

## **Elementary teachers' experiences and perceptions of departmentalized instruction: A case study**

Alecia Strohl  
Valdosta State University

Lorraine Schmertzing  
Valdosta State University

Richard Schmertzing  
Valdosta State University

### **ABSTRACT**

This case study investigated elementary teachers' experiences and perceptions during a trial year of departmentalized instruction in a rural south Georgia elementary school. To inform their decision about whole-school departmentalization for the future, school administrators appointed twelve first through third grade teachers to pilot the instructional model for one school year. This case study utilized data collected from focus group interviews, individual interviews with departmentalized teachers, teacher journals, and questionnaires. The experiences and perceptions of the departmentalized teachers informed the study about perceived positive and negative attributes of departmentalized instruction, self-efficacy beliefs, and experiences of a shift in instructional models. Aligning with related literature, findings revealed teacher preference for the departmentalized instructional model over the self-contained model due to lighter workload, more focused and higher quality instruction, and increased self-efficacy.

Keywords: content specialists, departmentalize, elementary, self-efficacy, teacher workload, case study

Copyright statement: Authors retain the copyright to the manuscripts published in AABRI journals. Please see the AABRI Copyright Policy at <http://www.aabri.com/copyright.html>.

## **INTRODUCTION**

To meet demands of state and federal standards, schools must explore methods that improve instructional quality and positively impact student achievement. At the elementary level, organizational structure of classroom instruction is one factor of student learning with little research to validate a significantly effective method; yet it has been debated in schools since the early twentieth century (McGrath & Rust, 2002; Otto & Sanders, 1964). Most commonly structured to deliver instruction through a self-contained classroom format, some elementary schools have begun implementing a departmentalized organizational structure (Chan & Jarman, 2004; Hood, 2009). Supporters of this structure argue students receive higher quality instruction from content specialists as opposed to the instruction received from generalists in the self-contained classroom (Chan & Jarman, 2004; DeViscio & Muffs, 2007; Hood, 2009). Further, workload, shown by studies to be a major cause of teacher burnout, is decreased in departmentalized instruction as teachers prepare for fewer subject areas (Bridges & Searle, 2011; Perrachione, Rosser, & Peterson, 2008; Timms, Graham, & Cottrell, 2007).

Another factor shown to have positive impacts on student achievement is teachers' self-efficacy or, "an individual's beliefs in his or her own capabilities to pursue a course of action to meet given situational demands" (Chang, 2009, p. 197). Self-efficacy is fostered in departmentalized settings as teachers become content specialists, narrowing their scope of instruction from all subject areas to a few and becoming more proficient in teaching those areas (Bailey, 2010; Podhajski, Mather, Nathan, & Sammons, 2009; Schwartz & Gess-Newsome, 2008). Other positive effects of using teachers as content specialists include increased teacher attitudes toward subjects taught, improved instructional style, better use of instructional time, and increased scores on state test achievement (Bailey, Shaw, & Hollifield, 2006; Brashears, 2006; Eidielis & Jewkes, 2011; Schwartz & Gess-Newsome, 2008; Wilkins, 2010). Elementary school administrators implementing, or considering implementing, departmentalization do not have a significant pool of directly-related research on which to base their decisions, so they must rely on findings on these residual effects to justify the transition.

Those opposed to the idea of departmentalized instruction in elementary schools ground their argument in the idea of student-centered instruction, focusing on the teaching of the whole child (Elkind, 1988; McGrath & Rust, 2002; Chiro, 2008). Fostering an environment in which students' emotional and social needs are also monitored is important to advocates of the self-contained structure. Teachers in self-contained classrooms have the advantage of knowing students' abilities in all subject areas and can adjust instruction accordingly within a day (Culyer, 1984; McGrath & Rust, 2002). Further, flexibility in schedules in a self-contained classroom allows teachers to better meet students' needs by providing differentiation and more time in specific subject areas when needed (Elkind, 1988). Decision makers in elementary schools unwilling to transition to departmentalized teaching from the traditional structure generally believe student-centered instruction is more beneficial than a more subject-centered model.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

This case study explored a group of teachers' perceptions and experiences as they transitioned to departmentalized teaching from a self-contained model. For one year, twelve first through third grade teachers in one rural school in the southeast taught in a departmentalized format. These teachers were paired by grade level, creating six teams of departmentalized

teachers. For each team, one teacher planned for and taught science, social studies, and math, while the other team member was responsible for language arts, reading, and writing. Teachers taught their respective subject areas to their homeroom classes during the first half of the day and traded classes with their team members to teach those subjects to their second classes. The purpose of the trial year of implementation was to inform administrators on the decision to expand the departmentalized structure to include the remaining first, second, and third grade teachers in the following year. The school in this study housed kindergarten through third grade students; however, kindergarten teachers were not included in the trial year of departmentalization as administrators believed kindergarten students were too young to benefit from the change.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Mathematics and science reports have consistently revealed low performance amongst U.S. students and proposed reforms to improve student achievement in these areas (National Science Board, 2006). Based on standardized test scores, around 70% of all students enter middle and high school with severe deficits in mathematics and science; often unable to achieve grade-level standards even with remediation (Nelson & Landel, 2007). To prevent these deficits, efforts should be made on the elementary school level to ensure all students receive quality instruction from effective teachers. One method of delivering effective instruction is through the use of content specialists (Li, 2008; Nelson & Landel, 2007).

