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Teachers' Perspectives on Self-contained and Departmentalized Instructional Models

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Teachers' Perspectives on Self-contained and Departmentalized Instructional Models

By: Linsay Stewart

May 2015

A capstone project submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of
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requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to answer the question, which instructional model, self-contained or departmentalized, do fourth grade teachers believe is more beneficial to use in a rural elementary school? I used purposeful sampling to select only the teachers who have taught in both the traditional self-contained and the departmentalized instructional models at the school district where the teachers work. Through the use of a survey, interviews, and a focus group, the two fourth grade teachers expressed their opinions on the advantages and drawbacks of both classroom designs. The main conclusion of this study is while there are pros and cons to both instructional models; overall the departmentalized instructional model is preferred. Departmentalization allows teachers to become experts in one or two subject areas, while encouraging communication and collaboration between teachers. In the departmentalized environment teachers and students become a community of learners. There still needs to be further research done on departmentalization to determine how realistic it is as an alternative reform option.

Keywords: departmentalization, self-contained, instructional model, traditional setting, content specialist, elementary, fourth grade

Chapter 1: Introduction

While the majority of elementary schools in the United States have self-contained classrooms, some school administrators are beginning to look at alternative instructional models, such as departmentalization. In the traditional self-contained structure each elementary teacher in the school is responsible for teaching a class of students every subject in the curriculum, while in the departmentalized structure each teacher instructs students in one or two subject areas where the teachers specialize and students move from one classroom to another (Chan & Jarman, 2004; Chan, Terry, & Bessette, 2009; Chang, Muñoz, & Koshewa, 2008; McGrath & Rust, 2002; Strohl, Schmertzling, Schmertzling, & Hsiao, 2014).

Problem Statement

The traditional self-contained classroom organization at the elementary level requires teachers to serve as generalists and to be experts in every subject that is part of the curriculum. In New York the elementary core curriculum consists of literacy, social studies, the sciences, and mathematics (Anderson, 1962; Chan & Jarman, 2004; Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield, 2008; Strohl, Schmertzling, Schmertzling, & Hsiao, 2014). Unfortunately past research has shown the traditional self-contained classroom model is deficient in several of the key features associated with an efficient classroom structure, including teachers' ability to teach every subject equally (Anderson, 1962; Brown, 2012; Chan & Jarman, 2004; Klassen & Chiu, 2010), excessive workload (Strohl et al, 2014), and increased job related stress (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Strohl et al., 2014).

Due to the flaws with the traditional classroom model, researchers have begun investigating alternative classroom designs, including departmentalization as a way to reform academic instruction. The researchers who have started to study departmentalization state further

research into the alternative model is needed before there is conclusive evidence for teachers and administrators to recommend transitioning from the traditional self-contained classroom format (Chan, Terry, & Bessette, 2009; Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Liu, 2011; McGrath & Rust, 2002; Reed, 2002; Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014). The question remains, which instructional model, self-contained or departmentalized, is more beneficial to use in elementary schools?

Significance of the Problem

The purpose of all schools is to educate students and prepare them to be productive citizens in the community. To meet the objective of successfully educating students, schools need to examine current practices and determine where improvements are required, for instance improving academic instruction (Baker, 1999).

While the tradition self-contained model requires elementary teachers to teach every subject in the core curriculum, most elementary teachers are not equally proficient in all content areas (Anderson, 1962; Brown, 2012; Chan & Jarman, 2004; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Anderson described a study conducted by George Akerlund, where 260 generalist teachers were asked about their beliefs on their capability to teach all elementary school subjects. Half of the teachers in the study felt they were not prepared in content and method to teach in all subjects in the curriculum (Anderson). Teachers' perceived sense of inefficiency in some areas of the curriculum may lead to job related stress, emotional exhaustion, teacher burnout, and decreased job satisfaction, (Brown, 2012; Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014) which in turn can negatively affect student achievement (Strohl et al., 2014).

Another potential reason to examine the current classroom model in elementary schools is the increasing workload for teachers. Over the past twenty years in the self-contained

classroom format teachers' workloads, such as paperwork requirements and the amount of time it takes to plan and prepare to teach the curriculum, have steadily increased to a point where the workload is becoming unsustainable. This in turn has increased job related stress and job dissatisfaction, which can lead to teacher burnout and teachers leaving the profession (Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014).

This study is important because it provides additional research into which classroom model, self-contained or departmentalized, is more beneficial to use at the elementary level, and whether or not there is justified reason to push for schools to shift from the traditional classroom format. If this type of research is not conducted, then the current practices will remain in place, since there would be limited evidence for more effective alternative possibilities.

Purpose for the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate elementary teachers' perceptions on departmentalized and self-contained classroom models. Through the use of a survey, interviews, and a focus group, the teachers expressed their opinions on the advantages and drawbacks of both classroom designs. The goal was to determine which structure fourth grade teachers believe is more valuable to utilize in their rural elementary school. The following research question was addressed through this study: what classroom structure, departmentalized or self-contained, do fourth grade elementary teachers in a rural school district think is more beneficial to use in elementary schools?

I began by giving the survey to the fourth grade teachers who have taught in both the former self-contained model and the current departmentalized structure at their rural elementary school. After analyzing the completed surveys, I conducted a twenty minute interview with each teacher to clarify responses and themes that emerged from the surveys. Then I used the focus

group to gain further insight into the teachers' opinions and beliefs about the two classroom designs.

Rationale

During my student teaching phase of my undergraduate degree, I taught at the school district I studied for this research project. At the time the teachers were still teaching in the traditional self-contained format at the elementary level, and in the process of planning to transition to the departmentalized structure. Throughout my student teaching placement at this school, I was able to observe the process the administrators and teachers were going through to enact the new classroom design. During this process, I witnessed some of the struggles the administrators and teachers faced to transition to the departmentalized structure, such as which educators would teach which subjects, how grade level planning would take place in the new structure, how students would move from class to class, how to assign homework and tests so the students would not be overwhelmed, what to do with materials students would need for in class assignments and homework, along with some other challenges. At the time, I wondered if the challenges the school faced were worth switching from the traditional self-contained model to the alternative structure of departmentalization. I used this research study to answer that question, by gathering data on the perspectives of the teachers' who taught in both classroom models.

