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The Block Schedule: Personal Perceptions and Feelings of Success

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Abstract

Research on the block schedule versus the traditional schedule in high school classrooms suggests that there are benefits and negatives to both schedules, without a majority of conclusive evidence to readily support one schedule over the other. Most research focuses on qualitative data to demonstrate the success of the schedule, with less focus on qualitative data in the form of perceptions, opinions, and feedback from students and teachers learning in these schedules. This project examines the personal views, and resulting perceptions of educational success, of the block schedule through survey responses from students and teaching staff at two Wisconsin schools located near Madison, WI. The project was completed between summer of 2010 and spring of 2011. It measured perceptions of the block schedule, feelings of student success, and correlations between these two factors through the use of a survey. Results showed that a majority of participants felt positively about the block schedule, as well as their levels of academic success. Suggestions for further research and use of the study data are discussed as well.

Chapter One

Introduction

The class schedule that a high school utilizes to assign daily instructional time and course length is a very visible characteristic of the educational structure at a school. Two common schedule structures are the traditional schedule and the block schedule. This paper focuses on the perceptions that students and teachers have of the block schedule, in comparison to the traditional schedule, and the corresponding level of success that both students and teachers feel that they experience on the block schedule, in contrast to the traditional schedule. This project, entitled, "The Block Schedule: Personal Perceptions and Feelings of Success," is a timely issue and one that I see as important in education today, as many schools are adopting the block schedule format. In Wisconsin, and across the country, there are schools that are moving to, as well as away from, the block schedule. Having completed my student teaching experience, as well as my own high school years as a student, on the traditional schedule, I am now teaching on the block schedule. I see benefits and disadvantages for each schedule, and often find myself questioning which schedule I would select were the choice up to me. Scheduling format changes in neighboring districts and the frequent resurfacing of this issue in my own district's faculty discussions demonstrate that this is an issue that is still up for debate, and does not yet have a clear answer. With the increased emphasis that is being placed upon students' standardized test scores through programs like President Bush's No Child Left Behind and President Obama's Race to the Top, discussion and research into which type of schedule is most beneficial to student success is worth pursuing. "What is best for the students?" is a question asked by, and of, staff in many schools on a daily basis, and the class schedule structure is a topic that should be subjected

to this question. However, it is important that this question be asked of the students as well as the staff, as the perceptions and attitudes that both groups hold toward an educational method are likely to have an impact upon the efficacy of that method.

Having pursued this topic in previous courses in my graduate program, I have found that the research is still inconclusive as to which schedule better serves the educational needs of students. As with any topic, there are studies and research that favor arguments on both sides, indicating that more information is still needed. Carroll (1994) focused on the letter grades that students earned in their classes, and finds support for the block schedule looking at this end result for students in a course. Maltese, Dexter, Tai, and Sadler (2007) studied how traditional and block schedules prepared students for college science classes. Looking at numerical data in the form of student scores, and collecting qualitative data and opinions through student surveys, this study found that there were points to be made for both schedules, but that neither was proven to be noticeably more successful than the other in terms of the students' level of preparation. Lawrence and McPherson (2000) approached the topic by studying the end-of-year tests in core subjects in two North Carolina high schools and found evidence that the traditional schedule allowed students to be more successful. They scored higher in these core subjects, which are used as benchmarks and common focal areas on standardized tests. Also looking at standardized testing, the College Board Office of Research and Development did a study in 1998 that compared Advanced Placement test scores of students on both the block and the traditional schedule, and found that students on the traditional schedule scored better. It was noted that there were also differences in performance between students that studied the coursework on the block schedule in the Spring versus the Fall semester, as they were more removed from the course at the time of the test, or had not yet completed the course when the test was

administered. However, in both cases, the data favored those students on the traditional schedule. These studies indicate that research shows that benefits exist for both types of schedules and more data needs to be collected and analyzed in order to find a conclusive answer.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to gather data from two different school districts operating on the block schedule at the high school level to obtain personal perceptions and opinions of the block schedule from both students and staff. These perceptions and opinions focused on whether or not the block schedule is seen as a positive class structure by students and staff, as well as the perceived advantages, disadvantages, and feelings of success that are experienced on this schedule. Using a survey that was administered to both 10^{th} grade students and staff at the participating schools, this data was collected and analyzed to make comparisons between student and staff perceptions, as well as noting any correlation between positive views and feelings of success on the block schedule.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

- Did students and teachers learning and teaching on the block schedule feel that the block schedule was more beneficial than the traditional schedule?
- What were the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the block schedule that students and teachers experienced?
- Did a positive perception of the block schedule correlate with the feelings of success, or lack thereof, that teachers and students experienced?

As a means of answering these questions, the goal of this study was to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data. Data, in the form of responses obtained through survey questionnaires, created a picture of the perceptions of the block schedule that students and teachers have. It was expected that the data would lean in favor of the block schedule, and would show trends or specific areas in which teachers and/or students feel that the block schedule is helping them to be successful, as well as reasons, methods, or activities that the survey participants feel are particularly beneficial or effective with regard to the block schedule.

Scope of Study

This project took place between the summer of 2010 and the spring of 2011. Over the summer, basic research, the creation of goals and research questions, and a review of relevant literature were the emphasis. This basic framework led to creating a survey, contacting schools to receive permission to administer the survey, distributing the survey, collecting data, and beginning data analysis throughout the fall semester. Once surveys had been completed and the data received, data analysis and synthesis were completed in spring of 2011.

Including both students and staff in this study was a conscious decision, as no matter how positive a teacher feels about a method, if their students do not buy into it, then it will not be as effective as it could have been. Collecting and comparing data between the two groups adds an extra dimension to the study, and assists in making a stronger argument for, or against, the block schedule. Teachers were selected as they are the individuals that are working with the block schedule to create instruction that must cover a certain scope and sequence, which can be greatly impacted by the class schedule structure. Students in the 10^{th} grade were selected as this survey was completed in Wisconsin, and the state mandated standardized test scores that rank students and schools are taken from the 10^{th} grade state WKCE tests. In addition to the 10^{th} grade being a

state recognized benchmark, the 10th grade also allows the students to have experienced one full year on the block schedule, giving them time to have formed an opinion of their educational experience in this class structure.

