Profile for Teacher Decision Making: A Closer Look at Beliefs and Practice

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Abstract
The Profile for Teacher Decision Making Survey was developed to capture inservice teachers' beliefs and practices related to instructional decision making. Eighty-seven inservice teachers enrolled in various Master's degree programs responded to the survey. Results indicate that most teachers, regardless of grade level or content area taught adopted student-centered beliefs. Furthermore, the teachers endorsed more student-centered practices than standards-based or curriculum-based practices. This finding indicates that, regardless of possible and probable pressures from outside the classroom, the teachers were most concerned with teaching students rather than just covering standards or adhering to a prescribed curriculum, with one exception being teachers who taught in Reading First schools. These teachers reported that their curriculum-based practices were a result of being told to implement the curriculum and not because they believed it was the right thing to do.

Research related to teacher decision making reached its peak in the 1980's (Borko, Shavelson, & Stern, 1981; Calderhead, 1981; Inglis & Lucas, 1976; Parker & Gehrke, 1986; Peterson & Clark, 1978; Shavelson & Stern, 1981). Recently, research related to responsive and adaptive teaching has once again highlighted the importance of teacher decision making (Bauml, 2011; Corno, 2008; Duffy, Miller, Kear, Parsons, Davis, & Williams, 2008; Griffith, 2014, Griffith, Massey, Atkinson, 2013; Vaughn & Parsons, 2013), particularly in light of increased accountability, scripted programs, and the national standards movement (Garan, 2002; Griffith, 2008; Yatvin, 2005). Glickman (2003) noted that effective teachers make moment-by-moment teaching decisions based upon the needs of students. Taylor & Pearson (2002) noted that exemplary teachers adapt their instruction to meet the needs of the students, while Allington & Johnston (2002) noted that exemplary teachers seized teachable moments in response to student needs. Furthermore, Taylor, Pressley, and Pearson (2003) state that successful instruction goes beyond skill-based, rote memorization, and incorporates higher order thinking. Finally, by adopting a student-centered approach, influential teachers tailor instruction to meet the needs and interests of individual students.

Ruddell (1992; Ruddell & Ruddell, 1995) identified four common characteristics of influential teachers: (1) tend to be energetic, passionate, caring, and flexible; (2) are sensitive to individual student's needs and motivations; (3) are passionate and enthusiastic about the subjects they teach; and (4) are concerned with the value of each student as a person.

Also at play in the beliefs to practice realm are teachers' visions for instruction and the implementation or enactment of those beliefs into practice (Vaughn & Parsons, 2012). Even teachers who hold tight to their set of beliefs about teaching and learning face the challenge of enacting those beliefs when competing forces are at play in the classroom.

While adaptive teaching might be characterized as student-centered, there are additional constructs that influence teacher decision making. With the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and so many teaches are striving to cover all of the standards tested by the state's standardized test, teacher decision making is heavily influenced by the standards-based movement (Ogawa, Sandholtz, Martinez-Flores, & Scribner, 2003; Swanson & Stevenson, 2002). In some cases, student-centered beliefs collide with standards-based practices. One teacher in Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas's (2000)'s study noted, "All these years, I believed we were supposed to teach the child at the child's level, at the zone of proximal development. Now the state tells me that I was wasting my time because their standards are the name of the game, not the children" (p. 389). Teachers must make decisions about how to navigate this hurdle.

As school districts seek the programs "hailed as *the answer* for ensuring that no child is *left behind*" (Altwerger, Arya, Jin, Jordan, Laster, Martens, Wilson, & Wiltz, 2004, p. 120) the impact of adopted and/or mandated curricula significantly influences teacher decision making. At the time of this study, Reading First funds influenced the types of reading instruction being implemented in the public schools. Reading First was "designed to ensure that every child can read on grade level by the end of third grade through the implementation of instructional programs and materials… grounded in scientifically based reading research" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 9). While there was no listing of accepted programs for Reading First (Garan, 2005), school districts applying for these funds were required to select programs that addressed the five essential components of reading instruction as recommended by the National Reading Panel (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), thereby limiting schools to commercially produced programs with a "very narrow range of acceptable practices and program choices" (Lipson, Mosenthal, Mekkelsen, & Russ, 2004, p. 540). With the acceptance of the Reading First funds, school districts often mandated that teachers implement these reading programs with fidelity, potentially creating dissonance between the teachers' beliefs about reading instruction and the philosophy of the program (Author, 2008). Teacher buy-in of these instructional mandates also influenced teachers' beliefs about instruction. Understandably, when the ideologies behind the reform effort aligned with teachers' beliefs, they were more likely to embrace the reform (Datnow & Castellano, 2000).

