Teacher Candidates' Perceptions of Grade Level Organization and Its Influence on Their Professional Development

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Abstract:
Teacher candidates consistently indicate field experiences are the most impactful aspect of their preparation for teaching. In this study we explored elementary teacher candidates' perceptions of elementary K-6 grade level organization (departmentalized or self-contained) during their teacher preparation field experiences at two universities in the southeastern region of the United States. Findings suggest teacher candidates vary in terms of their attitudes towards grade level organizational structures and how their preparation in these contexts impacted their professional development. Because field experiences occur at critical developmental junctures for teacher candidates, teacher educators must understand the impact of grade level organizational structures on teacher candidates' professional development so as to appropriately scaffold and guide these experiences.

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Learning to teach elementary-aged students is an incredibly complex endeavor—particularly in the current educational landscape. Across the past two decades, elementary classrooms have increasingly become pressure-filled workspaces due to an overreliance on accountability mechanisms such as standardized testing, data monitoring, increasing workload,

and stagnant salaries (Bridges & Serle, 2011; Wei, Pecheone, & Wilczak, 2015). Because of these factors, the increase in elementary teachers' workloads has reached unprecedented levels in recent years (Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014).

One way in which elementary principals attempt to ameliorate the pressures teachers face in elementary classrooms is through departmentalization. Departmentalization, also known as teaming, platooning, or specializing, is broadly defined as a grade-level team configuration in which individual teachers take responsibility for specific content areas for multiple classes of students (Gewertz, 2014). Juxtaposed against this structure is the more historically typical self-contained elementary grade level configuration. The term self-contained is used in this study to describe general education classrooms in which a single teacher is responsible for planning and teaching all content areas for one group of students. Literature on the elementary grade level organizational structures is limited and more frequently discusses scholars and practitioners perspectives or opinion. However, recent empirical research conducted by researchers in economics suggests increasing interest in the topic of elementary organizational structures (Fryer, 2018; Hill & Jones, 2018).

Because the use of departmentalization is on the rise, particularly in primary grades, it is critical to understand teacher candidates' preparation for and perceptions of this organizational structure as they transition into the profession (Gewertz, 2014). We assert it is likely that many elementary teacher candidates enter their teacher preparation coursework envisioning a future career as the sole teacher leading a group of young children across an academic year. Yet given current trends (Gewertz, 2014), it stands to reason elementary teacher candidates will find themselves placed in a classroom that uses some variation of departmentalized instruction at some point in their preparation program. Similarly, we suggest that many teacher preparation programs continue to prepare teacher candidates for scenarios that are increasingly unlikely and/or are not facilitating discussions with teacher candidates to make sense of departmentalized settings. Ultimately, there is little, if any, rigorous empirical research to suggest how departmentalized and self-contained classroom experiences impact teacher candidates' professional beliefs.

Given this changing context, the role of clinical experiences becomes critically important in the preparation of teachers for 21st century classrooms (AACTE, 2018). Clinical experiences afford authentic opportunities for teacher candidates to learn how to teach in real world situations (AACTE, 2010, Zeichner, 2014), and they often represent teacher candidates' initial experiences with varying grade level organizational structures such as departmentalization or self-contained structures. Our purpose here is to understand teacher candidates' perceptions of elementary schools' grade level structures (departmentalized and self-contained) and how learning to teach in various structures impacts their growth as future teachers. Two overarching questions guide our work:

1) What experiences do teacher candidates have to prepare them for teaching in the various grade level organizational structures?
2) What are teacher candidates' perception of various elementary grade level organizational structures, and how do these structures impact their future teaching experiences?

In the sections that follow, we explore the literature as it relates to elementary organization structures, broadly speaking, as well as the nature of teacher candidates' perceptions of field experiences. Then we share findings from our survey of teacher candidates in two elementary preparation programs. We conclude with implications for elementary teacher educators and for the field of elementary education.

Organizational Structures in Elementary Classrooms

The organizational structure best suited for elementary classrooms is a contentious topic among stakeholders in elementary schools (Anderson, 1962; Culyer, 1984; Gewertz, 2014; Hood, 2009; Lobdell & van Ness, 1962). A mere mention of the terms 'departmentalization' or 'self-contained' elicits strong emotions among educators – oftentimes these responses are driven by their own experiences, positive or negative, with these school structures (Parker, Rakes, & Arndt, 2017).