Surveys were offered to students and staff at the participating schools in both paper and electronic form, using the online survey tool, Survey Monkey. Participants were able to choose either option for completing the survey. Responses submitted in paper form were then entered in to Survey Monkey, to be collected in a central place and analyzed. Requests were made that all teaching staff and students at both schools complete these survey questionnaires, but participation was optional, so the number of students reflects these choices, and the availability of time to complete the task. In addition, the survey was administered after the first term was completed at each school. This allowed students and teachers to receive a set of grades to assist them in determining their perception of their level of success, as well as to allow new and transfer students a reasonable amount of time in which to make an informed decision about their experience with the block schedule.

In the results section of this paper, I will focus on whether or not participants view the block schedule as a positive class structure, what the common advantages and disadvantages were perceived to be, and whether these perceptions correlate with the feelings of success that were reported by participants. These findings serve as possible starting points for discussions on which schedule may be better in the high school setting, particularly in these two schools, and will be concrete information that each school can use to assess the effectiveness of their current class schedule structure.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Changes in approaches to teaching and learning are common in schools as we strive to improve the education that we are providing our students, as well as help them to achieve higher levels of success. In the past decade or so, block scheduling has become one of one of the most popular scheduling alternatives to the traditional schedule previously held by many districts. When following the block schedule, schools devote larger periods of time, often 90 minutes instead of 45 or 50, to each class period. As a result, students have fewer classes per day/term, and teachers and students should be able to focus more deeply on the material. While still relatively new in the world of education, block scheduling has been the cause for much debate over whether it increases student achievement or not. While the aim is to provide teachers and students with larger, uninterrupted periods of time with which to delve deeper into class content and practice, the question is, does the block schedule really help students to be more successful? The main findings of the research for this paper present information on both sides of this argument, and discuss the block schedule with relation to advantages and disadvantages, teacher preparation, perceptions, and student scores.

The Difference Between the Block Schedule and the Traditional Schedule

The focus of this paper is on the block schedule, as it differs from the traditional schedule. As such, it is important to define these two schedules, and to note that the largest difference between the two of them is class length, both in minutes and overall course duration. Block scheduling tends to have four class periods in a day in which "students attend fewer but long[er] classes each day. Each class lasts approximately 90 minutes rather than the traditional 45 or 50 minutes," while traditional scheduling is when students have six to eight periods a day

"where each class meets every day for 45 to 55 minutes. This has been the traditional schedule used in most American high schools for the last few decades" (Wallinger, 2000). Most often, students on a traditional schedule take the same courses all year long, and students on the block schedule complete a course in a semester's time. As the block schedule has taken hold in more schools across the country, studies have begun to focus on whether or not this schedule is beneficial to students. Research has used standardized test scores, GPA, surveys, and interviews as instruments for measurement in many of these studies.

Advantages and Disadvantages

As with any type of schedule change or school reform, the block schedule has both advantages and disadvantages that are presented in research and observed in studies. Many of the advantages have to do with a perceived flexibility that comes with the block schedule, such as the ability to focus on fewer academic classes at a time, less homework for students, a wider variety of instructional methods being used in the classroom, and the option to take more classes over the course of a high school education than on the traditional schedule. Similarly, many of the disadvantages stem from improper use of that flexibility, or lack of a foundation for the transition to the block schedule.

Both advantages and disadvantages are discussed in an article by Linda Chion Kenney (2003), as she looks at the decisions of some schools to abandon the block schedule in favor of returning to the traditional schedule. She quotes R. Brian Cobb, a professor at Colorado State University, as saying that the block schedule is "a grassroots movement. It seems to build its momentum based on the logic of it and a judgment call by community and educational leaders that it just looks like it ought to do better" (para. 7). This statement relates both to the reasons for schools keeping and leaving the block schedule in this article. Schools continuing with the

block schedule made that judgment call and felt that the schedule fit their needs better, and see advantages in the block schedule. One of these advantages is being able to take more classes, "Add it up, and a student can complete 32 credits over the course of a four-year high school career—four more than is possible with the seven-period day" (para. 8). These schools also feel that students are less stressed on the block schedule, "What the block does is create a climate in which the kids feel a lot less stress...not worrying about seven different classes, seven different sets of rules, and what could be a number of different tests a day" (A Cyberspace Opponent, para. 7). However, Kenney also points out disadvantages to the schedule, and reasons that schools and districts have moved away from the block. While extra time can be very beneficial in class, some administrators feel that "many teachers used the additional minutes as busy time" (Quick Abandonment, para. 3). Additionally, there can be staffing issues in smaller schools, "When you go to the block, you have to hire more teachers, that's what it boils down to" (A Money Decision, para. 3), and then there is the fact that at this point, there is no conclusive proof that the block schedule is the more successful of the two schedules, "I've never really seen any clear, quantitative evidence that proved block scheduling was superior to the traditional schedule...There was a general feeling it was better than the traditional schedule, but no one could prove it" (A Money Decision, para. 5).

In Boone, North Carolina, Watauga High School is using a schedule that combines the traditional and block schedule, and they have found similar advantages to the block classes that Kenny mentioned in her article. Watauga's schedule includes both traditional and block length courses, and the number of classes that a student has each term depends upon how many blocks they choose to take. It is possible for them to take between four, all block, and eight, all traditional, classes at any given time. This schedule has been implemented because the school

decided that their "philosophical position was that neither all block nor all traditional schedules best serve all students, teachers, and subjects...We review student performance, teacher opinion, and available research annually to determine how to best offer the particular course under review" (Childers & Ireland, 2005, p. 49). Through this schedule, the school is showing that their intent is the best interest of their students and teachers, and the learning process. As they continue to work with the block schedule, they note that some of its advantages are "less homework each night because of a lighter course load" (p. 48), that it can help "at-risk students because they usually have two major academic blocks each semester, allowing them to focus more on academics because they have fewer courses" (p. 48), and that "Block courses are taught in a more hands-on way" (p. 48). These three advantages are all student-centered, in that they provide students with more time to focus on a class, and different, more interactive ways to learn in the classroom.

