5-2022

Implementing Best Practices: Setting Students up for Success

Alaina Wallick

alainawallick@unomaha.edu

Implementing Best Practices: Setting Students up for Success

Honors Capstone

Alaina Wallick

University of Nebraska at Omaha

College of Education, Health, and Human Services

Faculty Advisor: Saundra Shillingstad

May 2022

Table of Contents

Abstract

It is evident that individuals within the education field maintain a high level of

involvement and responsibility within their school role(s). However, the primary purpose of

schooling is to provide a safe, welcoming environment for students to grow socially,

emotionally, and academically. This requires teachers to create thoughtful, applicable lesson

plans to encourage their students to succeed. The purpose of this study is to emphasize the

importance of utilizing one's time to research and develop differentiated instructional strategies

for each unit. For this project, data was collected weekly through an analysis of test scores from

three separate assessments. The assessments were completed at the beginning, middle, and end

of the unit. After reviewing and analyzing this data, I found that incorporating best practices into

my classroom set the students up for success.

Keywords: reflective writing, graphic organizers, differentiation

Introduction

A goal for me as a future educator is to provide a safe, welcoming space for students' growth and achievement. This study was developed based on the question "How does researching and implementing best practices affect student performance?" The purpose of this study is to highlight the importance of researching and developing differentiated instructional strategies for each unit plan an educator creates. For this unit plan, the chosen strategies were graphic organizers and reflective writing.

This study was conducted throughout a unit that focused on short stories. Before lesson planning, I created a calendar to depict goals and activities for each week (see Appendix A). Each week I set a higher expectation for my students as they went from simply identifying literary elements to analyzing text to decipher the meaning and reasoning behind this incorporation of literary elements. These practices were broken into instructional and assessment strategies. I collected data throughout the four-week unit to determine the effectiveness differentiation instructional strategies had on student performance. The primary instructional strategy was graphic organizers–PEEL Paragraphs and Venn Diagrams (see Appendix B). The primary assessment strategy was reflective writing. The effectiveness of the strategies was analyzed through two formative assessments that were administered during weeks one and two and one summative assessment that was administered during week four.

This unit contained 15 differentiated lessons and 5 days for various assessments. It focused on short stories and the literary elements necessary to analyze these stories. Four short stories were analyzed for specific literary elements. These literary elements were symbolism ("A Sound of Thunder" by Ray Bradbury), foreshadowing ("The Monkey's Paw" by W. W. Jacobs),

and irony ("Lamb to the Slaughter" by Roald Dahl). Students spent 1-2 class periods reading, analyzing, discussing, and viewing a short story.

After reading and viewing the text, students would complete a reflective writing strategy called a "word journal" (see Appendix C). This assessment was adapted from a study conducted by Marin (2017) that took place within an elementary math classroom. The researchers would look over student writing samples for code words to address deficits. The study found that the code word strategy allowed students to put misunderstandings or confusions into words. This strategy was implemented into my classroom by having students work on their analysis of mood and tone throughout a text as well as create a theme statement.

Throughout the unit individual writings provided the students with opportunities to practice their analysis skills before the summative assessment was given. This assessment was a culmination of the ideas explored throughout the unit. Students read and viewed "The Chaser" by John Collier, and they then crafted a paragraph contrasting them. Before beginning this assessment, students completed a graphic organizer called a "PEEL" (point, evidence, explanation, link) paragraph with sentence stems. This graphic organizer assists students in formulating their ideas in a concise manner.

<div align="center">

Background

</div>

My study was conducted in an 8th grade classroom located in central Omaha, Nebraska. There were 117 students in the study. One percent of students are English Language Learners, 23% gifted, and 36% receive free and reduced lunch. The student to teacher ratio is approximately 14:1 (Nebraska Department of Education [NDE]). According to the NDE, this school was recognized as a Blue Ribbon school. Blue Ribbon schools are recognized "based on

their overall academic excellence or their progress in closing achievement gaps among student

subgroups" (U.S. Department of Education).

Participants

This study was conducted with 117 students in an 8th grade English Language Arts

(ELA) classroom. I taught lessons across six ELA sections. All sections were 40 minutes. All

students had an Ipad to complete assignments and access readings. Fourteen students were on

Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and one on a 504 plan. These IEPs noted that the students

had deficits regarding reading and writing. The students with an IEP received modified tests

during the unit. They were also provided with the opportunity to take the pre and post-tests on

paper rather than an electronic device.

