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Learning Focused Schools Strategies: The Level of Implementation and Perceived Impact on Student Achievement

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Abstract

Max Thompson's Learning Focused Strategies approach to school improvement has been embraced by school leaders and teachers as an approach to redesign and reform public schools. The program developers claim schools with 90% minority students and 90% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch programs can achieve at high levels on required curriculum. Examined are the beliefs and attitudes of teachers as related to the degree of implementation of Learning Focused Strategies in their classrooms. The study supported the premise that LFS are research based and effective, that teachers believe the strategies will improve instruction, high level of implementation, enhancing the potential for student success. The study examined the relationships between experience, grade level, degree level, and the self reported degree of implementation.

Introduction

The Learning Focused Schools model as designed by Max Thompson's Learning Concepts, Inc., has gained widespread acceptance in many Georgia schools. Large numbers of school leaders and teachers have embraced the concepts as the approach needed to redesign and reform public schools. Claims by program developers that schools with 90% minority students and 90% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch programs can achieve at high levels on the required curriculum has fueled the interest of many school leaders. These claims of reform and the success of these reforms have been substantiated by Dr. Douglas Reeves, President of Center for Performance Assessment, in many of his publications, including his book, *Accountability in Action: A Blueprint for Learning Organizations*. Other research and writings providing some support for these claims include Schmoker, Marzano, Carter, Haycock, and Peters and Waterman.

Max Thompson's Learning Concepts, Inc. is dedicated to promoting comprehensive, continual school improvement and increasing achievement for all students (Thompson & Thompson, 2000). The acceptance of this statement by school leaders has created a groundswell of support of the strategies that appear to have an extended life past what might be termed an educational fad.

Another consideration is whether teachers, who are so resistant to changing the basic way they conduct the instructional processes in their classroom, will be willing to accept this reform over the long term, and whether it will be successful in achieving the goals and objectives established by both Georgia educators and by Max Thompson.

Though a comprehensive study relating achievement to the implementation of Learning Focused Schools' strategies is needed, the purpose of this study is to examine the beliefs and attitudes of teachers in relation to the degree of implementation of learning focused strategies in their classrooms. The study is based the premise that if this program is indeed research based and effective, teachers believe the strategies will improve instruction, and they report a high level of implementation, the potential for student success is enhanced. This study is also designed to explore teacher acceptability of a "canned" reform model. A further purpose of this study is to examine the

relationships between experience, grade level, degree level, and the self reported degree of implementation.

Literature Review

Max Thomson's Learning Focused Schools model as an approach to improve the academic performance for students has become popular with schools and school districts looking for research based school improvement processes. The Thompson model has not been around long enough for there to be a solid research base for it on its own merit. Max Thompson (personal communication, November 19, 2002) described his approach as an instructional model or philosophy rather than a program. He further stated that the instructional methodology offered as a part of his Learning Focused Schools strategies training workshops were ideas that were research based. He offered as the research base the vast work in the 90/90/90 schools done by the Performance Assessment Center, headed by Dr. Douglas Reeves and others (Thompson and Thompson, 2000). The 90/90/90 schools research included four years of test data (1995-1998) from 130,000 students in 228 buildings. The 90/90/90 schools had the following characteristics; more that 90 percent of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch, which indicates low income families, more than 90 percent are from ethnic minorities, and more than 90 percent of the students met or achieved high academic standards. The common characteristics of the 90/90/90 schools are: a focus on academic achievement, clear curriculum choices, frequent assessment of student progress, and multiple opportunities for improvement, and an emphasis on writing, and external scoring (Reeves, 2000a).

Reeves says that schools must have a clear view of what success looks like in order for there to be success in the classroom. He believes that teachers should create assessment tools for describing and measuring success then plan curriculum around that assessment. Finally, he says teachers must really evaluate whether the activities they are doing will truly help them to accomplish their vision of success (Reeves, 2000b).

