

BECOMING A NATION OF READERS

Maybe Johnny can't read, as all those national reports insist, but reading specialists in the OU College of Education are determined to give Johnny every opportunity to learn.

“Reading is fundamental,” goes an old slogan that never has gone out of date, not even in this age of bewildering computer technologies. Reading is still the main ingredient in the pursuit of education, business or professional success, fruitful use of leisure time.

Nowhere is the conviction that reading is all-important held more strongly than in the University of Oklahoma's College of Education. The college's emphasis, of course, is on teacher training, but in the process new instructional methods and materials are being tested and students

from elementary school to adult are benefiting from exposure to the college's reading centers.

The architect of OU's efforts in these areas is Richard Williams, professor of education and director of the college's reading education center and its spinoff programs. Williams became interested in reading instruction while teaching junior high mathematics. “Modern” math had just been introduced, and Williams discovered that students who had been successful at “traditional” math could not make the transition unless they also were good readers. Likewise, the math perform-

By MARGARET FRENCH

It's difficult to tell who is profiting the most from one-on-one sessions in OU's reading education center (at right), Norman education senior Holly Wilfong or her 7th grade pupil, Duane Martin.

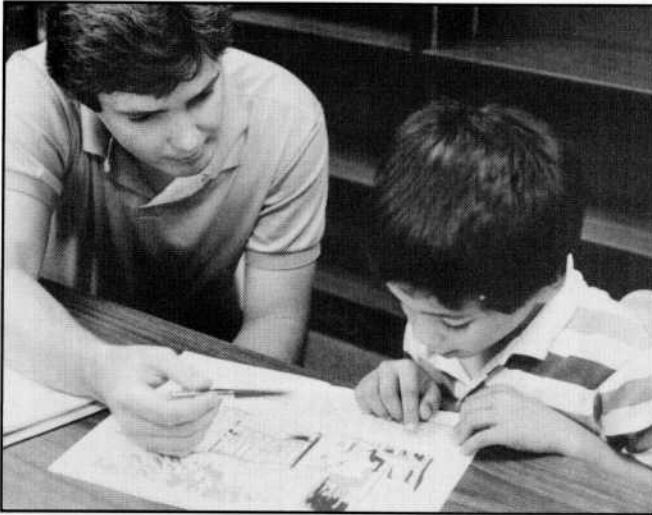
Associate professor of reading Leonard G. Breen (at far right) warms to his subject in an undergraduate class in diagnostic techniques for reading instruction.



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Norman senior Dusty Gregory (left) uses the reading center's extensive teaching materials to help 3rd grader Allen Rachel.



Moore elementary teacher Laura Eckstein familiarizes herself with new materials as part of her first master's level course.

ance of poor readers fell off dramatically.

Williams went back to school at Arizona State University to learn how to help poor readers become good mathematicians. During the completion of the master's and doctoral programs, he returned to the public schools to teach a combination of reading and math, but his interest in developing reading programs soon led him to the college level.

In 1968, after four years as the coordinator of reading research at New Mexico State University, Williams came to OU to expand his work in teaching children how to read to include the broader problem of keeping them in school. Those efforts earned him an award from the U.S. commissioner of education for exemplary research in preventing school dropouts through identifying problems in kindergarten and beginning corrective measures in first grade.

“I always thought we could be successful with a program of this type,” Williams says of his 12-year study of potential dropouts. “Most critical was finding the children who needed help early, instead of waiting until they reached high school and then saying, ‘We’ve got a problem on our hands.’ ”

Williams' reading programs surface in three areas in OU's College of Education, the undergraduate and graduate programs and a service course in reading for University freshmen who need to improve their reading abilities.

While reading education is addressed primarily at the graduate level at OU — with a master's and two doctorates, the Ed.D. and Ph.D. — practical experience is available to students at all levels. Service courses to teach theory and provide tutorial experience are offered to undergraduates in elementary education, early childhood education, special education and secondary education.

Undergraduate students in elementary and early childhood education must take 12 hours of reading education to satisfy degree requirements. By the time they are juniors, OU student teachers are involved in twice-a-week tutorial courses on the OU campus and in the Norman public schools, always under the supervision of their college instructors.