The use of content specialists in elementary schools has potential positive effects on both the students and the teachers. Students in multiple studies received higher quality instruction through more focused teaching and performed better on achievement tests than students who received instruction in all subject areas from one teacher (Bailey et al., 2006; Brashers, 2006; Schwartz & Gess-Newsome, 2008). Gerretson, Bosnick, and Schofield (2008) discussed the importance of the impact created by specialized teachers. To argue for departmentalization, they asked whether, “a model where elementary teachers cover all core subjects with a high level of expertise should continue unchallenged, or would a model where teachers can specialize in one or two areas be a more viable option?” (p. 305). Podhajski et al. (2009) attempted to determine the effectiveness of scientifically-based professional development in reading instruction on both student achievement and teacher knowledge. Based on their study, the authors found that the scientifically-based reading instruction significantly improved teachers’ knowledge and student achievement.

Teachers also benefit from teaching as content specialists. By narrowing the scope of teachers’ instruction, their attitudes toward subject areas taught improved as their self-efficacy and quality of instructional methods increased (Brashears, 2006; Schwartz & Gess-Newsome, 2008). Teacher attitudes toward specific subject areas were explored by Brashears (2006), as well as the implications of those attitudes. Brashears’ (2006) study analyzed teachers’ beliefs about reasons students may or may not achieve on a state writing test. Based on this study, the author found that teachers’ justifications for test scores varied, and most teachers did not attribute their own teaching methods to the test scores. Brashears’ study also highlighted the quality of content specialists’ instructional styles. The results in Brashears’ study not only indicated how teacher attitudes varied greatly in regards to subject matter, it also revealed how scores impacted by teaching strategies, or instructional styles, especially in the context of writing. Departmentalized teachers can focus improvement in their teaching strategies on best

practices for particular content due to the concentration of teaching fewer subjects than to a self-contained teacher. When considered together, the aforementioned results indicate a strong likelihood that continuous improvement may result in better teaching strategies and student learning.

The scope of professional development is also more focused for content specialists than self-contained teachers, as they are trained more in-depth in their subject areas. In order to impact student achievement, professional development must be high-quality and focused to affect teachers' proficiency levels (Nelson & Landel, 2007). Specializing professional development to improve math instruction had similar results in a study conducted by Bailey (2010). The purpose of this work was to investigate the impact of a standards-based professional development program on second and third grade math teachers' levels of pedagogical and content knowledge. These teachers taught at failing schools and showed significant gains in their math teaching abilities. Teachers specializing in specific content areas, like in the departmentalized format, could be positively impacted by participating in subject-specific professional development to improve and refine their expertise areas. Teachers of self-contained classes have more subject areas to refine; participating in an extensive program, such as the one in this study, for each of the areas they teach would be much more difficult than for departmentalized teachers.

The use of instructional time is another residual effect of the implementation of content specialists through a departmentalized structure. Eidiotis and Jewkes (2011) examined the impact of teacher preparedness in a particular topic on the instructional time allotted for that topic. They discovered the less prepared teachers reported they were to teach a topic, the less time they spent on teaching it. Eidiotis and Jewkes used statistics to analyze teachers taught subjects in which they were most knowledgeable and prepared. Departmentalized teachers experience repetition with fewer subject areas than self-contained teachers, potentially giving them more practice and opportunities for reflection through repeated lessons. Wilkins (2010) also conducted a study that revealed a relationship between teachers' attitudes toward specific subject areas and the time they spent teaching each area. She noted that teachers were more likely to spend the most time teaching the subjects they favored and also introduced literature regarding instructional quality for teachers' more favored subjects. Wilkins' (2010) study can be used to show how teachers vary in levels of favoritism of subjects they teach, which further adds to the value of departmentalization when teachers are assigned their preferred subjects.

Another time-related matter regarding instructional areas found in the literature is the concern of cutting some subjects because of the emphasis placed on others. Bailey et al. (2006) explored the quality of teaching in social studies, an area on which most state tests do not place significant emphasis in the elementary grades. They found that instructional strategies used during social studies instruction were less interactive than in other subject areas and teachers spent significantly less time teaching it as well. Further supporting these findings, in the report, "Perceived Effects of State-Mandated Testing Programs on Teaching and Learning: Findings from a National Survey of Teachers," results yielded data regarding time spent on tested and non-tested subject areas (Clarke, Shore, Rhoades, Abrams, Miao, & Li, 2003). The researchers reported more time spent on instruction in tested areas and less time spent on instruction in non-tested areas. Bailey et al.'s (2006) results aligned with this national report, as the authors found overall, teachers spent significantly less time on social studies instruction than in other subject areas. These studies showed teachers were not spending equitable time in all subject areas. The departmentalized structure could alleviate the imbalance because of the blocks of time teachers

are allotted to concentrate on a few specific subject areas. With fewer subjects in a block of time to teach, less subject matter can overlap into the allotted time for social studies, or any other area of instruction.