Departmentalization is premised on the notion that teacher specialization and spreading expectations for content knowledge and instructional planning across a number of teachers (typically 2-4) will improve instruction within a given content area, particularly if teachers are assigned to teach in their most effective area of instruction (Condie, Lefgen, & Sims, 2014). Proponents assert departmentalization allows teachers to focus on fewer subjects and develop more extensive content area expertise, ultimately decreasing the already extensive and unrealistic demands on teachers in elementary schools (Anderson, 1962; Chan & Jarman, 2004). By focusing on a single content area, elementary teachers can develop confidence, content expertise and pedagogical competence in ways that are not possible when asked to teach all content areas (Epstein & MacIver, 1992; Gewertz, 2014; McGrath & Rust, 2002).

Proponents of departmentalization at the elementary level identify a number of additional benefits for teachers including reductions in stress due to decreased time spent on planning and fresh starts with new groups of students throughout the day (Strohl et. al., 2014). While departmentalization does increase the number of students a given teacher instructs, it limits the possibility of a potential teacher/student mismatch across an entire school day. Ultimately, the positive aspects of departmentalization are primarily experienced by the teacher – more focused time for planning, less instruction to plan for on a given day, and opportunities to develop content and pedagogical knowledge in fewer subjects (Poland, Colburn, & Long, 2017).

Advocates of self-contained structures also note a number of benefits – the majority of which are focused on students and their experiences in school. In fact, self-contained classroom settings align with student-centered approaches which emphasize instruction as well as social and emotional learner needs (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007; Schiro, 2008). Proponents of self-contained elementary classrooms believe that young children should spend the day with a classroom teacher who is responsible for all content areas. This structure facilitates the development of strong student/teacher relationships and provides teachers with an opportunity to deeply know each learner across all content areas (McGrath & Rust, 2002; Squires, Huitt, & Segars, 1983). The trade off in self-contained classrooms is that the teacher has fewer students but more time with and more instructional responsibilities for those students. Unlike departmentalized structures that are necessarily driven by regimented schedules, self-contained settings have more flexibility over how time is spent and how content areas are integrated.

The limited number of studies on elementary organizational structures means there is little to guide individuals as they make decisions about the nature of elementary students' experiences. In our investigation of factors driving elementary principals' decision-making regarding elementary organizational structures, we found decisions related to organizational structure are largely based on administrators' personal beliefs and preferences (Parker et al., 2017). In fact, there was no discernable contextual pattern to the rationales principals applied to their decisions to departmentalize or remain self-contained. This resulted in tremendous variability in implementation of departmentalized instruction across school settings in a single district.

Additionally, there is limited understanding of the impact of this organizational structure on elementary students. For example, McGrath and Rust (2002) found that overall scores in self-contained elementary classrooms were higher than those in departmentalized as were subject specific scores in science and language arts. However, there was no difference in achievement in math, reading, and social studies subject test scores based on organizational structure. More recently, Fryer (2018) found in a study of 46 elementary schools that students in departmentalized classrooms with teachers assigned to specialization areas based on principal recommendations experienced a decline on high and low stakes test scores for each year of the two-year evaluation period. The negative impacts were most noticeable in students receiving special education services and students in classrooms with new teachers. Fryer also found an increase in both absenteeism and behavioral issues. In terms of teacher behaviors, teachers departmentalizing reported being less likely to tailor instruction to individual student's needs, likely due to having fewer interactions and decreased time with students, and less satisfied in their overall work (Fryer, 2018). These recent findings indicate a negative impact of departmentalization on elementary students, particularly those who might be most at risk for academic and behavior challenges.

The Nature of Field Experiences in Teacher Preparation

Given the growing number of departmentalized classrooms in elementary schools, it is likely that elementary teacher candidates will have experiences in a non-traditional organizational configuration during their teacher preparation. Because the field of teacher preparation is large, and teacher candidates specifically and without fail, point to their field experiences working within teachers and children in PK-12 contexts as the most impactful aspects of their teacher preparation training (Daoud, 2018; Darling-Hammond, Pacheco, Michelli, LePage, & Hammerness, 2005; Valencia, Martin, Place & Grossman, 2009; Zeichner & Bier, 2015), it is essential to understand the literature on field experiences.