“We have a wonderful working relationship with the Norman Public Schools,” Williams says. “They love this program. While we explain that we're bringing inexperienced teachers

to work with the children, they know that the one-to-one relationship between the tutor and child helps the child feel good about reading and about himself. The children receive plenty of attention, and the regular teacher then can deal adequately with the skills that need to be taught at school.

“Many of our beginning students are presenting lessons perhaps equal to those being taught in the classroom because it's on a one-to-one basis. The child receives 50 minutes of undivided instruction. Done twice a week, that becomes a very positive factor in the education of the child.”

When the children come to OU's reading education center, which was established in 1976 expressly to supplement the program in the public schools, they enter a facility Williams says houses “the finest collection of teaching materials in reading education in the Big Eight and neighboring states.”

At the disposal of the reading pedagogues is more than \$40,000 worth of the latest materials, books, games and kits, much of which was made possible by the generosity of Norman resident Ruby Grant, whose interest in supporting the program developed

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Kelly Murphy (left), Ardmore junior, works with "language master" equipment to expand her vocabulary under the guidance of OU teaching assistant Tera Stough.

after she observed its benefits firsthand.

The retired schoolteacher telephoned the college to request assistance in tutoring some neighborhood children in reading. Williams visited her, pretested the children and offered curriculum recommendations. After attending a 15-hour workshop, she embarked on the seven-week tutelage and administered the posttest. When Williams confirmed an astounding reading level gain in one of her students, she was at first distraught.

"She was upset with the public schools," Williams remembers. "I explained to her, however, that a large

gain, even of the amount she had produced, was not abnormal, considering she had spent seven weeks with that child in totally undistracted instruction in a one-to-one relationship."

Ruby Grant's contributions funded the purchase of "Reader's Choice," a series of books tested by 12,000 children nationwide. Each item in the series carries a bookplate honoring the benefactor's parents, Mr. and Mrs. T. S. Grant.

Williams also used the Grant funds to acquire the W. S. Gray Reading Research Collection, a microfiche index, bibliography and review of literature pertinent to the profession, an inval-

able research resource for both undergraduate and graduate students.

In one master's degree practicum course, each OU student, working under supervision, diagnoses a public school student, writes a clinical report and prescription for correction, confers with the parents, observes the child in follow-up tutoring sessions, and reports to the public school so that successful treatment methods can be continued. Another assignment requires the master's candidates to instruct according to a program written by other student teachers, forcing them into new materials and away from their favorite methods, a technique Williams believes ultimately improves their teaching abilities. Throughout the semester, the student teacher sees two pupils back-to-back — one whose problems they are diagnosing and one who has returned for followup tutoring.

On the waiting list for diagnostic assessments, which cost \$20 for each term, are approximately 200 children from Norman, Lexington, Purcell, Washington, Dibble, Moore and Oklahoma City, referred by school counselors, teachers, parents, ophthalmologists, psychologists — almost anyone who has come in contact with children who need help. A similar assessment in a private reading clinic, Williams notes, would run approximately \$500.

"As I talk with some of my colleagues across the country, I find their fees are all higher. We're basically a teaching center, and as a product of good teaching and building a good teaching center, we're able to provide service for about 200 children a year."

In a second practicum, master's level students gain experience in the small group instruction they are likely to encounter in the public schools. Williams realizes that one-to-one teaching is not always possible and wants OU reading specialists to be sufficiently flexible to be able to adapt their instructional methods to whatever situation they may find on the job.

Doctoral students are utilized as teaching assistants in the reading pro-

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gram, particularly in a college reading improvement course attended primarily by OU freshmen referred by University College counselors. The two-hour course is designed to improve basic reading skills and is open to members of the Norman community and University employees as well as OU students.

“One man from Norman enrolled in the course, knowing about 10 words from the basic Dolch sight word list of 220 words generally mastered by the third grade,” Williams recalls. “He was about 35 years old, had traveled extensively, was a large property holder, very bright, but he had never learned how to read. He had learned to compensate in our society, but he felt he was really missing part of life. He stayed with us five semesters and was reading the newspaper with ease when he left us.”

Every semester 20 sections of the reading improvement course are offered with room for 20 students in each section. All 20 sections fill quickly, Williams notes.