Methods and Materials

Methods

This unit was broken up into four weeks. Each week focused on a new objective for

students to master. The state standards remained consistent throughout the unit as students were

guided toward mastery of the content. Lessons were co-taught using the one teach, one assist

method. This method has one educator facilitating instruction and one monitoring the classroom

for behavior management and providing individual assistance.

Week One

Introducing Literary Elements.

The initial week of this unit focused on introducing students to this content and making

connections to their background knowledge regarding literary elements from previous English

Language Arts classes. The goals for this week were for students to define literary elements and

identify literary elements within short stories. The first lesson involved students taking notes

over and reviewing definitions of literary elements. The following class had students take a

formative, multiple-choice assessment to understand where students required additional support

or explanation over literary terms. I labeled this data "Pretest," and it found that students were on

track to move to identifying literary elements within a text (see Appendix D).

Identifying Literary Elements.

Students began identifying literary elements within text during the next lesson with a

whole-class reading of "The Monkey's Paw" by W. W. Jacobs. During this lesson, students

received a mini-lesson over foreshadowing before beginning the reading of the text. Students

were also shown a list of common descriptions used for foreshadowing (weather, color,

dialogue). All students simultaneously listened to an audio version of the text over the classroom

speakers. After listening to the text, students completed an exit ticket identifying one element of

foreshadowing they identified within the text. The following lesson contained a whole-class

discussion of the different examples of foreshadowing throughout the text, and they

hypothesized potential meanings behind the foreshadowing.

Assessment.

Students were formatively assessed based on their oral responses to the prompt, and they

completed an exit ticket identifying one example of foreshadowing within the text. Additionally,

students completed a formative written assignment called a "word journal" (see Appendix C).

Students chose a single word to describe their short story then crafted a paragraph explaining

their reasoning behind choosing this word. This reflective writing activity assisted students in

identifying mood and tone throughout a text. Students also completed a formative assessment

that required students to apply literary elements to the text. This assessment contained multiple-

choice and open-ended questions. Students answered open-ended questions regarding their views

on characters within the text as well as discussing how foreshadowing affected the story. This assessment was labeled "Applying Skills," and the data collected indicated an increase in understanding of the content following their pre-test (see Appendix E). To end this week, students viewed a live adaptation of the text to further understand how elements such as sound or color enhance foreshadowing.

Week Two

Introducing Symbolism.

During week two, the goals changed to identifying symbolism throughout a text and hypothesizing the author's reasoning for including symbolism within the text. I provided students with a mini-lesson at the beginning of this class to enhance their knowledge and understanding of symbolism. I also went over how authors denote symbolism through various writing techniques, such as repetition or description. After the mini-lesson, the class listened to an audio version of "A Sound of Thunder" by Ray Bradbury. This short story took up the entire class period, so a discussion over the symbolism within the text took place the following day. Students identified two primary examples of symbolism within the story and considered what the author was implying through the imagery. Students completed an additional word journal that contained the same prompt as the initial one. The symbolism week ended with watching an adaptation of the text from the Ray Bradbury Theater.

Assessment.

The primary assessment focused on students' contributions to the whole class discussion. Students began by reading the posted prompt on the whiteboard: what do you think the butterfly represented in the story "A Sound of Thunder?" After some silent reflection, students discussed potential answers to the question in groups of 3-4. This small group discussion went on for

approximately 5 minutes. Students then came together to share their thoughts as a whole group. This assessment provided students with a new opportunity to showcase their understanding of the content.

Week Three

Week three focused on identifying the three different types of irony: situational, verbal, and dramatic. I presented my final mini-lesson of this unit. I introduced the uses and interpretations of these types of irony. Students also viewed videos that provided various examples of each type of irony. After listening to this information, students viewed video clips from recent movies and television shows to practice identifying each type of irony. These videos were watched as a whole group, and students would raise their hands to provide their answers and reasoning. The nuances between each type of irony required more instructional time compared to the other literary element lessons. Because of this, students spent an entire class period examining the differences between each type of irony. The following day, students listened to and followed along with the story "Lamb to the Slaughter" by Roald Dahl and focused on examples of irony throughout the text. Students' entrance ticket the next day was to identify one example of irony and explain the category into which it falls. This helped refresh the differences between each type of irony as well as give students an opportunity to apply their understanding to the text.

