

Improving Student Reading Scores
in the Freshman Humanities Course

A Special Project

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FACULTY APPROVAL

Improving Student Reading Scores
in the Freshman Humanities Course

Approved for the Faculty

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the project was to assess the effectiveness of a Freshman Humanities course at a large high school in the Columbia Basin of Washington State to improve student literacy. A pre and post test was used in the fall and spring of two consecutive years to determine if freshmen students' literacy scores improved as a result of the Freshman Humanities class. The author found that students improved literacy scores by a minimum of three percent in both years. As a result, the author concluded that Freshman Humanities was effective in improving student literacy.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Background for the Project

In the past few years, many Washington districts have struggled to find a solution for assisting students in becoming successful on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning. Student success was believed to be linked to having the ability to read and comprehend text. If students were unable to comprehend the text, then the students would more than likely perform poorly on the majority of the assessment. The primary concern was that students were struggling with literacy and as a result the students did poorly on the entire test.

One large district in the Columbia Basin of Washington State found the struggle with literacy to be overwhelming. The majority of this district's students were of Hispanic descent and seemed to struggle with grasping the English language more than students in other districts whose first language was English. In addition to language difficulties the district also had a large number of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. These two factors led the high school in the district to implement a class that would focus on increasing literacy among the freshmen students and ideally lead to better success on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning. This class, titled Freshman Humanities, was intended to be taught by English teachers who would receive training in the teaching of literacy and reading skills.

In the fall of 2004 the class was implemented into the freshman curriculum at the

high school. At the time the class was taught in addition to freshman English. In the following years the class was blocked with the English 9 class. The blocking meant that the students had English 9 together and then attended Humanities together, but with a different teacher.

Statement of the Problem

This project focused on the efficacy of the implementation of the Freshman Humanities class. There was no accurate data accumulated to verify whether the class in fact improved student achievement overall and/or whether the students did become better readers as a result of the class. The other concern was whether students performed better on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning as a result of being in Freshman Humanities, but that data was difficult to accumulate and could not be included in this project.

Purpose of the Project

As a result of this project the author intended to demonstrate that a year in the Freshman Humanities class improved students' reading scores. The author also sought to discover if students and staff thought the class was effective in ensuring academic success in the freshman year.

Delimitations

This project was completed in the school year 2006-2007 at a large school in a developing community in Eastern Washington. At the time of the study the school had a student population of over 3000 students. Many teachers in the building were sharing rooms to accommodate the large amount of students, and portables were being added to

create additional space for the school. According to the district website, the school had a 66% Hispanic population, as well as 61% of students on free and reduced lunch. In the 2004-05 school year, the on time graduation rate was 50% (OSPI, 2006).

Assumptions

The intent of the Freshman Humanities class was to increase student literacy, as well as to provide students with the skills necessary to be successful in high school and life. The reason this class was established was because the incoming freshmen of the academic school year 2004-2005 were the first class that would be required to pass the Washington Assessment of Student Learning. Historically incoming freshmen failed many classes during the first year of high school, as well as subsequent years, and students seemed to lack an interest in working toward academic success. The class was created with many objectives in mind; some of these were as follows:

The Freshman Humanities course is the current result of the desire to create a language rich class that engaged students and demonstrated in “real world” ways the importance of becoming literate. Literacy, in the practical sense, involves the ability to access and utilize disparate types of information to produce meaningful outcomes in a person’s life. (Freshman Humanities Handbook, Part 1)

In addition to these goals, the Freshman Humanities class was allowed to use a wide variety of books of high interest to students. The goal was to ensure that students would have a desire to read and to have student choice in the content of the class. The school district supported this idea and allowed a substantial amount of money to go towards the purchase of books, training, and other supplies that would ensure the success

of the class and students. The books varied from low-level fiction books like *Holes* to more complex non-fiction books like *Fast Food Nation*.

Research Question

The author researched whether a year in Freshman Humanities has a positive impact on students' reading and overall performance as measured by the Degrees of Reading Power test. In addition, the author researched whether staff believed the Freshman Humanities class was effective in ensuring academic success as measured by staff surveys.

Significance of the Project

At the time of the study, the Freshman Humanities class had been in existence for three years. From 2005 to 2007 the school began implementing a Small Learning Communities class structure. Many teachers questioned the value of keeping the Humanities class in the Small Learning Communities and thought the class was frivolous with little student benefit. In casual conversation, some teachers noted the students were more prepared for the sophomore and junior years than if the students had not had Humanities. Because there appeared to be a great deal of speculation without substantial facts, the researcher thought to investigate and formulate a more tangible, factual premise that would demonstrate the validity of either case.