Based upon this research, the theoretical threads that guided this study included : (1) the standards-based movement (American Federation of Teachers, 2009; Donnelly & Sadler, 2009); (2) adopted and/or mandated curriculums (Cochran-Smith, 2009; Shelton, 2005; Westerman, 2010); and (3) student-centered beliefs (Corno, 2008; Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Gill & Hoffman, 2009). The purpose of this study was to report on teachers' self-reported beliefs and practices related to decision making. Specifically, it was hypothesized that elementary teachers would be more student-centered than middle school and secondary teachers. Additionally, it was hypothesized that middle school and secondary teachers would be driven more by the standards than by student-centered decisions. Finally, it was hypothesized that teachers who were required to implement a mandated curriculum or adhere to a specific pacing

guide would report a misalignment of their practices with their beliefs. The researchers hypothesized that when operating in educational settings where autonomy was valued and curriculums were not mandated, teachers' practices would reflect their beliefs.

Method

Initial Survey Construction

The survey development was an outgrowth of many years of working with classroom teachers, particularly during the early years of implementation of No Child Left Behind and the era of scripted reading programs. Many of the questions arose from the conversations the first researcher had with teachers and from the review of literature related to teacher decision making. Since there was no survey available that examined the forces that guide teacher decision making, the first researcher developed the *Profile for Teacher Decision Making (PTDM),* modeled after DeFord's (1985) *Theoretical Orientation in Reading Profile* (TORP). The Profile for Teacher Decision Making Survey included thirty questions related to teachers' beliefs with ten questions related to student-centered beliefs (SCB), ten questions related to standards-based beliefs (SBB), and ten questions related to curriculum-based beliefs (CBB). (See Table 1). Responses were arranged on a four-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Examples of questions related to beliefs included:

1. When planning lessons, teachers should think first about what the students know and then about what they need to know next. (SCB)
2. The main goal for teachers should be to plan and organize tasks so that students can attain the standards for that subject and/or grade level. (SBB)
3. Scripted lessons help the teacher prepare and deliver focused lessons. (CBB)

In addition, fifteen questions related to teacher practice were included in the survey; five questions related to student-centered practice (SCP), five questions related to standards-based practice (SBP), and five questions related to curriculum-based practice (CBP). These frequency responses were arranged on a four-point Likert scale from almost never to usually. Examples of questions related to practice included:

1. When teaching, I base my teaching decisions on ongoing feedback (verbal and nonverbal) that I receive from my students. (SCP)
2. When teaching, I begin my planning with the standards for my grade level and subject area. (SBP)
3. When teaching, I trust the experts who designed the instructional program adopted by my school. (CBP)

In order to capture the reasons behind these responses, one follow-up question was posed after each practice statement.
1. I do this,
    a. because I believe it is the right thing to do.
    b. because I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.

      c.   because I believe it is the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum.

Pilot Study

Following extensive feedback from other literacy researchers and from practicing classroom teachers, the final survey was distributed to 20 graduate students enrolled in a reading course at a large, state university in the south. To test for reliability, a test/retest option was implemented with participants responding to the survey within five calendar days. Initial responses were compared to the second responses and discrepancies of more than one point difference were noted. All but one curriculum-based question and one standards-based question were reliable. The two unreliable questions were re-worded for the final survey.

