In many school systems the basic organizational unit is known as the self-contained classroom. In the true self-contained classroom, the children are taught all subjects by one teacher. In actual practice, however, certain subjects—usually art, music, and physical education—are often taught by special teachers, and the regular classroom teacher has the children for all other school activities. This arrangement, sometimes referred to as the modified self-contained classroom or the co-ordinated classroom, is as far as many elementary-school officials are willing to depart from the pure self-contained classroom.

The antithesis of the self-contained classroom is departmentalization, a program “in which children move from one classroom to another for instruction in the several subject fields by different teachers” (1: 146).

There are, of course, degrees of departmentalization. One, two, or more academic subjects may be taught by special teachers. Some educators consider the modified self-contained classroom a degree of departmentalization, and undoubtedly it is. Actually, the self-contained classroom and departmentalization may be thought of as being at the opposite ends of a continuum; any deviation from the pure self-contained classroom represents a point on the continuum in the direction of departmentalization.

Discussions between the proponents of the self-contained classroom and the proponents of departmentalization in the elementary school have been going on for at least half a century, according to Goodlad (2: 223). From 1910 to 1929 there was a growing interest in departmentalization, and during these years it was on the increase; from 1930 to 1939 there was constant debate between those who favored departmentalization and those who favored the self-contained classroom, with each side claiming the same advantages; between 1940 and 1949 more schools were reported as giving up departmentalization than adopting it, although in more and more schools art, music, and physical education were being taught by special teachers; finally, in the decade from 1950 to 1959, departmentalization...
zation again seemed to be increasing, mostly in the intermediate grades and especially in school systems where the 8-4 pattern was in effect. Today there is some departmentalization in the primary grades, but not a great deal.

After sifting recent research, Shane and Polychrones concluded that departmentalization is widespread, that such organization per se is neither demonstrably helpful nor definitely harmful to children, and that while there may be a trend to the unit [self-contained] classroom, it is not a massive trend [3: 427].

However, it should be noted that these authors included in the term departmentalization, the teaching of art, music, and physical education by special teachers. If they had counted schools that had this arrangement as non-departmentalized schools, as is often done, the number of departmentalized schools reported by these researchers would have been smaller.

It is in the area of definition that confusion arises. While Shane and Polychrones use the word departmental to describe the Tulsa type of elementary-school organization, Broadhead, for example, uses the word semi-departmental. Broadhead wrote:

The child receives instruction from the homeroom teacher for half the school day in the basic subjects of reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, language arts, and social studies. During the remainder of the school day, the child receives instruction in other classrooms from various other teachers who have had specialized training in science, art, music, speech, physical education, or library science [4: 385].

This semi-departmentalization, it should be noted, is not departmentalization at all in academic areas other than science. It is difficult to see how the Tulsa findings can be used to support academic departmentalization or teacher specialization in the teaching of the academic subjects, as Anderson seems to attempt to do (5).

While research that deals directly with departmentalization is inconclusive, authorities in other areas suggest implications that favor the self-contained classroom. Under departmentalization, when each subject is taught by a different teacher, integration of children's educational experiences into a meaningful whole becomes difficult, if not almost impossible. What Blough says about science may well be applied to all subject-matter areas:

A basic premise underlying the science program is that it should be in harmony with the total program of education. This implies that elementary science is an integral part of the fabric which includes social studies, language arts, music, mathematics, art, and health education. Science brings new strength to the elementary schools. Its methods, its approach to problem-solving, and its informational content enrich the whole program and give it new scope and depth [6: 122–23].

If this premise applies to science, it also applies to every subject area and every skills area. Each has its important contribution to make to the elementary-school program. Reinforcement of learning often occurs when a concept is applied to areas other than that involved in the teaching of the moment. It is difficult to see how this kind of reinforcement, this mutual enrichment, this integrative process, can take place as effectively outside the self-contained classroom as in.

While not mentioning either de-
partmentalization or the self-contained classroom by name, Tyler says:

From the standpoint of achieving desirable organization, any structural arrangement that provides for larger blocks of time under which planning may go on has an advantage over a structural organization which cuts up the time into many specific units, each of which has to be planned with some kind of transition and consideration of the work of other units [7: 123–24].

How will teachers in the departmentalized school find time to get together to provide these transitions and considerations?

In support of Tyler’s position on the difficulty of achieving integration in a departmentalized situation, Elsbree and McNally state:

If one holds an organismic point of view with respect to learning, and believes that education should be life-problems centered rather than subject-centered, a considerable number of objections will be raised against departmentalization. It will be pointed out, for example, that its approach to learning is fragmentary and disintegrative, discouraging of unity and wholeness in the learning program. Even with sincere attempts at “integration” the separate subjects will tend to be discrete and relatively unrelated in the minds of pupils [8].

Another weakness of departmentalization, as opposed to the self-contained classroom, is the disruption of continuity when each activity is cut off arbitrarily at the sound of a bell.

The organization of the elementary school and its curriculum must be a means to an end, not an end in itself. It must take into consideration the feelings not only of the educators but of all those who are concerned with any aspect of the development of children.

With regard to what is known about how children grow, develop, and learn, Hamalainen finds the self-contained classroom superior to departmentalization:

Departmentalization disregards the fact that the individual is an organic being who cannot be farmed out piece-meal to many persons. He must be seen and reacted to as a whole being if the most effective learning is to occur.

In the self-contained classroom the teacher is thought of as the guide and counselor, the coordinator with the children of the experiences most meaningful to them. Because of the length of time he spends with the children he has the opportunity to know individual children in the class and thus better understand their needs [9: 272–74].

In view of the lack of any conclusive research evidence in favor of departmentalization, and in view of the knowledge we have of children’s growth, learning, and needs, it is difficult to account for the trend toward departmentalization noted by Shane and Polychrones.