At the school level the principal must rely on data-driven decision making and focus staff development on areas that are really needed by teachers. The classroom must be focused on success. Reeves stated that in great classrooms assessments are standards based, teachers provide students with a spectrum of varied tasks to learn the material, and each task that is assigned has a separate and comprehensive scoring guide. In the school, the principal must focus on the important aspects of learning in every teacher's classroom. Principals should also provide additional time for productive planning on implementing learning focused activities and encourage collaboration among grade levels and subjects, and understand and evaluate the risk of every change made (Reeves, 2000c).

In order for schools to improve their instructional processes they must change the way teachers go about the daily business of student instruction (Janas, 2003). In this time of accountability for students results administrators must grapple with creating not only instructional changes, but changes in the very culture of their schools. These changes are not easily brought about often because a large gap exists between teacher knowledge and practice and the vision and reality of the change. Janus (2003) suggested that administrators should expect resistance to change and develop strategies to minimize its effects.

Wagner (2001) suggested that teachers are distrustful of change and offered three factors which contribute to this resistance. The first is risk aversion. Teachers, according to Wagner, are tired of quick fixes and fads that have flooded education for the past 30 years. The second contributor is craftsmanship. Craftsmanship is the work and effort teachers put into the design of their instructional units and the pride they feel in their labors and creations. The third factor is teacher isolation. Teachers are confined to their classrooms, isolated from the school as a whole, and from the changes in the world around them.

Sparks (1997) said that much of the blame for the resistance of teachers to change lies with the staff developers and the past experiences that teachers have had with staff development. Sparks noted that most of the changes occur without any input from the people actually in the classroom, which has resulted in many veteran

teachers forming a resistance to change.

According to Jonathan Supovitz and Susan Poglinco (2001), leaders must create coherence in the school improvement effort. This means that all involved in the program implementation understand that there is a common goal to which every one is accountable and that policies, practices, and resources are aligned with that goal (Lashway, 2002).

David Conley (1994), in describing the impact of model reform programs, said that educators have pursued a shimmering rainbow of promising programs: outcome-based education, the Madeline Hunter model, assertive discipline, site-based management, Goals 2000, standards –based reform, and block scheduling, to name a few, and although there may well have been a place for programs like these, they were likely to fail if they were viewed in isolation. Conley contended that changes in education had often reflected a “project” mentality, in which schools are buffeted by a steady stream of episodic innovations and as a result, these programs have tended to come and go without leaving a mark on student achievement. Conley implied that most education reform programs seem to give the appearance of significant change (change to enabling variables) but are not accompanied by changes in teaching and learning.

Susan Fuhrman and Allan Odden (2001) pointed out that the discussions of education reform were not always harmonious ones: conflicting opinions frequently created a clamor as certain voices rose to the forefront and faded away leaving practitioners to sort through the noise and understand what was working and what was not. Fuhrman and Odden suggested a “theory of action” about what it takes to make better schools. They said that first there must be clear and ambitious goals, together with such indicators of results as coherent educational standards and sound measures of student achievement; second, the core technology of education (instructional practice) must change dramatically; and third, dramatically improved instruction requires an extensive investment in continuing professional development, in developing a strong curriculum, and in leadership at the system and school levels (Fuhrman and Odden, 2001).

In a review of five large-scale school reform efforts, Leithwood, Jantzi, and Mascall (2002) concluded that most large –scale reforms have not produced gains in student achievement. Furthermore, they reported when using available data on other types of student related outcomes across the five cases, the results were negative. None of the cases of large-scale reform demonstrated evidence of increasing graduation rates, college attendance, or student retention. Ben Levin and John Wiens (2003) questioned why the results of so many reforms been so disappointing. They concluded that the answer is no mystery. They contended that improved student outcomes resulted from appropriate changes in classroom and school practices that were widely accepted and implemented by teachers, seen as meaningful by students, and supported by parents and communities. Reforms have not worked because they have not focused on the things we know can affect student performance in schools (Levin & Wiens, 2003).