“We have had a lot of interest in the course,” Williams says. “It has always been very popular.” The course has been especially helpful to students with low ACT test scores who must qualify for admission to OU through successful completion of six hours in summer school.

Students who enroll in this reading improvement course are pretested to determine their strengths and weaknesses in reading and a personally tailored program is developed for each student.

Williams admits that not every student who attempts the reading improvement program is successful, but those who do not gain are a small percentage. “It is not uncommon for students in those courses to increase their reading levels by a year, and in some cases a student might gain 3 or 3½ years in a semester,” Williams says.

Another aspect of the reading improvement program is assistance in increasing the reading rates and comprehension of students preparing for law or medical qualifying exams.

The training which the prospective reading specialists receive is not always confined to the OU campus, or even to Norman, however. “Our students may work in a community college, or perhaps in a penal institution, so we prepare them by sending them to those places for a practicum,” Williams says.

“Our students find good jobs,” he explains. “Our last doctoral graduate went to Emory University; we have two graduates at the University of Houston, and we have a student at Nebraska, Northern Illinois, and the University of Arkansas, and at all four-year state schools. We’re very pleased and proud of our program.”

The master’s degree program has just been increased from 32 to 36 semester hours, with an increase from 12 to 18 graduate hours in reading, a development which Williams insists is in keeping with college goals.

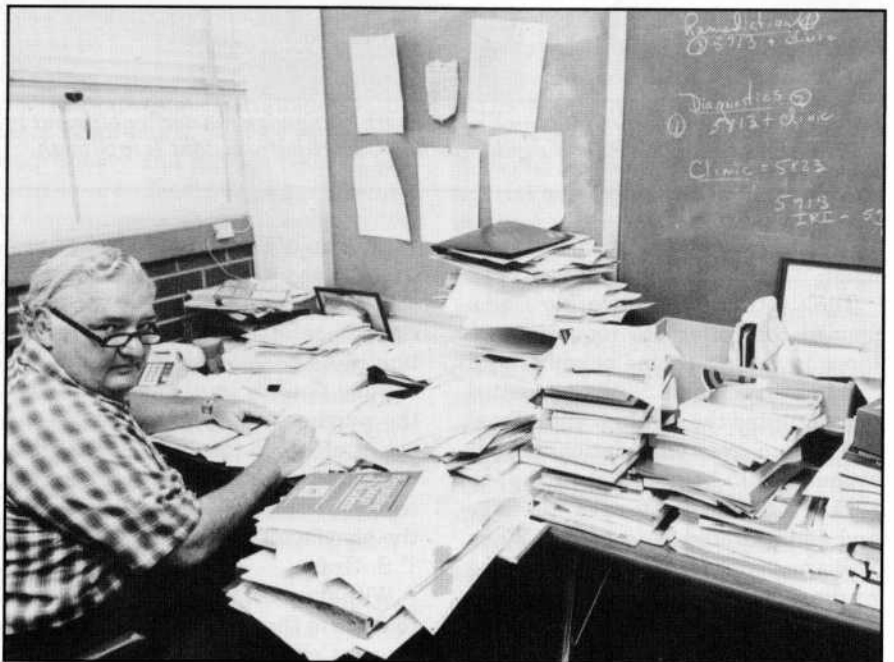
“In both the master’s and doctoral programs, we’re trying to exceed the standards set by our professional organization, the International Reading

Association, and the minimum requirements for state certification. We want our students to exceed the minimum, to be the very best teachers as well as excellent diagnosticians.”

As these teachers-in-training hone their skills at the OU College of Education, they experience the kind of personal satisfaction that first led Williams and his colleagues into reading education.

“It’s hard to select one success story to highlight when we’ve had so many,” Williams says. “It’s very gratifying when someone who has been with us for several semesters finally achieves success in school and in their independent reading and no longer needs our services.

“The parents of these ‘success stories’ are just overwhelmed. They look for a way to say ‘Thank you for helping my son improve, to have a chance at success in education, because now he is reading with his peers.’ We become as emotional as the parents because we’re human too — and we love success.”



Architect of OU’s reading instruction program, Dr. Richard Williams, surrounds himself with stacks of materials to review, evaluate and pass along to students.