Survey Implementation

This study utilized descriptive statistics based on data collected from 87 students enrolled in graduate courses in all MAEd Programs in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the same, large state university used in the pilot study. The Profile for Teacher Decision Making Survey was distributed via the university-supported survey software to 270 students in seven Master's degree programs. Eighty-seven of the 270 students responded, achieving the average response rate of 30% for online surveys. These programs included Elementary Education (ELEM), Reading Education (READ), Special Education (SPED), English Education (ENED), History Education ((HIED), Middle Grades Education (MIDG), and Math Education (MATE). Forty-two percent were enrolled in the READ program; 30% were enrolled in the SPED program; 15% were enrolled in the ELEM program; the remaining 13% were enrolled in the MIDG, HIED, and ENED programs. At the time of the survey administration, all of the participants were practicing teachers. Almost 55% of the participants had less than five years of teaching experience; 25% had five to nine years of teaching experience with the remaining 20% having taught more than ten years. The average teaching experience was 5.74 years and the median was 3-4 years. Nine of the participants were male and the remaining 78 were female. Sixty-eight percent identified at least one instructional program adopted by the school that they were expected to follow. Ten percent of the participants were teaching in Reading First Schools and 56% were teaching in schools that had failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress in the past five years.

Results

Data Analysis

All statistical tests were conducted using SPSS Version 19.0. First order correlations, using Pearson r established the foundation for reliability. Student-centered belief items were then submitted to a test of inter-item reliability ($\alpha = .84$). One student-centered belief item (SC6) was eliminated from the scale because of a low correlation. Following inter-item reliability on standards-based beliefs, one item was eliminated from the scale. One curriculum-based belief item was removed to improve scale reliability.

Beliefs.

To capture the belief systems held by the respondents, a paired sample t-test was used to compare the respondents' student-centered belief scores with their standards-based belief scores. The t-test results indicates that the participants beliefs were significantly more student-centered than standards-based, with t (86) = 13.24, p = 0.000 (see Table 2).

Though hypothesized that the elementary teachers would identify with more student-centered beliefs (SCB) than teachers in middle and high school, an independent samples t-test revealed that there was not a significant difference in terms of student-centered beliefs between elementary teachers and "other" teachers, t (85) = .775, p = .44. Table 3 lists the mean scores for the elementary school teachers, the standard deviation, the t statistic and the p-value.

Additionally, the hypothesis that the teachers at grade levels other than elementary would adhere to more standards-based beliefs was nullified. That is, as Table 4 indicates, there was no significant difference between the elementary teachers and "other" teachers with regards to standards-based beliefs, t (85) = -0.185, p = 0.85.

Further, the curriculum-based beliefs scores for elementary level teachers were compared with "other" level teachers using an independent samples t test and the results were not significant. That is, as Table 5 shows, there was no significant difference between the elementary teachers and "other" teachers with regards to curriculum-based beliefs, t (85) = -1.031, p = 0.306.

In conclusion, there was no significant difference between elementary level teachers and "other" grade level teachers with regards to student-centered beliefs, standards-based beliefs, or curriculum-based beliefs.

Practice

Frequency of student-centered practices questions revealed that almost every participant identified one's own teaching as student-centered. Student-centered practice 1 had mean= 3.87, Sd = .367; Student-centered practice 2 mean = 3.73, Sd = .538; Student-centered practice 3 mean = 3.816, Sd = .389; Student-centered practice 4 mean = 3.827, Sd = .379; Student-centered practice 5 mean = 3.747, Sd = .487 (See Table 6).

An independent samples t-test was used to compare the student-centered practices between elementary level teachers and "other" level teachers. The results indicated that the difference between the elementary teachers and "other" teachers was not significant in terms of student-centered practices, t (85) = -0.171, p = 0.86 (see Table 7).

The respondents' standard-based scores have a mean = 3.45, Sd = 0.655. Descriptive statistics indicate that the curriculum-based practice is lower, with mean = 2.39, Sd = 0.742. Additionally, a t-test revealed no significant difference between elementary teachers and "other" teachers with regard to standards-based practices, t = -.766, p = 0.446 (Table 8). Because the two groups have unequal variance based on the results from Levene's test for equality of variance (F = 4.989, p =

0.028), the t statistic and p-value reported were based on equal variance not assumed *t* test results.

Furthermore, a *t*-test revealed no significant difference between elementary teachers and "other" teachers with regard to curriculum-based practices, t = 0.238, p = 0.813 (Table 9).

An ANOVA indicated that there is a significant difference among respondents' scores on the three types of practices (p <.001). A follow up t-test indicated a significant difference between respondents' student-centered practices and standards-based practices (*t* = 4.683, p = 0.000) and a significant difference between standards-based practices and curriculum-based practices (t = -13.020, p = 0.000). These results reveal that teachers endorse a greater agreement with student-centered practices, than standards-based practices than curriculum-based practices.