Self-efficacy is another component affected by decreasing workload and increasing focus in subject areas. Self-efficacy can be fostered through a departmentalized format as teachers become more proficient in their content knowledge through focused professional development. Self-efficacy of departmentalized teachers is also fostered as their skills become more refined through the concentration of fewer subjects than self-contained teachers (Bailey, 2010; Podhajski et al., 2009). Self-efficacy was shown to have a positive impact on teachers' job performance in multiple studies. Brown (2012) compiled an extensive review of studies conducted on the relationship between self-efficacy and burnout and found that all the studies reviewed revealed a negative relationship between teacher self-efficacy and burnout. A study conducted on the relationship between various factors of teaching and teachers' job satisfaction revealed student achievement, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction were reciprocal in nature (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006).

With the possible benefits of shifting to departmentalized instruction, most elementary schools continue to follow the traditional self-contained structure. By nature of the self-contained classroom, students interact with fewer teachers than in a departmentalized model; allowing a single teacher to teach the "whole child" through observing and accommodating students' personalities, social needs, and emotional predispositions (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2011; Elkind, 1988). Departmentalized teachers teach two or more classes each day, increasing their number of students and limiting the depth of knowledge about each child individually. This lack of focus on the whole child is the central argument made by those opposed to departmentalized instruction.

## **PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCH SITE**

All participants in this study were teachers employed by the school at which the study was conducted. These 12 teachers were part of a pilot group appointed by school administrators to test the implementation of departmentalized instruction during the 2011-2012 school year. Though the school serves kindergarten through third grade, kindergarten teachers and students were not part of the pilot group, as administration believed kindergarten-aged students were too young to benefit from organizational transition. Every teacher in the pilot group willingly agreed to participate in this study and meet for at least one hour-long interview and three focus group meetings during the course of the year. The participants were all first, second, or third grade female teachers between the ages of 28 and 50, with varying credentials and years of experience. Table 1(Appendix A) provides visual organization of the participants' data in regards to teaching careers and roles as departmentalized teachers.

The research site, located in a town with a population around 17,000, was one of five public schools in a southeastern U.S. district. All five primary schools were classified as Title I, and of them, this school contained the most students, faculty members, and administrative personnel. Of the 7,620 K-12 students enrolled in the system, 815 attended the school at which the research took place. Table 2 (Appendix B) displays student demographics for the school, system, and state.

## DATA COLLECTION

The investigation took the form of a single case study, allowing the researcher to explore an phenomenon within real-life context using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2003). Because this research examined the perceptions and experiences of participants, a qualitative approach allowed for more in-depth analysis and greater freedom to analyze unforeseen occurrences during the process. According to Patton (2002), “qualitative methods facilitate study of issues in depth and detail. Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry” (p. 14).

Participants were asked to engage in individual interviews as well as in focus groups with other participants. Questionnaires and journal notes provided by participants also provided rich data for analysis in this study. Participants in this study attended two to three focus group sessions, consisting of four to six participants, in which they discussed their experiences and perceptions of departmentalized instruction (Quible, 1998). To increase variety in data, participants did not meet with the same members each time. Prior to participants’ initial focus group sessions, they were encouraged to record their thoughts in journals reflecting their perceptions, experiences, feelings, and attitudes related to their experiences involved with departmentalization (Hayman, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2012). Categorical analysis from transcriptions of initial focus group meetings provided guidance for other data collection instruments created throughout the study, including questionnaires and graphic organizers provided for teachers to systematically record data (Saldaña, 2009). For each focus group meeting, participants were asked to stay for the duration of one hour, but were invited to stay longer if the discussion was of interest and/or wanted to contribute more. Two focus group meetings lasted 15 minutes longer than planned, but all participants stayed to finish the discussions. By analyzing data from individual interviews, common themes and viewpoints were discovered amongst participants. Based on these commonalities, the researcher selected specific combinations of participants for the focus groups, which allowed the gathering of more concentrated data on the common viewpoints of those participants. To avoid repetition of specific themes and viewpoints, participants were asked to not participate in more than three focus group meetings, but were encouraged to schedule additional individual interviews if they wished to provide more insight for the study. Though no teacher scheduled additional interviews, five teachers initiated two or more unscheduled conversations with the researcher lasting ten to fifteen minutes each. Because the researcher was employed by the same school as the participants, occasional opportunities for unscheduled interaction occurred. Each recorded and transcribed meeting was analyzed for categories, preponderance of responses, and notable comments about which to inquire during individual interviews. To present and analyze data, transcriptions were coded through a two-cycle method (Saldaña, 2009) to generate categories that were reviewed further for connecting threads and patterns to create themes (Seidman, 2006, p. 125). Fostering a deductive model of analysis by confirming patterns and themes found through inductive analysis of data (Patton, 2002, p. 454), overarching themes found in focus group data allowed for a more customized approach for each individual interview.