Procedure

In fall of the school year 2006 the Degrees of Reading Power test was given to students in all Freshman Humanities classes. This was a pre-test to determine students' reading ability and to select grade appropriate reading materials for students. In the spring,

students were tested again to measure growth over the course of the year. In addition teachers and students were given a survey that assessed personal perceptions on the effectiveness of the Humanities class.

Definition of Terms

independent reading level. This was the highest grade equivalent level at which a learner could read with high accuracy and comprehension.

detracking. This referred to the process of changing over from tracked classrooms to heterogeneous grouping.

Acronyms

EALRS. Essential Academic Learning Requirements

DRP. Degrees of Reading Power

GLE. Grade Level Expectations

WASL. Washington Assessment of Student Learning

CHAPTER 2

Review of Selected Literature

Introduction

To meet the goals of improving student success on the WASL and increase literacy skills, the Columbia Basin district in Washington State pursued the grouping of students into homogenous groups in Humanities and English classes. Homogenous groups provided students with an environment that allowed teachers to be more intentionally focused on improving student literacy skills. “The key for effective homogeneous reading group instruction in today’s classrooms is a small, flexible, group based on instructional need in a specific strategy” (Chapman, 2003, p. 1). Grouping was found to be successful when the structure of the class was flexible (Chapman, 2003).

Grouping students by ability dates back to the early 19th century in American schools and the one room school house (Glass, 2002). Even then, educators understood the importance of meeting “the needs of students working in a wide range of abilities” (Rutledge, 2003). In the Humanities class in the Columbia Basin there was a similar desire to meet student needs and provide the appropriate environment that would be student-centered. The advocates for the Humanities class researched the most effective formats to promote learning and literacy growth of students of varying abilities. The effectiveness of homogeneous grouping versus heterogeneous grouping has been analyzed by educators, psychologists, and sociologists alike. The two methods created controversy over the benefits of grouping versus the hindrance of grouping in education circles for years. Despite controversy over the topic, the goal of grouping students was to

enhance the learning environment for optimum student learning and growth (Cromwell, 1999).

The Rationale for Grouping in Literacy Instruction

A differentiated approach was incorporated in the Freshman Humanities classroom in the Columbia Basin district to account for students' learning needs and diverse abilities. This was supported by such researchers as Rutledge and Tomlinson. Rutledge (2003) defined the manner in which education could be differentiated to meet students' needs:

Differentiated instruction is *proactive*. The teacher assumes that students have differing needs and therefore plans a variety of ways for learners to express learning.

Differentiated instruction is more *qualitative* than quantitative. Simply adjusting the quantity of the assignment is usually less effective than adjusting the nature of the assignment to match student needs.

Differentiated instruction is *rooted in assessment*. Throughout the unit teachers use a variety of methods to assess students' developing readiness levels, interests, and modes of learning. Learning experiences are based on their best understanding.

Differentiated instruction provides *multiple approaches* to content, process, and product.

Differentiated instruction is *student centered*. An important premise of differentiated instruction is that learning experiences are most effective when they are engaging, relevant, and interesting.

Differentiated instruction is a *blend* of whole-class, group, and individual instruction.

Differentiated instruction is *dynamic*. Students and teachers are learning together and require ongoing collaboration in order to monitor progress of the student and adjust the learning activities as needed. (Rutledge, 2003, pp. 1-2)

The approach of using differentiated instruction in conjunction with grouping allowed the Humanities teachers in the Columbia Basin district to develop instructional strategies that enhanced learning in the classroom. Differentiated instruction matched the requirements for effective homogeneous grouped classes.

Because differentiation was meant to be student centered and engaging, one standard curriculum was not an effective approach for teaching students with varying levels of experience and interests (Rutledge, 2003). The whole class format did not appear to be effective as Chapman (2003) stated:

The decline of traditional homogeneous reading group instruction has resulted in the bulk of reading instruction in today's classrooms taking place in a whole class format, with one story from a literature-based reading arts program sufficing as the basis of instruction. Engaging but ineffective, authentic literature in these anthologies is often too difficult for the students on the given grade level to read independently. (p.1)

Instead, an inclusive homogeneous grouping format was the solution for making the classroom more student-centered to meet learning needs and styles. It was reported

“...ability grouping, as one part of an integrated language arts program, can provide effective contexts for teaching lower ability readers as well as higher ability readers” (Wilkinson and Townsend as cited in Chapman, 2003, p. 3).