Study Approach

According to Clark and Creswell (2014), I used a qualitative research design for my study, since I used the "data to answer research questions by exploring participants' views" (p.286) on a central phenomenon. In particular, I used a case study design, where I studied one case to understand what was happening in the bounded system (Clark & Creswell, 2014). For my

research project, I focused on the central phenomenon of classroom models, self-contained and departmentalized, by exploring perspectives of one case of fourth grade teachers bounded by one system, a rural elementary school. To explore the teachers' perspectives I used multiple forms of data collection, including a survey, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group with anecdotal notes and audiotapes. Data analysis focused on developing descriptions and themes from the data, to determine what the teachers believe about the two classroom instructional models.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To begin exploring which instructional model is more beneficial in elementary schools for teachers and students this literature review will focus on the potential advantages and drawbacks of both instructional formats, related to teachers' curriculum subject proficiency, teacher workload, communication between teachers, and teacher-student relationships. This literature review will discuss the current research for each of the subheadings and describe the areas where the participating teachers in this research study were asked to share their opinions for both instructional models.

Curriculum Subject Proficiency

One of the strongest arguments against the traditional self-contained classroom structure is the teacher's ability to teach every part of the elementary curriculum equally. Even though most elementary education programs prepare teachers to be generalists (Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield, 2008), research suggests that elementary teachers should receive more extensive training in every school subject (Liu, 2011). It is rare for any teacher to be proficient in more than one or two areas of the curriculum (Anderson, 1962; Brown, 2012; Chan & Jarman, 2004; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). As described in his study the majority of generalist teachers do not believe they are equally proficient in all content areas. Ackerlund administered a survey to 260 generalist or self-contained elementary teachers in a large school system. In the study the teachers were asked about their competence to teach all of the subjects associated with the elementary curriculum based on subject knowledge and teaching methods. Of those teachers, 47 percent said they were not well prepared in content and method to teach the elementary curriculum, and only four teachers believed they were proficient in all of the elementary subjects they taught. Of the four teachers who believed they were proficient, only one teacher favored the traditional self-

contained classroom structure, while the other three teachers opposed the traditional format (Ackerlund, 1959).

When teachers believe they are not effectively teaching parts of the required curriculum it can cause negative effects for the teacher and students. Brown (2012) reviewed eleven studies that explored the relationship between self-efficacy or a teacher's belief in their own teaching abilities and the three dimensions of burnout in teachers, consisting of emotional exhaustion, lack of personal accomplishment, and depersonalization or feeling detached from one's work at the school. All of the studies that were reviewed discovered a negative relationship between self-efficacy and burnout. This is significant because the lower a teacher's level of self-efficacy or belief in ability is, the more emotionally exhausted a teacher feels, and less the teachers believe they are accomplishing their goals, until the teachers reach the point where they are depleted of their emotional resources and become disconnected from their teaching career, and leave the teaching field (Brown). Klassen and Chiu (2010) also studied self-efficacy and job satisfaction, and found similar results in their study as Brown. Klassen and Chiu sought to discover "the relationships among teachers' self-efficacy, job stress (overall stress and sources of stress), job satisfaction, and contextual factors" (p. 743). During an annual multidistrict teacher conference the researchers approached about 2,000 teachers out of the 8,000 teachers attending the conference and asked the teachers to complete a questionnaire. The researchers administered the questionnaire to 1,430 practicing teachers working in urban, suburban, and rural school districts. One of the researchers' conclusions in their study was teachers with low self-efficacy experience higher levels of job related stress, and lower levels of job satisfaction, and therefore are more likely to leave the teaching profession (Klassen & Chiu). Both of these studies are

noteworthy since research has shown that teacher retention has positive effects on student achievement (Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014).

For that reason, schools want to find ways to increase teacher retention. One way to increase teacher retention is to departmentalize teachers so they can specialize in a specific subject area of interest to them. If teachers are focused on their favorite parts of the curriculum, they are more enthusiastic about the content, which will show in their teaching (Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014). Also, since teachers can focus their efforts on a specific area in the curriculum the teachers can concentrate on learning subject and pedagogical content, and instructional strategies at a deeper level (Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield, 2008). Therefore, specialized instruction improves teachers' confidence and competence, and consequently improves teachers' attitudes and job satisfaction, which increases teacher retention (Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield, 2008; Strohl et al., 2014). This also benefits students, since they will be taught by teachers who are teaching to their strengths, who are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about their content areas (Reed, 2002; Strohl et al., 2014).

Teacher Workload

Specialized or departmentalized instruction also reduces and focuses teachers' workloads, since teachers concentrate on teaching one or two content areas in-depth, rather than multiple subjects. As a result, job related stress decreases and job satisfaction improves, which in turn improves the retention of highly qualified teachers (Anderson, 1962; Chan & Jarman, 2004; Chang, Muñoz, & Koshewa, 2008; Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014). Instead of preparing multiple lessons for the curriculum for one class of students, departmentalized teachers focus their planning time on a specific area. This allows teachers to design more creative and

imaginative lesson plans, and prepare for more in-depth activities, which promotes students' learning at a more advanced level (Liu, 2011).

On the other hand, in the self-contained classroom model, teachers' workloads and the hours per week worked have progressively increased over the past twenty years. Teachers are responsible for several non-teaching tasks and paperwork requirements, in addition to planning and preparing to teach each subject in the curriculum (Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014). Many teachers believe that their workload requirements are at or will reach a level that they will not be able to maintain (Strohl et al., 2014). The Strohl et al. qualitative case study, "explored differences in perceptions between departmentalized and self-contained teachers within the same school" (p. 117). The researchers gathered data from first, second and third grade teachers working in a rural Georgia school district. Out of the total 29 participating teachers, 17 teachers worked in the traditional self-contained structure and 12 teachers who were chosen by administrators taught in the departmentalized structure. After the researchers analyzed the data from surveys, interviews, and focus groups, the researchers found that workload requirements are one of the main sources of job dissatisfaction for teachers. The findings of the study also emphasized how workload negatively affects teachers' stress levels, which is detrimental to teachers' ability to be effective educators. For instance, teachers who have higher levels of stress spent a significantly less amount of time teaching cognitive and social-emotional skills, and interacting and communicating with students' parents (Strohl et al., 2014).