Each of the 12 teachers was asked to participate in at least one individual one-hour interview. As with the focus group meetings, participants had the option to continue interviews after one hour to further discuss any topics related to the study; two teachers each extended an interview by ten minutes. Data collected through interviews and focus groups revealed perceptions and experiences of departmentalized classroom teachers. Seidman (2006) discussed

how interviewing, at its core, is “understanding the lived experience of other people and meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). These interviews provided insight to experiences of teachers who taught in departmentalized settings, as well as their perceptions related to those experiences. The purpose of the interviews was to narrow the scope of the data gathered from the initial focus group meetings to more individual levels. As Seidman discussed, understanding the individual experiences allowed for comparison between perceptions of the same experience. Interview questions were open-ended and to eliminate influence on responses, the use of biased or leading language was intentionally avoided. Analysis of interviews was much like that of focus groups, as they were coded for themes and patterns; they were also compared and contrasted with all other interviews (Saldaña, 2009).

In addition to focus group meetings and individual interviews, participants were periodically given graphic organizers on which they were asked to write their thoughts on various topics (i.e., pros/cons of a certain topic, or likes/dislikes of a component of a program). These graphic organizer templates were given to teachers as new themes emerged during the data analysis process. Out of respect for the participants’ time and schedules, they were given in lieu of multiple individual interviews and were another tool used to guide the creation of focus group and interview questions. To encourage richer, more candid responses, participants were asked to not provide identifiable information when responding. Maxwell (2004) states rich data are “data that are detailed and varied enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on and the processes involved” (p. 254). It became apparent throughout the constant comparative data gathering and analysis process that (Creswell, 2009) asking teachers to complete the graphic organizers anonymously, they provided more detailed and opinionated responses than in the focus group and interview settings, allowing for a more rich description of their experiences and perceptions for the study.

A final data collection tool used in this study was an optional teacher journal. Because participants were already devoting time and effort to participate in focus groups and interviews, as well as complete graphic organizers, they were presented with the option to record additional thoughts, perceptions, or experiences in a personal journal to further enrich the data collection for the study (Hayman et al., 2012). Four of the teachers provided journals, and though small in quantity, these data enriched the study by providing more real-time perceptions. In comparison to focus groups and interviews, which occurred days or weeks after the teachers’ experiences, teachers who used journals recorded notes closer to the time of the experience, giving a more accurate recall of what happened. Another benefit of the journals was their role in focus groups and interviews, as they were used to help those four teachers recall experiences or other items they wished to discuss. These journals were treated like transcriptions, as they were coded for themes in the same manner.

## **RESULTS**

Multiple themes were developed through analysis of data collected during the course of the school year in which the study took place. Overarching themes included: workload; teaching methods; interactions with parents; interactions with students; and lesson planning. These overarching themes were consistent across all sources of data, though the individual interviews and anonymous graphic organizers revealed more detailed and candid responses than did the focus group setting, in which participants were less able to provide details and less likely to be candid.

## Workload and planning

Workload was by far the most present theme amongst all sources of data collected in this study. All 12 participants discussed workload and unanimously agreed the workload in the departmentalized setting was significantly lower than in the traditional self-contained format. One second grade teacher shared, “I almost feel guilty leaving work at a reasonable time; the parking lot is still at least half-full of other teachers’ cars when I leave now.” They attributed this decrease to the narrowed scope of subject areas for which they were preparing. All teachers discussed the use of their personal time for work-related activities before they departmentalized. When recalling her experience as a self-contained teacher, one teacher shared:

My work life was overtaking my personal life. I came home stressed and upset most days; it took a toll on my marriage and personal time with my children. I was coming up here every Sunday to work an additional six hours and having to find extended childcare for my own children because I was staying at work so late every day.

Several teachers specifically noted the amount of time they spent planning, though much more productive, was cut by at least half from their prior year in the self-contained setting. Also during the course of the study, all teachers mentioned or discussed an increase in their productivity during their planning time. One teacher reflected on her outlook on planning when she taught in a self-contained structure, “I’m not staring at my cluttered desk in a daze because I don’t know where to start like last year. Now I know I’ve got three subjects to plan for, and those lessons are going to be awesome!” Many teachers described being “spread too thin” when they taught all six subjects as self-contained teachers, but were more focused and creative when they were planning for fewer subject areas in the departmentalized setup. When discussing the planning process, one teacher noted:

Planning last year took at least three days because we had ten teachers trying to share their ideas for one lesson in one subject. I did enjoy those conversations and the idea-sharing, but it left little time for us to prepare for those lessons by finding the materials and resources we needed. The amount of ideas became overwhelming. This year, I only meet with the departmentalized teachers for planning and we focus only on our three subjects.

Teachers noted other advantages to focusing their planning time by reducing the number of subjects for which they plan. Several elaborated on the advantage of using planning time to sift through the curriculum resources they otherwise would have overlooked. For instance, a first grade teacher shared her excitement about implementing experiments in her classroom:

I’m able to do the things I thought I was going to get to do as a teacher when I was in college; the fun learning activities that make kids excited about coming to school. Science experiments were things I had to ‘cram in’ whenever I could, but with this new way of teaching I actually get to do them every week with my kids!