In contrast to a diverse teaching format that focused on students’ needs and abilities, schools were required to show student success on state standardized tests in Math, Science, and English (Cromwell, 2001). “Because of the great and ever-increasing diversity in schools...needed skills may need to be standardized, [but] reading material should be highly diverse” (Goldberg as cited in Chapman, 2003, p.1). The goal of grouping was to blend the two concepts of improving students’ success on standardized tests, while accommodating individual needs. “Schools cannot embrace high standards for all students without addressing the barriers that prevent many students from equal educational opportunity” (Cromwell, 2001, p. 1). Differentiated instruction addressed the barriers that prevented students from equal education opportunities and allowed students at all levels to learn. Rutledge (2003) stated:

For students with disabilities, IDEA 1997 provides that all students, regardless of their abilities must be given the opportunity to become involved with and progress in the general education curriculum. Differentiation of the curriculum is one way to provide that access through the creation of multiple pathways to student learning. (p. 1)

The Structure of Groups in Literacy Instruction

There have been varying views of grouping without a concise definition. “Though tracking and ability grouping are widely used terms, what they actually mean in the

contexts of different schools varies greatly” (Cromwell, 2001, p. 1). Grouping has been referred to as tracking, homogeneous or heterogeneous, in-class groups, and whole class groups. “The seemingly simple notion of grouping pupils by their ability for instruction proves, upon closer examination, to be very complex with many variations” (Glass, 2002, p. 1). One of the variations included tracking. “Tracking...refers to grouping students between classes, offering academic courses in subjects that reflect differences in students’ prior learning or ability” (Cromwell, 2001, p. 1). The Humanities class in the Columbia Basin district was organized in a tracking format in conjunction with the English class.

Terms such as tracking and flexibility had a vagueness that added to the complexity of appropriate grouping. Flexibility meant being able to modify student groups throughout an academic hour. Flexibility also meant being able to move students to the next level once proficiency had been reached (Chapman, 2003). The meaning of flexibility varied depending on the person discussing grouping. Nelson’s definition of grouping illustrated a format that kept the needs of students central and incorporated the necessity to be flexibility. “Classification of children in groups should frequently be determined by specific purposes...individual children should be regrouped as their performance requires” (Nelson, 1994, p. 3). A format that reflected flexibility of this kind appeared to be the model for effective grouping.

In terms of differentiated instruction, grouping became a critical element of the classroom environment. “When cooperative learning is implemented correctly, five defining elements are present; a) positive interdependence, b) face-to-face promotive interaction, c) individual and group accountability, d) interpersonal and small group

skills, and e) group processing” (Rutledge, 2003, p. 2). Cooperative learning was a format that could be implemented with differentiated instruction and met the parameters of being flexible (Rutledge, 2003). In contrast, homogenous grouping was not considered to be an effective format for students of varying ability levels. As Rutledge (2003) explained:

Homogeneous grouping of students has very different effects for different students. Low ability students perform worse when in groups with other low ability students. However, high and medium ability students benefit from working with peers with the same ability level...utilizing a practice of flexible grouping is best and should be used to meet the needs of all students for a variety of purposes. (p. 2)

In terms of literacy instruction, Chapman (2003) advocated that homogenous grouping was an appropriate format for bringing students to appropriate reading levels.

“How can diverse needs be met?” and the obvious answer becomes, “With diverse instruction!” Now, another obvious question is, “What do diverse needs and diverse instruction have to do with homogeneous?” The answer: small, flexible, homogeneous groups of students assembled for short periods of explicit reading instruction. (p. 2)

Homogeneous grouping required careful planning and a supportive environment to ensure the success of the teacher and the students.

Problems that Interfere with the Success of Grouping

Issues that detracted from the effectiveness of ability grouping were the lack of teacher knowledge, training, and experience (Rutledge, 2003), insufficient research at the high school level of the effectiveness with improving literacy, the increased amount of preparation time and work for teachers (Nelson, 1994), and the lack of support (Glass, 2002). Other downfalls found in ability grouping were the raised awareness of students and parents of students' lower levels of achievement, teachers using one text for all students did not meet individual student needs, and teachers needed more time to find a variety of materials and prepare to instruct students in different groups. The success of grouping also depended on teachers' attitudes and expectations. The use of cooperative learning was encouraged so that students were not always grouped according to ability, but to accomplish tasks and build learning together (Nelson, 1994).

Summary

Researchers argued that students grouped according to ability received a sub-par education and had not been given equal education opportunities (Glass, 2002). Other researchers argued that students at a higher level suffered by being placed in a mixed ability class. Teachers on both sides of the debate did not reach a consensus on the topic (Cromwell, 1999). Glass (2002) stated, "when homogeneous and heterogeneous groups of students are taught identical curricula, there appear to be few advantages to homogeneous grouping in terms of academic achievement" (p. 1). Much of the research showed that higher-level students made academic gains when separated into homogenous groups (Glass, 2002).

At times heterogeneous grouping was viewed negatively because of the reality that not all students were academically advanced or at level. As a result, parents and educators alike became concerned for the well-being and future success of students (Nelson, 1994). In addition, when students were grouped by ability, teachers had the tendency to expect less of students in lower academic groups (Chapman, 2003). In contrast, students in the higher level groups were given higher expectations, and as a result, often had greater achievement and academic success. To combat disparities in student learning of varying levels, recommendations were made encouraging the use of cooperative learning and varying content so students of different abilities could work together not based on ability, but by subject interest (Rutledge, 2003). “Ability grouping, as one part of an integrated language arts program, can provide effective contexts for teaching lower ability readers as well as higher ability readers” (Wilkinson and Townsend as cited by Chapman, 2003, p. 3).

