IRT and 25% SbRS who had been in the role for five years reported feeling like a leader. Like others, RS4 felt the line between SbRS and IRT roles was hard to delineate: "I keep asking myself: okay, as I do this, what role am I in here? It's a little confusing at times."

Role confusion may be rooted in part in how allocations were awarded. RS6 recounted, "When the SbRS first started, we lost 25% from our [IRT] unit and got 25% SbRS." This left the staff at that school feeling that "basically, they changed the name so that the SbRS is acting under the realm of an IRT" so that children who would not qualify for IRT services could now receive service through the SbRS. The interpretation at this school was that IRT time was being replaced with SbRS time, with the new role taking over the duties of the old role. Whether that was the policy's intent or not, on the ground, at that school, at that moment in time, that interpretation made sense.

RS4 discussed the value of collaborating with others over time: "We all have that relationship where we can say [do something differently], and no one's horrified." Reaching this point of comfort would not happen overnight and highlights the importance of time spent in the role. RS4 has had five years to learn, try things, develop relationships, and understand the school's needs. This also results in more opportunities to develop professional networks locally and provincially. As RS4 navigated the role over time and built their knowledge, the recursive nature of their sensemaking process has contributed to constructing a leadership identity. RS4 can see leadership as plausible, whereas RS3 is just beginning this process.

RS4 commented on their intent to be more of a leader by "leading the charge in the science of reading and trying to lead us away from practices that don't work as well, and trying to get to some evidence-based instruction." They felt that working with teachers more so than students was important, especially with limited time, so they could share their knowledge and "make

more of us." With increased knowledge for all teachers, they felt there would be "less kids that are going to need pullouts and support."

Both RS3 and RS4 acutely felt the demands of IRT. The current context of education in NL puts a high strain on IRT. Even participants who do not have an IRT allocation feel the strain of IRT demands. RS2 expressed, "I feel like I'm picking up the slack of the student-support services division that's completely overwhelmed."

SbRS combined with administration

SbRS, who were also administrators, felt like leaders but tended to associate their leadership with the administrative side of their role. RS6 and RS7 framed their responses similarly when asked, "Do you feel like a leader?' One replied, "Yes…But I'm also admin," and the other stated, "Yes. But I'm admin, though." The word "but" in their responses connected their leadership with their administration role instead of their SbRS role. When discussing the importance of consistent student intervention, RS6 again included a reference to their administrative role: "I keep reiterating to my staff *as an administrator* that these intensive and targeted supports are put in place for a reason. "

Even though RS6 and RS7 feel like school leaders, they do not always get feedback from teachers that supports their sense of literacy leadership. They tend to relate feelings of success to directly working with students. RS6 said, "The most I feel successful in our school, aside from the fun days, is when I'm working with my small group." This contrasts with their experiences working with teachers, where they report feeling more thinly spread, "supporting and modelling for the teacher." They also conveyed frustration when they tried to work with students, but the teacher made plans which included those students' participation. They felt this sent a message to students that time working on reading skills was unimportant.

RS6 discussed the importance and value of working with students. As others discussed, the strain of meeting needs is significant, so working directly with students was prioritized. RS6 reported, "Most times, are intervention groups for me because we are very short on our support staff. So, mostly right now, I'm working with kids who have interventions." When working with students, they see results, contributing to a positive feedback loop. "When I hone in with my reading group, and I'm just there doing my thing with them, I start seeing progression in their reading" (RS6). The positive feedback from this experience would reinforce that they make the best use of their time prioritizing working with students.

RS7 had multiple roles, leaving them pulled in many directions. They referred to "just squeezing in what they can" with the limited time available, and like RS6, prioritized direct intervention with students: "If you do a read-aloud somewhere, you put in a meeting there, and if you're working with a couple of students individually, you're getting it for 15-20 minutes, tops." As a

result, RS7, like others, found it difficult to understand how the role can be effective and how needs can be met: “We're not doing a lot of things justice; we’re just doing them.”

As a result of being spread thin, RS7 described school-wide literacy events as a trade-off. These events contribute to building a culture of literacy, which is an expectation of SbRSs, but RS7 felt it was at the expense of the students who needed consistent intervention. RS7 reported that reading interventions do not happen at these times and allocated SbRS time is surpassed. “That took a whole month of no other time for support because I was reading to K-3 and 4-6” (RS7).