The argument of whether model reform programs have had a positive impact on student achievement will continue. In specific situations and at specific locations, some reform programs had a positive impact on student achievement. What remains a problem is that a number of factors, both political and within the education establishment, prevents any measurable success for reforms. Successful reforms are slow and steady processes and do not generally meet the political needs of immediate improvement. Politicians react to the dynamics of the system they inhabit and those dynamics are not well understood by most people. This creates a lack of patience in politicians and the community as a whole making it difficult for the reforms to have a lasting impact. From inside the education establishment there a myriad of problems associated with unions and professional organizations, top-down initiatives, a lack of understanding of the reforms, a lack of common goals, leadership problems, and shortages of resources (Levin & Wiens, 2003).

Methods

The questionnaire for the study included the collection of demographic data about the responders. It addressed nine of the strategies suggested by the Learning Focused training staff as essential to improve academic achievement. These included: essential questions, activating and linking strategies, distributed guided practice/summarizing, extending and refining activities, summary strategies, concept maps, acceleration, formative rubrics, and cognitive teaching strategies.

The data for this study were collected through a forced choice questionnaire. The questionnaire was titled “Learning Focused Strategies: Implementation Level Teacher Survey” and included 19 items divided into three sections. In the first section were four items concerned with demographic information of the respondent. The second section was comprised of five items soliciting information about the respondent’s training in Learning Focused Strategies (LFS) and its impact on their classroom instruction. The items were presented in a Likert format and responses of agreement ranged from “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neutral,” “agree,” or “strongly agree” (scored 0-4). The last section included nine items asking the respondents how often they use the LFS in their classrooms. Responses were “less than once per month,” “at least once per month,” “at least once per week,” or “daily” and were scored 0 to 3, respectively.

Respondents

The respondents to the survey were 98 (of 105) teachers enrolled in graduate courses in Educational Leadership. Because the focus of the investigation was implementation of LFS in classrooms only respondents who were full-time classroom teachers and who had received training in Learning Focused strategies were included in analyses. Participation in the study was voluntary and the questionnaires were completed anonymously.

Results and Discussion

Characteristics of Respondents

The sample included 39 (39.8 %) elementary school, 22 (22.4 %) middle school, and 30 (30.7 %) high school teachers. Seven respondents taught classes, such as physical education, that spanned across grade levels. The majority of respondents (67.3 %) had between 5 and 20 years of teaching experience. Twenty (20.4 %) had fewer than five years experience and 12 (12.2 %) had more than 20 years. The amount of LFS training received by the participants ranged from two days (13.3%) to five days (59.2 %). Twenty seven (27.5%) of the teachers surveyed received three or four days of LFS training.

Teacher Acceptance of LFS

To assess whether teachers’ believe the Learning Focused strategies training impacts student learning, the frequency of responses was calculated for the five items in the second section of the survey. The responses were converted to percentage scores and are presented in Table 1. The results indicate that over one-half of the teachers (58.7 %) believe that LSF has had a positive impact on student learning. A majority of respondents believe that their lesson plans are reflective of a curriculum that has been prioritized by the state Quality Core Curriculum.

Table 1

Percent of responses to statements about LFS and classroom instruction

Statement	Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	
LSF has made a positive impact on the learning in my classroom	2.1	9.3	29.9	47.4	11.3
The curriculum I teach has been prioritized using the Georgia QCCs	2.1	3.1	8.2	47.4	39.2
The units I teach are related to the prioritized curriculum.	2.1	2.1	15.6	45.8	34.4
Lesson plans are related to the units.	1.0	2.1	9.4	47.9	39.6

Classroom Implementation of Strategies

To determine the level of classroom implementation of LFS, responses to the nine items in section three of the survey were tallied and converted to percentages. Table 2 presents the results. The results indicate that the majority of teachers use the strategies at least once per week with the exception of the formative rubrics strategy. This strategy is used once per week or more by only about 29 % of the respondents. The most popular strategies appear to be the use of essential questions, activating and linking, and distributed guided practice.

