

Beliefs and Instructional Practices among Secondary Teachers within Selected High- and Low- Performing High Schools

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Previous research has demonstrated a correlation between student demographic factors and standardized test scores in Florida. The researcher examined the impact teacher beliefs and instructional practices had on students' performance on Florida Comprehensive Reading Assessment Test in 10th grade. Teachers at four schools with a majority of at-risk students were observed and interviewed. Findings showed that teachers at high performing schools emphasized learner-centered teaching and teachers at low performing schools emphasized teacher-centered behaviors. These findings suggest that there is a positive relationship between student-centered learning and Florida Comprehensive Reading Assessment Test performance, and a negative correspondence between Florida Comprehensive Reading Assessment Test emphasis and student success.

Key words: at-risk students, instructional practices, teacher beliefs, teacher-centered practices, student-centered practices

How teachers think about and practice teaching has a profound effect on learning among students (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Fisher, 2001; Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001). Researchers have noted that the practice of high-stakes testing affects teaching practices (Benson, 2003; Popham, 2001; Stecher, 2002), causing some to “teach to the test.” One high-stakes test, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), has affected the curriculum but not uniformly. The fact that students from schools with similar demographic backgrounds perform so differently on the FCAT suggests that factors internal to the classroom and/or school are affecting student performance on the 10th grade FCAT Reading test, for example. Teacher learning and practice, school restructuring, and student learning in low resourced schools with high percentages of culturally diverse students occurs in an interconnected and interdependent manner that cannot be explained in linear fashion (Anness, 2000). Recent research into the effects of teaching on learning, notably in the language arts, finds that use of more student-centered or student empowered teaching models produces more effective learning, and is more likely to contribute to higher test scores (Applebee et al. 2003; Cook-Sather, 2002; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University, 2001).

Additionally, the impact of culture on teaching and learning is just beginning to be reconceptualized to account for the increased cultural diversity present in 21st century US, as well as the importance of school cultures on teaching beliefs and efficacy. Culturally responsive teaching uses the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning both more appropriate and effective for them. Culturally responsive teaching teaches to and through the strengths of diverse students (Gay, 2000). Unfortunately, school reform efforts in the 21st century have focused almost exclusively on external forces, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, rather than on the powerful internal forces that determine student success in any school: namely, its culture, norms, values and expectations (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

This study draws from Prosser and Trigwell’s (1998) assertion that teaching is based on two strategies: teacher-centered and student-centered. The author postulates that teacher beliefs are either teacher-centered or student-centered. Teacher-centered (TC) beliefs are grounded in transmission theories of teaching whereby knowledge is thought of as information that is transmitted from expert teacher to inexperienced learner. Thus, the teacher’s task is to “get it across.” Transmission is the mechanism of providing students with important concepts that they need to understand the discipline. Thus, the focus resides in what the teacher does. Student-centered (SC) beliefs focus on bringing about conceptual change in students’ understanding of the world. Hence, what students are able to achieve through the understandings that they acquire are what is important, not what teachers do. Teacher-centered instruction focuses on what skills are needed to achieve success while the student-centered style focuses on what methods are essential to achieve outcomes. In student-centered instruction, the teacher guides students in constructing their own understandings. SC practices are directed towards enabling students to think about complex issues. These practices promote student ownership for their learning, as well as active learning, and learning how to think. SC instructional practices are multi-dimensional and they empower learners, two of the key characteristics of culturally responsive teaching that Gay (2000) notes. As a result, SC practices are more likely to bridge the apparent gaps in learning and achievement observed among culturally diverse students in many settings, by empowering learners and allowing them to construct meaning on their own terms. Three

assumptions guided this research and were tested in this study: (a) the existence of the FCAT as a high-stakes test affects teaching beliefs and practices in 10th grade English classes, (b) teachers in high performing schools are more likely to employ learner-centered methods in curriculum design and implementation, than are teachers in low-performing schools, and (c) teachers in high performing schools are more likely to use the social and/or personal family of teaching models (Joyce and Calhoun, 1996), and are less inclined to “teach to the test,” in comparison with teachers at low performing schools.

The purpose of this study was to examine how teacher beliefs and instructional practice might influence FCAT scores. Classrooms in high performing schools and in low performing schools were examined in this study to test these theories. The following questions are investigated in this study: (a) What are the instructional practices and beliefs among teachers of students in high performing and low performing schools? and (b) What is the correspondence between the teachers’ beliefs and instructional practices at the high performing and low performing schools?

