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COBASAL READING ADOPTIONS PRESENT UNIQUE PROBLEMS

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The selection of basal reading materials reflects crucial decisions made periodically by most school districts in our country. Considering that approximately 20 million students are enrolled in public school grades 1-6 in the United States, it is not difficult to understand why the selection of basal materials receives such considerable attention. In this vast market the publishers of basal programs compete for high stakes, and the selection process is important to the adopting district from both an educational and economic perspective. Yet selection committees often undertake the decision-making process without adequately assessing all the ramifications of their choices. On the surface the task is to choose the "best" books, but to do this numerous issues must be considered. The publishers' presentations must be critically reviewed. Problems of ordering and warehousing materials must be solved. Pupil placement, instructional management, and pupil progress must also be examined in light of the materials chosen. These issues present problems in any adoption, but when more than one basal is adopted the problems are often compounded. The purpose of this article is to acquaint teachers, administrators, and parents with the unique problems to be dealt with when adopting two or more basal programs, and to suggest potential solutions to these problems.

Sales Presentations and the Selection Process

The foremost goal of any publishing company is to sell the books. Publishers of a basal program would prefer to be selected as a single adoption rather than as part of a co-adoption. The co-adoption is usually viewed positively by the publisher under only

two circumstances. The first is the situation in which its program will not be considered as a single adoption. This can be described from the publisher's standpoint as the "something is better than nothing" idea. The second occurs when one company publishes both of the series which are considered for coadoption. This situation could arise when Keytext (1977) and Keys to Reading (1975) from Economy Publishing Company are being considered. In situations other than these, the publisher's representative will try to present the comprehensive nature of his or her program. The major problem is that the presentation typically makes it difficult to determine how applicable the series will be in a coadoption instructional setting.

> Suggestion one: If a coadoption is being considered, it should be made completely clear to the publisher's representatives prior to their presentations to the selection committee. They should be asked to address themselves specifically to their program's potential for such a use in their presentations.

Another concern with the selection process is the "compromise" theory of coadoption. This happens when the selection committee begins with the purpose of selecting one program, but later becomes deadlocked over the selection. At this point a conciliator may suggest "let's get both programs." This is not a wise basis on which to select the coadoption alternative. The fact that the committee cannot choose between Bookmark Reading Program from Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1979) and the Basics in Reading Program from Scott, Foresman (1978) or between Series r from Macmillan (1975) and Reading Basics from Harper and Row (1976) is not justification for choosing both.

> Suggestion two: Decide early in the selection process whether or not cobasal adoption is a viable option. Make the decision on firm instructional grounds considering the needs of the students to be taught. If coadoption is not educationally justifiable at that point, don't compromise values later.

Ordering

Knowing how many of each of the components of a basal program to order is always a problem. Determining how many students in the district will work in any given level of a series can only be estimated prior to the initiation of instruction. Even if the district has done adequate pre-ordering assessment, some changes in students' abilities from pre-ordering

level to actual reading level when instruction begins will be inevitable. Because materials are generally ordered in the spring for use in the fall, any pre-ordering assessment must be done in winter or early spring of the year prior to the beginning of instruction with the new program(s). This time lag increases the ordering problem because changes in students' abilities increase as the time span between assessment and instruction increases. This ordering problem is compounded in the cobasal adoption, because a change in student reading level may reflect a change from one reading series to another. Thus, in a single basal adoption students may need to be changed between levels --but in a cobasal adoption students may need to be changed between levels or between series.

> Suggestion two: Order 10% to 15% more instructional materials and 15% to 20% more teachers' manuals than the anticipated necessary number based upon preassessment. Roughly 2/3 of these extra materials should be stockpiled in the buildings and 1/3 held in reserve at a central storage point. This amount of extra material usually is enough to accommodate changes between levels within a series and changes between series.

The ordering problem in cobasal adoption are not limited to how much to order. Problems also arise over what to order. Although the term cobasal generally implies that the basic readers, workbooks, and manuals from both series will be purchased, there are numerous points in a reading program at which a district will not purchase matching components from both programs. As an example, many districts using two basals in a tracking approach often purchase only one readiness program. If a district is using Pathfinder from Allyn and Bacon (1978) and Houghton-Mifflin Basal Reading Series (1979) it may choose to use only Reading Steps and Ready to Read from Houghton-Mifflin as the core readiness program. This calls into question the readiness level of the students who will begin instruction in the Pathfinder series. On the other hand, if the district elects to purchase both Houghton-Mifflin's program and Moving Days and Summer Fun from Allyn and Bacon as readiness programs, they are confronted with tracking students even prior to their receiving readiness instruction. The readiness program is one example of the selection of components problem which will surface later in the discussion of placement, advancement, and skill management.

> Suggestion four: Try to identify points in the program where components will be selected on an either/or basis. Then assess the merits of the components of each program in light of their

usefulness to the other program. Also consider the possibilities of using some supplementary components which are not parts of either program but are generalizable to both.

