Focus Group and Individual Interview Paper

Making the Transition from Self-Contained to Departmentalization of Fifth Grade Students

Focusing on Themes, Patterns, and Discrepancies

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EDU 7900 Qualitative Research: Methodology and Analysis:

***Focus Group Questions:***

The focus group contained summer school teachers who have knowledge of elementary and/or middle school teaching experience by virtue of their teaching assignments over the past few years working at the Central Islip Public School District or other districts across Long Island. During the group meeting the members of the group expressed enthusiasm for participating in this project for various reasons. Some individuals were happy to give support for the person designing the questions and writing the answers. To them, it was a joy to give support for their administrator who they say has given so much the year before to help them. To others, this experience gives them a chance to organize their thoughts about self-contained classes and get more information about whether departmentalization would be a better way to proceed in the elementary school. Yet, others were summer school teachers “housed” at the Reed Middle School looking for full time teaching positions in the fall, and used this interview process to convey their desires of wanting a job at Central Islip; showing their knowledge base was a way to prove that they were, indeed, qualified for a position this fall. Finally, there were other teachers who, for the most part, were interested in becoming turn-key professional developers in the new process of departmentalization.

Focus group questions:

1. How would you respond to the changing process from self contained classes to departmentalization?

***Answer***: It makes it really hard to adjust for the students and the teachers. The students are not mature enough to make the program work. Departmentalization retards the learning of the students. The students could not cope with it, the change process would be too much pressure. The students would have a much too much difficult time in dealing with the many personalities of the several teachers that they would have to have during the departmentalization process with a teacher in each subject and a different class each period. The good thing is that the students might like the change of teacher if, indeed, one teacher doesn’t get along with him/her. In other words, he/she only has to spend 40 minutes or so until the bell rings and then be able to go on to the next class. It alleviates frustration that way. Another bonus would be that the students would be more prepared for increased standards required by the state of New York. It would increase specialized knowledge for the 40 minutes in one subject area, and science and math will get more attention than if the students are in the self-contained classes.

1. What are the necessary steps that are required for the process of changing from a self contained class to departmentalization to take effect?

**Answer:** Parents would have to be sold on the idea and the change process. There should be an orientation assembly in the summer for the parents and at the beginning of the year to let the parents and students know exactly what is required and what comprises a departmentalization program. There should be a trial period to get all the “kinks” out of the program before you put it in motion. The administration should encourage the older students to mentor the younger students in order to establish a positive learning environment in the departmentalization program and let the younger ones shadow the older students during the process. There should be a lot of professional development to ensure that the teachers comprehend the necessary steps of departmentalization and how it should be run.

1. How would you assess the effectiveness of the program utilizing formative and summative assessment techniques?

**Answer**: the central office could send a survey to the newly designed departmentalized school; a different survey for the teachers and students to get an idea of how the program is working and what needs to take place to improve. Interviews and seminars should take place to encourage teachers to convey their thoughts on what works and what doesn’t. As far as the students are concerned, lateness, attendance statistics, discipline referrals, school policies, standardized test scores are all an indication of how well the departmentalization program works.

1. How should parents and the community be involved in the process to ensure that the students in the new departmentalization process are being looked after appropriately?

**Answer:** Parents should be involved in the decision-making procedures from the start. There should also be a parent representative in place to remain involved in future communications. Parents should be permitted to enter the building and observe how the process is affecting their children. Parents should be permitted to vote or have representation on issues related to how departmentalization is being facilitated during the course of the year. The school building should have an open door policy and permit parents a partnership in the new program so that they can feel comfortable with the nuances of the differences of instructional strategies that accompany departmentalization compared with self-contained classes.