Methodological Framework

The goal of this study is to understand what impact teacher beliefs and practices can have on student performance on a high-stakes standardized test such as the FCAT, especially in an environment where a majority of students are at-risk for poor performance on the FCAT based on demographic factors unrelated to teaching and learning. Numerous challenges are inherent in any such undertaking. In this project, the amount of data that exists is daunting; being able to select, gather, and interpret data that would address this topic is critical. Determining whether a group of students is “at-risk” for poor performance on the FCAT was based on student demographic data. Other factors that are unique to students, families, neighborhoods and schools also may play a role in student success on the FCAT and are not considered in this study. At the time of this study, the author was a full time secondary social studies teacher and a doctoral candidate.

An observational and interview study. Four high schools (identified by pseudonyms) in one large central Florida district were selected for analysis based on the performance of 10th grade students on the Reading FCAT test the prior year. A majority of students at each school either receive free/reduced lunch benefits, is of a minority background, or both. One 10th grade language arts teacher at each school was observed during one class period multiple times over a period of three to four weeks. Each teacher was also interviewed. Observation notes and interview transcripts were compared and analyzed looking for emergent themes.

The Setting

Four public urban central Florida high schools with a student population comprised of a majority non-white, low SES students, or both were studied. Two of the schools recorded passage rates on the 10th grade FCAT Reading test the previous year of 65% or higher and were designated “high performing.” Two of the schools had fewer than 40% of their 10th grade students pass the same test were designated “low performing.” At each school, one 10th grade English/language arts classroom was observed on five separate days for a minimum of 50 minutes per observation. Following the observations, each teacher was

interviewed. This project is a follow up to a quantitative study conducted by the author where he analyzed the correlation between student FCAT scores and student demographic data, which was published in 2007. The research questions contained in this study were a direct result of analysis of the previous quantitative study, in which the author determined that an investigation of the impact of classroom variables playing a role in student success on the FCAT would be a worthwhile endeavor.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews and observations were analyzed inductively, guided by Spradley's (1980) domain analysis method, and Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic networks method. After all observations had been completed, field notes were typed and coded using an open coding system based on methods of participant observation described by Spradley. Emergent themes were coded along the margins of each set of typed field notes. Afterwards, these codes were listed in a separate document chronologically. Next, codes were tabulated for frequency of appearance and listed accordingly for each set of observational notes. Finally, themes among the codes were identified based on the categories of codes listed, as well as the frequency of each code in the notes.

Emergent themes were identified from each set of teacher observations and then compared with themes and trends observed across the four teachers. In order to assess the differences in instructional beliefs among the four participants in this study, interviews of each were conducted and audio-recorded. The researcher transcribed the interviews were transcribed and then each transcript was sent to each participant for review. Each of the transcripts were each coded and analyzed using the same methods regarding analysis of field notes taken from the twenty observations conducted. Using these methods of analysis, several themes emerged from each interview.

The most substantial threats to the credibility, or internal validity, of this study include selection of teachers, dates/times of observation, and researcher bias. At each school, one 10th grade language arts teacher was selected for observation and interview; each volunteered or was referred to the researcher by a school's administrator for participation in this study. Dates and times of observation present a threat to the internal validity of this study, as the dates and times observed were chosen by mutual agreement of the researcher and each teacher, based on dates and times that the researcher was available and the teacher was teaching the same group of students. All of the dates selected for observation occurred within one month prior to FCAT testing, which one could argue would be a time when a substantial amount of test-centered instruction might occur.

Researcher Bias

Researcher bias could arguably come into play in the gathering and analysis of observation notes and interview themes. Toward that end, the researcher's dissertation chair played a significant role in questioning and guiding the researcher in order to minimize researcher bias. Other, lesser, threats to the credibility of this study include instrumentation (the observation instrument has been used previously in other research studies). Additionally, the observation instrument was field tested with a colleague of the researcher's

prior to usage in this study. The researcher observed her in her classroom setting and then met with her (as well as his chair) to go over results of this analysis.

Results

Each of the four participants discussed the pressure placed on teachers and students because of the FCAT. They also described the extent of school administrators' involvement with curriculum, annual evaluations, and the FCAT.

