"Teaching on the Block:
A Model for Pre-service Teachers"

by

Marla M. Mondie

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"There are approximately 18,000 high schools in the United States, and over half of them utilize some form of block scheduling. The university personnel responsible for coordinating field and student teaching experiences for those secondary education preparation programs need to make a conscious effort to place [pre-service teachers] in a school that employs a block schedule…"

Zepeda and Mayers, 2001

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ABSTRACT

Sufficient research shows that most pre-service teachers do not receive adequate training on teaching or preparing lessons on block schedule. This paper provides a framework for those pre-service teachers that may not be familiar with the tenets of block schedule. This paper is organized in the following manner as it relates to block schedule: the historical inception, the pros and cons, personal reflections from novice and veteran teachers (n = 44) collected from a quasi-study carried out by the researcher, and recommendations.

This paper concludes with an original template designed by the researcher. This daily lesson plan template infuses the ideals of Madeline Hunter that enable teachers to showcase the five key teaching skills needed for block scheduling purported by Algozzine, Eaddy, and Queen, (1996). It is this researcher's opinion that the accompanying lesson plan template will assist pre-service and novice teachers in developing engaging and carefully crafted lessons that will provoke student achievement and optimize teacher efficacy.

The Historical Inception of Block Schedule

Before the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* and the National Commission on Time and Learning's publication, *Prisoners of Time,* structural changes were taking place regarding the total amount of time students were spending in each of their classes. Block schedule is rooted in J. Lloyd Trump's 1959 Flexible Modular Scheduling Design. This plan originally reorganized the school day into extended blocks of time, each approximately 70 to 90 minutes long (Zepeda and Mayers, 2001) and proposed eliminating traditional high school schedules and instituting classes of varying lengths. The Trump Plan called for classes to meet for a 40 minute lecture, a 100-minute lab, and a 20-minute help session per week, whereas other classes could be short periods of 20 or 30 minutes (Queen, 2000).

John Goodlad, urged educators that the traditional structure of schools did not allow time for teachers to individualize instruction, extend laboratory work, or offer remediation and enrichment activities for needy students. Goodlad further detailed how students were wasting a tremendous amount of time and energy moving from six to eight times a day. He also argued that schools needed to redesign their [master] schedules into larger blocks of time to ensure students receive more instructional time from each of their teachers. Nine years later, Donahoe reported in his 1993 article, "Finding the Way: Structure, Time and Culture in School Improvement", that restructuring schools should include formal rearranging of the time that would promote and improve student learning. Experiments in changing the amount of time students spend in each class continued in 1990 where Joseph Carroll suggested changing class schedules that

would allow a student to concentrate on at the most two subjects. Carroll's Copernican Plan urged high school teachers to concentrate more on individual students, improve their instruction, and increase academic performance (Queen, 2000).

At this junction, it is imperative to define explicitly the various types of block schedule. Particularly, block schedule organizes a 90-minute class around one semester versus a 50-minute class around two semesters. The literature identifies various forms of block schedule which includes the original block format which consists of four 90-minute periods per semester—this is known as the four-by-four (4 x 4); the two-day rotating format where students complete eight classes during the year—known as A/B or eight block; or two or three 90-minute blocks and variable or split 45-minute classes—known as modified block. It is important to state for the purpose of this paper, no particular format of block scheduling is favored or depicted. The term "block" or "block scheduling" signifies any length of class time that has been lengthen beyond the traditional 45 or 50 minute class period.

Block scheduling is highly touted in efforts to reform and restructure U.S. secondary school. And, while block schedule has emerged as a trend in American secondary schools, the potential for block scheduling to increase student achievement and self-efficacy continues to heighten discussion regarding its effectiveness. The next section outlines some of the pros and cons of block schedule.

The Pros and Cons of Block Schedule

The underlying premise for block scheduling is that when students are given fewer classes each day, for longer periods of time, increased student achievement will follow. However, the litany of research on block schedule has been in constant battle and continues to contrast each other. As with many educational reform efforts, many positive and negative outcomes have surfaced regarding the use of block. These pros and cons are identified for teachers, students, administrators, and overall schools.

Robert Algozzine, Mike Eaddy and J. Allen Queen reported that teacher are better able to engage students using an in-depth study process and that 70% of classroom time is being used to engage student in interactive instruction. Hackmann and Water report in "Breaking Away from Tradition" that students were able to take a broader array of courses, schools report fewer disciplinary referrals, improved class attendance, increased enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, advanced mastery of subject content, and improved grades.