Relationships between Beliefs and Practices.

Though hypothesized that teachers who were required to implement a mandated curriculum or adhere to a specific pacing guide would report a misalignment of beliefs with practice, the results indicated that it was only true in some contexts with some teachers.

Teachers who taught in Reading First Schools reported a range of reasons they engaged in curriculum-based practices. Four responded that they engage in curriculum-based practices because they were told to do it. Three reported that they engage in curriculum-based practices because they were told to do it and they believed it was the right thing to do. Only one of the eight Reading First teachers engaged in curriculum-based practices because he/she believed it was the right thing to do. These findings indicate a curricular-buy-in issue with at least half of the teachers in the Reading First schools represented in this study.

In comparison, 54% of teacher in non-Reading First schools reported never engaging in curriculum-based practices because it was mandated. Less than 5% of the non-Reading First teachers reported engaging in curriculum-based practices because they believed it was the right thing to do, rather because they were told to do it by their school administration. Seventy five percent reported engaging in curriculum-based practices in part because they believed it was the right thing to do.

Forty-four teachers identified at least one instructional program that was adopted by the school that they were expected to follow. Of those 44 teachers, 29% said they engaged in curriculum-based practices because it was the right thing to do (chi-square (5) = 12.6, p < .03).

A number of belief statements significantly correlated with the corresponding practice statements. For example, when a teacher responded with a strongly agree on a belief question, the paired practice question also had a high rate of agreement. This indicates that, if the teacher believed the statement to be true then he/she also usually implemented the corresponding practice. For example, the standards-based statement "When planning lessons, teachers should first think about the standards for the subject area and grade level" (belief) was statistically significant when correlated with the practice statement "When teaching, I begin my planning with the standards for my grade level and subject area." Additionally, the belief statement related

to student verbal and nonverbal feedback, "When teaching a lesson, teachers should base teaching decisions on the ongoing feedback (verbal and nonverbal) received from students" was highly correlated to the practice statement "When teaching, I base my teaching decisions on ongoing feedback (verbal and nonverbal) that I receive from my students."

While a number of paired beliefs/practice questions were statistically significant, those that were not are worth examining. They reveal a possible disconnect between the teachers' beliefs and practices. Tables 10, 11, and 12 present the correlation between student-centered, standard-based, and curriculum-based statements. The strengths of their correlation were indicated by a p-value.

The correlation between student-centered belief statement "When a child enters a classroom knowing less than his/her peers, the teacher should employ strategies that help the student catch up to his/her peers" and the paired practice statement "When teaching, I employ multiple strategies to help students who are performing below grade level to 'catch up' with peers." was not statistically significant (p = .224).

Additionally, the correlation between student-centered belief statement "All students are entitled to work on tasks that ensure some level of success" and the paired practice statement " When teaching, I plan tasks of varying levels of difficulty to address the varying needs of my students " was not significant, but approached significance (p = .071).

The correlation between student-centered belief statement "All students enter school with varying levels of understandings and the teacher has an obligation to understand what each student knows." and practice statement "When teaching, I can identify the strengths and needs of each student in my class" was not statistically significant (p = .221).

Discussion and Implications

The Influence of Grade Level on Beliefs and Practices

Contrary to the hypothesis that grade level would influence the types of beliefs and practices reported by the teachers, all teachers, regardless of grade level reported being more students centered in beliefs and in practice than driven by the standards or by a specific curriculum. There are several possible reasons for this finding. First, the survey was self-reported which is a possible limitation in terms of validity due to the possibility of response bias (Walker, Schmitt, & Miller, 2006). Second, the participants in this study were a unique population; educators seeking advanced degrees. As graduate students, these participants were immersed in the literature related to best practices in education and would be likely to adopt a stance that aligned with these identified best practices. Finally, most teachers entered this profession with the intent to teach students, not just content (Moje, 1996).