Grouping was most successful when an intentional format and structure was implemented, as opposed to being a haphazard process. “Much of the effectiveness of grouping within the class will depend on the children’s understanding of the purpose for which they are assigned to the groups and on the teacher attitudes and expectations” (Nelson, 1994, p. 2). The formats that made groups effective were the ability to maintain flexibility and modify content and members to best aid students in making academic gains. Grouping worked when teachers modified the format of reading groups instead of relying on literature anthologies and teaching in a whole class format. Material that was diverse and appropriate for students’ reading level needed to be provided. Homogenous

groups also needed to be flexible and small to accommodate for diversity. In addition, the teacher needed to have high expectations of all students, as well as work with students in small groups to meet individual student needs (Chapman, 2003). It was stated:

Schools are “places for students to learn content that is designated, authoritatively, by someone else.” This authoritative designation involves, “Deciding what students should know (content), deciding what they are capable of learning (ability), and finally, reconciling the content with students’ ability to learn it.” The educator’s responsibility is that of “matching students with curriculum.” (Loveless as cited in Glass, 2002, p. 10)

The key for effective homogeneous grouping was educators taking time to consider students’ needs and offering flexible environments that took into account different learning needs and adapted differentiated curriculums that were developmentally appropriate for students of varying abilities.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology and Treatment of Data

Introduction

The author sought to discover whether the Freshman Humanities class was effective in improving student reading scores on the DRP test. Students took the DRP test in the fall of the school year and took the test later the same year in the spring. Throughout the year the Humanities' teachers taught students reading strategies and exposed students to different forms of literature, fiction and non-fiction, and gave students different skills to improve literacy. Throughout the year, various students transferred in and out from the school. To maintain consistency in the test results, the researcher only included results of students that took both fall and spring tests.

Methodology

The author used experimental methods in conducting the research. This consisted of a pre- and post-test given to freshmen students enrolled in the Freshman Humanities class. Students were given the pre-test in the fall of the 2005-2006 school year and the post test in the spring of the same school year. The same process was repeated in the 2006-2007 school year.

Participants

The sample of participants included all freshmen students enrolled in the Freshman Humanities class that took the DRP in fall and spring. If students transferred into the class at a later time and missed one of the tests, the test results

were not included in the study. These sample students were counted as freshmen based on the amount of credits they had acquired or not acquired in high school. If students had less than six credits, by the district's standards, students were considered to be freshmen. In the 2005-2006 school year, 532 students completed the fall and spring DRP tests. In the 2006-2007 school year, 346 scores were compiled.

Instruments

The testing device used was the DRP reading test. The test was a criterion-referenced test that was meant to track students' reading development over time.

Primary and Standard DRP tests are single-objective tests measuring the reading comprehension process – the ability to construct meaning from text.

-These tests consist of carefully constructed nonfiction paragraphs and/or passages on a variety of topics. Words have been intentionally omitted from these paragraphs and passages. Students are asked to fill the conceptual gap by selecting the correct word from a set of multiple choice options. All forms and levels of Primary and Standard DRP tests, from grade 1 to grade 12, measure the same construct of reading.

-The criterion-referenced score scale describes what students are able to read.

-DRP tests are not timed, which means slow readers are not penalized. Most readers are able to finish a DRP test in a single class period.

-Student performance can also be reported in terms of national percentiles, stanines and Normal Curve Equivalents (NCEs).

-DRP tests enjoy broad applicability. Over 4 million are administered annually.

-Primary and Standard DRP test results can be used to select instructional materials...inform parents about their child's reading performance, set performance standards, measure student progress, and conduct evaluations of specific programs such as Title I.

-Selecting test forms and levels often involves some degree of compromise. For continuity of measurement and to provide the most reliable assessment for the greatest number of students, it is best to keep the test forms centered on the ability of the students in each grade. At each testing level, parallel test forms J and K (i.e. of equal difficulty) are available for pre- and post-testing. The easiest DRP test forms, J-0 and K-0, should be used only after students have "mastered" decoding skills. (TASA Literacy)

In the Freshman Humanities class, the J-4 or K-4 was used to measure student comprehension. This aligned with the standard test for students in the 9th grade of school.

Reliability of the test could potentially have been affected by students' attitudes toward test taking. Some students did not understand the value of the test and as a result failed to take it seriously and filled in blanks without completing a careful reading of the text or taking time to perform well on the test. Many Freshman Humanities teachers took time to explain to students the significance of the test and to encourage students the value of showing true reading abilities. Teachers worked to instill ownership in students over reading scores. The main argument teachers used was that the teachers would be better able to assist students in being academically successful if students showed valid responses on the test and in scores.