In a study of students with different academic profiles, Marchant and Paulson (2001) focused on the student perceptions of their alternating, A/B block schedule. Marchant and Paulson gave questionnaires to 2191 high school students in an upper class Midwest suburban high school. They wanted to know what the students perceptions of the block were in relation to areas such as behavior, student-teacher relationships, success, and their support for the block schedule. Students were broken up into clusters relating to whether they were high or low-achieving in school, and whether they were happy, displeased, or apathetic about their success. The general finding was that those who were happy and already successful, responded more positively in all categories on the questionnaire, while nearly the opposite was true for the lower-achieving students, "In particular, students who were average or high achievers, were satisfied with their achievement, and believed school is important had the highest levels of school

functioning and the highest support for block scheduling" (Discussion, para. 1), while, in contrast, "Students who were the lowest achievers had the lowest support for block scheduling, worst teacher relations, and worst perceptions of student behavior" (Discussion, para. 1). This information shows that what works for one student, may not work for another, and that it may be possible for the high achieving students to be successful in any environment. While this may not be a specific disadvantage for the block schedule, the fact that it does not always reach the low achieving student population is something to be considered when looking at the effectiveness of the schedule, or when there is the possibility of making the change to the block schedule.

Teacher Preparation

Teacher preparation is an aspect of the block schedule that appears in many articles and studies about this topic. The general consensus seems to be that the level of preparation a teacher has going in to teaching on the bock schedule can be a major factor in the success of the schedule, and that training and support is needed to achieve that preparation. As such, a prepared teacher can be an advantage of the block schedule, but an unprepared teacher can be a disadvantage.

Adams and Salvaterra (1998) conducted a study of 67 teachers in four block-scheduled high schools in Pennsylvania to see how the teachers perceived the block schedule, and whether or not they changed their instructional practices to accommodate that schedule. Some teachers felt unprepared for the schedule change, and were worried about being able to cover all of the content that they were used to covering. For some, they still felt that "the textbook drives the curriculum; a sense of urgency to cover the book persists" (Method, para. 2). Those teachers that felt they had not received enough training for the block schedule had "difficulty shifting from traditional patterns of content or continue[d] to use activities which do not fill well under

the new schedule" (Results and Discussion, para. 8). While some teachers felt that the block schedule was a great fit and looked for ways to use it to its fullest, one main finding was that "Teachers in all four schools identified a need for staff development, particularly in pedagogical techniques such as cooperative and integrated learning" (The Role of Staff Development, para. 1). This appears to support the idea that even a change for the better may not end up as positive as it could, if those making the change are not prepared for it.

Proper training to make effective use of the block schedule is important for all teachers. Experienced teachers need training to successfully implement the block schedule if their school is making the change. Beginning teachers will also benefit from support and staff development on the block schedule if they have never experienced it in their field experiences, as the block schedule will be an addition to their list of first-year challenges. Zepeda and Mayers (2001) conducted a study of 31 first-year teachers in the Midwest, all teaching on the 4x4 block schedule. Each of these teachers worked at a racially diverse school of 1,200 to 2,000 students and had graduated within three months of beginning to teach. Zepeda and Mayers conducted interviews with these teachers at the beginning, middle, and end of the year to get their perceptions of the block schedule. Only the teachers were interviewed, so administrative and student feedback was not included. These new teachers found that they were "having difficulties in adjusting their instruction to the extended block periods....varying instruction throughout the period," and that they were "running out of materials and/or activities before the end of the period" (Analysis of the Data, para. 2). These teachers did not feel that they possessed the repertoire of activities needed to successfully carry out a class on the block schedule, and they also "expressed concern about student discipline and their inability to keep activities running smoothly" (Adjusting Instruction, para. 15). Later in the study, teachers also commented on a

feeling of being unprepared to assess students effectively on the block schedule. Concerns presented in this study support the idea that teachers being prepared and supported on the block schedule will make the schedule much more effective.

Finally, Jenkins, Queen, and Algozzine (2002) conducted a study of 2,000 teachers in North Carolina that taught on the block and traditional schedules, and compared their opinions on instructional practices, appropriateness of those methods, and their level of training in those methods. 1,036 teachers taught on the traditional schedule, and 1,131 taught in a school that had been on the 4x4 bock schedule for at least three years. Responses to the level of use of various instructional methods showed very similar answers, except that for peer coaching/peer tutoring, "teachers on the block schedule reported a higher use of this strategy than did their peers teaching with a traditional schedule" (p. 198). When answering questions about the appropriateness of instructional methods, again, answers were very similar. However, "teachers on the block schedule reported a higher appropriateness of" (p. 198) of using projects than teachers on the traditional schedule. In terms of training for using different instructional practices, there were no significant differences in the answers. The focus of these questions was on instructional practices and training for those practices. While this shows a comparison between teachers on the two different schedules, it does not include whether or not teachers on the block schedule had training on utilizing the block itself, instead of just the instructional methods. The higher use of projects and peer tutoring shows a slight lean toward student-centered activities, but does not account for whether that comes from training or personal preference.

Perceptions of the Block Schedule

Perception of how something is working can often contribute to whether or not it is successful. The same can be said of educational reforms, including the block schedule. The last section discussed how teachers being prepared for the block schedule can make it more successful. Yet, student perceptions must also be included to see the whole picture.

One study involving student perception of the block schedule was completed by Slate and Jones (2000). This study took 1205 high school students in a high school in southern Georgia, and asked them what they thought of the block schedule after a one week trial period. Though it was a brief introduction to the schedule, this study provided data for those considering moving the school to the block schedule from students who had actually had a taste of the schedule, instead of merely having it explained to them. While all students were asked their opinion, it is worth noting that participation was voluntary, and data could only be taken from those who chose to participate, making the sample less representative. Giving their responses through a questionnaire, one disadvantage from the students' point of view was that they had "difficulty paying attention through the longer class periods (Overall Results, para. 1). The study had a positive outcome, as "Many more students reported advantages than reported difficulties with every advantage being reported by at least 20% of students" (Overall Results, para. 2). However, an interesting piece of information was that while "Students reported that the bock schedule had important advantages, especially increased time for study, and relatively few disadvantages...they reported that block scheduling was only a slightly acceptable alternative to traditional scheduling, and expressed a slight preference for traditional scheduling" (Discussion, para. 1).

