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ABSTRACT

J.E.B. Stuart High School moved into the minicourse elective program five years ago from an anthology-survey oriented English curriculum. The students are grouped into two levels, one offering minicourses for eleventh and twelfth graders and the other offering minicourses for ninth and tenth grade students, with some courses open to all of the different grade levels. The courses are planned around specific themes, including "The Bible as Literature," "Science Fiction," "A Vision of Tragedy," and "Poetry." When teachers decided that needed skills were not being adequately taught, the curriculum was restructured so that first quarter minicourses emphasized skills in spelling or punctuation, or such complex skills as critical reading and writing. Vocabulary, usage, history of the language, the oral skills--discussion, debate, and oral interpretation--are mini-units in the skills-oriented quarter. All courses include a library unit. During the spring quarter a wide range of creative activities and readings are offered. Enthusiasm for this successful teacher-initiated minicourse program is reflected in teacher preparation and student response. (RB)

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The THEMATIC ELECTIVE PROGRAM
Five Years Later

Focus Group AB 6
NCTE Convention, 1973

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Five years ago our school, J.E.B. Stuart High School, a medium-sized suburban school in Fairfax County, Virginia, moved into the mini-course elective program from a traditional, anthology--survey oriented English curriculum. We had high-ability classes, low classes and average classes at four grade levels. Today our students are grouped into two levels, one offers mini courses for eleventh and twelfth graders, the other to our ninth and tenth grade students. Some of the courses are open to any grade level.

After five years of enthusiasm, of teacher resistance, of trial and error and change, the mini courses in the Language Arts continue as a dynamic means of growth -- student growth, teacher growth, and content expansion in our task of teaching for an unknown future.

If we examine student responses, in addition to their whole-hearted approval of the elective system, we have a clear pattern of courses the students will choose. First of all, their responses tell a schedule-making department chairman more than he really wants to know about teacher accountability. Students, by their consistent choices, tell us they will choose difficult ideas and reading; they will select skills courses that relate to today's needs -- film and media courses, college composition courses, reading improvement courses. And they will reject the teacher who hasn't thought through the theme or idea, or who chats about family, or grades unrealistically. Students, in exercising their choices, are learning to discriminate, usually after a year and a half of freedom.

Other department chairmen in Fairfax County, in exchanging scheduling experiences with me, corroborate our experience: that students are reading more widely, are articulate and questioning about assigned reading, and have more to say in their writing. In addition, in our own school, the Advanced Placement 12th grade students, those highly-motivated readers we are always hoping to find in any class, are consistently scoring high on the A.P. exam. These students enter the screened group only after three years in our regular mini course program. The two classes who have graduated since we entered the mini course system and who had not experienced a segregated, high ability placement before their senior year produced higher scores than did the earlier groups who had advanced status for two or more years. The past two classes had read more widely, and wrote consistently better. At the other end of the scale, we are having fewer failures. Students who have chosen their courses are more interested, more likely to read, to attend class, to find success.

To repeat, we find subtle student growth in making decisions, a very clear indication of teacher evaluation, and a student who reads more and has more ideas.

If we examine teacher response to mini electives we find that the challenge to creative thinking and teaching slowly, gradually outweighs the teacher's reliance on the anthology-plus-grammar book method of teaching. Teachers do find they can pair a favorite classic -- yes, even Silas Marner -- with contemporary material. They are now learning to present material to small groups so that individual students can follow the theme in different genre of differing readability. The English teacher in the

mini course program is more vocal in curriculum planning. In our school when teachers decided that the needed skills weren't being taught adequately, we replanted so that first quarter is a skills unit. Included may be such simple skills as spelling or punctuation, or such complex skills as critical reading and writing. All classes experience a library unit. We agree upon composition skills. Vocabulary, usage, history of the language, the oral skills--discussion, debating and oral interpretation--are all mini units in the skills-oriented quarter that the teacher may include based on student needs. Some teachers prefer to offer some literary history this quarter. All students know that a skills unit will be offered first quarter. Therefore, as they choose the teacher in our August pre-registration, the student in effect can indicate the kinds of skills he wishes to study. He knows the teachers will vary in their emphases.