RS6 and RS7 report their struggle to meet needs. Limited time and the demands of their other role make it even more difficult. They frame their work as doing their best but feeling it is not enough: “I leave here more frequently feeling like I didn't do enough. I didn't do enough to support this teacher. I didn't do enough for the students, even though I've done everything humanly possible that I can do (RS6).”

It was also noted that having a role combined with administration had benefits. These SbRSs do not need to build relationships with the administration or seek support. Typically, when SbRSs want to undertake an initiative or try new resources, they need administrative approval. This can be a potential roadblock as it involves convincing someone who may not understand shifts in reading science. RS6 and RS7 considered this a perk since they did not have the added pressure of convincing the administration that their idea was worthy. RS7 described it as not having “anyone telling me, ‘No you can't do it this way,’ or ‘you need to do it that way.’”

Still, discussions among SbRSs who are PT administrators suggested that this combination may not be the most effective because the administrator role must always be prioritized. There will be interruptions that cannot be avoided. RS7 relayed how administrative responsibilities cause interruptions and even require her to bring a group to a different location to accommodate “running back and forth to keep an eye on things while you deal with stuff.”

Part-time SbRS combined with teacher-librarian

Four participants were responsible for the teacher-librarian (TL) role. RS1 and RS2 are SbRSs and TL, while RS5 and RS7 have TL and SbRS responsibilities, amongst other roles. Both RS1 and RS2 reported feeling like leaders in their school when asked directly. It was felt that this combination was ideal for part-timers and was a “beautiful combination” (RS2). Both roles focus on reading and building a literacy culture within the school, and the demands of the TL role would not impede SbRSs’ time like administration or IRT.

RS1 has been in the SbRS role for less than a year but has been in the TL role for over five years. They reported feeling like a leader in their school, even before having the SbRS role. Their time in the TL role established them as the "go-to" literacy person. They shared with pride cleaning up

the library and adding thousands of dollars of new books, and as a result, an "excitement for literacy had grown that wasn't there before, [which] helped carry over into my reading specialist role." They felt the staff "already looked at [them] as a leader" because they have taken on many extra activities such as "student council, prom, parent nights, and movie nights." This feeling contributed positively to a leadership identity. They also reported developing a good understanding of the SbRS role because, due to turnover, they had helped several SbRSs settle in over the previous years.

The potential downside to this combination is being pulled for other duties, as it was felt their roles were easy to redeploy. This concern was not exclusive to RS1 and RS2 or even PT SbRSs. When a role is not directly responsible for students or doesn't impact teacher preparation time, the work may be seen as less critical on a given day. RS2 shared that they had been redeployed the entire previous year, and as a result, their school "did not receive any library or SbRS support" that year. When short staffing takes away the SbRS role, it may inadvertently send a message diminishing its value. RS11 described frustration when being reassigned: "I do find that very, very hard, I'll admit, because I don't want to be a substitute teacher. I have my job, and I really like it and want it to be valued."

Full-time SbRSs

The FT SbRSs in this study are experienced teachers, all having taught for twelve years or more. Their experience in the SbRS role ranged from two to five years. The work they described varied, but all displayed a strong commitment to improving reading at their schools. Some had implemented new programs. Others tried new assessments and screeners. Another described leading changes in kindergarten. All of this took time. FT SbRSs' discussions of leadership illustrated that time spent in the role is important. Four FT SbRSs said yes when asked directly if they felt like leaders; all had been in the role for five years. One FT individual (RS9) said "yes and no," and another (RS8) said they did not. These two individuals had only two and three years in the role, respectively, and RS8 had gone from FT to PT and back to FT.

The FT SbRSs in the role since 2018 report evolving and finding a place in their schools. They reported initially not knowing what to do and that "no one really knew what to do with" them. RS11 described the first year as "chaos, and figuring out, what is my role? What am I doing?" RS12 shared the story of their first day and that after everyone was settled away in classrooms, they went to their room, shut the door and "just cried. And I was like, what did I do?" Fast-forward to 2023, and RS12 now confidently states, "There's lots of things now that I have kept from the very first year, and there's lots of things I've let go of since the very first year and, like we've said, every year looks different." Initially, they reported feelings such as "being hated" by the staff, whereas now they report feeling sought out. Their initial feelings would not have suggested leadership, but now they report feeling like a leader.