Week Four

The final week of this unit worked to prepare students for their two summative assignments at the end of the week. On Monday, students read or listened to "The Chaser" by John Collier. This was the shortest story of the unit, so students had time to discuss the literary elements throughout it. Students then watched an adaptation of "The Chaser" on Tuesday. This

viewing took the entire class period as the video version included additional information not present in the read version. Students were provided with a Venn Diagram on Wednesday to help them organize their ideas for their written summative paragraph. The prompt for this was: "Identify two key differences you noticed between the text and the film version of 'The Chaser.' How do these differences affect the story? Write a well-organized paragraph explaining your answer. Use specific evidence from each version in your paragraph." To prepare, I led students in filling out their Venn Diagrams based on differences they remembered between each story. The level of prompting on my part varied between classes, and each class ended up with similar answers within each Venn Diagram.

Students received an entire class period to complete their summative paragraphs. This took place on Thursday. Students also received a PEEL Paragraph graphic organizer (see Appendix B). It included sentence stems to assist student writing. Most students completed their paragraphs within this singular class period, but some required additional time during study hall to finish.

Friday concluded this unit with a summative post-test. This post-test was identical to the pre-test, and students were aware of this prior to beginning the assessment. The reasoning behind making the post-test summative was to encourage students to complete it. This would give a more complete picture of students' understanding of the material as well as their growth throughout the unit. I labeled this assessment "Post-test," and the results showed a further increase in mastery of the content (see Appendix F).

Materials

Students had electronic and paper copies of the text. During an initial reading of the text, an audio version was played over the classroom's speakers, and students read the story in a

whole group. The audio was typically accessed through Youtube after evaluation from an educator. When completing word-journals, students could independently use any version of the text to assist them on the assignment. Students would also receive mini lessons or view explanatory videos before analyzing a text for a specific literary element. Word journals were completed on Google Docs that students accessed through Google Classroom. Quizzes and tests were completed on Google Forms that were also accessed through Google Classroom.

Results

Data was collected through a pre-test, mid-test, and post-test. The objective for each assessment was that students answered questions of various levels of analysis with 70% accuracy. The pretest and post-test were identical, multiple-choice assessments that gauged students' overall understanding of literary elements. However, while the pretest was formative, the post-test was summative. This was to encourage student participation on the post-test. The application of skills assessment was conducted after week one to see if student understanding was improving. It contained multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

Pretest

An analysis of the pretest scores regarding literary elements (the focal point of the short story unit these students were about to begin) indicated that a high percentage of students could meet or exceed the expectation of answering multiple choice questions with 70% accuracy. I found that 4.3% of students met expectations while 71.8% of students exceeded expectations. This indicates that over 75% of students were prepared for an increase in expectations with appropriate scaffolding. The results also showed that 11.1% of students did not meet expectations, and they would require further scaffolding to reach the objective. The number of

students who did not take this pretest came in at 12.8% (over 1 out of every 10 students). The

average score of students who completed this assessment was 88.1%.

Application of Skills

  After a class reading and discussion of the short story "The Monkey's Paw" (the first in

this unit), students completed a formative quiz with both multiple-choice and open-ended

questions. These questions built on students' previous knowledge regarding literary element

vocabulary, and it required them to analyze the text for elements such as mood, theme, and

foreshadowing. The average score for this assessment was 86.4% with 2.6% of students meeting

the expectation and 76.1% of students exceeding the expectation. This analysis also showed that

7.7% of students did not meet the expectation. A larger percentage of students did not complete

this assessment: 13.7%.

Post-test

  The post-test for the literary elements unit had the most conclusive results on student

understanding given the low percentage of students not represented within the data: 6.8%. The

average score for this test is slightly lower than the two preceding it: 87.7%. This is likely the

result of some students not receiving the same amount of practice with the other two assessments

as their peers did. Additionally, despite the average score being lower, this is the highest

percentage of students to meet or exceed the expectation of answering the questions with 70%

accuracy. I found that 80.3% exceeded the expectation and 3.4% met the expectation.