Due to the increased amount of time, several researchers indicate an increase is the use of individualized and differentiated instructional practices among classroom teachers (Skrobarcek, et. al, 1997; Algozzine, et.al, 1997, Isenhour and Queen, 1998). More so, the lengthen classes increased the amount of high-quality instructional time because teachers spend less time on procedures, routines, and management reports Seifert and Beck, 1994.

Canady and Rettig discovered that teachers in a 4x4 block used less time for lesson reviews and closures than teachers in tradition schedules. They argued

that block classes provided time for extended lessons for greater continuity and extensive laboratory investigation or classroom experiments. They further outline how specific subject area teachers can utilize the extra time allotted in block to enhance student learning. Gunter et.al. (1990) discuss how teachers see the added time as advantageous because it enables them to design differentiated lessons that maintain greater student interest—a beacon of hope for teachers that fear plan for the longer class periods. Additionally, research suggests that teachers save time by keeping records and grades for half the number of students; in addition teacher have fewer number of preps versus the number of preps they would have on the traditional model.

In their 1998 book *4X4 Block Schedule*, Isenhour and Queen detail a multitude of advantages of block schedule which include the following: a) lengthened classes reduce the amount of instructional time spent on classroom administration; b) lessons can be extended and maintained with greater continuity; c) a less fragmented schedule allows students to focus on fewer courses at one time; d) teachers benefit from additional planning time; e) students who need remedial assistance or fail a course during the first semester have the opportunity to repeat the course during the second semester; and finally, f) advanced student have the opportunity for enrichment.

Students and teachers are not the only entities that experience the positive product. Administrators and schools that have moved to some form of block schedule from traditional 50 minute periods have also experienced positive outcomes also. These positive outcomes include, fewer disciplinary referrals,

(Hackmann and Waters, 1998), discipline improves in direct response to reduced number of class changes and schools that offer block scheduling are able to offer a variety of elective courses s (Isenhour and Queen, 1998), increased school safety (Queen, 2000), and improved school climate (Hottenstein, 1998).

While many positive outcomes have been reported by teachers, students, and schools that have implemented block schedule, many concerns or negative outcomes have surfaced regarding its use. Block schedule has been disparaged for lower content retention from one level of a subject to the next and for the extensive time required for independent study outside of class. (Queen, 2000). Hackmann and Waters (1998) reported that the first year on block scheduling was the most challenging for teachers and principals. In their paper "Block Scheduling Can Enhance School Climate" Shortt and Thayer purport that foreign language teachers stress the importance of sequencing courses that minimize the time lapse between sequenced subjects. These data magnifies information provided by Isenhour and Queen's 1998 book where they urge educational administrators to create schedules that allow student to take sequenced courses in one subject area during a single school year.

With the advent of block, students who are absent from class have fewer classes to make up or complete their missing work. This has caused many schools to implement innovate homework policies and guidelines, according to J. Allen Queen.

The majority of the experts agree that the major downfall of block schedule is the teacher's refusal to vary their instructional strategies and activities.

Many of them report that instructional time is lost in block scheduling because of this oversight or fear. An overuse of lectures or teacher-centered instruction is observed by many researchers (Skrobarcek, et. al, 1997; Queen, 2000) and has been reported by students across the country. Zepeda and Mayers detail in their 2001 study, properly titled, *New Kids on the Block Schedule: Beginning Teachers Face Challenges,* that many new teachers rely on "lectures" and "even more lectures" because they feel comfortable with this instructional method. The lecture method remains the most widely used instructional strategy in high schools today.

In my opinion there are three sources of this widely used and ineffective teaching technique. They include one, increased pressure to improve test scores because of No Child Left Behind mandates; two, fear of losing classroom control, and three, inadequate training and professional development on how to design lessons (for veteran and novice teachers). The latter complaint, developing lessons, will be the focus of the recommendation section of this paper.

These three arguments alone summarize the litany of comments collected from teachers during a quasi-study I conducted five years when the school I teach at first implemented block schedule. This inquiry into block scheduling has continued over the years as I facilitate workshops at the local level on the same subject. Teachers and workshops participants (n = 44) were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire about their feelings regarding teaching on block schedule. The next section includes a sample of the prompt that teachers responded to. What follows thereafter is a matrix which includes some of the

candid responses offered by novice and veteran teachers alike; and how many times each response (or a similar response) was offered.

Personal Reflections from Novice and Veteran Teachers

In the space below, write your candid feelings and opinions about teaching on block schedule. Identify whether you are a new teacher (0-1 year experience) or a veteran teacher (2 or more years of experience).