Themes, Patterns, and Discrepancies

There were several themes that applied to the interview questions concerning the implementation of departmentalization of fifth grade students. In terms of teacher perceptions of elementary faculty, interviewees explained ideals of the self-contained classroom versus the middle school where departmentalization is commonplace. The one constant theme, regardless of elementary or middle school level, is that there is a multiplicity of roles for the teachers. One theme concerning the relationship of teachers to administrators is one of a symbiotic one. The patterns herein are inclusive of the support and guidance that each side has or should have available to the other, especially during the course of the changing process of a self-contained class to the departmentalized program. During this transition phase from the self-contained to departmentalized, there were several comments concerning the arduous and inauspicious beginning; the fifth grade students were casted as too immature to benefit from the process. Others patterns of thought consists of the interviewees being role models, parent figures, coaches, and counselors. However, with the advent of the standardized exams, departmentalization has, perforce, enabled the students and teachers to make the new system work as long as there is professional development for the teachers, ongoing support for the teachers and parents, open and constant communication during “the changing of the guard “as the first person interviewed indicated. A few discrepancies stand out among the themes and patterns. For example, when discussing the role of the elementary teacher, while most of the respondents indicated that they perceived that role to be a self-contained class situation with one teacher who supervisor a standard group of students for the entire school day, which led to responses that the traditional role would be too strenuous for teaching present-day standards, two individuals pointed out that there should be more math and more science manipulatives to help the students with the standardized exams. Contrary to this viewpoint, one response was that we should move away from standardized exams and move toward authentic assessments. The other respondents did not mention standardized exams until the students got into the eighth grade. A discrepancy with respect to the middle school, many respondents indicated that their perceptions were that it was a more serious academic learning environment where students were getting the proper skills of making the appropriate transition which is supposed to get them ready for high school. However, one respondent was adamant that it was believed by most that the perception of the middle school teacher is that they do not gain the respect of their teachers. These respondents believed that most of the participants seem to consider the role of the individual teacher as “wearing many hats,” most of which have supportive or meaningful roles. However, one participant indicated that he believed the role of the teacher connoted little respect, and that the community believed that the teachers do little, and take too much time off. As far as priorities are concerned, most of the participants agreed that the priority of the fifth grade teachers should prepare their students socially for the next grade level, acquire applicable and appropriate skills to get them to the sixth grade, and deliver the curriculum as the way of preparing the students for the state standardized exams. With respect to the parent/teacher/ student relationship, most respondents were emphatic that there should be open communication so that there is a partnership among the three groups for the adoption, implementation, and evaluation of the departmentalized program. One respondent indicated that the “administration is the hands that drives the wheel of the ship,” indicating that the teachers should take their cues from the administration whenever reasonable directions for transition occur, and as long as there is ongoing communication the students would be prepared for the “chaos of the high school.” However, another respondent indicated that the parents should respect the professionalism of the teachers and accept the decisions made for the new departmentalized programs without questions. The parents should be permitted to approve the transition phase as long as they do so at “arms length” away.” At the conclusion of the interview the last question “Would you like to add anything was not included, but will be certainly added to the array of questions in the subsequent interviews. All in all as a result of the interview process, each person wanted to establish his/her comprehension that they knew the nuances of a self-contained elementary school class to a departmentalization.

**Transcripts:**

Individual Interview Questions:

1. What are your perceptions of elementary school curriculum?
2. What are your perceptions of middle school curriculum?
3. How would you describe the role of the individual teacher in our society today
4. How do you perceive your relationship with the administration?
5. What is your priority as a fifth grade teacher in the classroom?
6. How would you perceive the departmentalization of fifth grade students?
7. How would you describe the parent/teacher/student relationship in the departmentalized program?
8. How should fifth grade students be assessed in the new departmentalized program?
9. How do you involve parents in the education of their children as they grow into the departmentalized program through the middle school?
10. How would you differentiate between departmentalization and self contained in elementary school?

Interview #1

1: Elementary school consists of ELA, social studies or some type or history, spelling, and writing.

2. The perception is that students should be more mature at this stage to be more serious in their work. Of course, you would have your five core subject areas, but at the middle school level you have to account for the transitional period.

3. The role of the teacher is to provide knowledge for the student, first and foremost. Another role is for the teacher to care about the kids.

4. My relationship with the administration is open for corrections. I am very supportive of them and they are supportive of me.

5. priority as a fifth grade teacher is to provide for the transitional role from a self-contained learning atmosphere to a departmentalized one, going from fourth to fifth grade. Another priority is to prepare the kids for sixth grade.

6. Departmentalization in fifth grade is where the kids learn more in specialized areas, not generalized knowledge. “Education is like a foundation of a house, if you try to take shortcuts, it will collapse.”

7. I believe that the relationship should be one of cooperation, open lines of communication, all with the benefit of helping the kids.

8. These fifth graders under the departmentalized program should be assessed through standardized programs.

9. Parents should be involved in the discussion of curriculum after many of the decisions have been made. They should not be active for much of the decision-making process because they have not had any professional development, education or training to make any decisions. Besides, sometimes there are parents present merely to implement their own agenda which may not be salutary for the student body of the entire building.

10. After focus group questions and this interview it is easy to differentiate. The self- contained class is where the students have one teacher for most of the school day, while departmentalization purports to specialize the students’ academic skills by utilizing several subject area instructors in different parts of the building to whom the students visit during the course of the school day in order to learn and develop specialized knowledge.

#2

1: I taught in most every elementary school in Central Islip, so I can truly say that the perception is that you have your five basics; then you have programs implemented to help the student’s progress to the next grade level and strengthen their weaknesses.

2Now that I am teaching at the Reed Middle School, I can say that we have a transitional period which is supposed to get the students ready for high school.

