

THE IMPACT OF THINKING MAPS INSTRUCTION ON READING  
COMPREHENSION OF THIRD GRADE STUDENTS IN A LARGE URBAN  
SCHOOL DISTRICT: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

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### Abstract

With the stakes of the Texas accountability system increasing, schools are searching for resources to help improve thinking and learning. The No Child Left Behind Act emphasizes the federal government's pledge to improve proficiency of readers by the third grade through the use of research-based reading practices in the early grade levels (Nelson, Benner, & Gonzalez, 2003). Thinking maps is an instructional strategy, which is intended to serve as a common visual language for students to foster specific cognitive thinking across all academic content areas. This program evaluation examined if there was a significant difference in the mean gains in reading comprehension scores as measured by the Diagnostic Reading Assessment between students who receive Thinking Maps as a strategy and those who do not. This study also examined students', teachers', instructional specialists' and campus administrators' perceptions of the impact of Thinking Maps on reading comprehension.

Mixed methods were employed. For the quantitative portion of this study, archived DRA data were collected from eight campuses for the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years. Two years of archived DRA data from 456 third grade students who received Thinking Maps instruction and 400 third grade students who did not receive Thinking Maps instruction were included. An independent two tailed t-test was conducted. Four focus groups with 32 students, one focus group with eight teachers, four semi-structured interviews with four campus instructional specialists and four campus administrators were conducted. Transcriptions were analyzed for emerging themes using

a general inductive approach and constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Findings from the t-test reveal that there was a small, but significant difference in scores for campuses that received Thinking Maps instruction. Focus groups with students revealed they believe Thinking Maps promote their understanding of what they read, foster specific cognitive processes, and positively impact their affective domain. The themes from the teacher focus group revealed they believe Thinking Maps reinforce the comprehension skills of students, are easy to use for students and teachers, are a canvas for students to demonstrate understanding, and require specialized and ongoing training for teachers. Finally, emerging themes from the campus administrators' and instructional specialists' interviews revealed beliefs about the importance of prescribed training for teachers, administrators and other staff along with gradual and consistent implementation of Thinking Maps.

Although the quantitative results of the study revealed a very small but significant difference in the means of reading comprehension gain scores between campuses that received Thinking Maps instruction and campuses who did not, the perception of teachers, campus instructional specialists and campus administrators in this study have indicated that their use of Thinking Maps had a positive effect on the reading comprehension of students. The results of this study and recommendations have been provided to assist teachers and school leaders in their decision-making to utilize or improve upon the implementation of Thinking Maps as an instructional strategy.