DEPARTMENTALIZATION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A Paper

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Departmentalization in Elementary Schools

Departmentalization in primary grades is a current issue in education that I feel needs to be thoroughly researched and examined. Schools have been departmentalized in both the intermediate and high school grades for several years. However, recently districts are departmentalizing in elementary schools. This idea of children having a different teacher for each content area leads to many questions. The questions are often from parents of children experiencing departmentalization for the first time. Parents have expressed concern regarding the possible lack of nurturing the children may experience when moving several times a day and losing time with one teacher. Another parental concern involves the needed communication between parents and teachers in regards to each individual’s progress. Parents want to know the benefits of departmentalized classrooms over the self-contained classroom.

Teachers also have expressed concerns regarding this issue. In order to make departmentalization effective many hours of organization are needed. There are several issues to consider when choosing to departmentalize, especially in primary grades.

As a teacher in a newly established departmentalized third grade program, I have several questions and concerns regarding this issue. By thoroughly researching departmentalization and the effectiveness of it in elementary grades, I hope to be better prepared to answer questions parents present to me, as well as help myself understand the value departmentalizing may have on children.
Changes in School Structure

Changes within schools have been depicted as a “fashion trend” as opposed to a scientific building process (Stevens, 2004). Often changes are proposed and supported without thorough research to indicate the innovations are beneficial. Innovative programs are implemented, and before results of them are evaluated, districts move on to another idea.

Often innovative approaches to education are imposed, or demanded, by administrators without fully preparing teachers. Two areas where teacher preparation could better meet teachers’ needs include training with more focus on measurable outcomes of instruction and more knowledge of theory and principles that describe how learning occurs and how instruction influences learning (Stevens, 2004). Often teachers are not provided with professional development needed to implement an innovative program. Any newly implemented program cannot become successful without full support and cooperation of the teachers and staff. Commitment to an idea is different than knowing what to do to make it effective (Joyce, 2004). If a district is willing to provide professional development and resources needed for an innovative program, teachers perceive them as serious about it (Stevens, 2004).

Elementary school structure is an issue debated by educators and administrators (McGrath, Rust, 2002). One aspect of organizational structure involves the number of subject areas one teacher covers in their classroom. In the more traditional, self-contained classroom the teacher is expected to carry the responsibility of curriculum for the entire day. The other side of organizational structure is the departmental approach. This is sometimes referred to as the four-teacher model. In this approach the teachers teach specific content areas and the students move from classroom to classroom during the day.
Self-contained classrooms allow students to become well acquainted with the teacher. The teacher becomes aware of their students’ strengths, weaknesses and personality traits. Additionally, self-contained classes allow for more flexibility in scheduling and less transition time.

Some advantages of departmentalization include specialization, instructional teams, teacher retention and transition to middle and high school and flexibility (Chan and Jarman, 2004). Specialization allows instructional time to be better utilized. Instructional teams can be formed to integrate subject content across the curriculum. Teachers are able to complete more in-depth lessons in a specific area, which may result in greater stability for them. Transition from elementary to middle school and middle to high school has been more easily achieved with departmentalization.

Departmentalization increases the opportunity for teachers to be involved with more students, thus improving interpersonal skills through adapting to different teaching styles. Students are able to move more frequently during the day, which helps increase attention. “Specializing in one subject area is a more efficient use of time.” T. Williams (personal communication, October 7, 2004). Teachers are able to cover more of the state standards by specializing in one content area. In self-contained classrooms, science and social studies often do not get the amount of time necessary to cover the standards that need to be covered. When grade levels are departmentalized, equal time is given to all subject areas, which is a more efficient use of time. In one rural elementary school, teachers discussed the fact that they are required to document each standard and the date it was taught. A curriculum director keeps records of each teacher and the standards they teach on a weekly basis. Departmentalizing cuts down on the
amount of time teachers spend recording standards taught for each subject. When teaching one subject, they are required to only record standards for that area.