Teachers mentioned other ways they used their more focused planning time to enrich their lessons, including the integration of technology and art. “I have actually had time to look

up resources to use on my Promethean board. I only wish I had known about the cool things I can do with my board when I was teaching all six subjects,” shared a third grade teacher. They believed these additions to their lessons made the learning more memorable for students.

Stress as it related to the workload and planning demands was another factor upon which departmentalized teachers unanimously agreed. While some participants provided more details about impacts the previous years’ stress brought upon on their health, social lives, and families, they all reported feeling less stressed, which many noted positively impacted their overall teaching abilities. The anxiety and pressure of creating quality lesson plans for all subject areas while they were in the self-contained setting was commonly addressed by participants. When compared to the departmentalized setting, all teachers reported experiencing less stress and lighter workloads than any other year they taught. Departmentalized teachers taught each lesson twice a day, once for a morning class and once for an afternoon class. They generally administered the same assessments for both their morning and afternoon classes, resulting in twice the amount of a single assessment to grade than in a self-contained setting. Instead of having about 20 math assessments and 20 reading assessments to grade, they would have about 40 assessments in one subject area. When asked about grading 40 or more of one specific assessment, teachers showed preference for it over grading multiple assessments for half the students as they did in self-contained settings. A first grade teacher explained:

The more I grade the same test, the more familiar I am with that test, which makes grading faster. When I had just one class of kids, I did not have as many of the same test, but I had tests in all subjects. When I had to stop and start again grading the different tests, it took longer. I grade 40 math tests quicker than I do 20 math and 20 reading tests.

Another residual benefit mentioned by several teachers in regards to grading assessments was the increase in amount of scores per individual test among which to compare student achievement. “Having more scores lets me compare more students and also helps me think about my own teaching based on their responses to test items,” shared one second grade teacher.

### **Teaching impacts**

An additional overarching theme found in this study was the positive impacts the departmentalized structure had on teaching methods and instructional time. With more focused planning, teachers reported incorporating more supplemental activities to extend or differentiate lessons to better meet their students’ needs. The supplemental activities reported most were interactive whiteboard slideshows, science experiments, and vocabulary games. Teachers reported these activities, in addition to a variety of others, allowed them to teach more in-depth, which most said resulted in better teaching overall. One third grade gifted teacher stated:

Because my lessons go deeper, I know I can hold my kids more accountable because they are being asked to go deeper too. I’ve never had more kids grasp what I’m teaching so well. I feel like they are getting more from me as a result of my more focused teaching.

All participants reported positive attributes of departmentalized instruction in relation to time. Most teachers shared that they better adhered to instructional schedules for each class they taught. Almost every teacher admitted that when they taught in self-contained settings, they

allowed the teaching of some subjects to exceed allotted time slots and take time away from other subject areas as a result. One teacher explained:

Keeping a tight schedule keeps me from getting behind and helps me stay on top of my own teaching. When I had my own group of students, I would allow my literacy block to run into my math and science almost every day so I could finish those lessons. Now I know I have only three subjects to teach and I must teach them in that time, because I don't have the rest of the day to do it. I have another class coming midday that I'll have to teach.

They attributed their increase in time awareness to several factors, including the midday switching of classes and fewer subjects to teach to their classes. Knowing a second group of students would be coming midday resulted in a more rigid schedule, as some reported wanting to avoid delays in sending their first group to their second teacher. This also helped them avoid taking time away from their second set of students. Breaking up their schedule into three distinct segments instead of six, like they did in their self-contained classrooms, made time management easier and reduced the likelihood they would allow one subject to take up the allotted time of the remaining two. One third grade teacher found she made better use of her instructional time in the departmentalized structure. She stated:

We start right at 8:25 now, right on the dot. In the past I would have given my kids a little more time to finish their morning work and maybe start around 8:45 because I knew within the course of my day I could make adjustments to the academic schedule when I needed to. I don't have the luxury of those adjustments anymore, but I like that it keeps me on schedule and almost forces me to stick to my agenda, which are good things!

Another topic discussed several times was the repetition of lessons throughout the day. Teachers were essentially teaching the same lessons twice a day, once for each group of students. Several teachers predicted they would tire of the repetition of lessons each day, but on the contrary, they reported a preference for receiving a new group of students after lunch, with many calling the switch a midday "fresh start." Stemming from the repetition of lessons was the advantage of modifying instruction when necessary. A second grade teacher shared:

I feel like I teach better lessons to my second group because I can make immediate adjustments based on what happened in the first round of lessons that morning. It also reassures you of your teaching; I may need to reevaluate the way I taught if it didn't work for both of my classes.

Another second grade teacher stated the repetition of "teaching the lesson again keeps me on my toes; I can see weak areas of lessons and adjust for my next class." Echoing this comment, every teacher in the pilot group discussed or at least mentioned the value of repeating lessons in the same day, as they were able to adjust based on feedback and observations of their first classes.