Table 1

Amount of contact time spent engaged in student-directed activities

| | High Performing Schools | | Low Performing Schools | |
|---|-------------------------|-------------|------------------------|---------------|
| | Athens HS | Hamilton HS | Jackson HS | Pine Crest HS |
| Minutes in student-directed activities | 150 | 80 | 0 | 0 |
| Percentage of class time in student-directed activities | 60% | 32% | 0% | 0% |

Instructional Practices at High-Performing Schools. At both of the classrooms in high performing schools, several instances of student-led activities, the provision of student choice in the curriculum, and an emphasis on reading-related activities and assignments, both in and out of the classroom, were observed with great frequency. In both settings, higher order thinking skills were emphasized. Talking specifically about the FCAT was rare among the teacher or the students. Student-directed learning was part of the normal daily routine in these classrooms, as demonstrated above in Table 1.

Both teachers at high performing schools consistently displayed a high level of rapport with their students. The teachers utilized technological innovations, such as PowerPoint presentations, or other, more traditional props, to foster learning and interest in language arts. Their classrooms were positive learning environments. Students were generally attentive to, and participated in, the lesson or activity, regardless of whether such activities were student-led or teacher-led. Both teachers planned creative and entertaining lessons for their students on a regular basis, activities that gave students ample opportunities to develop their reading and writing skills. Classroom management or discipline-related issues were rare in both classes, and hardly ever consisted of more than a few minutes of chatter. In both classes, the teacher easily redirected students towards the class activity.

Table 2

Mean number (n) of reprimands issued by teacher per period observed

| | Athens HS | Hamilton HS | Jackson HS | Pine Crest HS |
|---|-----------|-------------|------------|---------------|
| n | 0.8 | 1.8 | 2.6 | 2.0 |

Low-Performing Schools. In the low performing schools, there was a high level of teacher-directed activity. Students were given little opportunity to lead the class or to conduct any significant, curriculum-related activities in class. At the low performing schools, none of the instructional time was student-directed. Reading activities unrelated to the FCAT were not stressed in either setting, the FCAT itself was mentioned frequently by both teachers as well as the students.

Many of the classroom learning activities stressed lower order thinking and learning basic skills. In both settings, there was a low level of interest or participation in the learning process by students. Teachers in low performing schools were more likely to reprimand their students than were teachers in high performing schools as shown in Table 2.

In contrast, students in high performing settings seemed to be more engaged than the students who were observed in low performing school settings. Student participation in lessons at low performing schools frequently consisted of students randomly shouting out answers to questions posed by the teacher.

In both of the low performing schools, students acted as passive recipients of knowledge. Student interest in learning, and in the classroom activities, was observed to be very low. Students often were inattentive. The teacher frequently had to redirect students' off-task behavior. In both classrooms at least one student, and often more than one, was observed with his/her head down for substantial amounts of time during instruction. Both teachers often overlooked this activity. Students in both classrooms frequently were seen playing with cell phones, CD players, and other gadgets, rather than completing assigned work. Student chatter, unrelated to the content or lesson, was commonplace in both settings. Assignments in both classrooms consisted often of seatwork that explicitly related to the Sunshine State Standards benchmarks and the FCAT.

Teachers' Instructional Beliefs at High Performing Schools. The interviews revealed that the teachers at high performing schools each hold an open and dynamic view of the curriculum and believe that curriculum is a reciprocal rather than a linear process. Both teachers stressed their belief that the curriculum should be tailored to the students' needs. They also mentioned that the curriculum decisions they make do not consider the FCAT specifically. They also asserted that they do not "teach to the test." Both teachers emphasized that teaching and learning in the language arts classroom should be student-centered. The teachers reported that their learning did not remain static over time and that they made adjustments as needed on an annual, monthly, or even daily basis.

These teachers reported that they were proponents of giving students real choices, decision-making power, and ownership over aspects of curriculum planning. Both reported that an emphasis on teaching and learning literacy skills weighed heavily in their curriculum planning. Their statements suggested they had a high level of efficacy. Neither teacher plans their curriculum around texts, although both utilize texts to suit their needs.

Teachers' Instructional Beliefs at Low Performing Schools. The FCAT itself received much more consideration from teachers at low performing schools. Both teachers discussed the pressure they felt from the FCAT, coupled with the historically low student scores. As a result, the state and district had gotten involved in curriculum decisions made for language arts classes at their schools. Perhaps as a result of this outside involvement, both of the low performing teachers viewed curriculum as linear, or top-down, unlike the teachers at high performing schools.