Field experiences provide a critical third space in which teacher candidates, in tandem with university-based and school-based teacher educators, can make meaning of their theoretical course experiences in practical, realistic classroom contexts (Gutierrez, 2008). And while field experiences have long been a part of teacher preparation, there are surprising inconsistencies and variabilities in these experiences. This is in part due to the uniqueness of university communities and their neighboring school districts, but is also a function of programs', schools', and universities' attitudes towards clinical partnerships. As a result, field experiences are often poorly planned and loosely organized with limited connectivity to coursework (Darling Hammond, 2009; Zeichner & Bier, 2015). This contributes to a reality--that clinical field experiences run the gamut in terms of quality, quantity, duration, and nature of support/feedback (Zeichner & Bier, 2015). Consequently, the outcomes for teacher candidates as a result of field work vary tremendously and are highly contextualized.

As a field, teacher educators recognize a number of factors associated with high quality field work. This includes extended time in the field and purposeful connectivity to coursework. In fact, courses intentionally tied to field experiences prove particularly effective in allowing teacher candidates to make theory to practice connections. (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Koerner, Rust, & Baumgartner, 2002; Zeichner & Bier, 2015). Similarly, national teacher education organizations and leading scholars note that mentor teacher selection and consistency in expectations across PK-12 and university partners also play a role in highly effective field experiences (AACTE 2010; Clift & Brady, 2006; Grossman, 2010). In addition, rather than relying on the assumption that good teachers are automatically good mentors, high quality field experiences are more likely to occur

when teacher candidates are paired with mentors who are properly prepared for the work (Grossman, 2010; Valencia, Martin, Place & Grossman, 2009).

While more is not always better in regards to field experiences (Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton & Doone, 2006), we do know that a combination of high quality and extensive time are necessary. In fact, Darling-Hammond (2014) notes "the most powerful programs require students to spend extensive time in the field, examining and applying the concepts and strategies they are simultaneously learning about in their courses alongside teachers who can show them how to teach in ways that are responsive to learners" (p. 551). Time in the field is certainly a factor in high quality teacher preparation, but it is more about the quality of the time than it is the quantity.

The purpose of our work is to explore the intersection of what on the surface may appear to be two disconnected bodies of literature: departmentalized instruction and clinical field experiences. Specifically, we endeavor to understand teacher candidates' perceptions of their field experiences when they are situated in departmentalized and self-contained structures. Because field experiences are so impactful, and yet so historically haphazard in nature, an exploration of what teacher candidates perceive and experience in varying elementary contexts may inform the growing literature on clinical teacher preparation.

Method

Contextual Overview

Participants in this study were teacher candidates enrolled in teacher preparation programs at two universities in the southeastern United States. Program A is a graduate licensure and certification program that situates its course and fieldwork with Professional Development Schools (PDS) in two large, diverse districts. All teacher candidates in Program A are placed in PDS sites and have required field experiences that increase in complexity and duration, culminating in either a semester long or year-long internship. Program B is an undergraduate licensure and certification program that situates its course and fieldwork with schools in one large, diverse district. While the participants from Program A and B differed in terms of the degree level (undergraduate or graduate) of their preparation, the nature of the coursework and field experiences were similar. All teacher candidates are placed in elementary classrooms and have required field experiences that increase in complexity, culminating in a semester long internship.

Data Collection

A survey was sent to approximately 100 teacher candidates in two university settings. The questionnaire asked teacher candidates open-ended questions about their clinical experiences in both departmentalized (two or more groups of children with two or more teachers) and self-contained (one group of children with one teacher) settings (See APPENDIX A). The surveys were compiled by question to compare the teacher candidates' answers. Teacher candidates were asked to discuss

  1) teacher and student benefits in self-contained and departmentalized classrooms,
  2) teacher and student drawbacks in self-contained and departmentalized classrooms,
  3) teacher and student challenges in self-contained and departmentalized classrooms.

In addition, teacher candidates were asked about the impact teaching in self-contained and departmentalized classrooms had on them and whether or not, if offered, they would accept teaching jobs in either classroom setting.

One hundred teacher candidates were surveyed and 53 responded, for a return rate of 53%. In many cases, the teacher candidates had completed multiple clinical experiences (both self-

contained and departmentalized); therefore when those numbers were analyzed, they totaled greater than 53 (See Table 1). Three of the teacher candidates completed all four clinical experiences in a self-contained classroom. However, none who completed four clinical experiences did so in all departmentalized settings.

Table 1
Teacher Candidate Clinical Experiences

Number of Clinical Experiences	Self-Contained Experiences	Departmentalized Experiences
teacher candidates with one clinical experience	2	9
teacher candidates with two clinical experiences	22	11
teacher candidates with three clinical experiences	22	11
teacher candidates with four clinical experiences	43	21

Note: Most teacher candidates reported multiple clinical experiences in both self-contained and departmentalized settings; therefore, some the columns total greater than $N = 53$.