## Interactions with students and parents

Interactions with parents and students were themes both heavily discussed throughout this study as well. Many teachers admitted feeling apprehensive about communication with parents, mostly stating they were intimidated by the amount of parents they would deal with compared to the years they taught self-contained classes. As the year progressed, teachers began to shift their thinking, and viewed the aspect of parental interactions as a positive trait of departmentalized instruction. Around the middle of the year, one teacher stated:

I've started encouraging parents to come in more for conferences when issues come up with a student. Now instead of feeling like I have to defend myself and sugarcoat issues, I have a partner teacher who is also at the conference to support what I say with her observations. They hear that two people are seeing the same things, now it's not my word against their kid's word; there are two teachers talking about the same issues occurring in two different classrooms. It's not as easy for parents to say it's a 'teacher issue' anymore.

Also, a few teachers noted the number of student check-outs had decreased, resulting in less missed instruction time. These teachers attributed this drop to a more rigid schedule, as one mentioned, "When parents know they are missing a block of something, they started scheduling appointments after school. I think the set schedule makes them realize they are specifically missing a math lesson or a reading lesson for that day."

Interactions with students are engrained in daily duties for both self-contained and departmentalized teachers; however, departmentalized settings created new types of interactions for participants. Most teachers reported an increase in the amount of time necessary to get to know all of their students; however, by the end of the second quarter, all teachers stated they had connected with their students as well as, if not better than, they had with students in the self-contained setting. Elaborating on this experience, one teacher noted:

I understand more about my kids now because I am paying attention to them more as individuals. Before, I didn't feel as present with my kids as I do now; I felt like in the past while I was teaching, my mind was thinking about all the things I had left to teach that day, and if I had remembered to get everything ready for those upcoming lessons. Now I know I am well-planned and prepared for everything each day because my workload isn't spread all over, and that focus is now placed on my kids.

On the other hand a few teachers mentioned some aspects of connecting with their students they missed from the self-contained setting. One of them shared:

I do miss their personal stories I used to hear during writing instruction, though. I don't get to hear all about their weekend events, or pets, or extracurricular activities like before. I will say that I do know more about their interests, though, and what gets them excited, because of the deeper level of science instruction I am giving. It's definitely give and take; but I still wouldn't trade this teaching style for the old one!

Some teachers enjoyed knowing a greater number of students in their grade level, as they taught two classes instead of one. One advantage mentioned multiple times throughout the year was addressing students by name to correct behavior. One teacher elaborated with:

If I see one of my afternoon students misbehaving in the hallway during the morning, I can call that student by name and correct the situation quickly. My partner teacher can do the same for me as well. These students know they have two teachers to answer to, so they seem to be more aware of their actions when they are not in the classroom.

The way in which students responded to having two teachers was also addressed by participants. The “double attention,” as one teacher noted, was encouraging for them and they looked forward to “sharing exciting news with two teachers as opposed to one.”

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration was at the heart of the entire structure, as pairs of teachers shared students, schedules, and responsibility for parental communication. Throughout the study, almost every teacher mentioned the importance of being paired with a compatible partner. Overall, the six pairs of teachers in this study felt they worked well with their partners, with only mentioning minor issues, such as aligning discipline styles for their shared students at the beginning of the year. Teachers reported several positive factors of collaborating with their partners, such as understanding more about students by combining perspectives, sharing triumphs of students with someone who knows them as well, and having another person to help analyze data. When discussing assessments, one teacher noted:

Sometimes I get bogged down in grading writing assignments because I am with the students through the entire writing process and think about their progress instead of the end result. It's nice to go to my partner and show her the final product to get a more objective viewpoint.

Some teachers utilized the system to integrate across the curriculum. Several teachers noted specific topics in their subject areas with which students struggled, and how departmentalized instruction was used to help provide additional learning opportunities for those topics. Discussing collaboration with her partner, one teacher said:

When I taught about certain historical figures in social studies, I would sometimes ask my partner to help reinforce that information through her teaching. She was always willing and had great ideas. She incorporated some of my topics through read-alouds, informational writing lessons, and interactive edit activities. I could do the same for whatever she happened to be teaching as well.

Overall, teachers felt as if they collaborated more in the departmentalized setting than they did in the self-contained setting. Many said they communicated with their partner teachers multiple times a day about their shared students.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

With heavy cuts in funding, school resources are becoming less accessible; yet teachers are expected to meet increasingly rigorous standards despite these cuts (Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp, & Tahan, 2011). To prevent teacher burnout, methods to improve various aspects of the profession should be explored and implemented. For elementary schools, departmentalization is one structure that alleviates stress of workload by narrowing the scope of teachers' focus from teaching all subject areas to a few. This study revealed insights of 12 teachers who participated in departmentalized teaching for one year and overwhelmingly showed favoritism for this teaching structure. Aligning with the literature, this study revealed that focusing on fewer subjects alleviated workloads for teachers (Bridges & Searle, 2011; Perrachione et al., 2008; Timms et al., 2007). Further, when workloads decreased, teachers also reported lower stress levels, which ultimately improved their attitudes toward teaching (Perrachione et al., 2008; Timms et al., 2007).

