

# Reading Research

BY CAROL CUMMINGS



*Sherry Powers*

**SHERRY POWERS, HEAD OF WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY'S DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS, BECAME INVOLVED IN EDUCATION AND LITERACY BY FOLLOWING AN INDIRECT PATH. SHE FIRST TRAINED AS A SOCIAL WORKER AND CHILD WELFARE SPECIALIST, AND WORKED SEVERAL YEARS IN THAT CAPACITY BEFORE SHE BEGAN TO CONSIDER OTHER WAYS SHE MIGHT MAKE A DIFFERENCE.**

"As a social worker, I became interested in how the whole cycle of low literacy affected families and children," Dr. Powers explained. "So I went back to school, earned my teacher certification, and spent several years teaching."

Along the way, Dr. Powers knew she wanted to become a reading specialist in an elementary school, so she obtained her master's in that area, taught classes, and consulted on reading issues. As a result, she considered yet another career path, as she obtained her doctorate in Instructional and Administrative Reading Specialization. This led her to WKU in 1999, where she served as a Visiting Assistant Professor, an Assistant Professor of Literacy, Associate Professor, and beginning in 2003 as Department Head.

"It was hard to leave the elementary classroom, but I enjoy working with teachers and helping them make a difference," she said.



photo by Tim in Annette

In her doctoral studies, Dr. Powers looked at research related to reading achievement for struggling readers, particularly as it related to culturally responsive instruction and learners from diverse background. In 1999 she got involved in the Kentucky Early Reading Incentive Grants (ERIG) research project, a six-year study that

program is designed to improve the reading achievement of Kentucky's primary students. In 2005, SB 19 charged the Collaborative Center for Literacy Development (CCLD), the leadership team of which Dr. Powers is a part, to create a comprehensive research agenda to consider the impact of various

learning more about how kids learn, and developing instructional practices and curricula that are designed to capitalize on how a variety of students go about learning. Teacher preparation in the area of culturally responsive instruction coupled with effective literacy instruction assists teachers in further developing and understanding effective literacy pedagogy and practice. Good reading instruction should never be about programs. Programs are only resources, and the teachers must be able to effectively use them. The most current focus of the RTA research (2007-2008) is designed to help us identify these promising literacy practices for struggling readers that increase student achievement and learning."

Data sources included the Group Reading and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE) reading achievement test, which is administered twice a year to all primary students, and an online teacher survey. In addition, twenty case study schools were selected for

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looked at reading achievement of struggling readers in the classrooms and at teachers who had received training for implementing specific reading programs. When the ERIG cycle was completed, Kentucky changed its literacy program to Read to Achieve, and Powers was once more a leader and principal investigator in that initiative.

Established by Senate Bill (SB) 19, Kentucky's Read to Achieve (RTA)

reading and intervention programs on student achievement in reading. During the 2005-2006 school year, CCLD conducted a statewide study of approximately 213 schools that received grant funds as part of Read to Achieve.

"Culturally responsive instruction is designed to meet the needs of individual learners, and especially learners from diverse backgrounds," Dr. Powers explained. "We are

a more detailed evaluation, which included classroom evaluations, interviews, and a library survey. A total of 9,003 students received Read to Achieve instruction, 6,681 of whom received it as an intervention service.

"Students who received Read to Achieve (RTA) services made strong gains from fall to spring on the GRADE assessment," Dr. Powers said. "Gains decreased for each grade level, meaning that younger students made greater gains than older students. In addition, fifty-five percent of students who received RTA services scored at or above average on the spring GRADE test, which means they were no longer considered struggling readers by the state after having received RTA services." Dr. Powers cautioned that the reading achievement gap remains and in some instances continues to widen. One contributing factor is that students at all grade levels are making gains, however struggling readers from diverse backgrounds are not making uniform gains with mainstream student populations.

"With RTA, as with most educational programs, the most important component is teachers," Dr. Powers said. "Their knowledge base and their understanding of promising practices in literacy instruction have a great impact on student learning."

Dr. Powers added that it is important to continue to emphasize teacher professional development to ensure

that intervention teachers are highly trained to meet the instructional needs of a diverse group of children who struggle. She also said that such training builds in components for holding teachers accountable, as they evaluate the effectiveness of what they teach.

Participating in this statewide initiative has been a positive experience for WKU and for Dr. Powers. "It gives us a presence at a statewide level, alongside Research I institutions," she acknowledged. "It also helps me know how to speak on behalf of children and schools at a political level and make recommendations on financial support that is provided for teachers and students. The governor and the legislature take our research into consideration when they look at how to design funding."

Dr. Powers received her B.A. from Asbury College. She obtained Montessori Teacher Certification from St. Nicholas Training Centre in London, England, and her K-4 and 5-6 certification in Elementary Education from Eastern Kentucky University. She earned both her M.A. in Elementary Education and Reading Specialization and her Ed.D. in Instruction and Administration Reading Specialization from the University of Kentucky.

For Dr. Powers, the greatest benefit is in the wisdom she can impart to her students. "Everything I learn I go back and teach my students, giving them a better sense of what's going on in schools and which instructional practices demonstrate the greatest benefit to children," she explained. "They become better teaching professionals and are better able to prepare students." ■



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