Data Analysis

Using content and thematic analysis, we coded the teacher candidate surveys and identified several recurring themes. Research using qualitative content analysis focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text (Budd, Thorp, & Donohew, 1967; Lindkvist, 1981; McTavish & Pirro, 1990; Tesch, 1990). Thematic analysis allowed the researchers to associate an analysis of the frequency of a theme with one of the whole content (Alhojailan, 2012). Patton (2002) postulates that core meanings can be discovered using content and thematic analysis on survey data.

To analyze and discover core meanings, answers on the survey were placed into a spreadsheet according to the question asked. As each answer was analyzed, the basic content was assigned a color as each content theme was discovered. On subsequent analyses, the color-coded content was grouped into major themes. Major themes were identified as those in which more than 50% of teacher candidates discussed (Alhojailan, 2012).

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Findings

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In the section that follows we share findings through five themes. The first four, relationships, time, classroom management, and academic needs, emerged as the major themes from the data analysis. In addition, upon a review across each of the four major themes, a fifth theme emerged related to teacher candidates' developing beliefs regarding organizational structures as a result of their reflections. In each section the teacher candidates' words elucidate the themes. To delineate the sources of each quote, teacher candidates were coded using a letter (to designate the two programs) and unique number.

As noted in Table 1, survey results indicate teacher candidates experienced both departmentalized and self-contained classrooms during their clinical field experiences. Teacher candidates expressed wide-ranging opinions about learning to teach in departmentalized and self-contained classrooms based upon their clinical experiences, acknowledging both pros and cons to each structure. Overall, there was remarkable consistency in teacher candidates' perceptions of self-contained and departmentalized instruction, which resulted in four overarching themes: relationships, time, classroom management and students' academic needs. Table 2 reveals the frequency of the major themes in our data set.

Table 2
Themes

	Relationships	Time	Classroom Management	Meeting Student Academic Needs
% of teacher candidates who discussed the topic in the survey	75%	72%	62%	60%

Relationships

Seventy five percent of the surveyed teacher candidates referenced relationships in their responses and overwhelmingly stated that teacher-student relationships are much stronger in self-contained classrooms. For example, Teacher Candidate F2 shared in regards to self-contained classrooms, "I think that teachers are able to create more meaningful relationships with students." Similarly, Teacher Candidate F14 noted, *"*Teachers are able to create a more family-oriented classroom in a self-contained classroom." Teacher Candidate G6 provided a rationale for the stronger relationships when she reflected, "The teacher is able to observe how their student is doing across all subject areas (so) the teacher is able to develop a more personal relationship with the student and create a comfortable consistent atmosphere." While we are unable to determine if these perceptions arose from their experiences as teacher candidates or was a function of their pre-existing beliefs about elementary classrooms, it was clear from their responses that they viewed relationships as a central feature of self-contained classrooms.

Conversely, teacher candidates also readily recognized that departmentalized structures made building relationships with students challenging. As Teacher Candidate F27 noted, "They (students) also cannot form as strong of bonds with multiple teachers as they would with just one classroom teacher." Teacher Candidate G17 shared as a drawback of departmentalization that "Students don't get to create that one on one relationship with the teacher." This seemingly dichotomous recognition indicates teacher candidates see a clear connection between structure/time with students and the nature of the relationships that they build with students.

Teacher candidates noted that self-contained structures facilitated their ability to build relationships with and understand their student learners during clinical experiences. G8 reflected,

"I came to know my students very well as learners and as individual children with unique personalities and strengths." Teacher Candidate F1 shared, "I had better relationships with students, I was comfortable with them and there was mutual respect. It made my job teaching more comfortable and easier." Similarly, Teacher Candidate F8 noted, "Being in a small classroom with many students all day can be very difficult, this encouraged me to get to know the students personally to be able to understand why they may act the way they do, and learn what situations help them learn better." Teacher Candidate F35 shared,

> When a class came in that only came in for a math class, there was much less of a connection. They didn't respond as well to me because they only saw me for about an hour every Tuesday so they didn't think they had to listen to me. The teacher didn't have the same relationship with them either, because really they weren't her class or her students.

The connection between relationships and their impact on teaching and learning is foundational. Through their field experiences, teacher candidates readily recognized and, in some cases, experienced the impact of different instructional configurations on the relationships they established or that they observed established in elementary classrooms.