Design

The author used a pre-test/post-test. The test measured students' reading growth over the span of one school year. The student test scores gave teachers an idea of students' ability to read texts at varying levels of difficulty. For example a student with a score of 54 would be able to read texts at the middle school level; which would include texts such as, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* or *The Hobbit*.

Procedure

All incoming freshmen students were placed into a Freshman Humanities class. Within the first month of the school year, students were given the J-4 or K-4 DRP test. If students were in what was considered a pre-Advanced Placement class, then more than likely students were given the K-4 test. Students placed into the mainstream or lower-level Humanities class, were given the J-4 test. Teachers allowed 2-3 days of class time to ensure that students were provided with sufficient time to calmly take the test. Upon issuance of the test, the students' Freshman Humanities' teacher acted as proctor for the test. This included passing out test booklets, response sheets, as well as pencils for test taking. Teachers then read and reviewed the directions of the test to the students, ensuring that students knew that time would be available as needed and that students were encouraged to try to complete the test as effectively as possible. Upon completion of testing, each teacher was responsible for grading each student's test and entering the data into the TASA database on the TASA computer program. Once the computer compiled the data, the teachers were provided with a printout that detailed students' raw scores, independent reading scores, frustration scores, and national percentile rankings.

This information was then accumulated by the Freshman Humanities department head.

This process was repeated again in the spring. In some cases teachers shared the results of the test with students' teachers in other academic classes.

Treatment of the Data

The test results of students were compiled on a Microsoft Excel worksheet. For the 2005-2006 school year the data included a sample of 532 freshmen students. For the 2006-2007 school year the data included a sample of 346 students. The diminished sample size was due to computer malfunctions, as well as poor data gathering techniques.

The data of each school year was separated into students' independent reading scores and instructional reading level scores. The independent scores consisted of students' ability to read without teacher assistance, whereas the instructional scores were how students would do with the assistance of a teacher or aide. Students' independent and instructional scores were then averaged separately to gauge the growth over each school year. Once the averages were determined, the researcher subtracted the difference between the fall independent reading scores and the spring independent reading scores, as well as the fall and spring instructional reading scores.

Summary

The data from two consecutive years of DRP testing was accumulated to determine the success of the Freshman Humanities course in improving student reading scores at the large high school in the Columbia Basin of Washington State. In total 878 students' scores were analyzed. This information assisted the school district in determining the value of the Freshman Humanities program as well as the potential impact of the class on

other academic courses.

CHAPTER 4

Analysis of the Data

Introduction

Over the course of two years, data was gathered on the progress of students in Freshmen Humanities classes at a large high school in the Columbia Basin of Washington State. The data was accumulated by issuing the Degrees of Reading Power test in the fall and spring of the school years 2005-2006 and 2006-2007. At the end of the two years, 800+ scores had been gathered and analyzed to assess whether students' literacy improved as a result of taking the Freshman Humanities class.

Description of the Environment

This project was conducted at a large high school in the Columbia Basin of Washington State. The school was seeking to have a more positive effect on the incoming freshmen classes, which would be reflected in an increased passing rate, better attendance, and higher student retention. In an ongoing effort to make improvements, the school sought to make the transition into high school easier for students by blocking students in the English and Freshman Humanities classes.

This concept was reinforced with the development of Small Learning Communities. The 2006-2007 school year was the pilot year for Small Learning Communities at this large school. Only a third of the incoming class was placed into the Small Learning Community, which consisted of English, Freshman Humanities, and Math.

The school also was attempting to accommodate the largest student population

that had ever been present at the school before. The school population exceeded 3000 students. In order to accommodate the size of the student population, many teachers shared rooms, new portables were brought in, and mid-year moves were required by many. In previous years, the school had moved to an open campus policy for lunch in order to accommodate the large student population. The two school cafeterias on campus were not enough to house students. The open campus policy continually proved to be a challenge in terms of student attendance. Students who left at lunch often chose not to return afterward, or would return late. The challenges of having a large student body as well as limited space, made the significance of fostering a positive learning environment paramount to student success.

Research Question

The author researched whether a year in Freshman Humanities had a positive impact on students' reading and overall performance as measured by the Degrees of Reading Power test. The author had hoped to discover if students and staff thought the class was effective in ensuring academic success in the freshman year.

Results of the Study

Over the course of two years, data was gathered on the progress of students in Freshmen Humanities class at a large high school in the Columbia Basin of Washington State. Upon analysis of the data, significant growth was demonstrated overall by students. In the 2005-2006 school year students made gains in independent and instructional scores. In independent scores, students

demonstrated gains of 3.7 percent. In instructional scores, students improved 3.5 percent.