Teacher Responses Regarding the Above Prompt

Response	Novice or Veteran
" *It is so hard for me to keep their attention for 90 minutes"*	Veteran (5)
"90 minutes is too long to be in the same class with the same students"	Novice (3) Veteran (2)
"*Students have the hardest time remembering what was taught yesterday…how do they [educational leaders] expect them to remember what they learned on Thursday?*	Veteran (1)
"*Block schedule forces students to be more independent in their study skills…some students are just not ready for that…not even my seniors"*	Veteran (2)
"*I have never a lesson plan for a 90-minute block"*	Novice (3) Veteran (2)
"I did not learn how to teach on teach on the block schedule in college"	Novice (7) Veteran (3)
"*When students are absent , I always have to spend most the next class reviewing what I taught on the last class…this is a never ending cycle…I am always behind the pacing guide"*	Veteran (2)
"I have never been trained on how to teach on the block"	Novice (8) Veteran (5)
"*I taught on the block at my old school and I loved it"*	Veteran (1)

As can be gathered from the responses above, many teachers reported a lack of training and express some a sense of anxiety with the increased amount of time offered by block scheduling. In Zepeda and Mayer's recent study *New Kids on the Block Schedule (*2001) that chronicled the lives of new classroom teachers, many teachers reported that their "student teaching experiences did not parallel teaching on the block. And this lack of preparation only adds to the isolation, fear and helplessness that many first year teachers experience.

In the next section lies effective instructional strategies (Queen, 2000) , five teaching skills that Algozzine, Eaddy, Queen (1998) deem all teachers should possess in order to be successful when teaching on a block schedule, and a lesson plan template that can be used every day by teachers to ensure their lessons are provoking, engaging, and productive (recommendations).

Recommendations

Any teacher that wants to experience a higher level of student success and self-efficacy should posses a cadre of professional skills. These professional skills are offered by Robert Algozzine, Martin Eaddy, and J. Allen Queen (1998) as the most important teaching skills necessary for teaching on a block schedule. They include:

- the ability to develop a pacing guide for the course in nine-week periods, which includes weekly and daily planning;
- the ability to use several instructional strategies effectively;
- the skill to design and maintain an environment that allows for great flexibility and creativity;

- the desire and skill to be effective classroom managers; and
- the freedom to share the ownership of teaching and learning with the students.

With the above characteristics, a pre-service or novice teacher would be more than ready to proceed to the next step, planning effective lessons.

While the research is rich with instructional strategies for teaching on the block, this paper outlines the major instructional strategies proposed by leading experts in the field, they include: grouping, varied cooperative learning techniques (such as Jigsaw or project group), case methods, Socratic seminar, synetics, concept attainment, inquiry (based-learning) method, simulations (Queen, 2000), learning centers or stations, literacy activities, and problem-based learning activities.

The density of the information provided by the research have led the researcher to develop an original template that can be used by pre-service teachers as they vie to create lessons that are engaging, interactive and worthy of a 90-minute block. This template infuses Madeline Hunter's ideals and serves as an innovative starting point for any teacher that wants to develop memorable lessons that evoke retention, relevance, and continuity.

Teacher Name _____ Date of Lesson_____

Course Title _____ Overall Objective _____

_____

_____

Today's Objective (s) _____

_____

Instructional Materials Needed for the teacher _____

Instructional Materials Needed for the Student_____

WHY?	WHAT?	WHEN?
Why am I doing this? (How will this benefit my students? How will it benefit me as the teacher?)	**TASK**	**TIME NEEDED**
	DO NOW:	
	ANTICIPATORY SET:	
	TEACHER MODELING:	
	INDEPENDENT PRACTICE with TEACHER MODELING (student-to-student interaction or independent work and student movement)	
	CHECKING FOR COMPREHENSION:	
	CLOSURE:	
	HOMEWORK:	

Conclusion

While the literature details that many teachers experience difficulty with teaching on a block schedule, the majority of the research identifies special attention must be paid to pre-service and new teachers (Zepeda and Mayers, 2001). These teachers experience a higher level of difficulty with maintaining an environment in the classroom conducive to learning, developing transitional activities, and a limited arsenal of instructional strategies. For those schools that are on the block schedule, new teachers, in particular, need systematic support from a variety of sources including principals, department chairs, and mentors.

The purpose of block schedule at the secondary level was to increase the amount of time a student had in each of his classes in an effort to improve student learning. Over the years, block scheduling has gained its fair share of proponents and advocates. While the literature provides, often polarized arguments, block schedule continues to grow in popularity among America's secondary schools.

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Marla Mondie, Ed.S. is a doctoral candidate at a historically black university in the Southern region of the United States. She is currently pursing a Ph.D. in Educational Administration with a minor in Mathematics Education. She is also a National Board Certified (2005) secondary Mathematics teacher and teaches at an urban, inner-city high school.