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ABSTRACT

The implementation of a content reading program at Urbana High School, Urbana, Illinois, is discussed in this document. Reading staff hired with Title VII funds offered assistance to all teachers in the high school by working with classroom teachers in their classes for 60 minutes of class time per week. Free reading time devoted to high-interest materials was encouraged during this time. The Title VII staff instructed teachers in the use of the Wide Range Achievement Test and tested the majority of junior and senior classes of the high school to identify reading problems. Student reading guides were prepared to help bridge the gap between students' reading level and the readability level of the texts. Six-week courses were offered as options in English to students with severe reading difficulties. The resistance to the program felt by the content-area teachers was overcome by the willingness of the reading staff to spend many extra hours preparing materials and leading workshops after school. At the end of the year average growth per student served was two years per semester and, equally important, all teachers had a core of materials to use year after year in assisting students with reading difficulties. (MKM)

CONTENT AREA READING: A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

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CONTENT AREA READING: A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

The Title VII project at Urbana High School in Urbana, Illinois was a corrective and remedial language arts program, responsible for helping teachers in all subject areas to implement reading activities in their classrooms. It was unique from the reading teacher's viewpoint because it was geared to help all teachers meet the goal of continuing reading instruction in the classroom, as mandated by state and district policy. The Title VII staff worked hand-in-hand with content area teachers in the following ways to help them to better accept the responsibility for reading instruction.

FREE READING PRACTICE

With the assistance of the Title VII staff, each teacher in the high school was encouraged to devote sixty minutes of class time per week for their students' reading practice in high interest materials. This free reading time was assigned in many ways, but in each case the Title VII staff assisted teachers in the classroom so that correction and remediation could occur in the natural learning environment of the student, without the stigma so often associated with a reading laboratory.

DIAGNOSIS

Since one of the inherent problems the classroom teacher faces is the identification of reading problems, the Title VII staff instructed teachers in the use of the Wide Range Achievement Test; but to insure consistency in scoring and diagnosis, the staff tested the majority of the junior and senior classes of the high school, using the WRAT as an indicator of both word attack and oral reading skills.

LEVEL OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Many of the reading problems which teachers confront are the obvious result of the use of materials that are either culturally biased or beyond the student's independent reading level. The teachers, with the assistance of the Title VII staff, assessed the readability of instructional materials, and in most cases were able to bridge this gap with the use of student reading guides.

SURVIVAL SKILLS

The staff designed six week units as course options offered through the school's English department, through which they were able to deal individually in assisting students with the severest vocabulary, word recognition or comprehension problems. In this way, the staff could later provide content area teachers with materials for students with specific problems in areas such as inferential comprehension, following directions, dictionary use, organizational skills, or self-concept deficiencies.

Thus the Title VII staff was not made up of "salespersons" of reading (Burgett, 1976), but instead functioned as resource instructors, consultants--at times even as teachers' aides! Initial resistance from teachers was overcome only when those teachers saw that the Title VII staff was willing to work well beyond the school day in order to make content area reading succeed in the high school.

But the problems of initiating such a widespread reading program in the school were not resolved immediately and completely; the staff nonetheless was able to overcome ten major obstacles that seriously threatened the success of a multi-level, multi-cultural content area program in the high school.

Since these are practical difficulties with which all content area programs must do battle, a look at the problems and solutions that the Title VII staff encountered and discovered might be helpful.

First, the content area reading approach in the high school met resistance from the administration at both the high school and district levels. Apart from natural suspicions of any "new" program, administrators wrongly viewed the Title VII staff as English teachers. The only advantage that they could then foresee coming from the project was the addition of more English teachers to lessen class loads for others. Next, the English teachers of the school felt that since there were now many more people employed in "their department", these new teachers should each carry five classes of "poor readers" per day and should not worry very much about anyone else.

The resistance that any such content area reading program will meet from various subject area department head will only be surpassed by the resistance encountered from subject area teachers. Content area department heads felt threatened because the Title VII staff was not subject to their authority, while content area teachers viewed the Title VII staff members as twice-removed from their classroom problems--first because they viewed the staff as being grossly ignorant of their own subject matter, and second, because the Title VII staff was not hired by the school district, the staff members did not qualify as colleagues!