<center>**Discussion**</center>

  The purpose of analyzing how graphic organizers and reflective writing impact student

performance is to consider the impact implementing best practices can have on student

performance. Data collected showed that student mastery of standards increased as these best

practices were introduced. Expectations increased along Bloom's Taxonomy to prevent students

from being overwhelmed, and it helped them gain confidence applying the material. Components

of gradual release were also incorporated throughout to ensure expectations for readings and

assignments were understood.

   I found it is imperative to note that best practices are less likely to work if they do not

line up with the objectives involved with each lesson. The use of graphic organizers and creative

writing helped students achieve the standards chosen by their teachers. Other methods that did

not coincide with the unit's objectives could have left students feeling confused or overwhelmed

by the expectations of their summative assessments. I believe it is important for educators to

research best practices for each unit to increase student success.

   My findings show that incorporating these methods requires additional time and research

in a field where time is already stretched thin. Between team meetings, professional

development, and parent conferences, educators might wonder how they can utilize additional

time to research best practices for each lesson. A solution to this problem would be for schools to

incorporate time for research into personal development and team meeting time. It would not

only provide educators with the time to craft their lessons with more meaning, but educators

would also have the opportunity collaborate with their peers to enhance the benefits of

researching best practices.

References

Armstrong, P. (2010). Bloom's Taxonomy. *Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching.*
https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/.

Calvin, K. L., & Gray, S. (2020). Double-bubble thinking maps and their effect on
reading comprehension in Spanish-English bilingual middle school students with learning
disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly,* 1. https://doi-
org.leo.lib.unomaha.edu/10.1177/0731948720958644

Martin, C. S., Polly, D., & Kissel, B. (2017). Exploring the impact of written reflections
on learning in the elementary mathematics classroom. *Journal of Educational Research*,
110(5), 538–553. https://doi-org.leo.lib.unomaha.edu/10.1080/00220671.2016.1149793

Nebraska Department of Education (2021). Westside Middle School school snapshot.
Nebraska Department of Education. https://nep.education.ne.gov/snapshot.html#28-
0066-018

Ramlal, A., & Augustin, D. S. (2020). Engaging students in reflective writing: an action
research project. *Educational Action Research*, *28*(3), 518–533. https://doi-
org.leo.lib.unomaha.edu/10.1080/09650792.2019.1595079

U.S. Department of Education (2022). Blue Ribbon Schools Program. *United States
Department of Education. https://www2.ed.gov/programs/nclbbrs/index.html*

Wei, L. Firetto, C.M., Murphy, P.K, Li, M., Greene, J.A., Croninger, R.M.V. Facilitating
fourth-grade students' written argumentation: The use of an argumentation graphic
organizer. Journal of Educational Research, 112 (5). 10.1080/00220671.2019.1654428.

Appendix A

W k	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	No school - professional development	Review short story elements with Blooket	Short story elements quiz	Read "The Monkey's Paw" Audio of "The Monkey's Paw" Choose word for word journal entry 1	Watch Simpsons Tree House of Horrors "The Monkey's Paw" Write paragraph for word journal entry 1
2	Formative quiz - Monkey's Paw and story elements	Read "A Sound of Thunder" Audio of "A Sound of Thunder" Choose word for word journal entry 2	Watch The Simpsons "Time and Punishment" Write paragraph for word journal entry 2	Activities with "short story 2" -foreshadowing mini lesson	Read "Lamb to the Slaughter" Audio of "Lamb to the Slaughter" Pick a word for word journal entry 3
3	Watch Twilight Zone - Lamb to the Slaughter Finish word journal entry 3	"The Ingredients" and Irony Mini Lesson Audio for "The Ingredients" (Snow Day)	Library Day Parent/Teacher Conferences	Parent/Teacher Conferences	No school
4	Read "The Chaser" Audio for "The Chaser" Choose word for word journal entry 4	Watch "The Chaser" Twilight Zone - in Google Drive Finish word journal entry 4	Introduce summative assignment Venn Diagram/Graphic Organizer for summative	Begin summative	Peer Review/Edits Finish Summative

Appendix A. This calendar provides an overview of the activities for each day of the short story unit.