Noting this particular piece of data is important, as how students feel can change their approach to something as important as scheduling. If their overall opinion is not as positive as it could be, they will not be fully invested in the process.

One school in the Midwest, South Springfield High School, decided to create three different types of schedules within one school, and get feedback from teachers and students on all three at one time. The school had a population of 1800 students, mostly white. Traditional, block, and hybrid schedules were all run at the same time with the same courses, and surveys were used to collect data. Participation in the surveys was voluntary, so data is based upon those who chose to participate, and not necessarily a representative sample. In these surveys, one area of feedback was changes in teaching methods. Block and hybrid students and teachers felt that teaching methods changed more than students and teachers on the traditional schedule (Changes in Teaching Methods, para. 2). Increased anxiety was experienced by students and teachers on the hybrid schedule more than those on the block and traditional schedules (Anxiety Levels, para. 1). While those on the traditional schedule did not experience a change, it seemed that those on the hybrid schedule had a larger adaptation to make than those on the block schedule. The block schedule was noted to have "increased variety of instruction" and "improved student-teacher relationships" (Beneficial Changes, para. 1), largely associated with the increased time spent together in the same class each day. This study seems to stand out from many others, as it takes one school and collects data from multiple schedules at the same time. While many factors go into success levels and perceptions of any schedule, working within the walls of one building helps to cut down on some of those factors, and allows for feedback from students and teachers with a similar background and context.

Finally, Edward Corley (2003) looked at student perceptions and attitudes of the block schedule in a small school district in Ohio. Students were given surveys in English class to complete without providing any identifying data about themselves. Many students filled out that they agreed that the block schedule allows for benefits such as more opportunities to work with others, more individual help, and more time to do homework in class. (p. 5). While student opinion was split as to whether or not teachers had changed their instructional methods, with "handout assignments/ seat work" (p. 5) coming in as the most commonly used classroom instructional method, "of the 255 students surveyed, 214 expressed their liking of block scheduling" (p. 5). Again, this shows that while small portions of the overall schedule or classroom methodology may not be ideal in their eyes, the perception of the whole picture is what they will reflect most on.

Student Scores

With the current trend toward accountability in education through student standardized test scores, there are many articles, reports, and studies that report student test scores and GPAs as evidence for the success, or lack of success, of the block schedule.

In Georgia, Gruber and Onwuegbuzie (2001) conducted a study of student scores on the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT) at a school that made the transition from traditional to block scheduling. Scores were taken from before the schedule change in 1996-97 and compared to scores from after the schedule change in 1999-2000. While it was hoped that data would support the block schedule, the findings of the study show "no significant difference in GPA between the two groups" (Results, para. 1) and statistically significantly higher scores were noted for students on the traditional schedule in all four core academic areas.

In 2005, Nichols conducted a study comparing the academic success of students in five high schools in a large urban area in English and Language arts. Over the course of this study, Nichols noted that the block schedule did not have a noticeable impact on the achievement of students in this content area. The schools went into the block schedule transition with noticeable GPA differences between them, and in "the 1998-1999 school year (several years after all schools converted to block formats), an overall mean difference in GPAs among the five schools remained" (p. 301). Similarly, GPAs in the individual schools themselves did not differ greatly from year to year, and after the schedule transition. "Student GPAs for River High School and South High School were initially lower than for other high schools in the district and, after block conversions, the students generally maintained the lower achievement" (p. 302). Similarly, the same was true for higher scoring students, "Oak High School and North High School were initially two of the higher achieving high schools in the district, and their conversion to block scheduling appeared to have little or no impact on student achievement in English or language arts courses" (p. 303). The one area of change that Nichols does take note of is that the number of students taking English and language arts increased substantially after these schools changed to block schedule (p. 307).

Lawrence and McPherson (2000) conducted a study comparing the traditional and block scheduling scores of students in two high schools in the same district on the North Carolina End of Course tests in the core subjects. The two schools used were selected as they were some of the first to adopt the block scheduling model. Data was taken on the traditional schedule from 1992-1994 and on the block schedule from 1994-1996. While evidence was expected to be found to support the success of the block schedule, this was not the case. For each of the four core subject tests, "the mean score for the traditional schedule was consistently higher than the

mean scores for the block schedule" (Hypothesis 4, para. 2). In contrast to this, however, there was support for the block schedule when "using the students' final classroom grades for comparison" (Results, para. 4). This could be due to many factors, such as tests being more closely tied to curriculum, or the standardized tests covering more material than students are used to on classroom tests.

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test has also been measurement tool for a study on the success of the block schedule. In 2009, Eric D. Forman presented a study on the scores of 762 10th grade students from North Reading High School on the mathematics and English and language arts sections of the MCAS. Data was taken between 1998 and 2001, a time frame that included the school's transition to the block schedule. While the previous study in Georgia showed that test scores dropped after the change to block schedule, in Forman's study, the scores increased noticeably after the introduction of the block schedule. English and language arts scores went up 21.64% and mathematics scores went up 8.7% (p. 7). While there are always other factors involved with success rates, these numbers are quite high, and would seem to indicate that the block schedule is a definite portion of the reason for the increase in success.

Harmston, et al. (2003) conducted a study in Illinois and Iowa that looked at the relationship between schedule type and ACT scores. Schools using the eight-period day, 4x4 block schedule, and A/B alternating block schedule were looked at. For the block schools, data was available for scores both before and after the implementation of the block schedule. On the 4x4 schedule, there was little difference in scores from two years before the schedule change and four years after the change (p. 15). The same was true for the A/B block scheduled schools (p. 17). However, in the middle years, near block schedule implementation, there was a brief dip in

scores. In contrast, the schools on the traditional eight-period day saw a small, but steady, increase in scores along the entire study length (p. 18). Results of this study show that, while at different points in the years of data, there were changes in success rates and scores, the eight-period day was the schedule that continued to increase, and at the end of the study time frame, had the highest scores. Thus, this particular study would support the traditional schedule over the block schedule in terms of student success on standardized tests.