Placement

One method of placing students into appropriate levels of a basal program incorporates the use of results from standardized tests, informal reading inventories, or word list assessments which are not directly related to the series. While this method has benefits, the generalizability of these results for placement into a specific reading series may be questioned. Another common placement method involves the use of placement tests which are optional components of almost all reading series. This approach overcomes the problem of generalizability because tests are designed specifically for placement into the series used for instruction. Although it is quite acceptable in a single basal adoption, it creates another problem in the cobasal adoption. For example, if the Basic Reading System (1977) from Hold and Reading 720: Rainbow Edition (1979) from Ginn are coadopted --should the Holt Placement Test be used for both series; or should the Initial Placement Tests from Ginn be used for both series?

On the surface the simple answer may be, "use both tests." However, this solution is confounded by the issue of which students will be placed in which series. Essentially the question is where to draw the line between students entering one series and students entering the other series. Thus, we have two problems, one of placements between series and the other of placements within series.

Suggestion five: Tackle placement problems one at a time. First, consider the reasons for adopting two programs, and let the same rationale guide the drawing of the line for between series placement. Once this rationale has been developed use an assessment device which is generalizable to both series. Teacher judgment, aided by informal assessment in questionable cases, may be effective for this between series placement decision. When the initial between series placement has been made, use the placement tests which are components of the respective programs for within series placements. Most of all be flexible. If student response to instruction prove the assessments to be incorrect, move the students accordingly either within a series or between series.

Management of Skill Instruction

This aspect of the cobasal adoption is perhaps the most difficult of all. Numerous problems in skill instruction will be encountered. The skill sequences of the two series are likely to differ to some degree. If a teacher forms ad hoc groups for skill instruction, this sequencing difference can be troublesome. Students reading in different series may receive direct instruction on a specific skill together, but when they return to their independent reinforcement materials, there may be no activities available. The instructional approach also may differ significantly from one program to another. Some programs specify preassessment on skills, others have opional preassessments, still others defer any assessment until after instruction. Some basals place greater emphasis on coordination between skill development and literary selections than do others.

The many problems with skill management have led districts making coadoptions to a myriad of solutions. Some of the more prevalent solutions include: adhering closely to the sequence, approach, as well as materials, in each series--combining the various skill management components of the two series into a single unified approach; and selecting or creating a supplemental skill management system which is independent of either series.

> Suggestion six: Initially, try to follow the manuals of the respective series as closely as possible. There are enough other problems to deal with in a cobasal adoption without further clouding the skill management issue. This is particularly true if both programs are new to the district, or if teachers are not experienced. Teachers need a period of trial before they are ready to select or develop a supplemental skill management system. These modifications can be made later.

> Suggestion seven: Use the consultant services provided by the publishing companies to solve skill management problems. The competition between the companies is at least temporarily over once the selection has been made, and the consultants can often work together effectively to solve problems.

Advancement

The problems in pupil advancement or progress in a reading series are similar to the problems of pupil placement. They center around movement within

a series and movement between series. The advancement problems within a series are no different in a cobasal from problems in a single basal adoption. The judgment relating to when a pupil has adequately mastered one leveled text and is ready to move to the next must be made in either case. However, the problems of advancement between series are unique to the cobasal adoption.

One problem of advancement from one series to another is essentially the age-old problem of any tracking system, "once a bluebird always a bluebird." If a child initially meets the criteria for the lower track and is placed into the appropriate series, he or she often is continued in that track. Even when students experience rapid growth in reading ability they sometimes remain lock-stepped into the initial series. These students may reach the point where they are ready to move from one series to the other, but the move may not actually take place.

> Suggestion eight: Never lose sight of the original rationale for selecting a cobasal adoption, nor the original criterion for placement into the respective series. Be sensitive to changes in students' performance, and when students meet the criterion for advancement—move them. Finally, be flexible enough to switch when the criterion is reached, but not before. It can be very discouraging to be "moved back" after a brief flirtation with advancement.

Another problem associated with between series advancement is the adjustment of the student to be made to the new program. This problem is related to the degree of difference between the "new" and "old" series and to the dynamics of the group to which the student moves. The student will be encountering new readers, workbooks, tests, instructional lessons, etc. Some students may make changes easily, but to some students any change in routine can be difficult. There is also a status change for the student to be considered. The student who is advancing is doubtless moving from being one of the more able readers to a group in which he or she will probably among the least able. Remember that the student making the change is the "new" member of the group.

> Suggestion nine: Don't neglect the affective needs of students because of the mechanistic aspects of advancement between series. Schedule an orientation session to acquaint the student with the new program. Designate a partner from the student's new group to help him or her make the transition. Strive to create an environment

where instructional changes are a regular part of the learning process and not a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Conclusion

The problems discussed here are not an exhaustive list of those which may be encountered. The issues of inventory control, teacher inservice, and consumable materials are just a few of those not mentioned. Remember that these problems do not exist in isolation, rather they interact with each other to produce many unique sets of problems. The suggestions made are not fail-safe, but they are suggestions which have been effective in stimulating discussion and creating solutions in many school systems. The message here should not be interpreted as an indictment of cobasal adoptions, but it should be interpreted as an advance warning of some of the pitfalls.

Final suggestion: Anyone who teaches encounters problems. Often the better job of teaching that is done, the more problems that are encountered. If the selection committee of a school district has chosen a cobasal adoption for sound education reasons, then teachers must roll up their sleeves and make the programs work. No program has anywhere near the effect on students that teachers do. If the teachers believe in the programs they will work.

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