Time

Teacher candidates recognized the connection between organizational structures and its impact on time. In fact, 72% of teacher candidates referenced time in their survey responses.
On the surface, the notion of time seemed to set up a dichotomous framing of self-contained vs. departmentalized instruction, with self-contained taking more planning time and departmentalized instruction requiring less planning time due to the reduction in content areas instructed. This was evidenced by Teacher Candidate F4 who reflected that self-contained instruction required "tremendous amounts of planning" whereas departmentalized instruction required "significantly less" planning. She elaborated based on her observations of watching her mentor struggle with the quantity of planning, "I'm worried I'll be facing a task that is too difficult to handle and become burned-out." The differences in time required for each structure and its impact on the teacher were noted consistently throughout the responses.

Teacher candidates also noted the impact of time as it related to the structure of the elementary school day. Self-contained classrooms had more flexibility in how time across the school day was spent, which impacted how responsive teachers could be to students' interests and needs. For example, Teacher Candidate G1 shared the impact of self-contained classrooms, "It (self-contained) showed me how subjects can flow together and teachers have much more flexibility with lessons and timing of teaching." However, teacher candidates also indicated that lessons could be streamlined and more focused in a departmentalized classroom because teachers only have to focus on one or two subjects when lesson planning. For example, Teacher Candidate F25 stated, "Being able to focus on two content areas (ELA/Social Studies) rather than all four, the teacher is able to put more time into her planning for these specific topics." Similarly, Teacher Candidate F14 noted that the developed lessons could potentially be more engaging, "I was able to solely focus on one subject area, which allowed me to plan and implement rich and diverse lessons each day."

Timing in terms of transitions and pacing also factored in teacher candidates' experiences with both positive and negative outcomes. In a self-contained placement Teacher Candidate F17 stated, "... it allowed me to see how to effectively transition between subjects within the same classroom, and keep the learning process going through all of the core subjects." Conversely,

Teacher Candidate F32 reflected, "The students switched four times a day and each time took around eight minutes to have the students sit down, get settled, and begin working. That is 32 minutes of wasted time. I feel that the students would have more benefit in a self-contained classroom." Departmentalization was seen as a drawback in the sense of having to stick to a schedule or calendar. As Teacher Candidate G11 noted, "They have to keep up with the pacing of the other team members no matter where their class is at the time."

Classroom Management

Classroom management is an area that most teacher candidates find challenging. In fact, 62% of teacher candidates surveyed said that classroom management was a concern in the elementary classroom and most stated that management was more effective in a self-contained classroom. Many stated that students do not behave the same way in each classroom when they travel to different teachers' rooms. For example, Teacher Candidate F12 stated that more behavioral issues were apparent in different classrooms and "expectations differ from class to class." Similarly, Teacher Candidate G7 shared, "The consistency between teachers' rules is hard for children to track; different teachers have different expectations, rules, management styles, and tolerance." Communication and consistency seemed key to teacher candidates. As Teacher Candidate F27 noted, "It may be difficult for students to learn the different rules and expectations of the different teachers." Teacher Candidate F13 further explained, "Students take advantage of teachers if they (teachers) don't communicate well." Ultimately, based on their clinical experiences, teacher candidates found classroom management challenging in departmentalized settings.

In contrast, teacher candidates mentioned that self-contained structures seemed to offer clearer and more consistent expectations for student behavior. Teacher Candidate G14 described the self-contained classroom as "one teacher/one voice" and stated that students receive "mixed messages" from traveling to another teacher's room for instruction. In addition, Teacher Candidate F14 explained, "Students can become familiar with the expectations of one classroom teacher. More routine can be established as rules and procedures remain consistent with only one classroom teacher." Teacher Candidate F8 said that her experience in a self-contained classroom allowed her to learn "more about transitioning and controlling students' behavior in the classroom." Teacher Candidate F10 also stated that being in a self-contained classroom "showed me how students' behavior changes throughout the day." Teacher Candidate F4 reflected, "Management becomes easier to solidify when students are with you all day." The clear distinction between management with one set of students and management with multiple sets of students show that teacher candidates value one set of rules and expectations and clear communication between teachers.