3: the role of the individual teacher is first and foremost to be a community member of the school district. I have taught at Central Islip for some ten years, but I have lived here most of my life. I can attest that teachers are valued highly in Central Islip, you have to keep on your best posture at all times.” As a teacher I wear many hats; I wear the coach’s hat, although I don’t have to pretend considering that I am a football coach this fall. I also wear a parent hat, guidance counselor hat, a big brother hat,

4: Open for communications. Listen, I am Here till it is time to leave, and I am not talking about 2:05pm right after the dismissal bell either.” I stay until 6 or 7 every day.

5: My priority is for my students to utilize their talents in P.E. and earn the transition from 5 to 6th grade.

6: Fifth grade students are not mature enough to move about the school building alone. Therefore, they still have to be chaperoned throughout the day, because the fifth grade students run.

7. The shareholders need to stay on the students to encourage them to stay on task. It is the teachers’ responsibility to inform the parent of any changes in the child’s academic, social, or spiritual.

8. Assessment: standardized exams, tests, new systems, innovative approaches and class presentations to help the kids with public speaking.

9. Give parents the student handbook and information about their school and individual child on the website utilizing e-mails and blogs.

10. easy to decipher after our conversation; self-containment is where the students go to one teacher all day for their core subject areas at least, and departmentalization as to do with going to several teachers during the course of one day for individual core subjects as well as to different teachers for ancillary subject areas like the gym, technology room, computer room, art and music rooms, etc.,

Interview #3:

1: My perception is that there should be better prepared teachers of mathematics in the Elementary. It seems that Math is not even discussed in the Elementary school, because the teachers do not have a proclivity for it.

2. The middle school is very well done. More collaboration should take place among the teachers.

3. The role of the individual teacher has changed over the years. Nowadays, we teachers cannot be in isolation. We have to have relationships with professional agencies. And have the foresight to gather summative data, which drives the instructional process.

4: My relationship with administration is one I look toward guidance and leadership, and trust. The administration has always looked to me for instructional goals, strategies, and advice.

5: Priority as 5th grade teacher is to prepare them socially and to give active listening skills.

6: I perceived the departmentalization process a success in our district, when we had professional development, and ongoing support, as well as ensuring that all the stakeholders were involved in the process in departmentalization.

7: Everyone should be able to work together during the three phrases of adoption, implementation, and evaluation of departmentalization of fifth grade students.

8: Assessment of the students in the departmentalization program should include surveys, quantitative or Likert scale type surveys, open-ended questions to encourage communication and new ideas to be presented. Portfolios and standardized exams are other ways to assess the students in the new fifth grade program.

9: Parents could stay involved in the education of their children by being active members of an ongoing evaluative committee of the departmentalization program.

10: After the focus group questions and individual interviews it is rather easy to explain the difference; self-contained is when the students stay all day in the same class with the same teacher except for gym, art, music, and other non core classes. Departmentalization refers to the mass movement of students from class to class each period to learn different subjects in a more specialized environment. The new standards have made it necessary for us to think about including more rigorous specialized subject area classes, like math, so that the students will have enough skills by the time they get to the high school to pass the regents exams and graduate high school.

Interview #4:

1: My first impression of elementary school is that it is too much at one time. One teacher all day teaching the same kids all those subjects without breaks. However, there is more flexibility in elementary school for students to have fun learning. For example, if the students are completing a reading assignment, and the teacher wishes to change “gears” to review a spelling test from the previous day, some students who read at a slower pace would be able to go off to the side of the room and continue their assignment while the teacher reviews his/her new assignment without losing class time.

2: Middle school is time to get the students ready for high school. It should be a more serious time for students. For teachers, it is a time to help their students prepare for the standardized exams.

3: role of individual teacher: prepare kids educationally. There should also be emphasis on character education either formally or informally.

4: Relationship with the administration should be supportive and teachers should be able to go to their supervisors and administrators for help. Administrators should also be “there” as a “go between” for parents. In addition, teachers should not have to be so fearful.

5: Priorities as a fifth grade teacher should include character education for the students as well as getting them ready for their next grade setting.

6: I perceive the departmentalization of fifth grade students as a positive learning environment where students get ready for the next level. They are busy with far more rigorous classes and more difficult educational experience overall; however, because of the standards, departmentalization at an earlier age is necessary because of the increased standards. The entire atmosphere is alleviated somewhat if teaming were included, because the departmentalization process ensures that the students may not be spread out all over the school building haphazardly, but are able to move about the building in one predetermined area where the core subject area teachers are close together.

7. The three-way communication is crucial for the program to be effective. The relationship would improve under teaming design because the parents, students, and teachers would belong to a specific scheduled program within the building program, rather than just being sent about the building in different places.

8: Assessing the fifth graders would be done with surveys, grades over time, teacher observations and more formative techniques.