Finally, Griffin and Nicholson evaluated the success of the block schedule in two schools in Cleveland, Mississippi in 2002. These schools transitioned to the 4x4 block schedule in 1997 and data was taken from prior to the change through 2001. Over the course of this study, "statistical analysis did not reveal an overall pattern of grade change at either of the schools under study" (p. 9). However, with a qualitative survey given to identify personal perceptions of the schedule, the general consensus was that "the majority of stakeholders involved in the evaluation of block scheduling at both schools favor the practice and desire to see it continue" (p. 11).

Summary

When taking all of these studies, articles, and reports into consideration, it is clear that there are advantages and disadvantages for the block schedule. When you fine one study reporting a lower test score on the block schedule, it is often possible to find another study sharing contradictory information.. For every district that is moving toward the block schedule, there may be one considering moving away. This paper provides some insight into the block schedule, and angles through which it should be considered as a successful method of course scheduling in schools. However, more study is still needed, as there is still no clear set of evidence that points to the block scheduling being the best option. "As with most reforms and

practices in public education, success and failure depends on where you look and whom you ask." (Chion Kenney, 2003, Competing Voices, para. 1). This statement rings true, and relates directly to the idea that "Given the mixed results of previous studies, additional research simply comparing traditional and block schedules is unlikely to provide useful information. Instead, researchers need to turn their attention to the specific factors that either contribute or undermined the effectiveness of block scheduling." (Slate & Jones, 2000, para. 4). The perceptions and ideas of personal success on the block schedule seem to be factors that need to be explored more, and I am interested in doing that. Is it really true that "students enjoy the concentrated time spent studying fewer subjects" (Queen & Isenhour, p. 14)? Perhaps we should be asking the students to find the real answer to that question.

Chapter Three

Method

This project focused on the survey results from teaching staff and 10th grade students at two high schools that both operate on the block schedule. Results were obtained from a survey questionnaire that was offered in both paper and electronic form to participants. Responses were collected in one central location using the electronic form, a survey on the online survey tool Survey Monkey. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to determine participant demographics, opinions, perceptions, and feelings of success in relation to the block schedule that they are teaching and learning on. Quantitative data was collected and presented as numerical information, while qualitative data in the form of opinions, perceptions, and personal comments was collected and analyzed for recurring themes, opinions, and key words.

Role of the Researcher

This project is a result of reflections on my own experiences in the middle and high school classroom, as both a student and a teacher, and on both the block and the traditional schedules. My own experience as a student was entirely on the traditional schedule, with some exposure to classes of a longer time frame at the university level. My first set of observing and student teaching experiences took place in a school that used the traditional schedule in a middle school, with a class structure of seven periods per day. The following year I observed a semester on the block schedule at a local high school, with four periods per day, and student taught the second semester in a high school on the traditional schedule, again with seven periods per day. Following these learning and practice teaching experiences, my contract teaching has been at two high schools over the past eight years, both of which operate on the block schedule. In the last

seven years at my current school, I have sometimes had a single section of 8th grade students in my schedule. In addition, one year I had a year-long "skinny" section of one course, which amounted to having one traditional schedule course in my otherwise block schedule class structure. Throughout all of these experiences, I have noted pros and cons to both approaches, and observed students who seem as though they would benefit from a different format. As a graduate student completing a research project, this topic and survey are of direct personal interest to me, and reflect a topic that has often been discussed at my own school. More information is needed on this topic, and I felt that staff and student opinions were a piece of the puzzle that is often missing when researchers base their findings solely on course grades, GPAs, and standardized test scores.

Participants

The participants in this study were teaching staff and 10th grade students at two rural high schools located near Madison, WI in the fall of 2010. Both schools utilize the block schedule format of class structure, and both schools also include a daily resource/homeroom hour. While School 2 is slightly larger than School 1, the general demographics of students and staff are similar, and the schools are located about 20 minutes apart. In total, there were 106 surveys completed between the schools, by 67 students and 39 teachers. Of these participants, 42 (39.6%) were male and 64 (60.4%) were female. 97 participants (91.5%) categorized themselves as White/Caucasian, while 0-3 identified themselves in each other categories-Native American, Latino/Hispanic, African American, Asian, and Other. These numbers did not indicate that race or ethnicity plays a noticeable role in this particular survey, nor were there any large differences in preference and response between male and female participants. This leaves the important categories to be compared and looked at as staff and students, and School 1 and School 2.

While both of these schools operate on the block schedule, it should be noted that School 1 runs a four block, semester-long course version, while School 2 runs a four block, A/B day, year-long course version. The difference between a semester block and an A/B year-long block schedule is that a course on a semester block meets every day of the week, for one semester. At the semester, student schedules will change, and they receive an entirely new schedule of four classes. In contrast, the A/B format schedules students for two separate four block schedules that run all year long. Students have eight classes at a time, but will have one set of four classes (A days) on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of a week, while they have the other set of four classes (B days) on Tuesday and Thursday. Each week will rotate between having two or three week days on either the A or B day schedules.

In researching, selecting, and obtaining permission from schools in the same area with similar sizes and demographics, it was noted that the year-long A/B block schedule was a common option in other schools located near School 1. Many schools that were identified as running on the block schedule with semester-long classes were much larger, or more racially and ethnically diverse.

Procedure

The procedure for this study involved multiple phases, including preparation, creation and identification, implementation, and data collection and analysis.

Preparation

This task began with a preparatory phase during a graduate course in the summer of 2010. Over the course of a six week time frame, I selected a topic of interest with relation to the classroom and education that would benefit from research. After deciding to work with the concept of the block schedule and how successful it is, research was conducted to find evidence

to support or refute the effectiveness of this class schedule, and to develop a literature review. Noticing that most research in this area focused on course grades, GPAs, and standardized test scores, research questions were drafted and I decided that a survey was needed to add to previous research by comparing student and staff opinions on the block schedule, while also asking about perceptions of success.