The gains, as well as overall average scores, are demonstrated in Chart A.

Chart A

	Total Average	Percentage gained
Fall 2005 Independent Scores	52.8	
Spring 2006 Independent Scores	56.5	= 3.7 % gain
Fall 2005 Instructional Scores	63.7	
Spring 2006 Instructional Scores	67.2	= 3.5 % gain

The 2006-2007 school year showed similar results. Students also made gains in both independent and instructional scores. Independent scores were improved by 3.5 percent and instructional scores were improved by 3.4 percent. Again these results are shown in Chart B.

Chart B

	Total Average	Percentage gained
Fall 2006 Independent Scores	54.9	
Spring 2007 Independent Scores	58.4	= 3.5 % gain
Fall 2006 Instructional Scores	65.8	
Spring 2007 Instructional Scores	69.2	= 3.4 % gain

The total scores were graphed and demonstrated in Appendix A, B, C, and D. The graphs demonstrated the overall growth of students over the course of each year. Appendix A demonstrated students' independent scores in the 2005-2006 school year. Appendix B demonstrated students' instructional scores in the 2005-2006 school year. Finally Appendixes C and D demonstrated students' independent and instructional scores for the 2006-2007 school year.

No data or information was gathered on staff or student feedback. The author was unable to survey or gather data from staff or students on the effectiveness of the class or the effects the class had in other academic areas.

Findings

Upon completion of the research the results demonstrated that a year in the Freshman Humanities class assisted students in making improvements in reading scores. Though each Humanities class followed a unique curriculum specific to the given classroom environment, the overarching teaching of specific reading skills, exposure to various forms of text, and continual teacher support made a significantly positive difference in students' literacy abilities.

Over the course of two years, teaching literacy skills in the Freshman Humanities class made a difference in the development of freshmen students' learning and ability to have appropriate skills to approach texts. The 2005-2006 school year showed an average growth of 3.6 percent, while the 2006-2007 school year showed an average growth of 3.45 percent. These findings demonstrated that if teachers continued to exercise similar classroom practices, students should show growth over the course of subsequent years.

Discussion

The flexibility of the curriculum, as well as the flexibility of the classroom environment, lent to the freedom for teachers to emphasize building particular literacy or other academic skills in the Freshman Humanities class. The need for flexibility was supported by the research on grouping students for improved literacy. The component of flexibility in the classroom may have been one of the aspects of the classroom environment that aided in student growth in literacy.

In addition, teachers having common objectives throughout the teaching of Freshman Humanities appeared to have aided in leading to the gains in reading

scores. Objectives such as teaching literacy skills and reading strategies, as well as differentiating the curriculum to meet varying needs of students, and enforcing a positive learning environment where students felt comfortable and safe, all may have been attributes of the Freshman Humanities class that cumulated in the success of the class, students, and teachers.

Though the Freshman Humanities class was blocked with the Freshman English class, and in some instances the Freshman English teachers reinforced skills from Humanities, most students only received instruction on literacy in the Freshman Humanities class. The intentional teaching of literacy skills appeared to be the determining factor in students' literacy gains.

Summary

This study was undertaken to determine the effectiveness of a literacy development class at a large high school in the Columbia Basin of Washington State. The school was located in a community that consisted of a large Hispanic population and low-socioeconomic families.

As was stated and supported by research in Chapter 2, the success of the study was dependent on teacher willingness to maintain a flexible classroom environment, ensuring that the class was student centered, and focusing on literacy development. Though the classes were initially meant to be separated into strands—a high, middle, and low strand, teachers immediately found that within each class students were at varying reading abilities and differentiating the content was essential.

The Degrees of Reading Power test was used to determine the effectiveness of

the Freshman Humanities class. The test was given as a pre and post test in the fall and spring of two consecutive school years. The results of each year showed positive results and growth of about three percent for each year.

CHAPTER 5

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

Overall the study provided valuable data for the author as to the effectiveness of the Freshman Humanities class. The author had an interest in seeking the historical progress of the Freshman Humanities program from the inception of the program which began the 2004-2005 school year, but was only able to accumulate data from two consecutive years of testing, 2005-2006 to 2006-2007. At the conclusion of the study, the author discovered that in the 2007-2008 school year the Freshman Humanities course was no longer being taught in conjunction with the Freshman English class. The Freshman Humanities course would be taught in Small Learning Communities that would include Math and Science classes. Students would no longer be placed in strands allowing for more heterogeneous classes.

Summary

The author was interested in discovering how effectively the Freshman Humanities class was being taught at a large high school in the Columbia Basin in Washington State. The author was concerned that the curriculum was vague and questioned the confidence of teachers in the teaching of the class. As the author was also a Freshman Humanities teacher, the author was concerned that the efforts being put forth were not impacting students positively. The results of the study showed otherwise. Despite the differences of format from class to class, the overarching goals of teaching literacy skills and maintaining a differentiated

approach led to positive results in students' literacy scores.