9: involve the parents with phone calls, e-mails, letters home and progress reports.

10: after the focus group questions and this interview it’s easy: self-contained is where the kids don’t move and only see one teacher all day and learn from that teacher rather than the departmentalized program where students move about the building to their specialized subject area classes.

Interview #5

1: Self-contained classes for the most part. Also, they follow more of a routine than we do.

2. More classes. I call it the “changing of the guard.” There are more personalities to deal with in middle school. Teaming helps alleviate that so that the kids are not scattered.

3. Role of the teacher is like a parent or companion. Sometimes you act like a coach (like my fiancée). A role model is really what we are.

4. It is a professional relationship. It should follow proper rules or whatever, protocol would be a good term. We have an open door policy, right. They should be supportive.

5: first priority for whatever grade should be safety for the children.

6: Departmentalization is challenging because both the teachers and the students have to get used to a tremendous change. The teachers, who used to prepare for several subject areas, still had flexibility in their day to teach their subjects. Now the teachers have only one specialized preparation, but they have to have a better grasp of the information in that area. The kids used to go to one teacher all day now have to manage how to get through the hallways without either getting into trouble or getting lost. Also, whereas in the self-contained class, if a student had difficulty in an academic subject, the teacher could be flexible enough and spend more time on the skill, where in the other way, after 40 minutes, the student is out of luck and has to go to extra-help after school or miss the opportunity altogether to acquire the skill.

7. The relationship should not end after the departmentalized program is put in place. The relationship should be ongoing, constant, between all interested parties.

8: Assessment: testing, unit testing is important. Oh and formative assessments, too.

9: the parents should be involved by giving comments through surveys or phone calls, and we should have more organized building level parent-teacher conferences.

10: after the focus group and interview it is clear the self-contained is where the students go to one teacher for the most part with the exception of pull-out programs, and departmentalization is where the students go to several areas of the building to learn specific subject areas from different teachers who are certified in the area.

Interview #6

1: as a middle school science teacher, I believe that there should be more manipulatives in the elementary schools. Also, there needs to be more teachers willing and able to teach science..

2: My perceptions are first that we should move away from state exams toward real world or authentic, everyday activities and assessments in the classroom. My courtyard project was a perfect example. Our students turned a patch of dirt into four outside classrooms. My kids were engrossed in their work.

3: the role of Individual teacher is that we get little respect than in the past. Teaching used to be a noble profession. Now the overall perception is that we are overpaid, we have too much time off, and we don’t do anything in the day with the kids… Otherwise, my relationship with them is that I feel like I have to be a social worker with some of them. I also play the role of a parent, friend, and brother and at CI it is even more so.

4: My relationship should be a cohesive unit. Both should work together to fulfill our goals successfully. I know that we should support each other without question. If I have a student who is acting act, I expect the administration to give him/her punishment. Also, if there is a fight or if I am needed to cover a class I will be right there.

5: I don’t know about fifth grade, but my priority as an 8th grade science teacher is to get my kids to pass the state exam.

6: I perceive departmentalization of fifth the same as the way we have it.

7. The relationship should be, again, cohesive. Parents should not be allowed to hang around the building asking questions or questioning the regulations of the building or teachers. “Teachers should not be questioned.”

8. Exams, questions.

9. You could involve the parents with phone calls, notes, progress reports. And if something happened in class which would require the special attention of the parent.

10. After the focus group and interview departmentalization is like in my building where the students walk to different classes after the bell rings, where in the self-contained classes, the students stay in one class and learn from one teacher all the subjects.

Interview #7

1: a lot of work for a teacher. Do you know what they have to do? Just dressing up the classroom for the kids is a chore.

2. Teachers should concentrate more on writing skills across the curriculum. It is very important for the middle school “to prepare the students for the chaos of the high school”

3: students are our most important resource. “We are teaching the future of America.” My roles are expanding. I am a mentor, father figure, brother, counselor, role-model for them to look up to. “As a teacher you have to be open-minded and know who your clientele is.”

4: The relationship is important. “The administration is the hands that are driving the wheel of the ship.” Communication is the most important thing to have in this relationship and everyone should leave our personal lives out of it.

5: priority: delivery of curriculum is the best way to prepare the students for 6th grade.

6: It’s hard to implement it. You have to listen to other schools, do site visitations, research, talk to your colleagues and find out the best way to keep the program running smoothly so that our students are progressing. [[1]](#endnote-2)

7: Everyone should be involved in actively listening to make it work. You have to do your best to have a partnership so that the students are successful.

8. Traditional methods, grades over time, comparing different schools with similar characteristics, and comparing grades throughout the years.

9. Calls are important, meetings. Parents should be on committees.

10. Oh, kids in one class all day as opposed to following a schedule that has different teachers depending on your subject.

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)