Table 2

Classroom implementation of LFS

Strategy	Daily (%)	At least once per week (%)	At least once per month (%)	Less than once per month (%)
Essential Questions	71.3	23.4	3.2	2.1
Activating and Linking Strategies	45.7	47.9	5.3	1.1
Distributed Guided Practice	57.0	35.5	3.2	4.3
Extending/Refining Activities	15.4	63.7	14.3	6.6
Summary Strategies	48.9	35.9	8.7	6.5
Concept Maps for Units	12.2	53.3	21.1	13.3
Acceleration Strategies	13.0	52.2	23.9	10.9
Formative Rubrics	4.4	24.2	44.0	27.5
Cognitive Teaching Strategies	39.6	46.2	7.7	6.6

Relationships between Demographic Variables and LFS Implementation

earned with the self-reported degree of implementation of Learning Focused strategies, bivariate correlation coefficients were calculated using Spearman's correlation formula. Results were evaluated at $\alpha = .05$ for statistical significance.

No statistically significant relationships were found between years of teaching experience and the degree of LFS implementation or between highest degree earned and degree of LFS implementation. However, grade level taught was found to be related to two Learning Focused strategies. The use of formative rubrics, which was the least implemented strategy, was found to be positively correlated with grade level taught ($r_s (N=84) = .30, p<.05$). In contrast, the use of cognitive teaching strategies was negatively correlated with grade level taught ($r_s (N=84) = -.23, p<.05$). Additionally, a negative correlation was also found between grade level taught and agreement with the positive impact of LFS on student learning ($r_s (N=84) = -.36, p<.05$).

The data reflect and support several important issues. Of teachers surveyed, 58.7% either believed or strongly believed that LFS has had a positive effect on the achievement of their students, 86.6% believe the LFS process has led to all teachers utilizing the prioritized curriculum set by the state, 80.2% reported the units taught were related to that prioritized curriculum, and 87.5% felt that teachers' lesson plans utilized in classrooms were reflective of the prioritized curriculum.

The results indicate that middle and high school teachers use formative rubrics in their instruction more frequently than do elementary teachers. This might suggest that teachers at the higher grade levels expect their students to take greater responsibility for their own learning and are more likely to provide them with the information on how their progress will be assessed. On the other hand, these teachers tend to use cognitive teaching strategies less often than elementary teachers. This might be an area of concern if teachers at the higher grade levels are emphasizing factual knowledge rather than higher order thinking skills. In addition, the negative correlation between grade level and agreement with the positive impact of LFS on student learning suggests that teachers at the higher grade levels are less likely to see the importance of emphasizing these skills.

These data indicate that teachers are seriously looking at standards and utilizing them as a source of classroom instruction moving away from individually structuring what is taught and how it is taught in classrooms. LFS training and implementation seem to have contributed to this transition away from isolation by teachers through collaborate training on specific instructional improvement strategies. The data indicate teachers are regularly using most of these strategies in their classrooms on a daily or weekly basis.

Janus (2003) said in order for schools to improve their instructional processes teachers must change the way they go about the daily business of student instruction. Conley (1994) implied that most new reforms seem to give the appearance of change but are not accompanied by changes in teaching and learning. Levin and Wiens (2003) believed reforms have not worked because they have not focused on things we know can affect student performance, providing support for the use of Learning Focused Schools strategies.

The strategies used for this study seem to meet the parameters found in the literature for successful reform. Teachers report a high level of implementation, teachers believe these strategies will improve instruction, and they are supported by research. Based on the data, Learning Focused strategies utilized for this study should enhance the opportunity for student learning.

Learning Focused Schools strategies are being successfully implemented in schools surveyed. To enhance opportunities for instructional improvement and student achievement, additional research involving other Learning

Focused Schools strategies should be considered. Additional research is needed to determine if success in using these and other of Max Thompson's Learning Focused Schools strategies actually improve student achievement.

Limitations

Limitations include issues with the validity and the reliability of the instrument used to gather the data for the study and the degree of participant understanding of the instrument. The study addressed only the strategies advocated by the Learning Focused Schools training as essential to improve student achievement. Another factor limiting the study were issues associated with self reporting of data about one's performance.

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