Self-efficacy was found to be a positive effect of departmentalizing in this study as teachers reported feeling more confident and prepared in their teaching than they did when they taught self-contained classes. Studies showed self-efficacy was fostered when teachers taught the subject areas in which they were most confident, which departmentalization could make possible (Brown, 2012; Fantuzzo, Perlman, Sproul, Minney, Perry, and Li, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). These studies support the notion that residual effects of implementing a change such as departmentalization could potentially minimize the high teacher turnover rate by decreasing workload and exhaustion and increasing teacher self-efficacy.

Because this structure is a major change from the traditional self-contained structure, Chan and Jarman (2004) suggested piloting the change with a portion of the teachers before implementing on a school level, as was the case with the school in this study. Piloting major changes allows decision makers to determine how well a program will work on a larger scale and gather data to support or discredit these changes (van Teijlingen, Rennie, Hundley, & Graham, 2001). Pilot teachers in this study were able to determine problematic areas, such as the transporting of student materials from room to room, and use that information for future planning, should they departmentalize in upcoming years. One recommendation from this study is to pilot departmentalization before implementing it, allowing teachers to work through problematic areas and suggest approaches that may be helpful for other teachers if the school expands the program later.

Another recommendation for schools considering this structure is to strongly consider personality and teaching styles when pairing teachers for the year. Teachers in this study reported they collaborated with their partners multiple times a day and stated the frequency of collaboration greatly increased from their self-contained teaching experience. Collaboration occurred in multiple areas including planning, parent conferences, grading, monitoring student behavior, entering report card data, and integrating subjects across the curriculum. Administrators should allow and seek teacher input to determine optimal pairing options, as they may not know each teacher's personality traits, teaching styles, organizational habits, or any other factor that may affect this decision. A suggestion for future research is to investigate impacts on various types of learners. Within the same school using similar curriculum, student achievement could be compared across various subcategories.

**Appendix A**

Table 1

*Departmentalized Teacher Credentials and Class Details*

Teacher Code	Grade/Type of Class	Departmentalized Subjects	Teaching Experience (in years)	Highest Degree Earned
1A	1 <sup>st</sup> /Regular ed.	Math/science/S.S.	10	Specialist
1B	1 <sup>st</sup> /EIP	Reading/writing/lang.	14	Specialist
1C	1 <sup>st</sup> / Regular ed.	Math/science/S.S.	13	Specialist
1D	1 <sup>st</sup> /EIP	Reading/writing/lang.	22	Master's
2A	2 <sup>nd</sup> / Regular ed.	Math/science/S.S.	8	Master's
2B	2 <sup>nd</sup> / Inclusion	Reading/writing/lang.	15	Master's
2C	2 <sup>nd</sup> /Gifted	Math/science/S.S.	21	Specialist
2D	2 <sup>nd</sup> /Gifted	Reading/writing/lang.	20	Master's
3A	3 <sup>rd</sup> /EIP	Math/science/S.S.	9	Bachelor's
3B	3 <sup>rd</sup> /EIP	Reading/writing/lang.	5	Master's
3C	3 <sup>rd</sup> /Gifted	Math/science/S.S.	24	Specialist
3D	3 <sup>rd</sup> /Gifted	Reading/writing/lang.	12	Specialist

## Appendix B

Table 2

### *Demographic Data for School, System, and State*

	Black Student Enrollment	White Student Enrollment	Hispanic Student Enrollment	Free/Reduced Lunch Eligibility
School	35%	46%	15%	68%
System	34%	45%	17%	65%
State	37%	44%	12%	57%

## REFERENCES

- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (2011). *Making the case for educating the whole child*. Alexandria, VA.
- Aud, S., Hussar, W., Kena, G., Bianco, K., Frohlich, L., Kemp, J., & Tahan, K. (2011). *The condition of education 2011* (Report No. NCES 2011-033). Retrieved from Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics website: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011033.pdf>
- Bailey, L. B. (2010). The impact of sustained, standards-based professional learning on second and third grade teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge in integrated mathematics. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 38, 123-132. Doi: 10.1007/s10643-010-0389-x
- Bailey, G., Shaw, E. L., & Hollifield, D. (2006). The devaluation of social studies in the elementary grades. *Journal of Social Studies Research*, 30(2), 18-29.
- Brashears, K. (2006). I know this to be true...: Perceptions of teachers in one rural elementary school regarding writing scores. *Rural Educator*, 27(2), 19-27.
- Bridges, S., & Searle, A. (2011). Changing workloads of primary school teachers: 'I seem to live on the edge of chaos'. *School Leadership & Management*, 31, 413-433.
- Brown, C. G. (2012). A systematic review of the relationship between self-efficacy and burnout in teachers. *Educational & Child Psychology*, 29(4), 47-63.
- Caprara, G., Barbaranelli, C., Steca, P., & Malone, P. S. (2006). Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs as determinants of job satisfaction and students' academic achievement: A study at the school level. *Journal of School Psychology*, 44(6), 473-490. Doi: 10.1016/j.jsp.2006.09.001
- Chan, T. C., & Jarman, D. (2004). Departmentalize elementary schools. *Principal*, 84, 70-72.
- Chang, M. L. (2009). An appraisal perspective of teacher burnout: Examining the emotional work of teachers. *Educational Psychology Review*, 21, 193-218. Doi: 10.1007/s10648-009-9106-y
- Clarke, M., Shore, A., Rhoades, K., Abrams, L., Miao, J., & Li, J. (2003). *Perceived effects of state-mandated testing programs on teaching and learning: Findings from interviews*

