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Tak C. Chan

Kennesaw State University, tchan@kennesaw.edu

Daniel Terry

Kennesaw State University, dterry@kennesaw.edu

Harriet J. Bessette

Kennesaw State University, hbessett@kennesaw.edu

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Fourth and Fifth Grade Departmentalization: A Transition to Middle School

Tak Cheung Chan
Kennesaw State University

Daniel Terry
Kennesaw State University

Harriet Bessette
Kennesaw State University

Abstract

The difficulties involved in the transition for students leaving elementary school, where there typically exists little departmentalization, to the middle school, where departmentalization is the primary structure, have often been noted by scholars. While some studies cited in this work indicated a decrease in student achievement with the implementation of departmentalization, this approach should not be categorically rejected. In this regard, this study examines how elementary students can begin to be better prepared in fourth and fifth grades to enter the departmentalization system.

Traditional elementary schools are typically organized into self-contained classrooms as opposed to middle schools which are largely departmentalized. This difference in organization frequently results in obstacles to learning for students transitioning from elementary to middle school (Harris, 1996). Yet, while departmentalization at the elementary level has its opponents, others believe the improvement of the learning process for elementary school children is well worth the risk (Chan & Jarman, 2004).

Harris (1996) reported that the self-contained organizational structure allows for more instructional time due to lack of class transition, arguing that student achievement was found to be significantly higher in some subject areas for students in self-contained settings than for those in departmentalized settings. Findings from a number of studies, in fact, suggest that achievement losses frequently result when transition (from self-contained to departmentalized) negatively affects students' self-concept of ability and value in academic disciplines (Reuman, 1984). Academic difficulties in language learning (Alspaugh & Harting, 1995; Grooms, 1967; Lamme, 1976), mathematics (Alspaugh & Harting, 1995; Grooms, 1967; Reuman, 1984), and social studies (Alspaugh & Harting, 1995; Grooms, 1967) have also been cited as deterrents to implementing departmentalization. Further, Alspaugh & Harting (1995) advised that schools should expect achievement declines in the transitional year when transitioning students from self-contained to departmentalized classrooms.

Justification for transitioning from self-contained to departmentalized classrooms involves a different type of transitioning: from elementary to middle grade schooling. Among the obstacles created by elementary-to-middle school transitioning, the most significant appear to be social in nature (Blum, 2005; Pope & Simon, 2005; Tomlinson & Doubet, 2005). Pre-adolescents' psychological needs encompass a range of emotions, reflecting the most basic followed by higher level, increasingly complex needs, among them, the need to feel secure, accepted, safe, connected, and validated (Maslow, 1968). These concerns are heightened for students transitioning from elementary to middle school (Scholastic Administrator Partners, 2004) as the stakes for academic achievement increase.

Meanwhile, some middle schools have become proactive, offering school orientation visits to students and parents to familiarize them with a new school. Such visits serve to familiarize the middle school bound and their parents, especially in the areas of transportation, schedules, and rules (Scholastic Administrator Partners, 2004). Taking a step closer towards departmentalization, one school district designed a middle school program to facilitate transition from the elementary

grades by organizing its sixth grade classes in self-contained, multi-age, and team taught classrooms (Stelle & Wallace, 1979). These approaches to “blending” the elementary/middle grades experience offer assistance to students and parents readying for middle school.

Socialization: The Gateway to Academics

Educators need to acknowledge that pre-adolescents are wired differently – psychologically, physiologically, and, as a result, cognitively. The socialization and enculturation process during transitioning from elementary to middle school takes on increased importance. Pre-adolescent “hardwiring” sets the stage for future learning to occur. The environment of the school and its culture play a critical role in students’ ability to connect to learning. Above all, students at this age need to feel connected to their peers, to their teachers, and to their school. A school environment that feels safe, supports students’ autonomy, and includes them meaningfully, has the potential to help pre-adolescents think critically, develop opinions, and engage more in their classes (Inlay, 2005).

Elementary Schools Offer Assistance during Transition

Many elementary schools have collaborated with their feeding middle schools to offer assistance to fifth graders as they prepare to attend middle school, adopting “quasi-departmentalized” or “hybrid” models to ease school transition. Introductory sessions to middle school life are often organized in elementary schools to acquaint students with what to anticipate in middle schools. Observational visits to middle schools are frequently arranged to let the students become familiarized with the middle school environment.

A recent study by Reed (2002) investigated the perceptions of fourth grade students, parents, and teachers regarding a four-teacher instructional model of departmentalization at an elementary school. Results indicated that students were positive about departmentalization and liked the opportunity to move from class to class. Parents increasingly felt more welcomed in the schools, and teachers believed that students felt that they had a sense of a common mission in addition to positive social and academic experiences. Successful

elementary level departmentalization experiences like these need to be expanded to include other elementary schools as they prepare students for the social and academic challenges that await them in middle school.

Planning for Departmentalization in Fourth and Fifth Grades

Departmentalization in elementary schools offers an excellent solution to the transition problem in addition to all the benefits of academic specialization (Chan & Jarman, 2004). However, many educators and parents are opposed to departmentalization in elementary schools because they see the advantage of keeping the classrooms self-contained to maintain the uniqueness of a home-like environment and the teacher’s parental image. The point is well taken. As a matter of fact, self-contained classroom organization may be a good way to ease students from home setting to school setting. However, when students come to fourth and fifth grades, a change in academic organization is needed to work toward a seamless transition as they move from elementary to middle schools. Departmentalization in fourth and fifth grade seems to offer a solution to address this issue.