On the other hand, some teacher candidates shared that departmentalizing can benefit teachers and students if there is a personality conflict or a behavior problem with a student. Teacher Candidate F13 said that when departmentalizing, students can "have a break from one teacher if they're having a rough day with them." When teaching a self-contained class, students remain in the same classroom all day and "if a teacher has a very tough student to deal with, they receive no break at all throughout the day," according to Teacher Candidate F19. Regardless of setting, clinical experiences afford teacher candidates opportunities to learn about management strategies and the associated pros and cons with each. Both departmentalized and self-contained settings offer teacher candidates opportunities to learn classroom management strategies in various situations.

Meeting Student Academic Needs

Sixty percent of teacher candidates discussed student academic needs in the survey; however, they were divided in their thoughts about how teachers effectively met students' academic needs. Some teacher candidates asserted teachers in self-contained classrooms know and are able to meet student academic needs better than in a departmentalized classroom. Teacher Candidate F3 described teachers as having a "full understanding of students' abilities" in a self-contained classroom. Teacher Candidate F13 further explained that in a self-contained classroom, teachers are able to "see students' strengths and weaknesses across content areas."
Because most departmentalized structures are on tight time schedules, Teacher Candidate F6 observed that there were "not enough opportunities to spend one-on-one time with students."

Teacher Candidates recognized that teachers need to know students' learning needs and provide additional instructional support to help them be academically successful. Teacher Candidate F11 explained that in a self-contained classroom, teachers can "easily monitor their advanced and lower level students throughout the day." Teacher Candidate F8 added that having the same group of students all day allowed teachers understand the learning needs of their students in all subjects. Integrating subjects was mentioned pointing out that it was easier to cross disciplines in a self-contained classroom (Teacher Candidates F21 & G1). Teacher Candidate F21 further explained that in a self-contained classroom, teachers "determine where their students need more help in one area and spend more class time on a certain subject". The connection between time spent with students and meeting their learning needs was apparent in the survey.

Conversely, some teacher candidates felt that students' needs are better met in departmentalized classrooms. However, a majority of teacher candidates that mentioned students' needs are better met in a departmentalized setting where students are grouped by ability. This resulted in teacher candidates developing a narrowly and ultimately misguided definition of differentiation. Some saw the departmentalized ability groups as a way to differentiate within already leveled groups. As Teacher Candidate F2 explained, students are in classes with "peers with similar learning needs" and that "could lead to more individualized and differentiated instruction." Teacher Candidate F27 added, "Differentiated instruction is easier because in a departmentalized classroom, students can be broken up into groups based on their abilities and needs." Teacher Candidate G5 felt that working in a departmentalized setting allowed "practice with different levels of student readiness and understanding."

Conversely, some teacher candidates saw the departmentalized ability groups as the way students' needs are met. Teacher Candidate F11 said, "Teachers have a class of higher level students and a class of lower level students so there is not much need for differentiating instruction. Teacher Candidate F33 reflected, "Students are grouped by readiness (from what I have seen). I guess teachers can better meet the needs of students during whole group instruction." Teacher Candidate F36 explained departmentalized ability grouping as "increased differentiation." "I learned how to differentiate even better because the classes were grouped by ability", (Teacher Candidate F36). While we are unable to determine teacher candidates' understanding of differentiation in regards to meeting students' needs, it was clear from their responses that some equate departmentalized ability groups with meeting students' individual academic needs.

There was some concern expressed by teacher candidates regarding students having one teacher all day long because both student behavior and academics could be impacted. Teacher Candidate F14 said, "If students are placed in an ineffective teacher's classroom, then that student may not be provided with a high-quality education. With only one primary teacher, students are only able to grow as much as their teacher allows." Teacher Candidate G1 explained that the

learning gaps can be larger in self-contained classroom and that would make harder to meet all students' needs. Teaching style and learning preference may also hinder a teacher from being able to meet all students' needs as all students do not learn the same way and may not "mesh with a teacher's style" if in the same classroom all day (Teacher Candidate G2). Teacher candidates seem to realize the influence a teacher has on student learning, whether it be through content knowledge or pedagogical strategies.

Developing Beliefs

Teacher candidates' survey responses across the four major themes indicate the ways in which their experiences and reflections were shaping their developing attitudes about elementary grade level organizational structures and the elementary teaching profession, as well as their professional learning. A number of teacher candidates expressed significant frustration with the repetition of teaching and lack of strong relationships in their departmentalized classrooms. For example, Teacher Candidate F27 noted, "I definitely learned that I would not want to be in a departmentalized classroom. I was observing the same lesson over and over again. The day got very boring, and I would prefer teaching all of the subjects." Similarly, Teacher Candidate F1 stated, "Honestly, being in my departmentalized classroom as a freshman made me reconsider if this was the profession for me. I was bored, I did not feel any connection to the material I was teaching or the children I spent the time with because after an hour I would not see them again. How can you teach a student to the best of your ability if you barely know them?" Commenting on the role of standardized testing in her departmentalized field place, Teacher Candidate F6 shared, "I almost changed my major. I couldn't stand how test focused the teaching was and felt as if none of the students were receiving anything of significant impact." These developing perceptions highlight teacher candidates' awareness of the importance of knowing one's students and suggest a conflict with their beliefs about how elementary classrooms are supposed to 'look.'