The environment impacts the sensemaking process, including feedback via interactions, discussions and the actions of others. RS8 did not feel like a leader, and feedback from their school reinforced that. They did not feel included in important conversations, and the location of their room felt isolated. They did not feel that staff used them as a resource: “They don’t ask me anything.” This feedback from their environment contradicts plausible feelings of leadership.

RS9, in their second year of the SbRS role, reported ambiguous feelings of leadership felt “all over the place” as they began the role in 2022. In their second year, they made some changes and “rethought our whole idea of what's going on in terms of our grade levels and universal design.” RS9 felt supported by the administration, important in team meetings, and implemented and supported school initiatives. These experiences and feedback contributed positively to their sense of leadership. On the contrary, when a difficult conversation was needed, they felt a lack of leadership “because you're trying to have difficult conversations with teachers about things that may be happening, but sometimes their response... If they don't see me as a leader, then it becomes a line that you're constantly walking.” This impedes RS9’s development of leadership.

RS10 added that they do not equate themselves to administration: “I would never say I equate myself with admin or anything like that. No, not at all.” This delineation was also noted when SbRSs encountered resistance. RS8 said, “I don't feel like I have the power to be able to say anything about anybody's teaching, or anything that's going on, or anything in the classroom.” Comments by RS9 illustrate a lack of shared understanding of the leadership role: “I'm not sure that all teachers see me as a leader in terms of this position. I don't think it's directed at me. I don't think they see the SbRS position as being a leadership piece.” Comments such as this and the PT SbRSs’ discussion of leadership and administration raise the question: How is literacy leadership defined in NL schools, and is everyone on the same page?

Discussion and limitations

This study explored NL SBRSs’ perceptions of their role and literacy leadership. The findings parallel research from the United States and other parts of Canada with commonalities in ill-defined roles and perceived supports and challenges (Fougère, 2014; Liu et al., 2021; Lynch & Alsop, 2007; Lynch and Fergusen, 2010; Marsh et al., 2012; Mraz et al., 2008; Prezyna et al., 2017; Toll, 2014; Brieske-Ulenski & VanAllen, 2019). While the intent for leadership for NL SbRSs exists and has shown some success, struggles are likely to continue without a clearly defined role, a common vision, adequate professional learning and support, a strong knowledge base, fully staffed schools, and access to resources.

In NL, while the SbRS role is described as responsive to individual school needs, it lacks clear parameters, resulting in wide interpretation and varied approaches and leaving SbRSs to prioritize the best they can. Some participants focused on working with teachers, while others

worked with students. These prioritization decisions were not necessarily strategic but often based on immediate needs and where they believed they had the most impact. SbRSs reported feeling especially unsure in their first year and described it as chaotic. Making sense of their role was challenging. Establishing clear expectations so that SbRSs and all teachers and staff share an understanding of the role will help SbRSs meet their leadership potential.

Participants working as administrators and SbRSs identified as school leaders but did not necessarily identify as *instructional* leaders. For others, feeling like a leader and feeling as if you can act like a leader are two different conversations. Even those who stated they felt like leaders expressed many challenges that restrict their leadership capacity *in practice*. Reinforcing that conclusion for some participants is the concern that their employer doesn't see them as leaders or specialists. Participants discussed the irony that they have the word "specialist" in their title but do not qualify for specialist pay. This can contribute to feeling unable to lead (e.g., address ineffective practices). Participants quickly pointed out that they aren't "officially" leaders in their schools.

Recruitment and retention are vital to the success of leadership roles and must be addressed for SbRSs to be leaders in their field. When addressing the human right to learn to read and the need to make necessary changes in the education system, the work must be intentional, and the confidence to undertake this work does not happen overnight. Time spent in the role is important, and sensemaking is iterative, not a "one-and-done" thing. SbRSs in the role since the beginning have had time to establish themselves. Throughout, they have questioned practices and policies, demonstrating that there are contextual, environmental and social aspects that are still unreconciled. The expectation of SbRSs being responsive to schools' needs requires revisiting and constant sensemaking. Schools are ever-changing – the field of reading is significantly so right now. Those in the role longer have logically had more time to engage in this iterative process, thereby refining their knowledge and practice, positively impacting their sense of leadership.