Both discussed the importance of the Assistance Plus Plan, and/or the mini-lessons associated with this state-based plan for failing schools. One lamented about the amount of instructional time lost to Assistance Plus, noting that teachers must incorporate it into their curriculum. Both students and teachers, according to the teachers, experienced pressure and frustration due to state and district demands placed on these schools as a result of low school grades. They stressed the challenging nature of their school environments. The teachers focused on the need to understand and accommodate students of different cultural backgrounds. One stated that she could only do fun and interesting, student-centered activities after students had taken the FCAT.

Table 3

Emergent Themes from analysis of observations and interviews

| High School Name | Observations | Interviews |
|------------------|--|---|
| Athens HS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Student choice *Positive environment *Student-directed activities *Emphasis on reading *High efficacy *Technology *Rapport with students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Open view of curriculum *Student centered teaching and learning *Little focus on FCAT |
| Hamilton HS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Student-directed activities *Student choices *Emphasis on reading *Teacher provides guidance, scaffolding *Rapport *Little discussion of FCAT *Positive environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Practical teaching *Emphasis on literacy and language skills *Student influence on curriculum *Move away from texts *County assessments as a hindrance |
| Jackson HS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Teacher-directed activities *High efficacy *Low level of student participation *FCAT emphasis strong | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Mama factor *Nature of, and changes to, the school environment *FCAT *Assistance Plus Program |
| Pine Crest HS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Negative environment *FCAT emphasis strong | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Emphasis on low level learners |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| | *Teacher-directed activities *Low level activities | *Cultural differences *Curriculum as top-down *F grade for the school |
|--|---|---|

Correspondence among Teachers' Beliefs and Instructional Practices

Emergent codes generated from analysis of observations corresponded with the attitudes, beliefs and perspectives that emerged during interviews with the teachers at both the low and the high performing schools. Among these four participants, teacher beliefs and instructional practices generally corresponded. However, there were differences between the emergent themes among high and low performing teachers. Both high performing teachers believed in, and modeled student-centered teaching and learning rather than teacher centered approaches. Both low performing school teachers believed in, and modeled more teacher-centered teaching and learning styles more often than student-centered practices.

Additionally, the emphasis on the FCAT evident, both in belief and practice, among both participants from low performing schools, stands in contrast to the lack of emphasis on the FCAT, again both in belief and practice, among both participants from high performing schools.

Table 3 above illustrates the disparities and similarities in emergent themes from teachers at high performing schools, Athens HS and Hamilton HS, in comparison with teachers from low performing schools, Jackson HS and Pine Crest HS.

High Performing Schools. Both frequently included students into the curriculum design and implementation process. During their interviews, these teachers described why it was important to incorporate students' interests and needs in the curriculum decisions they make. Another theme that emerged during observations and their interviews was a practice and a belief that reading skills should be emphasized during classroom instruction but that the FCAT should be de-emphasized.

Low Performing Schools. There was a correspondence among low performing teachers. Both reported and practiced teacher-centered teaching and learning. No time in their classes was spent in student-directed activities; teaching and learning were exclusively teacher-directed, as reported in Table 1. Additionally; the FCAT, as well as the school grading formula, were significant influences on both beliefs and practices among both teachers at low performing schools. Their classroom activities centered on the following: planning for the FCAT, focusing on the benchmarks, and discussing the FCAT itself with students somewhat regularly.

Classroom observations and teacher interviews showed that the practices and beliefs of teachers at high performing schools differ from the practices and beliefs of teachers at low performing schools. At the high performing schools classroom observations showed that participants utilized more student-centered instructional practices and learning methods, and emphasized outside reading among their students. Teacher interviews showed that these practices were reflected in teacher beliefs among high performing schools. Analysis of emergent themes from both observations and interviews showed that teacher beliefs and practices among participants from both high performing and low performing schools were considerably consistent within each group, although there were stark differences between the groups both in teacher beliefs and teacher practices. Additionally, teacher interviews showed

that teachers at low performing schools consider the FCAT much more heavily in curriculum-related issues than their counterparts at high performing schools.

Discussion

In the current environment of high-stakes testing in Florida, teaching 10th grade English in a public high school in Florida is rife with pressure and opportunity for teacher and student alike. Using the information obtained through interviews and observations, there were clear differences in instructional practices between teachers in the high performing schools and the low performing schools. The wide range of instructional practice, coupled with the widely different levels of performance on the same test by students in similarly diverse settings residing in the same school district supports the nonlinear interrelationship thesis between culture, teacher beliefs, teacher practices and student learning among at-risk students advanced by Aness (2000). The instructional practices observed in the low performing schools indicate eschewing of student-centered teaching methods in favor of teacher-centered methods, suggesting movement away from culturally responsive teaching, (Gay, 2000) in precisely the environment where it is most needed.