Few people would argue that teachers must know the subject matter they are teaching. This is one of the main issues supporting departmentalization in elementary schools. The underlying reason for departmentalization in many schools is the demand to meet standards, indicators and benchmarks of the curriculum. Administrators and teachers indicate curriculum standards are better met if the teacher specializes in one subject area. In-depth study in elementary school science and social studies cannot be accomplished without some type of departmentalization (Alabama Administrative Code, 2003). Higher test scores in some districts give credit to departmentalizing the grade levels. Significant changes in test scores have been evident in schools using this program. “Fourth grade earned all five points on the state proficiency test after two years of departmentalization.” G.Guemelata (personal communication October 5, 2004). Administrators and school boards often buy into any innovation that remotely claims to raise test scores (Fege, 2004).

Successful departmentalization in elementary schools result from the amount of preparation involved. Science, Social Studies and Math may not be covered in depth without departmentalizing. The departmentalization allows teachers to maximize resources and preparation time. Teachers become more knowledgeable of the subject matter they are expected to teach when departmentalization is implemented. Teachers must have adequate understanding of the subject matter they are responsible for teaching (Lederman & Flick 2004). Furthermore, when considering what a teacher should know, standards for students are desired outcomes, but teachers should have a level of knowledge above and beyond what a high school student should
know. However, research suggests that knowing the subject matter does not necessarily make a person a good teacher (Rich, 1992).

Although the innovation of departmentalization has obvious advantages, there are disadvantages as well. One disadvantage is the risk that many students may not encounter a climate of caring and support. Positive teacher-student relations are made more difficult by departmentalization. When teachers see several classes of students each day, they may not be able to get to know the needs of individual students. It is also difficult to give them the individual attention they may need. It becomes similar to an assembly line, depersonalizing the time spent with students (Canady & Retting, 1995). Another disadvantage of departmentalization is when students change teachers several times a day, they may not relate to any of their teachers as well as they would when they have one teacher. The little research that does exist on departmentalization suggests that this type of program has negative effects for elementary children (Grouping students for instruction). Several studies have found elementary students in departmentalized classrooms show lower levels of achievement than children in self-contained classrooms (Canady & Retting 1995).

Organizational Strategies and Planning

When implementing a program such as departmentalization in elementary classrooms, there are several organizational issues to be addressed. To successfully departmentalize, all teachers must be working towards the same goals. Teachers much work to prepare in-depth lessons that meet curriculum standards. At the same time, teachers must continually monitor students’ progress, emotional needs, and behavior issues and communicate with parents. Subject area content must be covered thoroughly. Effective departmentalized grade levels integrate curriculum across all subject areas. The idea of integration is to enable children to make
sense of what they are learning and to connect their experiences in ways that lead to concept development (Burts, Charlesworth, Hart, 1997). If concepts are introduced in one subject area and reinforced in others, children will develop a deeper understanding of them.

In order to successfully integrate the curriculum, teachers need to have common planning time to discuss lesson plans. Administration must organize class and school schedules to ensure planning time. During regularly scheduled planning time, teachers can identify students who need special attention and follow through with extra help (Montgomery & Ross 1994).

Organization in daily routine is also crucial. Teachers at a rural school currently departmentalized in third and fourth grades discussed several organizational strategies they have implemented in their program.

Clipboards with class rosters, behavior checklists and assignment calendars are passed from teacher to teacher as the students switch classrooms. Each student carries a trapper with color-coded folders designated for each subject area. Students also have individual assignment books that are updated daily.

Daily routines are kept consistent in all classrooms. Specific stairways are designated for different grade levels to eliminate congestion in the hallways during transition time. A block of time for each grade has been established for special classes. The students switch teachers and classrooms three times in the morning, then remain in their homeroom for the afternoon. During the afternoon, the homeroom teacher teaches their subject area to his or her own class. The homeroom teacher is also responsible for teaching spelling, grammar and handwriting to their own students.

“Our third grade team spent several days developing consistent rules, discipline procedures and organizational strategies. A. Rosser (personal communication, October 7, 2004).
Time is a key element in organizing a new program in any school. Teachers must have time to get organized before the program is implemented in their classrooms. Students must begin the school year with expectations and procedures in place.

Teacher success, in relationship to both student learning and teacher efficiency, often depends on the ability of the teacher or teachers to manage the classroom. Effective classroom organization and management during the first few weeks of school are crucial in determining expectations, behavior patterns and procedures that will continue throughout the school year. M. Byers (personal communication, October 5, 2004). It is important these procedures remain consistent for the entire year so students understand what is expected of them.