Appendix B

POINT SENTENCE write a sentence that states your argument	There are several differences
EVIDENCE Focus on ONE key difference between the two versions.	One difference is
EXPLANATION Explain how this difference affects the story.	This affects the story because
EVIDENCE Focus on ONE key difference between the two versions.	Another difference
EXPLANATION Explain how this difference affects the story.	This affects the story because
LINKING SENTENCE Which version tells the story in a better way?	Overall, the _____ tells the story better because

Figure B1. A PEEL paragraph organizer helps students develop ideas in a more cohesive manner.
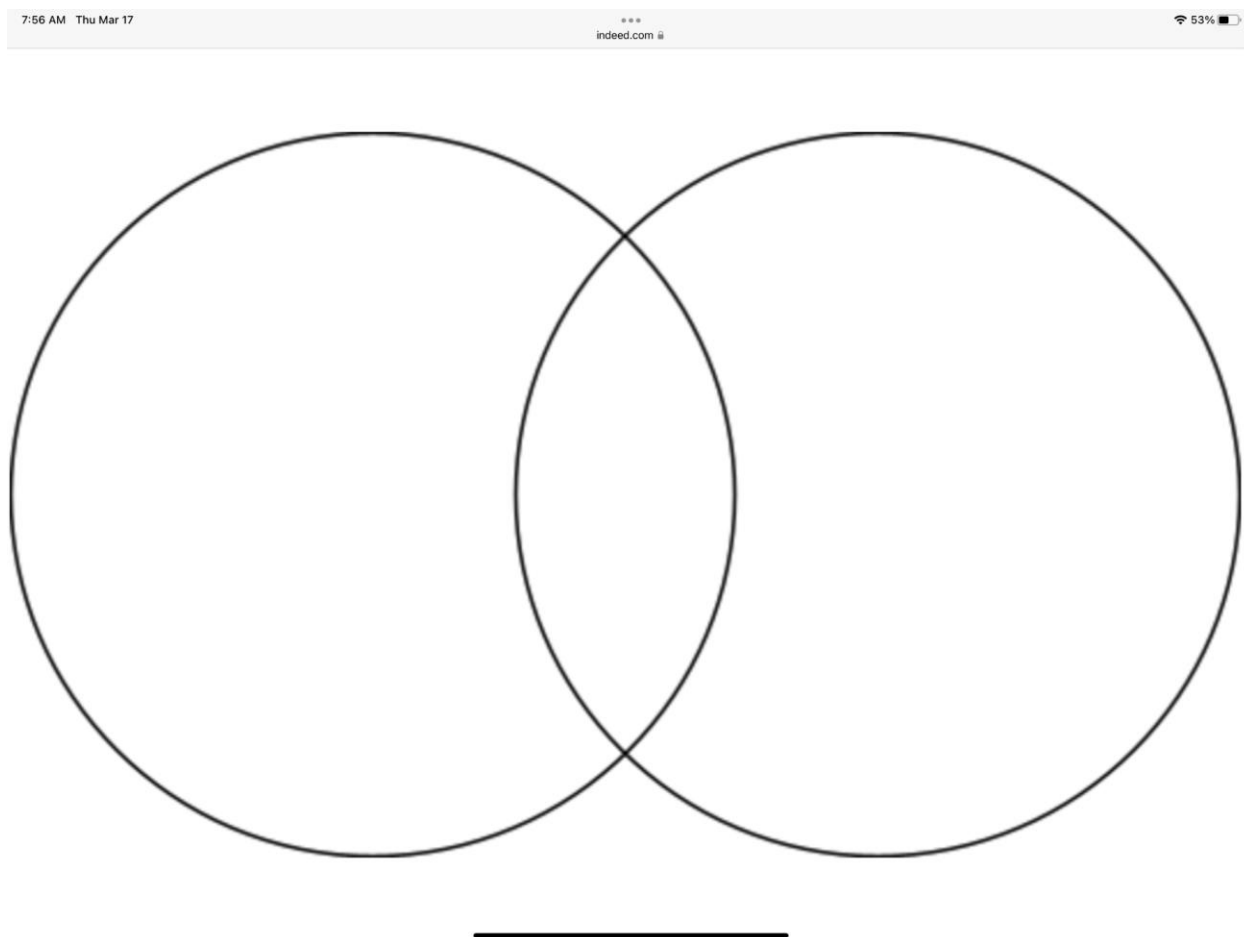
Figure B2. Venn Diagrams were used to assist students in organizing their ideas after analyzing two different texts.