County-wide last summer, with a small stipend, groups of teachers from different secondary and intermediate schools met for three-week Inservice planning sessions. Each group worked out some answers to individualizing instruction with its own school. From our building four teachers talked through with the English supervisor, researched, and laid out a pilot program for us to initiate this school year. In essence this is their plan:

1. All Level I (9th/10th) teachers with 3rd Period classes would participate. We have five classes in that time block.
2. All teachers with a planning period during third period would participate one day a week, Fridays.
3. The base teacher (regularly assigned teacher) works with the class on the skills unit for the first four days of the week. On Fridays with the added help of the five teachers who have planning periods, students choose from nine different activities.

Students who need reinforcement in skills are permitted fewer choices. Able students select from several areas of enrichment or creativity. Each small group on Fridays numbers about 15 or 16. The participating ten teachers, with joint planning, are sharing all sorts of materials, lesson plans, class coverage. The cooperating five who do not have scheduled classes use the material prepared by the base teachers. For their contributed time, they gain our preparations for use in their own classes. The students gain one day a week in very small classes with activities that enrich, reinforce or train their language arts skills.

The fact that our program, and others in the county, are teacher-planned projects coming from within our own school family without being imposed by a curriculum specialist or department chairman has given our staff greater impetus for success. In the mini course program teachers are finding wider answers to universal education.

If, on the other hand, we examine content in our courses, we find our range of ideas and works growing. Teachers are reading more widely and students are bringing to us their particular favorites to pair with the age-old themes we select.

The ninth/tenth grade students are still interested in their own micro-cosm -- their families, their friends, their pets, initiation experiences, and, of course, humor. Courses using the literature concerning these subjects and themes are always successful. Eleventh and twelfth grade students are most aware of power and its uses and abuses, heroes and antiheroes, justice and contemporary problems. A large registration, more than 70 per class,

explored a teach-taught subject, He and She, chauvinism and women's lib, the protagonists, such as a Hemingway hero or Ibsen heroine, paired with current newsmakers. The Bible as Literature always succeeds. A Vision of Tragedy gave students insights into classical drama. Myths, Legend and Folklore crosses grade line with success. Science Fiction has steady devotees in all grades.

A teacher paired historical fiction with biography and research techniques to offer a course based on popular reading. Courses in Fantasy, in Children's Literature, cultural and ethnic literature, readings in satire, comparative literature have all been well-received. We have managed to keep Macbeth, Hamlet and Antigone along with Tolkien and Hannah Greene. Not every student must read every work we teach.

During the spring quarter we offer a range of creative activities and readings. Since our department wide writing program assigns creative writing each quarter, the spring quarter allows the student to expand in a particular interest he may have experienced briefly during the year. We are finding that Poetry is drawing as well as Visual Literacy, and Backstage pulled in students that might avoid onstage dramatics. In one Fairfax County school, a teacher had the class put out a tabloid-sized paper of student writing and art. In addition to the creative writing, her class designed the graphics, handled the production and circulation aspects of the publication. They experienced very real trouble shooting problems in printing with a very real print shop. To cover the very real costs, they sold the paper to fellow students.

Another teacher named his course Break A Leg. The class studied Broadway musicals, wrote one themselves, and closed the 9-weeks course with a student production. Their profits went to the English department for equipment. Each student registered for the course contributed to the production, either back stage, on stage, in writing, or in promotion. We are finding that a student audience is effective in channeling student creative efforts. Much learning takes place when a writer keeps in mind someone other than the teacher who will grade his composition.

The mini course program at J.E.B. Stuart has another far reaching effect. The Physical Education and the Art Departments went on an elective program about two years ago. Social Studies teachers have worked out pilot thematic units that students now elect. Apparently no discipline or department has been unaffected by what we have done. Even the Guidance Department has felt our presence since we now do our own scheduling and are adding some advisory roles for our teachers to help students plan their own English programs.

Enthusiasm for teaching in the mini course situation has spread from a few teachers, across the resistance from fine, experienced teachers, until no high school in our county -- there are over 20 -- or in the surrounding Northern Virginia counties is without some version of mini-courses.

To indicate our changeover, which has not always run smoothly, I would like to show you -- with transparencies on the overhead projector -- how our growth and teacher involvement took place.

(Final remarks will include informal explanation of our specific yearly changes as we tried to work out problems)