Communication between Teachers

There is a range of research on communication between teachers for both the departmentalized and self-contained structures. For either classroom model, communication between teachers is increased if the teachers who teach the same grade level have a common

planning time (Reed, 2002). Creating a shared planning time for either classroom model may be challenging due to scheduling problems (Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield, 2008). There are always issues with teachers effectively working together and communicating, due to different teaching philosophies and personality conflicts (Reed). However, there are several benefits for teachers if they have opportunities to work together by having the same planning time or forming instructional teams, in either classroom model, teachers can consult with each other, collaborate on lesson plans, problem solve, and identify weaknesses in instruction (Reed).

Grade level instructional teams have additional benefits for departmentalized teachers and students. Since every departmentalized teacher in a given grade level work with all of the of the students in that grade, teachers can consult with each other on specific behavior problems and challenges they face with particular students, which can decrease the number of discipline problems. Also, teachers can collaborate for the success of all students by putting their thoughts together while planning (Reed, 2002), which creates strong learning communities among teachers (Chang, Muñoz, & Koshewa, 2008). Teacher communities develop as a result of the teachers feeling a sense of collective responsibility for the students they teach, and collaborating together for student achievement (Chan et al., 2008; Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield, 2008). In the Gerretson, Bosnick, and Schofield study, participants stated that teachers collaborate more when they share students, and are able to have more content specific conversations, and that communication was viewed as more meaningful for teaching within each grade level and between grade levels. For faculty members with content specific questions, content specialists in the departmentalized model were viewed as the staff members to go to for answers. Communication and collaboration are cited as the main benefits of instructional team teaching (Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield).

Teacher-Student Relationships

During the elementary school years, it is crucial for students to have quality school experiences as they develop their attitudes toward school and learning (Chang, Muñoz, & Koshewa, 2008). It is especially important that students' social and emotional needs, along with their educational needs are met at school. Students need to feel safe, accepted, validated, and connected to their school to gain the most from their education, and to do that it is essential that students form relationships with their teachers (Chan, Terry, & Bessette, 2009). Research has shown that teacher-student relationships are the foremost influence on students' academic and behavioral trajectories (Chang, Muñoz, & Koshewa).

The strongest defense for schools remaining with the traditional self-contained classroom model is the importance of teachers developing relationships with their students to be able to teach the whole-child (Anderson, 1962; Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield, 2008). In the self-contained structure there are more opportunities for teachers to learn about their students' strengths, weaknesses, interests, and personality traits (Liu, 2011; McGrath & Rust, 2002; Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014) since the teachers are able to assess students across a variety of the content areas, domains, and settings (Chang, Muñoz, & Koshewa, 2008; Strohl et al., 2014). Strong teacher-student relationships enhance teachers' abilities to implement accommodations and modifications for each student's learning styles (McGrath & Rust, 2002).

Opponents for the departmentalized model believe that teachers interact with more children than in the self-contained structure so the teachers are unable to know each student at the level they need to develop a connection with all of the students (Anderson, 1962; Chang, Muñoz, & Koshewa, 2008). The decreased amount of contact with each student, reduces the chances of students connecting with teachers and vice versa, and offers less time to build

community in the classroom (Chang et al.). In the Chang, Muñoz, and Koshewa study, the researchers "explored whether departmentalized elementary school children differed from their counterparts on their ratings of connectivity to school" (p. 133). The researchers used a comparative quantitative design to compare departmentalized students with self-contained students. For the study, all of the third, fourth and fifth grade students in eight different public elementary schools from a large Kentucky school district participated in the study by completing a Likert-type scale questionnaire. The third, fourth, and fifth grade students in the departmentalized schools scored supportiveness, trust, and respect for teachers significantly lower than the third, fourth, and fifth grade students in the self-contained schools. Also, in the departmentalized schools, the age of the students was negatively related to supportiveness, trust, and respect for teachers, given that the youngest students rated supportiveness, trust, and respect for teachers lower than older students (Chang et al.). Besides not connecting with the school environment, students in departmentalized schools, have to learn the expectations, rules, classroom management, and teaching styles of multiple teachers, which can confuse students (Liu, 2011; Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield, 2008).

Other researchers believe it is an advantage for students to switch teachers for different subjects throughout the day in the departmentalized classroom format for teachers and students. In the self-contained model, typically teachers have limited or no input in the students who will be in the classroom. As a result, teachers have students with a range of personalities, behavior related issues, and learning styles. In the departmentalized model, teacher still have limited or no control over the students they will be teaching, but instead of spending the whole day with the same class of students, teachers only spend a portion of each day with a group of students. For that reason, the teacher gets a fresh start with each group of students they teach and as a result,

experiences less stress from any problematic behavior issues from any of the students (Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014). Students also benefit from having multiple teachers because the students are exposed to different teaching styles (Chan & Jarman, 2004). This is significant because every child responds to different teaching techniques and approaches, thus the greater variety in teaching styles the better the probability that there will be a method that each student will respond to. Departmentalized model also offers students more prospects for role models. It is important for students to connect with teachers, and sometimes for some reason a student might not relate to a certain teacher, but when students have multiple teachers the chances that there will be at least one teacher that each student connects with increases (Anderson, 1962). Reed (2002) gathered the perceptions of fourth grade students, teachers, and parents on the departmentalized elementary school through the use of questionnaires using a five-point scale. The results of the study found that the fourth grade students, teachers, and parents all believed that the students successfully interacted with their four core subject teachers, and the students thrived academically in the departmentalized four teacher instructional model (Reed).

Summary

The literature review included literature on teachers' curriculum subject proficiency, teacher workload, communication between teachers, and teacher-student relationships. As the literature revealed there is evidence to support both the traditional self-contained and the alternative departmentalized classroom structures as being beneficial at the elementary level. The departmentalized model aligns with a subject centered approach, while the self-contained structure supports student centered ideals (Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014).