Creation and Identification

In early fall of 2010, my focus was on creating a survey (Appendix A) and measurement tool, as well as locating and identifying possible participating schools, and acquiring permission to administer the survey at these schools. In order to be manageable, yet still useful with the information that was collected, the survey was created to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Basic demographic questions were asked, in case of any surprising trends that would be linked to them, such as gender and race/ethnicity. Participants were also asked to group themselves by their position at school, teaching staff or student, and school, School 1 or School 2. To make administering the survey more efficient, and to offer the schools more options, both a paper copy and an electronic copy of the survey were created. The electronic copy was created using the internet survey tool, Survey Monkey. While responses were collected from participants in both formats, all answers were entered into the Survey Monkey format, so that they were able to be viewed and analyzed in a central location.

Secondly, schools that would be used in the project needed to be located, identified, contacted, and informed of the project, in order to gain permission and access to administer the surveys. Location and identification of the participating schools was accomplished using professional contacts, classmates in my graduate program, colleagues, and information provided on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction website. Once identified and contacted,

administrators at these schools then confirmed the schedule being used in their district, their willingness to have their students and staff participate, and the method and time frame which worked best for them. Problems were encountered with a few schools in finding a time frame that that allowed all 10th graders to take the survey without taking away from instructional time, and other logistical issues. School 1 and School 2 both had a daily, resource/homeroom time built in to their schedules, and this provided time to administer the surveys..

Implementation

Implementation of this task consisted largely of administering the surveys to the staff and students at Schools 1 and 2, as the surveys were the measurement tool and source of data collection. The surveys focused on collecting student and teacher feedback on different aspects of the block schedule. These aspects included topics such as whether or not the participants liked it, if they felt that they were more successful using it, and what they perceived to be the advantages and disadvantages of the schedule.

Surveys were distributed to the participants through paper copies and an internet link to the Survey Monkey electronic form online. Both schools were asked to complete the survey with as many participants from their 10th grade students and all teaching staff as possible, and to complete the surveys in a timely fashion. The majority of the responses from School 1 were returned in paper form, and these were then entered into the Survey Monkey format. School 2 determined that they had sufficient computer and internet access for their students and staff, and opted to provide all of their responses in electronic format via Survey Monkey. This proved a little more difficult to complete in a timely fashion, and did not produce as great a percentage of responses as at School 1. However, as mentioned in Chapter One, participation in this survey was voluntary, so not all participants that had access are part of the data, and not all of those that

would have liked to participate had access. Students who were absent on the days when their resource or homeroom had the survey administered to them may not have had a chance to take it later on.

Data Collection and Analysis

Once the survey was created and administered to Schools 1 and 2, responses were collected in a central location in the online format on Survey Monkey for analysis. Simple qualitative answers were analyzed by Survey Monkey and shown as graphs, numbers, and percentages. This allowed me to see how many people responded, what their position at the school was, what their gender and race/ethnicity were, if they like the block schedule, and what their personal perceptions and opinions of the block schedule were. Comparisons were made with the data between schools, as well as between students and staff.

Qualitative data was collected by asking participants two open-ended questions at the end of the survey. These two questions were:

- What do you think is the biggest benefit of the block schedule?
- What do you see as a negative of the block schedule?

These questions were open-ended, and participants were allowed to leave these responses blank if they did not feel that they had an answer for them. As a result, there are a few less responses to these questions than the total number of participants.

In analyzing the open-ended responses to these questions, responses were read for common themes, recurring words, and any comments of note that stood out in specific contrast to others. Also, the Text Analysis feature on Survey Monkey was utilized to see the specific frequency of certain words. In this way, common themes and trends were noted to support arguments both for, and against, the block schedule.

Permissions and Ethics

Paperwork for The Institutional Review Board (IRB) was filled out for this project, but it was not necessary to file extra paperwork for permission from the parents and schools of the participating schools and districts. Administrative approval was received from the principals of both schools, and they both had the opportunity to review the survey before it was shared with any of the responding participants. Confidentiality was maintained as students are not identified by name, school, or district.

Chapter Four

Results

Results for this study are responses to a survey on the block schedule (Appendix A) that was administered to teaching staff and 10th grade students at two rural high schools operating on the block schedule near Madison, WI. Surveys were completed in both paper and electronic formats, through the Survey Monkey online survey tool. Responses were collected in both quantitative and qualitative forms, and comparisons and trends were then looked for in the responses.

Demographics

Demographics questions were asked at the beginning of the survey, to determine the specific population that was participating in the study. Of 106 participants, 91.5% identified themselves as White/Caucasian. 60.4% identified themselves as female and 39.6% as male. As a result of these numbers, and the trends in responses, race/ethnicity and gender were not considered in the overall analysis of the data. Race/ethnicity numbers did not indicate large enough percentages of participants in varying categories for this to have a significant impact upon the answers, and the percentages of each gender were not overly skewed one way or the other. As no apparent gender-specific answers were noted, and the survey topic did not lend itself directly to benefiting one gender or the other, this category was not specifically analyzed.

Qualitative Data

Question 1: Do you like the block schedule?

The first question asked on the survey was whether or not the participants liked the block schedule. In an overwhelming majority, 90 participants (84.9%) responded in the affirmative to this question. Breaking the numbers down by schools, 92.9% of participants from School 2 answered in the affirmative to this question, while only 79.7% of participants from School 1 answered in the affirmative. In looking for the answers that made this difference, the largest number of negative responses were received from teaching staff at School 1, where it was only 55% who responded "yes," while 45% responded "no." While responses to this question show heavy support and positive feelings about the block schedule in general, teaching staff at School 1 have a split opinion.

Question 2: Do you feel that you/your students are more successful on the block schedule than you/they would be on the traditional schedule?

Responses to this question were again largely in the affirmative, but that percentage is lower than in the first question. There were 85 (80.2%) affirmative answers to this question, with 21 participants (19.8%) answering "no." School 1 gave a combined percentage of 75% affirmative responses to this question, while School 2 had 88.1% respond in the affirmative. Again, it was School 1 that had a lower score, and in looking at individual categories, this more negative view continued to come from the teachers at School 1. While affirmative responses were the majority for teachers, 84.2%, and students, 91.3%, at School 2, as well as students at School 1, 86.4%, it was the teachers at School 1 that were even split, with 50% each answering

"yes" and 50% answering "no." As a whole, the answer to this question is in the affirmative, and participants view their success on the block schedule in a positive manner, but it must be noted that teacher responses at School 1 differed significantly from the rest of the answers.