This alienation from the teaching staff of the schhol was also reflected in the attitudes of students and parents, so the Title VII project faced severe criticism from these two quarters. In addition, students found

in the Title VII program an excellent target for their own negative concepts about reading.

Every content area reading program must overcome the problems incurred through a lack of functional precedents, and a lack of applicable research, apart from the work of Herber and others. But even when these setbacks are resolved, a content area program can encounter three final problems: the lack of funding for on-going workshops and release time for teachers; the difficulty of maintaining long-range enthusiasm among teachers; and the necessity for continuing teacher-awareness workshops for its own staff.

But the development of a functional content area reading program is not a story of all gloom and desperation. The success of the Title VII program in Urbana demonstrates that it is possible for even the most impoverished and dangerously understaffed program to succeed, given the motivation, determination and dedication of its members. Once an administrator sees that the reading program staff is willing to spend hours after school giving workshops to teachers who in some way have been encouraged, convinced or coerced into attending that workshop on their own time, then that administrator will be more likely to consider dispensing release time to those same teachers for content area reading purposes. Once department heads or teachers are convinced that the success of a reading program as described can only mean new success for previous "problem students", then their cooperation is guaranteed to follow shortly. When those same students find an open and healthy and multi-cultural reading atmosphere in which they can succeed, they then become more likely to forget negative, past experiences and instead to relate positive growth experiences to their parents, which would naturally lead to greater community support of the new reading program.

Facing a lack of applicable research or precedent, the Title VII program created its own precedent, drawing assistance directly from teachers' own instructional materials. For example, instead of taking the "problem reader" out of his history classroom to give him day-in, day-out lessons in finding main ideas, the Title VII staff would take his history textbook and draw up study guide questions for each of his history reading assignments until, after a few weeks, the student began to succeed, at his own rate, in a former "trouble area".

In order to maintain enthusiasm among content area teachers, the staff throughout the year provided free coffee sessions, luncheon treats for teachers as they discussed particular lessons or students, or refreshments for teachers during all workshops, with funding for these pleasant activity-suppliments being donated by the Title VII staff. By taking full advantage of awareness training offered by the National College of Education, staff members were able to maintain high morale, cohesiveness, and a true sense of personal dedication and commitment to its unique goal of implementing and facilitating a radical content area reading program in a large school.

A common complaint of all content area teachers concerns the fact that the reading specialist is unfamiliar with the subject matter involved, and therefore does not belong in their classroom. The Title VII project was able to lessen that implicit defensiveness by employing staff with varied backgrounds in the content areas and in reading. But the problem of "intrusion", from the teachers' point of view, was solved only after long hours of work with teachers, when they were convinced that

the only concern of the Title VII staff was to help get their material across to students who would usually fail because "they wouldn't (couldn't) do the reading."

When the teachers were ready to make that major concession, the Title VII staff could then begin its in-service education of teachers in reading instruction. The first step taken was to draw up a practical, ten-page dictionary of reading terms. This listing clearly explained each concept that would be helpful in the correction or remediation of their students' reading difficulties.

After asking to observe teachers' classes, or being invited to observe them, the staff could then draw up its list of workshop priorities As it continued to test and work with individual students, the staff also developed more student guides for textbooks in use. The cloze procedures and Fry test of readability were helpful in determining which texts required the most attention, but the findings were not used as indictments against the teachers' choices of instructional material simply because trying to convince teachers to abandon their favorite texts would have been a waste of time, and would have also quickly alienated those teachers.

The workshops offered began with simple activities, such as providing vocabulary games from the teachers' instructional materials. Gradually, the workshops became more in-depth studies of how reading instruction in the classroom could succeed. Care was taken to assure teachers that workshop participation was non-evaluative, and that attendance was voluntary.

After utilizing Title VII funds in this manner for one year, the

average growth per student served (S=500) was two years' growth per semester, as measured by the Wide Range Achievement Test and a variety of diagnostic instruments, all documented and submitted to the Title VII offices in Washington. Of equal importance, however—each subject area teacher had a core of materials he could use year after year in assisting his students with reading difficulties. Further, all teachers had a functional knowledge of classroom reading instruction that would allow them to generate materials of their own in the future. In this way, the Title VII project in Urbana High School can serve as a model of how a content area reading program can succeed, against all odds, if its staff members are patient, persistent, and sincerely dedicated to that essential goal.

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