An effort was made on behalf of the school to maintain smaller class sizes in the freshmen classes. This was supported by the concept of successful grouping. Grouping was found to be successful when the structure of the class was flexible (Chapman, 2003). "The key for effective homogenous reading group instruction in today's classrooms is a small, flexible, group based on instructional need in a specific strategy"(Chapman, 2003, p. 1). Homogenous grouping required teachers to be intentional about the teaching format and maintaining a supportive classroom environment. In addition, the ability of the teacher to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students at varying levels of literacy was significant to student success.

At a time when standardized testing was frequent, the DRP test proved to be an efficient format for gathering applicable data on the progress of students in the Freshman Humanities class. Generally the test only took one to two class periods of time. The content was not overwhelming making the test accessible to most students, ensuring more student buy in and more accurate test results. The feedback for teachers was often immediate, as teachers scored students' tests and could then set up curriculum to meet the varying needs of each class. The promptness of test results also enabled staff to discuss approaches and methods for teaching the class effectively. The pre and post test format allowed the Humanities teachers to assess growth and develop goals for the subsequent years. The relevant information was fall and spring scores, as these demonstrated the growth of students over the school year. Positive results showed that students had a three percent gain in two consecutive years of testing Freshman Humanities students.

Discovering that students had shown positive growth was encouraging as the school environment was to a degree unstable. The high school was facing the largest school population of the area with 3000 plus students. Throughout the year, classrooms were being shifted to accommodate the size of the student population. The school also struggled with student attendance and high drop-out rates. Despite these factors, success was met.

Conclusions

The results of this study illustrated the significance of teachers having a shared vision, common objectives, flexibility, and a focus on student needs. Despite external environmental factors, the stability and consistency of classroom teachers to ensure a positive atmosphere in the classroom and teaching specific literacy skills, while providing high-interest literature for students and differentiating instruction, had a positive effect on student learning.

Recommendations

The author recommends that a continued effort be placed in the Freshman Humanities class to focus on building literacy skills. Even as the class evolves to work in conjunction with Math and Science classes, it is essential that students be able to apply literacy strategies to additional academic classes and transfer the skills to life beyond the classroom. In addition, the class should maintain the focus of differentiating instruction and ensuring that the content be of potentially high interest for students. Students should continue to be tested and data accumulated at the end of each academic school year. By following the recommendations of the author, the school district will be able to assess the

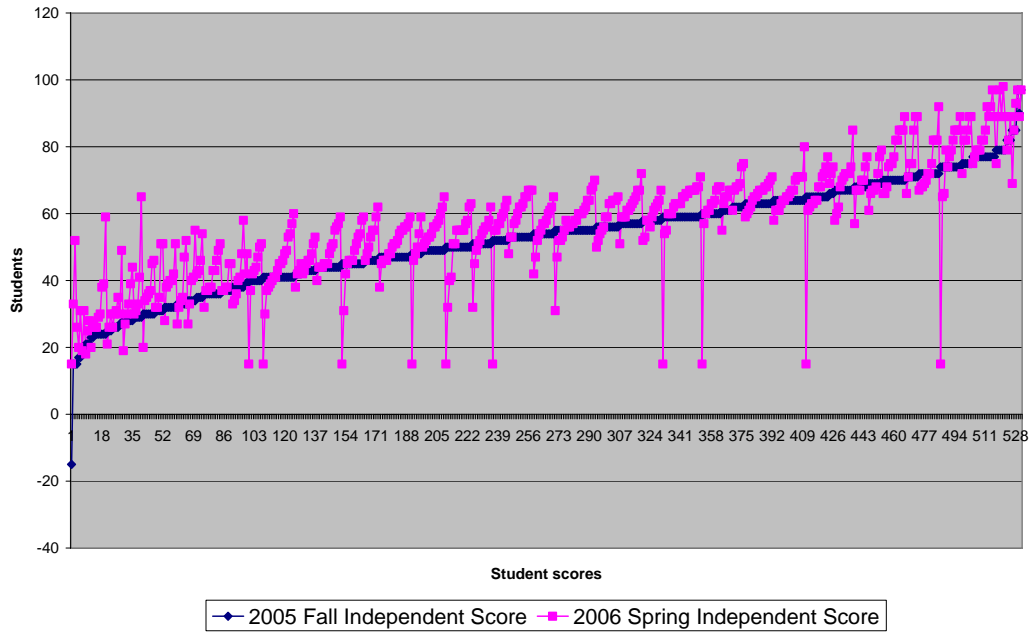
effectiveness of the Freshman Humanities class and make improvements to the curriculum or format of the class when and if it becomes apparent that the class is no longer effective.