Question 3: Rank you/your students' feeling of success on the block schedule.

This question ties in directly with Question 2 as both address the idea and perceptions of student success on the block schedule. Answers were provided on a scale of one to five, with one being the least successful and five being the most successful. The most commonly selected response was the level of 4/Very Successful, with 55 participants (51.9%) choosing this option. The trend in this response was that students are being successful on the block schedule, as only 13 participants (12.2%) chose a 1/Not Very Successful or 2/Moderately Successful for this question.

In looking at answers to this question for individual groups, there was no group in which 4/Very Successful was not the most commonly selected answer. Students from both schools, as well as teachers from School 1 were within a few percentage points of 50% selecting option four, and teachers at School 2 again had a more positive result, with 57.9% of participants selecting this choice. The number of note with regard to this question came from students at School 2. While most categories had similar response distributions, 8 students (34.8%) at School 2 chose option three. This number sticks out because it pairs the largest group of responses under answer four from any group, with the largest response to answer four, in the same school. While participants chose options that were next to each other in the sliding scale, it appears to be a difference in opinion at School 2 between the teachers and students. Overall, this answer again favors the block schedule, and correlates answers between Questions 2 and 3. The general

perception of both students and staff is that students are more successful on the block schedule than the traditional schedule, and that students themselves are noticing this experience and feeling of success.

Question 4: What do you think is the biggest benefit of the block schedule? (if none, leave blank)

This question was an open-ended question that participants were asked to answer, but was not required. This allowed them to express any particular benefits that they see with the block schedule, simply opt out of answering, or avoid making up a dishonest answer if they really did not see any benefits. To analyze this question, trends and commonly recurring words and ideas were looked for in the responses.

The biggest difference between the block schedule and the traditional schedule is the amount of time available for instruction and class activities, so it is no surprise that responses and trending topics revolve around this idea. 30% of the participants that answered this question mentioned homework. The idea of homework was a theme commonly mentioned by both students and teachers.. First, there was the student response that with fewer per day, there is usually less homework each night. That both gives them more time for activities other than homework in their free time, as well as allows them to spend more time and focus more on each subject that they are studying, when they have less to do each night, and less to prepare for the following day. Student and teachers both brought up the fact that the block schedule lends itself to allotting time at the end of the hour to begin work on homework. Students tied this in with the previous comments about homework, and both groups noticed that this time allowed for students to ask questions and get help from teachers before heading home for the night, allowing for better understanding. One student stated, “You are giving work time to do homework and if you

have questions you can ask your teacher." Similarly, a teacher commented on the ability for students to request clarification on work before leaving class by responding, "Time to begin work to check for understanding."

Another set of words that came up frequently were labs and projects. Both students and teachers like the extra time available in the block schedule to work on a larger variety of activities, as well as activities that go more in depth and take more time. Students expressed an interest in being able to do more projects, and teachers liked the flexibility to set up such activities, as well as being able to complete more of them in the classroom.

Finally, the idea of focus appeared frequently. While this idea appeared often, different words were used by different participants, and different ideas were expressed. Teachers viewed focus as more of a way to pinpoint and provide more in-depth instruction on certain parts of the material, to make them a focus of the course. Students and teachers both brought up the idea of attention and focus as being easier because there are fewer classes per day to work on, and it is easier to think about four sets of material rather than seven or eight. "You can focus on your main classes, rather than a multitude of them," stated one student.

While there were many answers to these open-ended questions, the main idea presented by both students and teachers was that the block schedule benefits from having more time per class, per day, because this allows for variety, individual attention, work time, and not having to jump as quickly from topic to topic, just because the bell rings.

Question 5: What do you see as a negative of the block schedule? (if none, leave blank)

As with Question 4, Question 5 is an open-ended question that participants were not required to answer. Just as with Question 4, this allowed them to leave it blank for any reasons that they had, including not having an answer to include because they do not see a downside, or not having an answer because they do not like the schedule "just because," but are not sure why.

Results for this question were analyzed in the same way as in Question 4, but looking at frequently recurring words and themes, and in fact, some of the same themes came up in this question, but were approached or explained in a different way.

One of the words that came up most often for students was related to a topic for both students and teachers. Many students mentioned the idea of a "break" during class, as all groups agreed that the long time frame can be difficult for students to focus (another repeated concept) and pay attention. If a student is in a class they are not interested in, or a teacher has not had enough time or training to plan the variety of activities that can be a benefit for the block schedule, then the hour can seem to drag on, and without a break is a long time for students to be on task. Lack of focus, and perhaps boredom can cause restlessness, said one participant, "longer classes make kids restless and bored of a subject, breaks are necessary."

In fact, the word break was also mentioned by teachers, but their focus was on the idea of the break between classes when students forget material and retention is effected. This was a downside for teachers on the block schedule as when classes only last for a semester, a student taking a class two years in a row may have nearly an entire calendar year in between levels if they have class first semester one year and second semester another year. Or, on the year-long schedule, students at School 2 always have two days between classes, allowing them to forget material, or questions that they wanted to ask. Math and foreign language were specifically

referred to by more than one teacher, “I think that students would be better off going to math and foreign language classes every day instead of every other. I think those classes are hurt by the block schedule,” and “Hard for classes like Math, Spanish that need consistency all year.”

The ideas of retention and forgetting tie into another theme that both students and teachers presented in response to this question, the idea of missing class on the block schedule. Both students and teachers noted how much material is missed, and the gap that is created in contact with the material when a student is absent. If a block class is twice as long as a class on the traditional schedule, missing one class is like missing two anywhere else. This idea was specifically noted by a teacher at School 2, who noted that on the A/B block schedule, a student missing a Thursday when the class only met Tuesday and Thursday that week will go an entire week, having only been in that class one day, “If a student misses on TH, I don't see them until the following M. That means Tues-Mon I have no contact with them!” This makes it hard to catch up and stay familiar with the material.