In the high performing schools, teachers emphasized the use of outside reading activities in the curriculum. Teachers reported little direct, outside influence into their classroom curricular decisions. They found ways to involve students in curriculum design and implementation, arguably making reading more enjoyable and fun for students, without losing sight on developing their literacy skills. These activities were not developed with the FCAT in mind; nonetheless students achieved the benchmarks set by the state and measured on the FCAT. The high levels of teacher efficacy noted in the high performing schools suggests internal school cultures at both schools that are more conducive to supporting reform efforts. Arguably, these teachers felt freer to make (and allow their students to make) real decisions about the curriculum taught in their classes.

The findings in this study confirm the theory that the presence of the FCAT has affected the curriculum. Teachers at low performing schools demonstrated the impact of the FCAT and its benchmarks in their daily teaching in the interviews and classroom observations. Some influence was probably due to outside pressure placed on these schools to increase performance. Additionally, both the state and the school district had taken some control of the curriculum away from classroom teachers and mandated them to focus on assessments and mini-lessons. This practice might have been counter-productive because of limited teacher freedom to engender student interest. In essence, as state-imposed mandates increased, students at low performing schools were less likely to develop literacy skills based upon their intrinsic value. External mandates do not help students internalize the motivation to learn to read and write or develop literacy skills as fully or successfully as students who can enjoy reading and writing for its own intrinsic value (Davis & Weber, 1998), nor do they engender school cultures that are equipped to support and carry out school reform efforts (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Teachers in high performing schools are more likely to utilize learner-centered teaching models. In both of the high performing schools, the teachers gave students opportunities to plan and carry out lesson plans related to the curriculum. These assignments fostered higher order thinking skills among students because they were required to analyze, interpret and synthesize information on their own before presenting it to the class. Second,

the methods of teaching utilized by high performing school teachers corresponded with the social and personal models of teaching described by Joyce and Calhoun (1996), unlike the behavioral methods of teaching utilized by low performing school teachers. The curriculum in the high performing schools was co-constructed with the students. These teaching methods support culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000). In the low performing schools, the curriculum was teacher-directed and explicitly tied to the benchmarks measured by the FCAT.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the state and school district would be better served if they focused their efforts on developing the literacy skills of low performing school students. This is not to say that teachers and students in low performing schools should not be held accountable for their test scores. The implication is that the state's decision making authority, with regards to classroom lesson planning, is more likely to produce the improvements in literacy among low performing schools if the schools themselves had greater freedom to plan and develop curriculum, as exists in the high performing schools. This suggestion is consistent with Ross' (2003) finding that an emphasis on testing results actually lowers student academic performance and increases dropout rates.

Ball and Farr (2003) offer several considerations for teachers to employ in order to inform and account for cultural variances when designing, planning and delivering English language arts instruction. These include cultural scaffolding, using interactive technology and an awareness of what the authors term "ethno-sensitivity," in order to develop fully functional communication and teaching norms in today's diverse classroom. Given the racial and ethnic diversity present in all four of these settings, use of these strategies arguably would assist teachers in low performing schools in their instructional efforts.

Teachers at low performing schools should emphasize outside reading activities to develop student literacy. They should strive to get students more involved in lesson planning and curriculum activities. Generating interest in reading and writing on their own, without emphasizing the FCAT would engender student-centered instruction and learning in low performing schools. This practice would likely lead to more developed literacy skills and improved standardized test scores (Davis & Weber, 1998; Gay, 1994; Kordalewski, 2000; Luker, Cobb & Luker, 2001; Stiggins, 2002). Teachers at low performing schools should be given access to, and training in instructional strategies that focus on ways to get students motivated and excited about reading and writing. Perhaps it is ironic that the classes that have the history of better performance on the FCAT are those classes in which instruction is less focused on the benchmarks or the test itself. The pressure of the FCAT, a recurring theme of this study, might be alleviated in the low performing schools if their stakeholders -- including students, teachers, administrators, and policymakers -- placed less emphasis on the test and more emphasis on teaching and learning literacy skills in an environment that accounts for cultural differences among students. Allowing teachers and administrators the flexibility to implement school-based reforms and decision-making authority as needed is one sign of a healthy and proactive school culture (Allington, 2004; Lewin, 2003, Gay 2000, Deal & Peterson, 2009).

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