In the departmentalized model there is greater emphasis on the curriculum (McGrath & Rust, 2002). Teachers in this model focus on learning subject and pedagogical content, and instructional strategies for one or two subject areas (Chang, Muñoz, & Koshewa, 2008; Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield, 2008; Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014). This decreases and focuses teachers' workloads to a more maintainable level, which reduces teachers' stress levels and increases job satisfaction (Strohl et al.). Also, in the departmentalized model communication between teachers can be more useful than in the self-contained structure. Departmentalized teachers with a common planning time can consult each other on specific behavior problems and challenges they face with particular students, and collaborate and plan together for the success of all students (Chang et al., 2008; Gerretson et al., 2008).

In the self-contained classroom model teachers have more opportunities to learn about their students' strengths, weaknesses, interests, and personality traits (Liu, 2011; McGrath & Rust, 2002; Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014). Therefore, teachers are more capable of teaching the whole-child (Anderson, 1962; Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield, 2008), and adapting lessons to student's learning styles (McGrath & Rust).

Chapter 3: Methods and Procedures

This section describes the study design used to answer the research question, which instructional model, self-contained or departmentalized, do fourth grade teachers believe is more beneficial to use in a rural elementary school? This section includes a detailed description of the participants, setting, researcher's positionality, data collection, procedures, and criteria for trustworthiness.

Participants

I conducted this study with fourth grade teachers. I used purposeful sampling to select only the teachers who have taught in both the traditional self-contained and the departmentalized instructional models at the school district where the teachers work, consisting of two fourth grade teachers participating in the study out of the three teachers that instruct fourth graders at the school. One teacher instructs all of the fourth grade students attending the district in science and social studies and the other participant teaches fourth grade mathematics.

Setting

This study took place in a small rural public school district in western New York State that is comprised of two schools, the elementary school and the middle/high school. The district's population consists of mainly Caucasians, with less than nine hundred students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, and about forty-five percent of the students in the district receiving free or reduced lunch (NYSED.gov, 2013). The study was conducted in the elementary school that serves pre-kindergarten to sixth grade. Students in pre-kindergarten through third grade are taught in the traditional self-contained instructional model, and students in fourth through sixth are taught by departmentalized teachers. For fourth grade there are three teachers, one teacher for math, another educator teaches literacy, and another instructor for science and

social studies. The students start the school day at 8:35 A.M. in one of the three homerooms, and the rest of the school day is comprised of Block A, specials, Block B, lunch, academic intervention services, and Block C (Appendix A).

Researcher's Positionality

As a researcher, it is important to analyze my positionality in relation to this study. I was raised in a middle class household near Batavia, New York, and I was educated in the rural Pembroke Central School District from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. In elementary and middle school until sixth grade I was taught under the traditional self-contained classroom design and in high school from seventh to twelfth grade I was instructed under the departmentalized model. After graduating from high school, I continued my education at The College at Brockport, State University of New York, where I earned my Bachelor of Science Degree in health science and teaching certification in childhood inclusive education in May 2012. I have my initial teaching certifications in birth through second grade, and first through sixth grade, in general education and special education. Currently, I am pursuing my Master of Science Degree at The College at Brockport, State University of New York for education in the curriculum specialist program.

My personal educational philosophies influence how I view the education profession. I believe the purpose of education is to provide equal opportunity education to all students to assist everyone in being successful in society. It is the teachers' responsibility to learn about their students' backgrounds and integrate students' individual learning needs and interests into lessons to promote learning. Dewey (1998) wrote about the goal of education and stated "that education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience – which is always the actual life-experience of some individuals" (p. 113). Students

need quality educational experiences that provide opportunities for students to collaborate with peers on interactive activities that encourage inquiry and reflection, and relate to real life situations. For me the question remains, which instructional model is best for teachers and students in reaching the goal of education?

Methods of Data Collection

Data was collected for this qualitative case study through the use of a survey, interviews, and a focus group. These methods assisted me in answering my research question, what classroom structure, departmentalized or self-contained, do fourth grade elementary teachers in a rural school district think is more beneficial to use in elementary schools? The results of the data collection methods report in-depth descriptions and the themes that emerged throughout the process of gathering the teachers' perspectives.

Survey

The self-created research survey (Appendix B) I administered to the teacher provided me with my first insight into the two fourth grade teachers' views on departmentalized and self-contained instructional models. Both teachers were asked to answer twelve questions related to the traditional self-contained instructional format and twelve questions about departmentalized instruction, and one final question regarding the teacher's instructional preference. Except for the final question, the survey posed the questions as statements and required the teachers to respond to each statement on a scale from 0-4 on how much they agree or disagree. I administered the survey by leaving a copy of the survey and an envelope for each teacher in the main office at the school. After the teachers completed the research survey independently, each teacher placed the survey they completed in an envelope I provided for them, sealed the envelope, signed the seal to

ensure that only the researcher saw the responds, and left the envelope in the main office for me to collect.

Interviews

I conducted a twenty minute one-on-one in-person interview with each teacher. I composed an interview guide with a list of nine questions for each interview, along with the option to add additional questions that emerge after reviewing the completed research surveys (Appendix C). The interview questions center around the teacher's views about their curriculum proficiency, workload, communication with other teachers, and relationships with students.

Focus Group

The focus group was the final method of data collection. I facilitated a one hour focus group with both participating teachers. The four open-ended focus group questions (Appendix D) are designed to collect the teachers' final thought on departmentalization and self-contained instructional models. The focus group method encourages participants to interact with each other as well as the interviewer. The social nature of this method added valuable data to the research by validating findings from the survey and individual interviews. The focus group provided an opportunity for participants to share and compare their perspectives and extend on what other teacher has shared. For this study, I used a form of focus group referred to as dyad where there are two participants and the mediator. In dyadic groups the mediator can gather more detailed in-depth data from each participant than can be gathered in a larger group (Morgan, Ataie, Carder, & Hoffman, 2013).

Procedures

This study was conducted over a period of at least six weeks, during December 2014 and January 2015. After the fourth grade teachers agreed to participate in the study and signed the statement of informed consent there were several steps I took to complete this research study.