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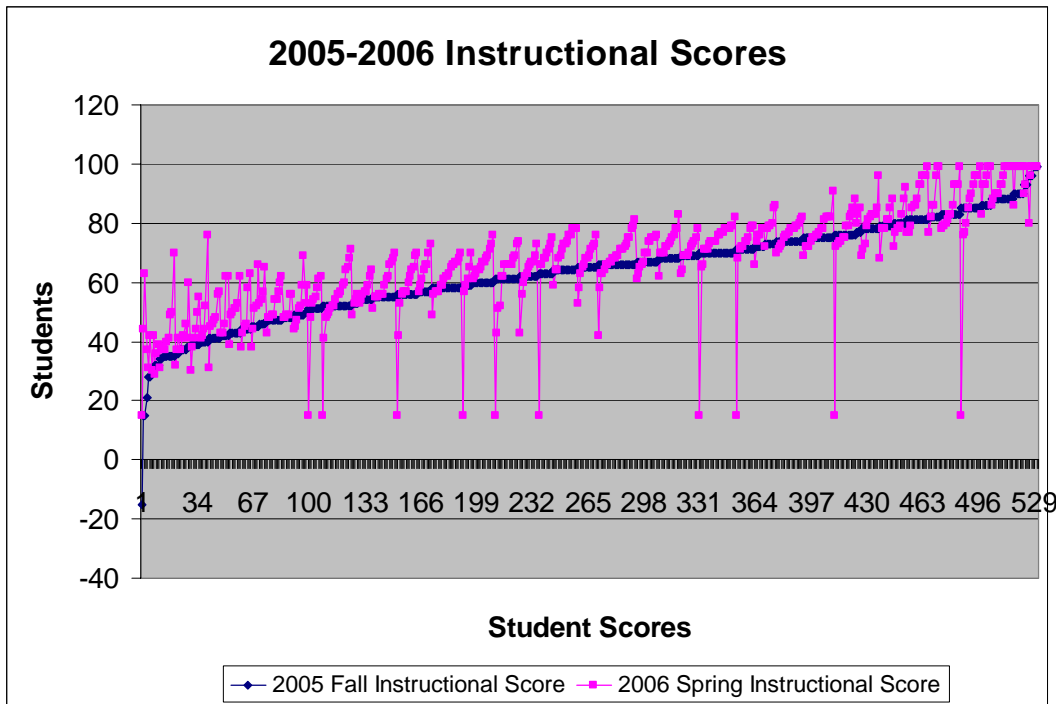
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Appendix A

2005-2006 Independent Reading Scores

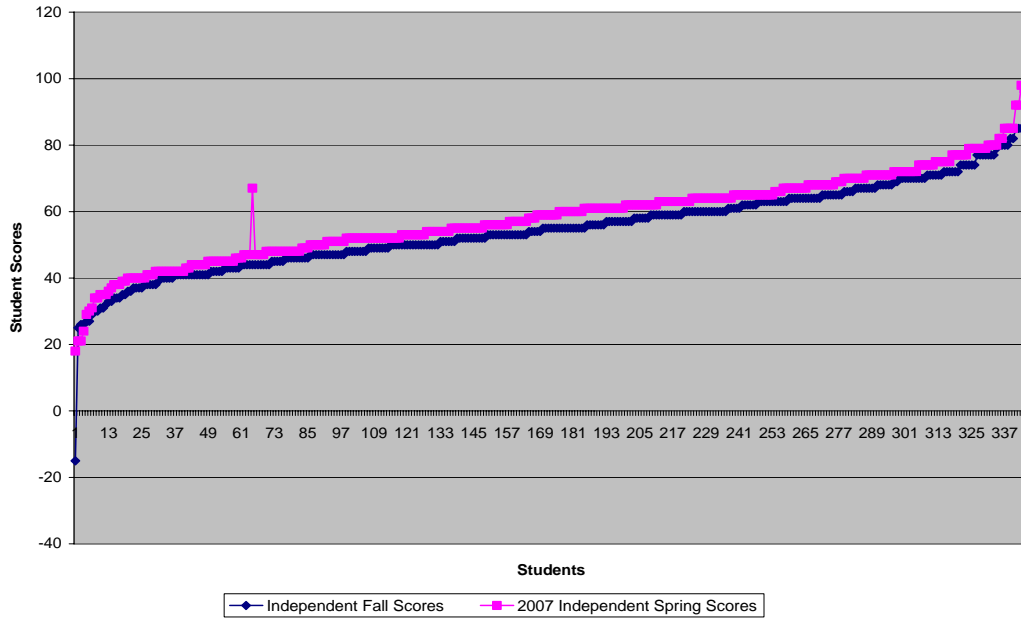


Appendix B



Appendix C

2006-2007 Independent Reading Scores



Appendix D