Context and realities of school are important factors (Atteberry & Bryk, 2011; Lowenhaupt et al., 2014). While SbRSs shared many common stories, each school had its own challenges and managed them differently. As Poekert et al. (2016) note, feedback from the context can support or challenge leadership growth, and SbRSs reveal that both exist. Some situations, such as the successes along the way, supported leadership, whereas some, such as redeployment, challenged it. The challenging situation in NL schools with chronic understaffing and an uptick in behavioural issues means that SbRSs, who are highly qualified educators, are often reassigned temporarily as substitute teachers, IRTs, or in other roles. Although SbRSs are likely to be effective in these other roles, reassignment takes them away from the core mission of supporting all children in learning to read. Many SbRSs are responsible for student intervention groups,

which, to be effective, must occur consistently. When redeployed, this important work is interrupted as well.

Regarding limitations, thirteen participants is a small representation of the population. It should also be recognized that only SBRS in Phase 1 and 2 schools were included, so experiences of later phases were not reported.

Conclusion and implications

NL and Canada are in the midst of change in reading practice. SbRSs are optimally positioned to lead change. They are on the ground, understand their schools, and can support teachers as they embark on their own sensemaking journey in reading instruction. NL as a province is beginning to catch up with the research on reading development and instruction; however, schools led by innovative SbRSs are already making changes. There is the implementation of research-supported programs and screening tools; SbRSs and teachers are courageously making adjustments now instead of waiting for top-down directives. SbRSs are leading a grassroots movement to help our schools effectively teach reading.

The identified challenges need to be tackled head-on; the bottom line is that it will cost money. Investment on many levels is required. First, there is a need to invest in human resources and recruitment to increase staff and remediate short-staffing, so redeployment is no longer a concern for SbRS, and IRT needs can be met. Second, there is a need to invest in professional learning and support through mentorship of SbRSs; the “safety net” of the year-one training and regular meetings need reinstatement. Finally, developing clear roles can ensure consistent practices across the province. Without a clear definition of a reading specialist, it is left open to interpretation, which makes it hard to draw comparisons and establish best practices.

While this study has focused on the SbRS, the issues at play are bigger. They are system-based and impacted by society at large, and they require systems change. The province is currently completing its current Education Accord and embarking on educational transformation across the K-12 system and beyond. When it comes to supporting educators to meet student needs, we advocate for deep, sustained, and collaborative professional learning. Generations of teachers who were likely taught to read and educated at university in methods that lack an evidence base need support to know where to begin. New policies and positions do not guarantee success in reading achievement, particularly when the necessary support is lacking for successful implementation. Our SbRSs have taken charge within their schools and are trying to fix a too-big problem. Impressively, despite challenges, they are making waves and significant changes. They persevere because of their commitment to their communities and student success.

References

Atteberry, A. & Bryk, A. S. (2011). Analyzing teacher participation in literacy coaching activities. *The Elementary School Journal*, *112*(2), 356–382. https://doi.org/10.1086/661994

Bean, R., Kern, D., Goatley, V., Ortlieb, E., Shettel, J., Calo, K., Marinak, B., Sturtevant, E., Elish-Piper, L., L'Allier, S., Cox, M. A., Frost, S., Mason, P., Quatroche, D., & Cassidy, J. (2015). Specialized literacy professionals as literacy leaders: Results of a national survey. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, *54*(2), 83–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2014.998355

Bingham, A. J. (2023). From data management to actionable findings: A five-phase process of qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *22*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231183620

Brieske-Ulenski, A. & Van Allen, J. (2019). The role of the literacy coach: where we were and where we're going. *Primer 47*(2). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334001461_The_Role_of_the_Literacy_Coach_Where_We_Were_and_Where_Were_Going

Brochu, P., Chuy, M., Deussing, M.-A., & Houme, K. P. (2013). Measuring up, Canadian results of the OECD PISA study: the performance of Canada's youth in mathematics, reading and science: 2012, first results for Canadians aged 15. In *Measuring Up, Canadian Results of the OECD PISA Study*. Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. https://canadacommons.ca/artifacts/11206696/measuring-up/12085641/

Calo, K. M., Sturtevant, E. G., & Kopfman, K. M. (2015). Literacy coaches' perspectives of themselves as literacy leaders: Results from a national study of K-12 literacy coaching and leadership. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, *54*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/19388071.2014.941050

Coburn, C. E. (2001). Collective sensemaking about reading: How teachers mediate reading policy in their professional communities. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *23*(2), 145–170. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737023002145

Cosenza, M. N. (2015). Defining teacher leadership: affirming the teacher leader model standards. *Issues in Teacher Education*, *24*(2), 79-99.