Step 1: I administered the research surveys (Appendix B) to the two fourth grade teachers. The teachers completed the research surveys independently.

Step 2: After I received the completed surveys from the teachers, I began analyzing the teachers' responses to the questions. If questions emerged after analyzing the surveys for themes I planned to add those new questions to the interview guide. I did not add any additional questions.

Step 3: I set up a twenty minute in-person one-on-one interview with each participant to ask the interview questions (Appendix C). I took anecdotal notes during the interviews, in addition to possibly audio recordings if the teachers signed the statement of informed consent. I only recorded one interview.

Step 4: For the interview that was audio recorded I transcribed the recording. Then I began to analyze the anecdotal notes and transcript for themes. If any additional questions emerged from the interviews, I planned to add those new questions to the focus group questions. I did not add any questions to the focus group question.

Step 5: I scheduled a focus group (Appendix D) time with both of the participants to gain further insight into the teachers' opinions and beliefs about the two classroom designs. I took written notes of the teachers' responses, and did not audio tape the focus group since both of the participants did not sign the statement of consent for audio taping.

Step 6: I analyzed the data from the surveys, interviews, and focus group for theme and answers to the research question.

Criteria for Trustworthiness

As a researcher it was important to me that I conducted my research study in an ethical and unbiased manner. I remained open to various interpretations of the data, and understood that the data may differ from my expectations. Strategies outlined by Clark and Creswell (2014), were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the research study finding. To verify the credibility of the research study, I triangulated information from multiple data sources, including surveys, individual interviews, and a focus group. Other strategies consisting of transferability, dependability, and confirmability all validate the quality of the findings. This study provides detailed descriptions of participants, research process, and the data so other researchers can scrutinize this study or conduct a similar study.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate two fourth grade teachers' views on departmentalized and self-contained classroom instructional models. Over a period of six weeks in December 2014 and January 2015, three different methods were used to collect data. Data was collected at a rural elementary school through the use of a survey, interviews, and a focus group. As the researcher, I distributed and collected the survey from each teacher, interviewed each teacher individually in a classroom, and interviewed the teachers together.

I administered the research surveys (Appendix B) to two fourth grade teachers by leaving a survey and envelope in the main office at the elementary school. After the teachers completed the research surveys independently, each teacher placed the survey in the envelope, sealed the envelope, signed the seal to ensure that only the researcher would see the responds, and left the envelope in the main office for me, the researcher to collect. After I received the completed surveys from the teachers, I analyzed the teachers' responses to the questions. No questions emerged after analyzing the surveys so I did not add any new questions to the interview guide. I set up a twenty minute in-person one-on-one interview with each participant to ask the interview questions (Appendix C). During each interview I took anecdotal notes. For Teacher 1, I recorded the interview, since the teacher signed the statement of informed consent for audio recording, and did not record Teacher 2 since the teacher did not sign the audio recording consent. After interviewing both teachers, I analyzed the individual interview responses. No additional questions emerged so I only asked the four focus group questions (Appendix D) I originally planned. I scheduled a focus group time with both of the participants to gain further insight into the teachers' opinions and beliefs about the two classroom designs. During the focus group I took written notes of the teachers' responses. I did not audio tape the focus group since only one

participant signed the statement of consent for audio taping. For the interviews, I followed interviewing procedures outlined in chapter six of Seidman's (2006) *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. As the facilitator, I needed to ensure that I listened to the participants, let the participants talk, tolerated silence to give the participants time to think, reflect, or add to their responses, and not to interrupt to pursue points that I found relevant (Seidman).

Data Analysis

After analyzing the data from the surveys, interviews, and focus group, I focused on four concepts to answer the research question, which organizational structure, self-contained or departmentalized, do fourth grade teachers believe is more beneficial to use in their rural elementary school? While analyzing the data I noticed both teachers discussed four main concepts during each data gathering method. The concepts that will be used to answer the research question include curriculum subject proficiency, teaching related stress, communication between teachers, and teacher-student relationships.

Curriculum Subject Proficiency

For this research study I asked the teachers' perspectives on subject preference, initial college training, and professional development trainings. Based on the research survey, when the teachers taught in the self-contained instructional format, one teacher strongly believed she was equally proficient to teach all curricular subjects and one teacher believed she was not equally proficient in all subject areas in content and method. During the individual interview Teacher 2 stated that when she taught in the self-contained format she felt qualified to teach every subject, but with the new common core standards there is a lot that she would need to learn if she went back to teaching in the traditional model. During the focus group, Teacher 1 commented that in

the self-contained model there are a lot of new standards to learn which can be overwhelming. On the other hand, both teachers believe they are proficient in content and method for the subjects they teach in the departmentalized instructional format. During the individual interview, Teacher 1 stated she feels she is more qualified to teach some subject areas more than others because she prefers certain subjects over others. For Teacher 1, she prefers to teach mathematics because she has a math mind and it is her favorite subject so she is enthusiastic about teaching mathematics.

The initial educational training teachers receive in college influences how prepared a teacher is with instructional methods and content knowledge. During the individual interviews, I discussed educational training with Teacher 1 and Teacher 2. Teacher 2 said the initial training she received was adequate when she started teaching thirty years ago, but with the new teaching standards the educational profession is changing. Teacher 1 believes the initial college training focuses on reading instruction, since student teachers take more literacy courses than any other subject or preparatory course. Both Teacher 1 and 2 declared the initial college training to be insufficient for self-contained as well as departmentalized teacher. Teacher 1 explained that there should be specific trainings for departmentalized teachers for the subjects the teachers specialize in. Both Teacher 1 and 2 believe that after departmentalized or self-contained teachers secure a teaching career the teachers need to continue with their trainings during professional development opportunities. Professional development trainings assist teachers to further develop their subject proficiency, learn new ways to present content and meet the common core standards, along with other areas where the teacher wants to improve.