Appendix C

**Word to describe text:**
Panicky

Explanation (100 word minimum):

I chose the word panicky to describe the story *The Sound of Thunder* because the main, distinct character, Eckels is often panicky and fearful. Eckels shows he's panicky when he has to hunt and kill a T-rex and when he arrives home after affecting the future. At first he masks himself as a brave, tough hunter who is "bored" with animals in the present. His character is revealed when he runs off the path and destroys the future. The word panicky describes the story *The Sound of Thunder* because the main character is revealed to be panicky and fearful which eventually leads to his demise.

Appendix C. An example of a student's completed word journal after reading "A Sound of Thunder" by Ray Bradbury.
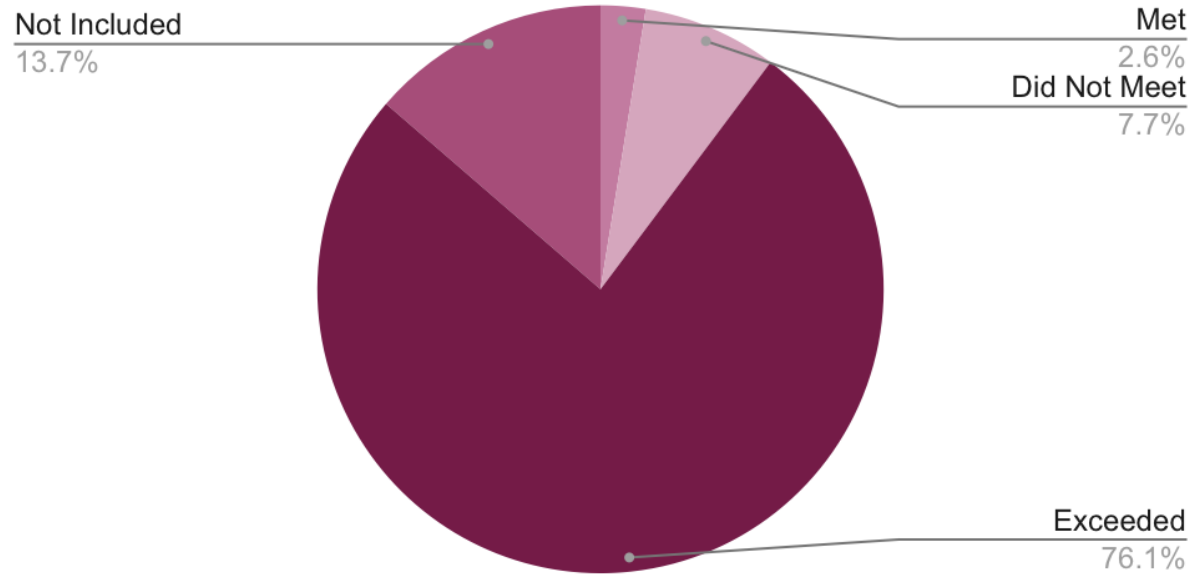
Appendix D