Lack of opportunities to teach across content areas also emerged as a frustration among teacher candidates placed in departmentalized settings. For example, Teacher Candidate G17 reflected, "It didn't really teach me all that much in regards to any other subject, but the subject my classroom was departmentalized in. I saw only one side of teaching, and it was very repetitive every time I was in the classroom. I wanted to see how other subjects would be approached, and I was unable to." Similarly, Teacher Candidate F15 noted "Though I became very comfortable with ELA I feel that I am now lacking in Math because of only seeing ELA for my entire internship." Again here, teacher candidates express an awareness of what is missing from their professional development when placed in departmentalized classrooms: opportunities to grow in all aspects of the elementary instructional day.

In describing the nature of their learning in self-contained classrooms, teacher candidates acknowledged that these placements helped them conceptualize the 'whole picture' of elementary teaching. For example, Teacher Candidate G16 noted, "I learned how to manage it all. I learned how to check my bias towards certain subjects. I work with all students." Similarly, Teacher candidate F8 reflected,

> I have had three very different experiences. I feel I have grown to love the self-contained classroom because of my last experience. I have learned more about transitioning and controlling student behavior in the classroom. Being in a small classroom with many students all day can be very difficult, this encouraged me to get to know the students personally to be able to understand why they may act the way they do, and learn what situations

help them learn better. Some students may not work well in this type of situation, but aiming your teaching to their needs can change the way this classroom setting affects them.

The self-contained classroom also highlighted some of the challenges of elementary teaching. Teacher Candidate F6 shared, "Being in the self-contained classroom has stressed me out. My CT always seems to be disorganized and lost about what we need to be doing, and that concerns me about teaching in a self-contained classroom. I'm worried I'll be facing a task that is too difficult to handle and become burned-out." The self-contained experience also highlighted some of the challenges of the structure for teacher candidates.

Discussion

The reflections of teacher candidates on their experiences in learning to teach in departmentalized and self-contained classrooms are remarkably consistent with what is noted in the literature. The mere frequency with which they are placed in classrooms adhering to some form of departmentalized instruction suggests that there is indeed increased implementation of this model (Gewertz, 2014). The four major themes emerging from their survey responses mirror those seen in the literature and the ongoing debate regarding the appropriateness of departmentalized instruction for elementary aged students. Their recognition of the benefits of self-contained classrooms in terms of creating strong student-teacher relationships, integrated instruction, awareness of students' needs, and opportunities for content integration reflects the perceptions held consistently by teachers and scholars in the field as is their concern regarding the overwhelming quantity of instructional planning in these contexts (McGrath & Rust, 2002; Schiro, 2008). Similarly, teacher candidates identified positives related to departmentalization in terms of decreased time for planning and opportunities for a specific content focus (McGrath & Rust, 2002; Strohl et. al., 2014), while also noting that relationships with students were negatively impacted.

In addition to providing support for the literature on enduring perspectives of the impact of elementary organizational structures, the survey results also revealed the ways in which experiences in self-contained and departmentalized classrooms informed teacher candidates' overall professional development. Our study results indicate that teacher candidates are learning a tremendous amount from experiences that occur in different organizational structures, particularly about the benefits and drawbacks of each structure and about the kinds of classrooms they want to be in as teachers. Teacher candidates see and experience tension between the two structures in terms of expectations for planning, content knowledge, relationships with students.

Based on the survey results, teacher candidates develop or reinforce strong attitudes towards elementary organizational structures. For example, following their field experiences, teacher candidates reflected that they would overwhelmingly accept jobs in self-contained settings and were more undecided about positions in departmentalized schools (Table 3). We do not know to what extent this is related to their prior beliefs or their field experiences; however, it does raise the question, how do we prepare teacher candidates for these very different elementary contexts? And furthermore, would preparation shape their willingness to (or to not) be in these settings?