Beliefs/Practice Comparisons

Though we hypothesized that teachers who were required to implement a specific curriculum or adhere to a specific pacing guide would report a misalignment of their practices with their

beliefs, regardless of these factors, the participants in this study reported consistency between their student-centered beliefs and their student-centered practices. This finding indicates that teachers, regardless of the possible and probable pressures from outside the classroom (e.g. high stakes testing) are most concerned about teaching students instead of just covering standards or sticking to a prescribed curriculum. The participants' beliefs about basing teaching decisions on students' verbal and nonverbal feedback aligned with their practices in this domain. A high rate of agreement between the belief and practice statements related to the importance of identifying students' strengthens and needs indicate that teachers are mindful of using assessment to inform instruction. Approaching statistical significance were the relationships between the beliefs and practice statements related to providing opportunities to work at a level of success most of the time. In contrast, a strong correlation did not exist between several student-centered beliefs and practice statements, in particular those related to dealing with students who are not on grade level. A possible reason for this finding is the tension between the pressures to cover the grade level standards and the mandated curriculum (Author, 2008).

Most standards-based beliefs and practices were complementary. Teachers believed that the standards should guide their instruction and engaged in practices that supported that belief. They planned instruction to match the standards; a belief they also endorsed. One standards-based belief did not align with practice dealt with the use of pacing guides to ensure that all students were taught the same standards. Given that most of these teachers endorsed student-centered practices, this finding is not surprising. Teachers were much more likely to cover the required standards in light of what the student already knew and what they needed to know next rather than adhering to a pacing guide set forth at the district level. One curriculum-based belief that aligned with teachers' self-reported practice related to the idea of "trusting the experts" who designed the curriculum. Most teachers did not believe they should simply "trust the experts" who designed the curriculum nor did they believe they should rely solely on the modifications offered by the instructional programs. Their reported practices about modifications aligned with this belief statement. Most teachers did not rely solely on the instructional program to offer modifications to meet a range of needs among the learners.

Significance of the Study

In light of the movement by states to adopt a common set of standards, teacher educators, policy makers, and school administrators need to understand how the movement might influence teacher decision making and consequently teaching and learning. This study provides evidence of how state standards are already influencing teachers' decision making.

This study also provides data about the impact of the school culture on teachers' decision making. To better understand these influences, teacher educators can work more closely with public school partners to identify the demands placed on teachers while forging partnerships that help teachers feel more empowered as professionals.

Finally, this study asked teachers to report on their beliefs and practices, allowing the researcher to note discrepancies between the two. Follow up studies will help to develop understanding about how to better assist teachers as they navigate these disparities and work to bring their practices more in line with their beliefs.

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Table 1.
Profile for Teacher Decision Making

		Student-Centered (SC)	Standards-Based (SB)	Curriculum-Based (CB)
BELIEFS (B)	Number of Questions	10	10	10
	Example	When planning lessons, teachers should think first about what the students know and then about what they need to know next.	The main goal for teachers should be to plan and organize tasks so that students can attain the standards for that subject and/or grade level	Scripted lessons help the teacher prepare and deliver focused lessons
PRACTICE (P)	Number of Questions	5	5	5
	Example	When teaching, I base my teaching decisions on ongoing feedback (verbal and nonverbal) that I receive from my students.	When teaching, I begin my planning with the standards for my grade level and subject area	When teaching, I trust the experts who designed the instructional program adopted by my school.
	Follow-Up	I do this, a. because I believe it is the right thing to do. b. because I am told to do it by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum. c. because I believe it is the right thing to do AND it is mandated by my school administration and/or by the adopted curriculum		

Table 2
Comparison between Respondents' Student-centered Beliefs Scores and Standards-based Scores

Scores	n	Mean (*sd*)	*t*	*p*
Student-centered	78	3.526 (0.368)	13.235	0.000
Standards-based	78	2.755 (0.417)		

Table 3
Student-centered Beliefs Scores by Group

Group	n	Mean SCB (*sd*)	*t*	*p*
Elementary	59	3.508 (0.358)	0.775	0.44
Other	28	3.444 (0.363)		

Table 4
Standards-based Beliefs Scores by Group

Group	n	Mean SCB (*sd*)	*t*	*p*
Elementary	59	2.750 (0.455)	-0.185	0.85
Other	28	2.767 (0.332)		

Table 5
Curriculums-based Beliefs Scores by Group

Group	n	Mean SCB (*sd*)	*t*	*p*
Elementary	59	2.274 (0.471)	-1.031	0.306
Other	28	2.381 (0.405)		