Pretest
Average Score: 88.10%

Not Included
12.8%

Met
4.3%

Did Not Meet
11.1%
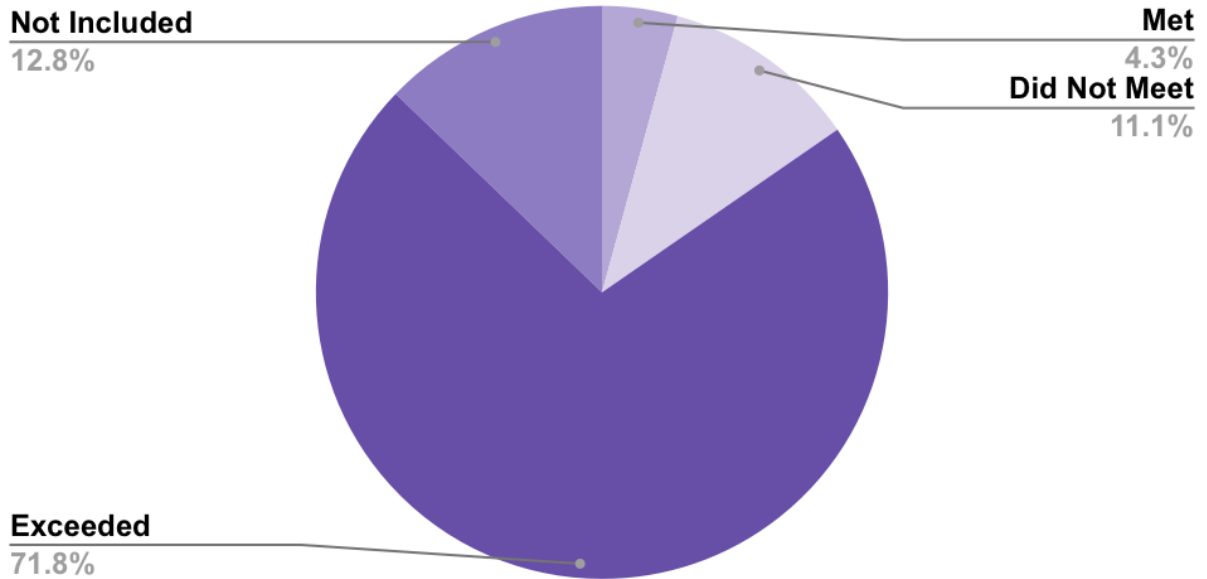
Exceeded
71.8%

Appendix D. Student data from their pretest over literary elements was collected and organized into four categories (exceeded, met, did not meet, not included) to assess students' needs.
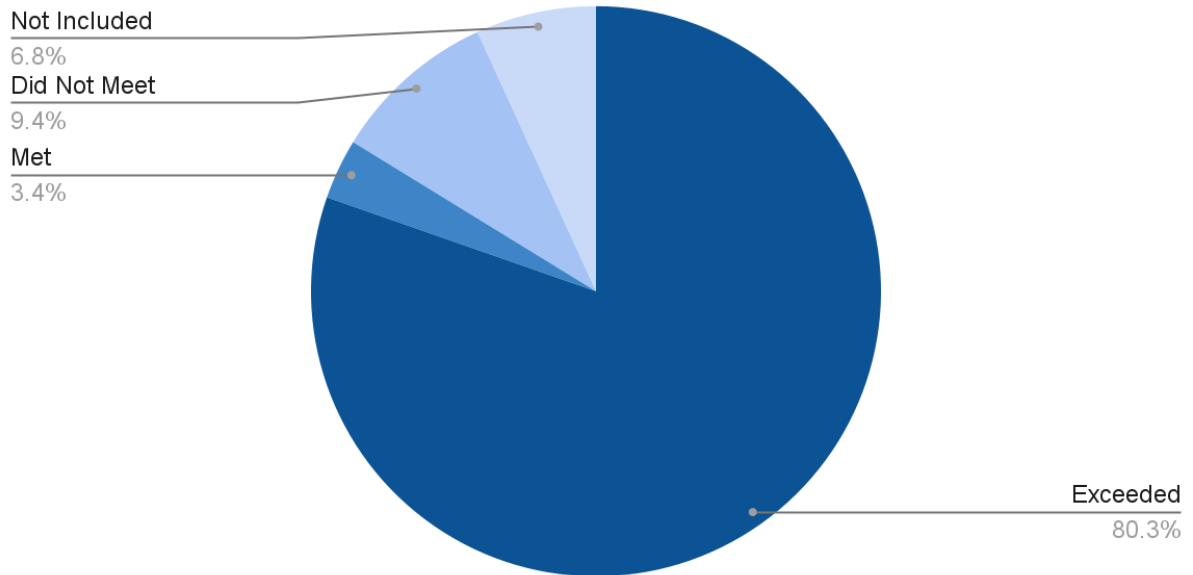
Appendix E

Applying Skills
Average Score: 86.40%

Not Included
13.7%

Met
2.6%

Did Not Meet
7.7%

Exceeded
76.1%

Appendix E. Student understanding was analyzed through an assessment that consisted of multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

Appendix F

Post-test

Average Score: 87.70%

Not Included
6.8%
Did Not Meet
9.4%
Met
3.4%

Exceeded
80.3%

Appendix F. Students completed a post-test, which was identical to the pretest, to assess their growth in understanding of literary elements throughout the unit.