Chapter Five

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that the majority of the participants view the block schedule favorably, and see benefits and evidence of success in the learning experience of the students. Instead of providing negative answers to the research questions, the responses from the Block Schedule Survey answered each of the questions in the affirmative.

Do students and teachers learning and teaching on the block schedule feel that the block schedule is more beneficial that the traditional schedule? 85 of 106 participants answered this question with a "yes." Only the teachers at School 1 had a split view on this question.

What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the block schedule that students and teachers experience? This question was answered and analyzed in Chapter 4, by discussing the benefits and negatives that participants perceived with regard to the block schedule. Viewing that data, it should be noted that many of the responses in both the positive and negative categories mentioned similar topics and ideas. These responses lend themselves to further research and data collection at the schools as to what might be causing the same factors to be seen as both positive and negative, especially in School 1, where the teachers did not have a unified opinion of the schedule. Possible questions for future research and discussion might be:

- Does the problem lie with the block schedule itself, or with the people using the block schedule?
- Are teachers using the block schedule effectively?

- If they are not, is this because of a negative view of the schedule, an inability to plan for an extended time period, or is it a result of a lack of training and preparation to teach on the block schedule?
- Are expectations, both from the students and of the students, high enough that fewer classes is not translating into less effort?
- If the problem is determined to be the schedule itself, what are the alternatives?

These questions lend themselves to further discussion, study, and data collection and analysis by the staff and administration at Schools 1 and 2, as well as other districts that are struggling with whether the block schedule is working for them, or whether the block schedule would be a schedule that they would like to transition to. Starting with discussion at the faculty level and informal questions may prove to answer the questions and guide the school in the necessary direction. If not, further research and study in a formal approach would be beneficial.

Does a positive perception of the block schedule correlate with the feelings of success, or lack thereof, that teachers and students experience? This last research question received another affirmative response from the participants in this survey, and data demonstrated a positive correlation between those who liked the block schedule, and those who felt that they/their students were being successful on the block schedule. While it can be argued that some students will do well, or poorly, no matter what format is used to present material, this study showed evidence of a direct link between these two perceptions. Students and teachers are more likely to buy into a format and class structure that they view positively, and when they are more invested in the process, the end result tends to be more successful.

Based upon survey responses from the participants at the two schools in this study, my recommendation for School 2 would be to continue what they are doing, as both students and staff seemed to feel very positive about the schedule, the benefits, and the success that students are experiencing. There were negatives to be discussed, and a slight variation between the level of success that teachers and students perceive, but the overall feeling was that the block schedule is a better fit for them than the traditional schedule. Continued and open dialogue between staff and students will help to address these smaller issues, and help the school to make improvements and reflect upon the schedule as they move forward.

In contrast, my recommendation for School 1 would be further discussion amongst staff and administrators, discussion with students, and surveys or data collection to see why the opinion in the staff is so divided. There may be a need for further staff development, collaboration between teachers to help improve teaching methods, or the ability to be open-minded and start discussions about whether a different class schedule structure might be a better fit for the school. A split opinion does not necessitate change, but when the staff has a 50% negative response rate as to this schedule being the best fit, some attention needs to be paid to why this is occurring.

To share this information with other audiences, I think that the first step is to ensure that administrators from both Schools 1 and 2 receive copies of the responses and data from the participants in their buildings. This can lead to discussion at faculty meetings, opportunities for professional development, efforts to research and collect further data on their own districts, and decision-making as to whether this schedule is the best fit. Sharing this study data with

colleagues will be a way to brainstorm further ideas and studies, help teachers pursue other research, literature, and instruction related to the block schedule, and look for ways to discuss, collaborate, and improve their instruction in this class structure.

While this study showed a majority of participants feeling positively about the block schedule, and showed a correlation between perceptions and feelings of success, I think that it would be important to take this concept further and gather more data. Future studies could include or focus on:

- A larger sampling of school districts on the block schedule.
- More qualitative data and interviews, asking about categories such as methods, lesson plans, assessment, and college preparedness.
- Comparisons between schools all utilizing the same form of block schedule.
- Comparisons/Contrasts between schools utilizing different forms of the block schedule.
- Comparisons/Contrasts between school utilizing the block schedule with schools utilizing the traditional schedule.
- Comparisons/Contrasts between schools with varying demographics—race/ethnicity, rural v. urban, student population, etc.

While there are any number of directions and focal points that future studies can take, I feel that it is important to include questions relating to personal perceptions and observations from both the students and staff. Course letter grades, GPAs, and standardized test score provide data and quantitative levels of success, but they do not show the whole picture. Were the students getting outside help? Did they already know the material? Did they feel like they had to teach themselves? Were certain teachers or methods more beneficial to them? Combining these types

of qualitative answers will help researchers, and thus schools, teachers, and students, to figure out which portions of the educational experience are really helping their students the most. It is easier to look at just the numbers, but opinions and personal answers tell so much more.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Block Schedule Survey

Block Schedule Survey

Personal:
Please choose one answer in each section.

☐ Male	☐ Female

☐ White/Caucasian	☐ Latino/Hispanic	☐ Asian
☐ Native American	☐ African American	☐ Other

☐ Student	☐ Teacher

☐ School 1	☐ School 2

Survey Questions:
Please answer each question honestly and to the best of your ability. For the purpose of this survey, the Block Schedule will refer to a schedule where students have 4 main classes per day, each about 90 minutes in length, and the Traditional Schedule will refer to a schedule where the students have 7-8 main classes per day, each about 45 minutes in length.

1. Do you like the Block Schedule?

☐ Yes ☐ No

2. Do you feel like you / your students are more successful on the Block Schedule than you / they would be on the Traditional Schedule?

☐ Yes ☐ No

3. Rank your / your students' feeling of success on the Block Schedule.

Not Very Successful		Successful		Extremely Successful
1	2	3	4	5

4. What do you think is the biggest benefit of the Block Schedule? (if none, leave blank)

5. What do you see as a negative of the Block Schedule? (if none, leave blank)

Thank you for your time! ☺

Please note, this survey is for a college project and is **not** associated with any official scheduling discussions at this school.