Daniels, C. (2006). What is teacher leadership? *Teacher Leadership That Strengthens Professional Practice* (pp. 12–27).

Fougère, D. M. F. (2014). Instructional coaching relationships: An interpretive phenomenological analysis. Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 5128. https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/5128

Gavey, N. (1989). Feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *13*(4), 459–475. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1989.tb01014.x

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Aldine.

Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. (2017). *Now is the time: the next chapter in education in Newfoundland and Labrador*. https://www.gov.nl.ca/education/files/task_force_report.pdf

Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Education and Early Childhood Development. (2018) *The way forward: Education action plan*. https://www.gov.nl.ca/education/files/eap-report.pdf

Helms Mills, J., Thurlow, A., & Mills, A. J. (2010). Making sense of sensemaking: the critical sensemaking approach. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, *5*(2), 182–195. https://doi.org/10.1108/17465641011068857

International Literacy Association. (2018). Standards for the preparation of literacy professionals 2017. https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/resource-documents/standards-appendix-A.pdf

Kennedy, A. (2024, October 30). *NLTA says violence in classrooms is getting worse, not better*. CBC news. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/langdon-school-violence-increase-1.7367026

Liu, P., Li, X., & Ciren, Z. (2021). Exploring literacy coach research in Canada: A review. *Language & Literacy (Kingston, Ont.), 23*(3), 130–146. https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29549

Lowenhaupt, R., McKinney, S., & Reeves, T. (2014). Coaching in context: The role of relationships in the work of three literacy coaches. *Professional Development in Education*, *40*(5), 740–757. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2013.847475

Luttenberg, J., Veen, K. V., & Imants, J. (2013). Looking for cohesion: the role of search for meaning in the interaction between teacher and reform. *Research Papers in Education*, *28*(3), 289–308. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2011.630746

Lynch, J., & Alsop, S. (2007). What works? Research into practice. *Ontario Ministry of Education*.

Lynch, J., & Ferguson, K. (2010). Reflections of elementary school literacy coaches on practice: Roles and perspectives. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne De l'éducation*, *33*(1), 199-227. Retrieved from https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/3074

Marsh, J. A., Sloan McCombs, J. & Martorell, F. (2012) Reading coach quality: Findings from Florida middle schools, *Literacy Research and Instruction, 51*(1), 1-26, DOI: 10.1080/19388071.2010.518662

Mraz, M., Algozzine, B., & Watson, P. (2008). Perceptions and expectations of roles and responsibilities of literacy coaching. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 47*(3), 141-157.

Prezyna, D.M., Garrison, M. J., Gold, C. P., & Lockte, H. A. (2017). Principal leadership and reading specialist role understanding in the era of test-based accountability policies. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership*, *12*(2). https://doi.org/10.22230/ijepl.2017v12n2a686

Poekert, P., Alexandrou, A., and Shannon, D., (2016). How teachers become leaders: An internationally validated theoretical model of teacher leadership development. *Research in Post-compulsory Education*, 21 (4), 307–329. doi:10.1080/13596748.2016.1226559

Saldaña, J. (2021). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (4e ed.). SAGE.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques.* (p. 270). Sage Publications, Inc.

Toll, C. A. (2014*). The literacy coach's survival guide: essential questions and practical answers.* International Reading Association.

Toll, C. A. (2018). Progress in literacy coaching success - a dozen years on. *The Clearing House, 91*(1), 14–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2017.1348733

Turner, J.R.; Allen, J.; Hawamdeh, S.; Mastanamma, G. (2023). The multifaceted sensemaking theory: a systematic literature review and content analysis on sensemaking. *Systems*, *11*, 145. https://doi.org/10.3390/systems11030145

Turney, L., & Pocknee, C. (2005). Virtual focus groups: new frontiers in research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *4*(2), 32–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690500400203

Weick, K. E. (2012). *Making Sense of the Organization: Volume 2: The Impermanent Organization.* Wiley.

Wenner, J. A., & Campbell, T. (2017). The theoretical and empirical basis of teacher leadership: a review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, *87*(1), 134–171. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316653478

Woodward, M. M., & Talbert-Johnson, C. (2009). Reading intervention models: challenges of classroom support and separated instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, *63*(3), 190–200. https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.63.3.2

York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(3), 255-316. Retrieved from https://qe2a-proxy.mun.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/what-do-we-know-about-teacher-leadership-findings/docview/1681907150/se-2