Justification

Departmentalization in fourth and fifth grades offers academic specialization in which self-contained classrooms are deficient. Departmentalization makes it easier for students to follow the discipline tracking to suit their abilities. It takes full advantage of the best of teacher resources and facilitates instructional planning. In addition, students seem to like the freedom to move around from classroom to classroom in a school day (Grooms, 1967; Reed, 2002). After all, elementary students really need to be exposed to the opportunity to develop their survival skills as they transition from the egocentrism of childhood to a group-centered way of school life (Perlstein, 2003).

Personnel Involvement

Teacher “buy-in” and support is particularly essential to the success of departmentalization. Involving parents at an early stage will make it easier for them to understand the process of

departmentalization and how it would benefit the academic development of their children. District level administrators, such as superintendents, curriculum directors, and school board members also need to be involved in all stages of the departmentalization initiative, as their continued support will undoubtedly translate into critical resources needed by elementary schools to sustain this effort.

Required Resources

An inventory of all resources needed to implement departmentalization has to be undertaken to ensure successful implementation. Teachers' qualifications and areas of certification need to be carefully examined and evaluated to determine their eligibility to perform in their new assignments. In terms of academic planning, strategies to achieve the goals and objectives of elementary school standards will likely need to be revised since curriculum by discipline area will be individually redeveloped to reflect the developmental needs of fourth and fifth grade students. School facilities will need to be modified to achieve particular educational goals. Other resource considerations will likely trigger an examination of required student instructional time as mandated by state regulations and an evaluation of the number of hours teachers will be required to work to fulfill their contractual agreement with the school district.

Procedures

Departmentalization in elementary school begins with expressed interest from school administrators, teachers, and/or parents. Initial discussions will include possible benefits to students. Parents will be invited to join the discussion to voice their opinions. A planning committee needs to be organized to consist of administrators, teachers, and parents. A formal request has to be made through the superintendent's office to the school board for approval. The request will consist of the following components: Introduction, review of literature, evaluation of faculty and facility resources, compliance with state and district regulations, major benefits to elementary students, implementation procedures, organizational, fiscal and facility impact, and interim and final evaluation.

Tips for Successful Transition through Departmentalization

To be successful in providing transition for elementary students through planning and implementing departmentalization in fourth and fifth grade, the following might be worth considering:

Working with parents

When parents understand the value of any initiative, they will be more likely to support that initiative. Parents are a potential resource in the planning and implementing of departmentalization in fourth and fifth grades, and it is essential that they are involved in planning from day one.

Soliciting support from district office

Since a departmentalization request needs to go through the superintendent's office to the school board, it is recommended that school administrators work with the district level curriculum director to present materials to the superintendent.

Collaborating with middle schools

Since the purpose of transitioning is to get students acquainted with middle school environment, feeding middle schools could provide much assistance in setting up middle school environments in elementary schools.

Reviewing current literature

Materials from current literature will help the planning committee to present good justifications for departmentalization and answer many related questions in the approval process.

Drawing from successful experiences of existing programs

It is recommended that planning committee members learn from elementary schools with departmentalization settings already in place. Site visits to these schools will facilitate start-up measures to be undertaken by non-departmentalized elementary schools.

Scheduling for departmentalization

In scheduling for departmentalization, factors such as teacher workload, student instructional time, state standards, and flexibility need to be taken into consideration.

Discussion

There appears to be wide agreement that elementary to middle grades transition is of critical importance in the development of self-confident, effectual learners for secondary school and beyond. It seems reasonable, therefore, to seek out alternatives to bridging the elementary/middle grades transition. The pitfalls of transition for students leaving elementary school cannot and should not be ignored. And while some studies cited in this work indicated a decrease in student achievement with the implementation of departmentalization, it should not be categorically rejected. The decline in academic achievement was not a result of ineffectual departmentalization; rather, poor academic gains were the consequence of transitional problems brought on by the transition to departmentalization while students were attending elementary school. The two types of studies represented in the literature – *to departmentalized classes from self-contained classes*; and *to middle school from elementary* – should therefore be interpreted individually and in proper context. Negative findings from one type of study do not necessarily translate to negative findings for another.

Second, we feel that departmentalization should be given at least a chance to be practiced on a small scale and be closely observed for a fair evaluation of its efficiency and effectiveness. One of us, Daniel Terry, former elementary school principal, verifies that departmentalized fourth and fifth grade students in his school better adapted to the middle school setting than their peers who attended fourth and fifth grades in self-contained classrooms, based upon faculty reports, as well as scores from the state criterion-referenced competency test. Results like these merit a closer look at efforts to departmentalize at the elementary level.

Conclusion

For a concept started decades ago, departmentalization has not been widely practiced. Most of the opposition to

departmentalization comes from critics who point out that departmentalized class settings are too different from the traditional self-contained classes which are easily recognizable by most elementary school students and parents. While the authors respect this standpoint based on professionalism, we feel that students today are overly protected by the greenhouse-type environments created by elementary educators.

Departmentalization has the potential to provide fourth and fifth graders with the tools needed to successfully begin transitioning to the middle school setting. Educators need to seriously challenge the traditional structure of elementary schools and explore the possibility of departmentalization in their own neighborhood schools. We also believe that educators need to understand that a successful transition into middle school begins in the elementary grades. With this understanding, elementary and middle grade educators can collaborate to structure departmentalization programs so that young adolescents get the best start possible in their middle school and beyond.

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