Table 3
Percentage of Teacher Candidates Who (if offered) Would Accept a Job in a Self-Contained or Departmentalized Setting

	Yes	No	Undecided
Self-Contained	88%	0%	12%
Departmentalized	54%	8%	38%

Our findings also suggest teacher candidates value strong student-teacher relationships and see self-contained classrooms as organizational structures that facilitate building, maintaining, and using relationships as a tool for management and instruction. This may be a function of their existing beliefs on teaching, their university coursework, their field experiences or a combination of the three, but the refrain of relationship is consistently seen throughout their responses. In fact, throughout the data, it was clear that relationships mattered to elementary teacher candidates in ways that developing expertise in a single content area did not. This mirrors findings by Poland and colleagues which suggests generalist teachers prefer the child-centered nature of elementary classrooms to content/subject oriented approaches (Poland et al., 2017). Thus, teacher candidates' recognition of the role of relationships is important, particularly when considered alongside Fryer's (2017) study indicating teachers teaching in their strongest content area did not translate into improved performance. The power of relationships cannot be underestimated, and teacher candidates' reflections on relationships in various organizations settings reinforces this notion.

As teacher educators, it is imperative that we understand the organizational structures of the field experiences our teacher candidates navigate. Teacher candidates are developing strong, enduring beliefs about the pros and cons of these various structures – some of which may be accurate and others perhaps not. In some instances, it is clear from teacher candidates' reflections that the field experience is developing/reinforcing an incorrect understanding of critical education concepts. For example, in our small-scale study, a number of teacher candidates conflated departmentalization by ability level as differentiated instruction:

I learned how to differentiate even better because the classes were grouped by ability. (Teacher Candidate F27)
Differentiated instruction is easier for students because in a departmentalized classroom, students can be broken up into groups based on their ability and needs. (Teacher Candidate F35)

As educators, we know that departmentalization by ability group is simply another form of tracking, which is associated with a host of negative outcomes for learners (Hallam, Iresona, & Davies, 2004). And differentiated instruction is an instructional approach meant to meet the needs of diverse learners through flexible grouping based on readiness, interests, and learning style (Tomlinson, 2005). Yet conflating the two could equate to teacher candidates' supporting ability grouped departmentalized structures in their careers because they have incorrectly defined this as differentiated instruction. It is unlikely that we ask in class discussions, "What is the organizational structure of your field placement?" but as the previous example highlights, it matters in terms of how they are making course to field connections.

Conclusion

Our study investigated teacher candidates' perceptions of elementary grade level organizational structures during required experiences in their teacher preparation programs--an unexplored area of the research literature. Our findings indicate teacher candidates encounter any number of configurations during their teacher preparation coursework and that they form strong opinions about how elementary classroom organizational structures impact K-6 students and teachers based on these experiences, as well as their own professional growth. While the findings here are from a small number of teacher candidates at two universities, the findings highlight the important role teacher educators play in assisting teacher candidates as they make meaning of field experiences. Without careful attention to how teacher candidates are navigating the various organizational structures they encounter in their field experiences, it is possible that these misconceptions evolve into a belief or worse, an advocacy for practices that may not be in the best interests of children. Because teacher candidates' beliefs are largely shaped, changed or affirmed by their field work, it is imperative that teacher educators carefully attend to how teacher candidates navigate placements in various elementary grade level organizational structures (Grossman et al., 2000; Singh & Richards, 2006).

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Appendix A

1. List your clinical experiences and state whether they were in a self-contained or departmentalized classroom.
2. What are teacher benefits in teaching in a self-contained setting?
3. What are student benefits in learning in a self-contained setting?
4. What are teacher benefits in teaching in a departmentalized setting?
5. What are student benefits in learning in a departmentalized setting?
6. What are the teacher drawbacks in teaching in a self-contained setting?
7. What are the student drawbacks in learning in a self-contained setting?
8. What are the teacher drawbacks in teaching in a departmentalized setting?
9. What are the student drawbacks in learning in a departmentalized setting?
10. What are the teacher challenges in teaching in a self-contained setting?
11. What are the student challenges in learning in a self-contained setting?
12. What are the teacher challenges in teaching in a departmentalized setting?
13. What are the student challenges in learning in a departmentalized setting?
14. How has teaching in a self-contained setting impacted you as a teacher candidate?
15. How has teaching in a departmentalized setting impacted you as a teacher candidate?
16. If offered a full time teaching position in a self-contained setting, would you accept it?
17. If offered a full time teaching position in a departmentalized setting, would you accept it?