Teaching Related Stress

A teacher's workload consists of everything a teacher is responsible for including planning, preparing, and teaching lessons, grading and correcting papers and projects, student and parent conferences, staff meetings, and other paperwork requirements. On the individual research surveys, both teachers marked the required workload as being too high when they taught in the self-contained instructional model. One of the teachers also marked on the survey there was a lot of complaining about teaching responsibilities in the self-contained structure, while in the departmentalized format both teachers indicated that there was not a lot of complaining about responsibilities. During the individual interviews, both teachers discussed workload as still being a source of stress. Teacher 1, declared the workload being significant in the self-contained and departmentalized instructional models. Both teachers commented about the differences in the workload for each instructional model during the individual interviews and focus group. In the self-contained model teachers have to plan, prepare, and teach lessons for every subject, and grade papers for every curricular subject. In the departmentalized model, teachers plan for only one subject, which makes planning easier especially when there is a substitute teacher in the classroom, but teachers have more students so there is an increased number of projects and papers to grade and correct and more report cards to complete. According to Teacher 1 and 2, one of the greatest benefits to departmentalizing elementary grades is the ability for teachers to focus on one subject. Focusing on one subject allows teachers to dig deeper into the content, and spend more time researching the subject, finding lesson ideas and different ways to differentiate lessons for students. As Teacher 1 declared in the focus group departmentalized teachers are not pulled as thin as self-contained teachers. On the research

survey both Teacher 1 and 2 indicated “the stress from teaching makes teaching undesirable to me” in the self-contained model.

Communication between Teachers

During the individual interviews, both teachers expressed the importance of communication between teachers in self-contained and departmentalized instructional models. On the research surveys the teachers' views on communication differed for the self-contained format, while teachers had the same interpretation on the quality of communication between teachers in the departmentalized model. On the research survey, for the self-contained format, one teacher marked there was quality communication between teachers and the teachers collaborated for the success of all students, and the other teacher believed the opposite, there was not quality communication or collaboration between teachers. For the departmentalized model, both teachers indicated there was quality communication between teachers and teachers collaborated for the success of all students. During the individual interviews and focus group, both teachers elaborated on their responses on the survey. Teacher 2 stated that in the self-contained format teachers can go to other teachers' rooms before or after school to brainstorm about lessons, but most of the time a teacher in this model feels alone. Some self-contained teachers do not want to discuss problems that appear in other teachers' rooms. In the departmentalized model, teachers can still visit other teachers' rooms to talk, but there are also department meetings and grade level meetings where teachers can discuss concerns or frustrations. Teacher 1 said that there should be communication within either instructional model, but communication is a necessity for departmentalized teachers, since the teachers share students. Teachers need to coordinate with other teachers for numerous matters, such as parent conferences, report cards, planning scheduling issues, planning when to test students, reporting

things to parents, and effectively managing students' behavior plans. During the focus group, both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 mentioned that in either instructional model if the grade level team works well together then there can be quality communication between teachers.

Teacher-Student Relationships

Teacher 1 exclaimed during the individual interview for this area, teacher-student relationships, she prefers the self-contained model. Teacher 1 explained in the traditional instructional format she feels like the students are her kids and she got to know the students better, while in the departmentalized model she feels like she is not as close with individual students. On the research survey, both teachers marked that in the self-contained structure they had adequate opportunities to learn about all of their students, and was able to provide assistance to students who needed the additional help. In the departmentalized settings, one teacher believed there are still adequate opportunities to learn about the students and time to provide assistance to all of the students that need additional help, while the other teacher disagreed. In the individual interview and focus group, Teacher 2 and Teacher 1 explained there are other parts of teacher-student relationships that are affected by switching instructional models. In the self-contained model teachers have the same students all day so more behavior problems may appear, since students are in the same environment all day. In the departmentalized format, students move locations so there are not as many behavioral issues. Students enjoy moving between classrooms and for certain students, such as students with ADHD who need to move throughout the day departmentalization provide the students with a certain amount of movement every day and the opportunity to switch gears. During the focus group, Teacher 1 announced one of the greatest benefits of departmentalization. In the departmentalized instructional model, students in the same grade level feel like they are a team, since all of the students share the teachers.

Summary

There are many concepts that can be used to analyze and answer this research question, which organizational structure, self-contained or departmentalized, do fourth grade teachers believe is more beneficial to use in their rural elementary school? I focused on four concepts including curriculum subject proficiency, teaching related stress, communication between teachers, and teacher-student relationships.

Departmentalization permits teachers to be proficient in content and method in the subject area the teachers specialize in. Departmentalized instruction also breaks up the day for teachers and students, which can decrease the number of behavioral problems, as well as providing movement and new classroom environment for students. Another effect of departmentalizing teachers is creating a setting where students feel like they are part of a team since the students share teachers. In the self-contained model teachers have the same students all day providing teachers more time to learn about each individual student.

In the self-contained and departmentalized models, teacher workload can still be a source of stress for teachers, since there is a considerable workload for both models. Communication between teachers is important in both instructional models, and if the grade level team works well together than there can be quality communication.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this case study was to generate a conclusion regarding whether departmentalization is a beneficial alternative to the tradition self-contained instructional model in elementary schools. This study's purpose is an important concept in education because the function of schools is to support children in developing knowledge and preparing them to be productive citizens in the community. To meet the objective of effectively educating students and creating contributing members of society, schools need to enact beneficial practices including the most effective academic instruction model. Gathering teachers' perspectives on both the traditional self-contained and departmentalized model was crucial for the conclusions of this study. The conclusions focus on departmentalization being a beneficial alternative to the traditional self-contained instructional format. Departmentalization reduces the demands on teachers created by the Common Core State Standards, prevents teachers from feeling isolated, and helps create a community of learners.

Conclusions

As the Common Core State Standards increase the demands on teachers and students, departmentalization allows teachers to become experts in one or two areas and allows students to learn from teachers who are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the subjects being taught. The Common Core State Standards have changed the expectations and skills for each grade level. Departmentalization helps reduce the demands on teachers by allowing teachers to focus on one or two content areas, while giving teachers time to develop the expertise required by the Common Core. By focusing on one or two subjects, teachers can devote more time to learning the new standards and researching the content and pedagogical methods to become experts on the curriculum subjects. When teachers focus on learning subjects thoroughly the teachers can

design more in-depth and creative lessons. Few teachers possess proficiency in more than one or two curriculum subject areas (Anderson, 1962). The majority of the teachers in the Ackerlund (1959) study and both of the participating teachers in this study believed they were not prepared to teach every subject in the curriculum in content and method. When the demands on teachers are reduced, the teachers can become proficient in specialized subjects.