Classroom management, student discipline and issues related to organization are among the most commonly discussed issues by teachers their first years of implementing a new program such as departmentalization. T. Williams (personal communication, October 7, 2004).

To effectively manage a classroom, teachers need to understand the developmental progress of their students. Departmentalization can make it difficult to understand the needs of each individual student. “It is difficult to develop a close rapport with individual students when we see seventy-six children each day.” M. Byers (personal communication, October 5, 2004).

The teams of teachers at a rural school understand that all children need to feel valued. They also know that personality and environment influence growth and development. Social and physical development and intelligence do not proceed for all children at the same rate. Departmentalization assumes, to some extent, children all learn at the same pace. A. Rosser (personal communication, October 7, 2004).
Working Together as a Team

In a departmentalized program, all teachers must work together as a team. Team planning is crucial when grade levels are departmentalized. Earlier, organization was discussed in relation to teachers being consistent with rules, discipline and procedures. The teachers need to work together to develop ways to transition children from the self-contained classroom to the switching of classes and teachers. “All teachers involved must buy into the program for it to work.” G. Guemelata (personal communication, October 5, 2004).

Teachers must discuss the curriculum being taught in each subject area. Integration plays a vital role in a successful program. Teams of teachers must meet on a regular basis (Merenbloom, 1997). Teachers must work together to meet the needs of all students. Administrators must provide teams of teachers with ample time to collaborate on a regular basis if departmentalization is going to be successful.

Integration of Content Areas

The integration of subject matter helps children perceive learning as a whole. It means that learning does not separate ideas, issues and skills but instead connects them in a meaningful way. Curriculum needs to be planned and organized so all subject areas are connected. (Smith, et al., 2000).

Departmentalization makes integration difficult because a different teacher in a different classroom teaches each subject area. Atwater’s study showed integration within curriculum varies depending on teachers’ instructions, learning style, comfort in subject content, structure and school day, and time available for planning integrated curriculum (Smith, et al., 2000).

Students create their own knowledge when searching for meaning and understanding. Knowledge without understanding is limited to the content it is learned, and can be easily
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forgotten. Departmentalized grade levels often teach content without integration. An effective program allows time for teacher collaboration and planning to meaningfully integrate concepts across all content areas.

It is obvious that children develop differently and at different rates. Their early experiences, including home and school environments, influence how they grow and achieve their ability to effectively respond to daily challenges (Cohen, 2001). The environment in each class of a departmentalized grade is a vital part for the success of the program as well as for the children.

At the elementary level, the relationship children establish with adults and their peers form the basis for transitions they must make, as they grow older. Studies have shown the relationships elementary students develop with significant adults, such as their teachers, have a major influence on them. These relationships with teachers significantly correlate with students’ learning, achievement and behavior (Cohen, 2001).

A positive, nurturing climate includes supportive and caring adults, and opportunities to share concerns and problems with adults who respond in a helpful and understanding manner. A feeling of mutual trust and respect is also important (Cohen, 2001).

Academic and social emotional growth is intertwined. Children’s emotions cannot just be turned off when teachers are trying to teach them to read, write or do math. The elementary schools who choose to departmentalize must work hard to develop and maintain a positive school climate (Cohen, 2001).

Teachers in all subject areas should implement curriculum that is designed to allow students to show their strengths daily in the classroom setting. Creating classrooms where risk
taking is accepted will develop a positive climate. Departmentalized classroom teachers must promote a positive climate and environment at all times. (Cohen, 2001).

Parent-Teacher Communication

Parent-teacher communication is another area of concern when grade levels in an elementary school are departmentalized. Teachers are responsible for maintaining accurate records and progress for large numbers of children. Accurate records and communication to parents are more difficult because of the number of children involved. Well-organized programs have effective communication procedures in place and teachers work closely to monitor progress for all students. Newsletters, web pages and student planners are effective tools to communicate daily and weekly with parents. Added responsibility is placed on the student to communicate to parents with the use of daily planners. M. Byers (personal communication, October 5, 2004).

Teachers’ Perception of Departmentalization

Some teachers believe that third and fourth grade students’ experience in a departmentalized program is positive. They believe students at this age must have consistency and structure throughout their day. All classes should use similar discipline guidelines and rules. Classroom routines and procedures should also be the similar. Students should be treated fairly by all teachers. Teacher expectations should also be consistent in all subject areas. A. Rosser (personal communication, October 7, 2004).

