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CMU Perc's Up Its Undergraduate Reading Program

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No other subject has more direct effect on a student's potential for academic achievement than the mastery of reading. The importance of a child's ability to achieve success in beginning to read is only paralleled by his or her ensuing success to gain sufficient independence in the use of this skill.

Because reading is the first "R" it has been given national prominence in the ten year "Right to Read" effort. It is also the central ingredient in the "Back to Basics" movement. No other subject has received as much attention since the revolutions in mathematics and science. Yet, even the combined and concerted effort on these subjects would not equal the importance of hoped for results sought in enabling all children to have the best chance possible to learn to read. Regardless of the teaching method or combined approach used to unscramble the mystery of printed symbols, the end desire is independence, security, and success.

To give children the best opportunities to learn to read, it is important that prospective elementary teachers get the best preparation possible in the methodology of teaching reading. At Central Michigan University the Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education is embarking on a experimental program to strengthen its undergraduate offerings in methods of teaching reading. Traditionally, colleges of education offer their elementary students one pre-service methods course in the teaching of reading. This course is usually taken somewhere in the student's upper division just prior to the student teaching program. Armed with one course the new graduate is expected to do a com-

mendable job with a highly complex subject.

Regardless of the information, concepts, methodology and general skills obtained from the beginning reading course, critics argue that colleges of education do not adequately prepare their students to teach reading. The contention is that college students preparing to teach do not have the opportunity to try out their reading skills with children. It is said they are too theoretical and lack experiential contacts.

Whether these arguments have merit or not is not the focus of this paper. The argument is endless and the point of departure comes with the ultimate outcome. What happens to children? Do they learn to read? How well do they learn?

All teachers, administrators, parents and supportive school staff know that schools exist for children. They need a receptive environment where they can learn. This important fact is sometimes buried in the business of day to day schooling. Some children don't get the attention they need. With this concern in mind, the authors set out to counteract the argument about teaching reading by taking reading into the field, involving children in the process of the preservice experiences with reading methods.

Braced with a core of college seniors who have just completed an introductory methods course in reading and have been assigned to student teaching, the authors prepared to assist them in a field based reading course. Having had prior success in offering an introductory course in reading in the

field based *FUTURE and BEAM student teaching programs, the next step up seemed natural.

The approach calls for an advanced course in reading entitled "Corrective Reading for the Classroom Teacher." It bridges the gap between the introductory course in reading and one with an extensive diagnostic approach. The course provides the student teacher with opportunities to work with children who are not functioning up to their potential. The program is called "Performance Evaluative Reading Competency" or PERC for short.

The format used to present PERC is competency based, using specific modules. Important to the course is the involvement of cooperating teachers. He or she serves as the general supervisor for both student teacher and children as they jointly direct their energies toward the solution of reading problems.

Each of the 13 modules is made available to cooperating teachers by his/her student teacher. Prior discussions with cooperating teachers and University faculty help to set the stage for this important program. The student teacher relies on the cooperating teacher to set the stage as he/she eases into the module. Bolstered by a maximum of six topic presentations/demonstrations (not to be confused with lectures) the student continues his/her work independently. The course for three semester hours of credit can be completed over the 16 weeks of student teaching, or compacted into as few as ten weeks. Time of completion depends on the energy, desire and fortitude of the student teacher. This may mean an acceleration of the typical three times a week work schedule with children in various reading experi-

*FUTURE and BEAM are acronyms for the "Flint-Utica Teaching Utilizing Resource Experts Program" and "Bangor Elementary Affiliation Model Program." Both of these student teaching models utilize field based school personnel to assist with methodology.

ences. At the same time the student teacher becomes more proficient in his/her ability to diagnose and treat the reading problems of specific children, the classroom teacher gets a break from the time consuming task of preparing an individualized corrective program for these children.

One objective of the competency based course is that it should be an integral part of the student teaching program. It is not meant as a detractor or an addition to the work of the student teacher. Instead it is set up to better utilize a student teacher's time by adding a specified structure to the existing focus of working with children. The student teacher's involvement with PERC does not involve competition for student teaching time. Instead it embraces the student's involvement.

While some student teachers may work with many children as they teach reading, for purposes of practicing diagnostic and therapeutic processes, a minimum of two children are selected. Children are selected from those who are not achieving vis a vis their potential. The student teacher assigned in any subject area can plug into the PERC program. There is no set grade or age level for working with under-achieving children.

A textbook serves as the manual for informal reading tests oral or silent for children. The following modules comprise the list of topics for the course:

Mastery Performance Modules for Teachers-in-Training

- I Corrective Reading in the Classroom - The Course; How it works
- II Corrective Reading in the Classroom - The Teacher's Role
- III Collecting Diagnostic Data
- IV Identifying Reading Disability, Tasks 1-2
- V Identifying Reading Disability, Tasks 3-4
- VI Organizing Class for Instruction

- VII Remedial Activities for Vocabulary Skills
- VIII Remedial Activities for Vocabulary Skills (Teaching aids)
- IX Remedial Activities for Comprehension Skills
- X Remedial Activities for Comprehension Skills (Teaching aids)
- XI Working with Non-educational Difficulties
- XII Role of Machines in Remedial Instruction
- XIII Evaluation and Progress Report

The student follows a prescribed text which contains information related to the 13 modules including 14 completion tasks covering the material. Upon completion of each module the student teacher reviews it with his/her cooperating teacher who signs the work and mails it to campus for further review and assessment by the designated instructor.

The PERC program is being piloted in Bangor Township where CMU's Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education has cooperated on a successful student teacher program for the past five years. It was a natural step to move from the Bangor Elementary Affiliation Model (BEAM) where the focus was on the student's

total involvement with all aspects of education. Included in the BEAM program was an introductory course in reading taught concurrently with the student teaching assignment.

After the pilot semester the PERC program will be re-evaluated, revised and established in two additional CMU student teacher centers. The ultimate goal of the PERC program is to make it available to all CMU elementary student teachers in any of the 16 centers to which they may be assigned. It also will become more individualized until it is nearly totally self-paced.

A follow-up reading course for students returning to campus after student teaching will enable them to gain nine hours of work in reading prior to graduation. The student will move through an introductory course in reading to the PERC program and back to campus to take "Diagnosis and Treatment of Reading Difficulties."

This concentration in reading will not only help to respond to the critics, but it should also help to provide CMU students with a better understanding of the reading process and aid them in mastering successful teaching strategies, which in turn will enable children to gain greater meaning from the printed page.