Departmentalization also encourages effective communication between teachers, instead of an environment where teachers feel isolated. "Collaboration is the most effective way for teachers to learn, ...people who work in isolation do not produce results" (Wong, 2007, p. 9-11). In the traditional self-contained instructional model teachers are typically separated from each other, while departmentalized teachers have opportunities to learn from each other and collaborate during department meetings and grade level meetings. Departmentalization creates teammates for teachers to collaborate with on lesson plans and consult to problem solve issues such as identify weaknesses in instruction, and challenges they face with particular students or behavior problems (Reed, 2002). Departmental teammates develop a sense of collective responsibility for the students they teach, while collaborating for the success of all students (Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield, 2008).

Departmentalization creates a school community where the students in the same grade feel like they are a team, since the students share the teachers. In the traditional model students identified as being part of Mrs. Teacher's class or Mr. Teacher's class. In the departmentalized structure the students see themselves as the fourth grade team. During parts of the day when one class of students interacts with students in other classes, such as during lunch or specials (art, music, gym, and library) the students discuss what is being taught in each subject. The strongest justification for schools remaining with the traditional self-contained classroom model is the

importance of teachers developing relationships with their students to be able to teach the whole-child (Anderson, 1962; Gerretson, Bosnick, & Schofield, 2008). However, teacher-student relationships can thrive in departmentalized schools when teachers and students create a community of learners with a common mission. When students are part of a supportive learning community the students are more motivated to learn and work harder (Chang, Muñoz, & Koshewa, 2008). For example, at the participating school the fourth grade created a community of learners, where teachers collaborate and students encourage each other to achieve. The teachers also organize activities for the all of the fourth graders to interact with each other and the teachers to promote a community environment.

Implications for Student Learning

Students learn from teachers who are experts on subject content.

Departmentalization reduces the demands on teachers caused by the new Common Core State Standards and provides time for teachers to improve their pedagogical practices through focused professional development. Teachers who mastered the content of specific subject areas can lead students profound comprehension of the discipline through expert instruction. There needs for highly qualified teachers in schools, since “the teacher is the only factor that can improve student achievement” (Wong, 2001, p. 2).

Students benefit from learning from several teachers with different teaching styles.

Departmentalized instruction exposes students to multiple teachers with different teaching styles and personalities. Students are unique individuals that have different strengths and weakness, and approach learning in different ways. When students are exposed to different teaching styles there are more opportunities for students to respond to different teaching methods (Chan & Jarman, 2004). Departmentalization also increases opportunities for students to improve

interpersonal skills through adapting to different teaching styles (Reed, 2002). There are also more opportunities for students to be understood by teachers and connect with different adults. Some student might not relate to a certain teacher, but when students have multiple teachers the chances that there will be at least one teacher that each student connects with increases (Anderson, 1962).

Students develop a sense of belonging in a grade level community.

Departmentalization provides the foundation to create a community of learners at each grade level. At the participating school teachers and students developed a team mentality. The students discuss content being taught with students in other classes. The students support each other and teachers collaborate for the success of all of the students. "Creating a community is perhaps the most important thing we can do, not only to support and drive student achievement, but to support the social and emotional needs of the whole child" (Logue, 2014). An environment where students connect with their teachers and peers, provides a foundation for students to take academic risks where the students learn to think critically, develop opinions, and engage in academic material (Chan, Terry, & Bessette, 2009)

Implications for My Teaching

This study helped me realize the pros and cons of both the traditional self-contained and alternative departmentalized instructional models. After finding evidence from this study that suggests departmentalization at the elementary level can be beneficial for teachers and students, my options for teaching environments have increased. I am now more open to teaching in an alternative departmentalized instructional format after gathering the perspectives from departmentalized teachers.

As a departmentalized teacher I would become an expert in one subject area and provide in-depth instruction to students.

I know that I am not an expert in every subject that is part of the elementary academic curriculum. If I taught at a departmentalized school I would be able to focus on my strengths and reduce my weaknesses by specializing in a subject that I am enthusiastic about. I also know that I favor certain subjects over other topics. If I was able to focus on one of my favorite subjects I would be passionate about the lessons I create and the topics I would teach. I enjoy teaching students, but I believe I would be even more enthusiastic about teaching and learning more about the content if I was able to focus on the subject I enjoy.

As a departmentalized teacher I would have teammates to consult and collaborate with.

In the departmentalized model I would be part of a team that is working toward a common goal. I find it reduces my stress level when there are others to bounce ideas around, to discuss frustrations, work through problems, and find solutions. Also, when creating lesson plans I have noticed that when collaborating with others a team of teachers can create inventive unit plans that are differentiated to help all of the students.

Recommendations for Future Research

There is an insufficient research base on departmentalization at the elementary level. If school administrators are going to genuinely consider departmentalization as a possible reform effort there needs to be more attention devoted to research on this topic. This study focused on teachers' perspectives, but there are several areas where this study can be improved as well as other matters that can be used to provide evidence of instructional effectiveness.

Diverse Participant Sample

The conclusions of this study are based on only one school and only two participating teachers. Future research should try to replicate these findings using a larger population. The conclusions from this study can be validated if another study repeated this study's process, but with a diverse population including multiple case studies at different school districts and a larger number of participating teachers' perspectives. If a larger population of teachers conclude that departmentalization is more beneficial at the elementary level than the traditional self-contained format then there will be more evidence to encourage administrators to transition to the alternative instructional model.

Student Views

For this study, only the teachers' perspectives are gathered for evidence of which instructional model is more beneficial for students and teachers at the elementary level. Further research into students' perspectives on both instructional models would provide evidence for which model students prefer. By gathering teachers' and students' perspectives it would present a more complete picture for the most effective instructional model.