Not all teachers support departmentalization in the elementary grades. Some feel these children are too young to adapt to the transitions, organization and added responsibilities that go along with switching classes. Furthermore, they feel elementary school children need the extra nurturing given by one classroom teacher. M. Byers (personal communication, October 5, 2004).
Students’ Perception of Departmentalization

Students have mixed feelings and thoughts on this issue. Some students enjoy changing classrooms and getting to know more teachers. Others feel they need to be with one teacher for longer periods of time during the day. Students are able to adapt to transition time and switching classrooms and teachers, but need help with organization. One third grade child suggested only switching four days a week and spend one full day with their homeroom teacher. C. Albets (personal communication October 7, 2004). Another student thought changing classes twice a day would be better. B. Oglen (personal communication, October 7, 2004).

Parents’ Perception of Departmentalization

Parents’ perceptions of departmentalizing elementary classrooms express mixed feelings on this issue. Some parents feel elementary age students are too young to handle the added responsibilities. They also express concern of the social and emotion issues associated with this type of program. They feel that third grade students may not be ready for the added responsibilities. The organization and transitions expected of them may be too much for them to handle at their age. Some parents who were initially against departmentalizing lower grade levels have changed their opinions because their child has been able to adjust to the changes implemented. J. Stumps (personal communication, October 5, 2004). Parents believe it will take constant communication and monitoring to assure success.

Recommendations for Implementing Departmentalization

- School administrators and teachers should be sure that each new group of students and parents are well informed about departmentalization.
- Teachers should communicate with parents in a consistent and timely manner.
• School administration should schedule professional development and inservice for all involved teachers and staff.

• Teachers should develop and examine procedures used to determine if the procedures are effective or need to be revised.

• Teachers should constantly monitor scheduling and effective use of time, including transition time.

• Review of student progress should be examined on a regular basis to determine the effectiveness of departmentalization.

• The program should be continued for a long enough time for effectiveness to be researched.

• Parents should play a role in determining some aspects of organization strategies.

• More research should be done concerning the effect of departmentalization and children with learning disabilities.

• Questions and comments from parents should be discussed and responses given in a timely manner.

Summary

The effectiveness of departmentalization can definitely be debated. There are many issues involved and many considerations to think about. Organization and planning seem to be key issues when implementing a program like this. Time given to teachers to plan and collaborate effectively is also vital. Teachers have legitimate concerns regarding the lack of inservice and professional development before beginning departmentalization. They often have been told they are going to implement this type of program, yet little information or support has been given. There is more to departmentalizing than opening a text and teaching a subject. Teachers should
be given a choice of the subject area they are expected to teach. Support from the team of teachers, as well as administrators must be evident. The entire team should work together to develop the best practices for transitions, homework policies, behavior plans and overall organization. Common planning time for collaboration must be in place. Everyone involved must be willing to implement the program in order to make it effective.

The review of literature often referred to the importance of teachers working together to develop effective ways to integrate across the curriculum. Integrating subject areas in elementary classrooms is difficult. Integration can only occur in a program, which is supported by all teachers, and time is given for effective planning.

Much of the literature also discussed the importance of school climate and the need for nurturing. Departmentalization makes the ability to get to know all children and develop close relationships difficult. Teachers need to make a valiant effort to establish relationships with all students and keep in mind the important role they play as a significant adult in children’s lives.

Currently, little research exists on the effectiveness of departmentalization in the elementary schools. If teachers and administrators focus on effective teaching practices, I am not sure it matters whether grades are departmentalized or not. Effective teachers, in my opinion, are effective in any school structure that is organized and has full support of administrators and parents.
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**Biographical Information**

*Melissa Dropsey is a third grade teacher at a small rural elementary school. She taught in a self-contained classroom for six years and currently is teaching in a newly departmentalized third grade classroom. Ms. Dropsey teaches math to four classes of third graders and is also responsible for teaching spelling, grammar and writing to her homeroom class.*

*The team of teachers Ms. Dropsey works with is supportive of each other. Several hours outside of the school day have been spent as a team collaborating and planning to effectively organize and implement departmentalization in their grade level. The program will be monitored and evaluated at the end of the school year to determine effectiveness.*