There are a number of excuses, unfortunately often offered as reasons, for entering into departmentalization. First, there is the willingness to experiment and, second, the submission to the hysterical pressure to do something. Experimentation may be a defensive hedge behind which to hide; yet it would seem unnecessary to experiment further with a device that was tried so widely a few decades ago that platooning (a form of departmentalization) was found in 1,068 schools in forty-one states (10: 379). Submission to the do-something! hysteria is indefensible; educators have no moral
right to take action for this reason alone.

A third excuse often offered for departmentalizing the elementary school is that junior high schools are departmentalized and elementary schools had better follow suit to "get the children ready" for junior high schools. One of us recently heard a school official defend departmentalization on the ground that the junior high schools will not modify their organization to the extent of undepartmentalizing the seventh and eighth grades. Therefore, he said, the elementary schools should departmentalize in the upper grades to "prepare" the children, even though departmentalization might not be the best arrangement for them. This line of reasoning, followed to its logical and ridiculous conclusion, would end only with the departmentalization of the kindergarten.

A fourth, and common, excuse given for departmentalization is that it allows each subject to be taught by specialists. This practice might be praise-worthy if the teachers were truly specialists in the best sense of the word; but there would seem to be a world of difference between one who merely specializes in teaching a given subject and one who has had both pre-service and in-service preparation in the area of specialization. We suspect that many elementary-school "specialists" are specialists by virtue of their teaching assignments only, not by virtue of their preparation. A true specialist is not made simply by changing a teacher's assignment.

Perhaps the best picture of what the self-contained classroom can mean to elementary-school children is that drawn by Koopman and Snyder. The self-contained classroom, these writers say, is a workshop in which the principles of child development come into play. It is a home away from home—a living room for learning. It is a base of operations out of which a group of children (ideally no more than 20) work all day, every day, for a year or more with one teacher.

... the responsibility for organizing and coordinating the educational experiences of a group of children is [the teacher's] alone [11: 18].

This "living room" promotes an atmosphere in which all phases of the child's growth—intellectual, emotional, and physical—are provided for.

The authors describe a warm and colorful physical setting, appropriate furniture, all kinds of books, records, films, and materials, and small groups of children engaged in meaningful and worthwhile learning experiences. To cite one example:

Four boys are in the far corner, where science materials are clustered behind a screen. They are involved with Tim, a turtle that Jimmy found on his way to school.

Since no one, including the teacher, knows how to care for him or what to expect of him, two of the boys are reading up on turtles in the encyclopedia. One of the boys is writing down important things to remember about turtles. Jimmy is on his hands and knees watching with wonder and adoration as Tim explores his new surroundings... [11: 19].

After presenting additional examples of children busy in a variety of learning activities, the authors consider and dispose of a number of objections that are sometimes raised against
the self-contained classroom. Good inservice programs may help overcome objections that not all elementary-school teachers are broadly educated and that some children might get a poor teacher. The children will not be deprived of instruction in the special fields if special consultants are made available to work with—not in place of—the teachers. Fundamentals may be developed in various organizational plans, always provided that the teaching is good. As for the objection that children in self-contained classrooms do not meet enough people—children and adults—Koopman and Snyder state: "The principle of emotional security implies that learners don't grow well in a swirling crowd of people. They need the homeroom base" (11: 20).

It would seem that such a base, rather than departmentalization, would make possible the establishment of group membership as described by Gibb:

The process of establishing membership in a classroom group is the process of both finding a niche in a group and also finding enough freedom to move in and out of the niche to build rich relationships with other members of the classroom group. The mature instructional group can provide rich internal resources that maximize learning outcomes [12: 135].

In the end, however, we suspect that the basic issue may not be the choice between departmentalization and the self-contained classroom. Educators must be concerned with organization and with organizational patterns; but they must likewise be constantly on guard lest concern for organization obscure the element for which all else exists: the child. Dean issues a clear warning to this effect:

The structural plan of operation of a school is not an end in itself; its value lies in the effectiveness it contributes to the improvement of the quality of classroom education. Since the teaching-learning relationship is the heart of any school program, campaigns to improve education should be focused on the classroom, not on the administrative design [13: 9].

If the focus should be placed on the classroom, then it is safe to say that sharpening the focus should result in concentrating on the most important element of the classroom, the child. Dean implies this:

There is ... danger of oversimplifying the issue, of abandoning the psychological studies being made of child growth and development or of not using the knowledge such studies have made available, and of casting aside the basic purposes and programs of elementary education [13: 8].

Perhaps the need for considering educational theory and practice, not alone but in connection with all possible sources of information about children, is best summarized by Lanning:

From guidance, from child development, from group dynamics, and from anthropology, new findings are coming that offer fresh understanding of the nature of the child and the dynamics of development. We can find in these rich resources support for the view that if we have the best interests of the child at heart we will be concerned about the whole child [14: 286].

We agree with Lanning that the emphasis should be placed on the child. There may be danger in accepting a procedure simply because it works. Under the pressing demands that
schools "Do something!" educators are discovering new facts, among them that some children apparently can learn subjects like algebra and geometry, generally reserved for the high-school years. But such discoveries are not really answers to anything; they simply pose the basic question: Granted that children can learn this and that, should they? Does this or that new proposal square with what is known— and is being discovered—about children's needs and characteristics? Is it in keeping with sound principles of guidance, psychology, and the learning process? Is its placement in keeping with the logical sequence of the development of the subject?

So with departmentalization, semi-departmentalization, and the self-contained classroom: the basic question is the same. Which of these administrative devices is true to all that we know about children? It is by this criterion that any educational program—including departmentalization—must be judged. Practicability alone is not enough.

REFERENCES