Student Achievement

Another way to further add to the research on the instructional models is to gather evidence of student achievement. One of the goals of education is teaching students skills and content knowledge so if students learn better in one of the instructional formats that would provide further evidence for the more beneficial instructional structure. Further research could gather data on how well students master similar learning objectives in each instructional model.

Final Thoughts

For the participating school, departmentalization was beneficial; however, the circumstances at each elementary school are unique. Departmentalization may not work at every rural elementary school. Some teachers may prefer one of the instructional models over the other, which is problematic if the school is departmentalized. If a school district is planning on transitioning from self-contained to departmentalized, it has to be something all of the teachers want to do, since the teachers have to work together and communicate with each other to benefit the students. Also, departmentalization may not be beneficial for all elementary grades. The youngest grade levels may benefit more from being in a self-contained environment. If schools do decide to switch to departmentalization everyone involved needs to be committed to the effort and understand the purpose and implications of the transition.

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Appendix A
Fourth Grade Student Schedule 2013-2014

| | <u><i>Group 4A</i></u> | <u><i>Group 4B</i></u> | <u><i>Group 4C</i></u> |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Homeroom 8:35-8:45 | TEACHER 1 | TEACHER 2 | TEACHER 3 |
| Block A 8:45-10:15 | ELA | MATH | SCI/SOC.ST |
| Special 10:20-11:00 | SPECIAL | SPECIAL | SPECIAL |
| Block B 11:05-12:35 | MATH | SCI/SOC.ST | ELA |
| Lunch 12:40-1:10 | LUNCH | LUNCH | LUNCH |
| RtI/AIS 1:20-1:55 | RtI/AIS | RtI/AIS | RtI/AIS |
| Block C 1:55-3:25 | SCI/SOC.ST | ELA | MATH |

Appendix B

Research Study Survey

Self-created by: Linsay Bartholf

Have you taught in both the traditional self-contained and departmentalized instructional models at your school?
 Yes _____ No _____

Please complete both parts of the survey (front and back).

Directions: Check your response next to each question. Base your answers on your past experiences teaching in the traditional self-contained classroom model.

Traditional Self-Contained Classroom Model:

(Definition: One teacher to a classroom of students, where the teacher teaches every subject in the curriculum for the school year)

| | 0 N/A | 1 Strongly Disagree | 2 Disagree | 3 Agree | 4 Strongly Agree |
|---|----------|---------------------------|---------------|------------|------------------------|
| 1. I believe I am equally proficient to teach all subject areas in content and method. | | | | | |
| 2. I have adequate opportunities for professional development. | | | | | |
| 3. All lessons I teach are high quality, creative, and promote in-depth learning. | | | | | |
| 4. The required workload for teachers, including planning and preparing lessons, paperwork requirements, and the number of hours teachers are required to work is too high. | | | | | |
| 5. There is a lot of complaining about teaching responsibilities. | | | | | |
| 6. The stress from teaching makes teaching undesirable to me. | | | | | |
| 7. There is quality communication between teachers. | | | | | |
| 8. I can count on other teachers for advice and support regarding instruction and challenges I encounter. | | | | | |
| 9. Teachers collaborate for the success of all students. | | | | | |
| 10. I believe I have adequate opportunities to learn about all of my students' strengths, weaknesses, interests, and personality traits. | | | | | |
| 11. I am able to provide assistance to students who need additional help. | | | | | |
| 12. Students understand and do not have trouble with classroom rules and expectations. | | | | | |

Directions: Check your response next to each question. Base your answers on your current experience teaching in departmentalized classroom model.

Departmentalized Classroom Model:

(Definition: More than one teacher for core subjects, and students move from one classroom to another)

| | 0 N/A | 1 Strongly Disagree | 2 Disagree | 3 Agree | 4 Strongly Agree |
|---|----------|---------------------------|---------------|------------|------------------------|
| 1. I believe I am proficient in content and method for the subject I teach. | | | | | |
| 2. I have adequate opportunities for professional development. | | | | | |
| 3. All lessons I teach are high quality, creative, and promote in-depth learning. | | | | | |
| 4. The required workload for teachers, including planning and preparing lessons, paperwork requirements, and the number of hours teachers are required to work is too high. | | | | | |
| 5. There is a lot of complaining about teaching responsibilities. | | | | | |
| 6. The stress from teaching makes teaching undesirable to me. | | | | | |
| 7. There is quality communication between teachers. | | | | | |
| 8. I can count on other teachers for advice and support regarding instruction and challenges I encounter. | | | | | |
| 9. Teachers collaborate for the success of all students. | | | | | |
| 10. I believe I have adequate opportunities to learn about all of my students' strengths, weaknesses, interests, and personality traits. | | | | | |
| 11. I am able to provide assistance to students who need additional help. | | | | | |
| 12. Students understand and do not have trouble with classroom rules and expectations. | | | | | |

Overall, which classroom model do you prefer (circle one):

traditional self-contained or departmentalized

Appendix C

Teacher Interview Questions

1. What subjects do you prefer to teach and prefer not to teach?
2. What subject do you feel most and least qualified to teach?
3. Do you feel that your initial college training adequately trained you to teach all subjects equally? Why or why not?
4. Is the initial educational training teachers receive sufficient for teachers to teach students in the departmentalized model or do they need specialized training in a specific subject area? Explain.
5. Can you list items you believe contributed to your stress level? (rank them from most stressful to least stressful)
6. What are the similarities/difference in how teachers communicate in the traditional self-contained compared to the departmentalized instructional model?
7. In what ways are student interactions with teachers alike and different in the self-contained classroom model versus the departmentalized instructional model?
8. In general, what are your feelings about changing from the traditional classroom model to departmentalization?
9. Is there anything else you want to share about your experiences in the two classroom models?
10. Questions that develop from analyzing themes from surveys:
 -

Appendix D

Focus Group Questions

1. What are some benefits and drawbacks to the traditional self-contained classroom model?
2. What are some advantages and disadvantages to departmentalizing classroom instruction?
3. Do you think district policy should encourage departmentalization? Why or why not?
4. Is there anything else I should know about either instructional model?
5. Other questions that develop after individual interviews or during focus group:
 -