- with educators in low-, medium-, and high-stakes states (Report No. TM034809). Chestnut Hill, MA: The National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED474867)
- Culyer, R. C. (1984). The case for the self-contained classroom. *The Clearing House*, 57, 417-419. Doi: 10.2307/30194990
- Delviscio, J. J., & Muffs, M. L. (2007). Regrouping students. *School Administrator*, 64(8), 26-30.
- Eidietis, L., & Jewkes, A. M. (2011). Making curriculum decisions in K-8 science: The relationship between teacher dispositions and curriculum content. *Journal of Geoscience Education*, 59(4), 242-250.
- Elkind, E. (1988). Rotation at an early age. *Principal*, 67(5), 11-13.
- Fantuzzo, J., Perlman, S., Sproul, F., Minney, A., Perry, M. A., & Li, F. (2012). Making visible teacher reports of their teaching experiences: The early childhood teacher experiences scale. *Psychology in the Schools*, 49, 194-205. Doi: 10.1002/pits.20623
- Gerretson, H., Bosnick, J., & Schofield, K. (2008). A case for content specialists as the Elementary classroom teacher. *The Teacher Educator*, 43, 302-314. Doi: 10.1080/08878730802249866
- Hayman, B., Wilkes, L., & Jackson, D. (2012). Journaling: Identification of challenges and reflection on strategies. *Nurse Researcher*, 19(3), 27-31.
- Hood, L. (2009). "Platooning" instruction: Districts weigh pros and cons of departmentalizing elementary schools. *Harvard Education Letter*, 25(6), 1-3.
- Li, Y. (2008). Mathematical preparation of elementary school teachers: Generalists versus content specialists. *School Science & Mathematics*, 108, 169-172.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2004). Using qualitative methods for causal explanation. *Field Methods*, 16, 243-264.
- McGrath, C. J., & Rust, J. O. (2002). Academic achievement and between-class transition time for self-contained and departmental upper-elementary classes. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 29, 40.
- National Science Board. (2006). *America's pressing challenge—Building a stronger foundation* (Report No. NSB 06-02). Retrieved from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED490850> (ED490850).
- Nelson, G. D., & Landel, C. C. (2007). A collaborative approach for elementary science. *Educational Leadership*, 64, 72-75.
- Otto, H. J., & Sanders, D. C. (1964). *Elementary School Organization and Administration*. (4th ed.). New York: Meredith Publishing Company.
- Palardy, G. J., & Rumberger, R. W. (2008). Teacher effectiveness in first grade: The importance of background qualifications, attitudes, and instructional practices for student learning. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 30, 111-140. Doi: 10.2307/30128057
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Sage Publications.
- Perrachione, B. A., Rosser, V. J., & Petersen, G. J. (2008). Why do they stay? Elementary teachers' perceptions of job satisfaction and retention. *Professional Educator*, 32(2), 25-41.

- Podhajski, B., Mather, N., Nathan, J., & Sammons, J. (2009). Professional development in scientifically based reading instruction: Teacher knowledge and reading outcomes. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 42*, 403-417. Doi: 10.1177/0022219409338737
- Quible, Z. K. (1998). A focus on focus groups. *Business Communication Quarterly, 61*(2), 28-38.
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Schiro, M. S. (2008). *Curriculum Theory: Conflicting Visions and Enduring Concerns*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Schwartz, R. S., & Gess-Newsome, J. (2008). Elementary science specialists: A pilot study of current models and a call for participation in the research. *Science Educator, 17*(2), 19-30.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2007). Dimensions of teacher self-efficacy and relations with strain factors, perceived collective teacher efficacy, and teacher burnout. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 99*, 611-625.
- Timms, C., Graham, D., & Cottrell, D. (2007). "I just want to teach". *Journal of Educational Administration, 45*, 569-586. Doi: 10.1108/09578230710778204
- van Teijlingen, E., Rennie, A., Hundley, V., & Graham, W. (2001). The importance of conducting and reporting pilot studies: The example of the Scottish births survey. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 34*, 289-295. Doi: 10.1046/j.1365-2648.2001.01757.x
- Wilkins, J. L. M. (2010). Elementary school teachers' attitudes toward different subjects. *Teacher Educator, 45*(1), 23. doi: 10.1080/08878730903386856
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.