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Improving Writing Skills of Low-Income High School Students

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IMPROVING WRITING SKILLS OF LOW-INCOME HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Literature Review

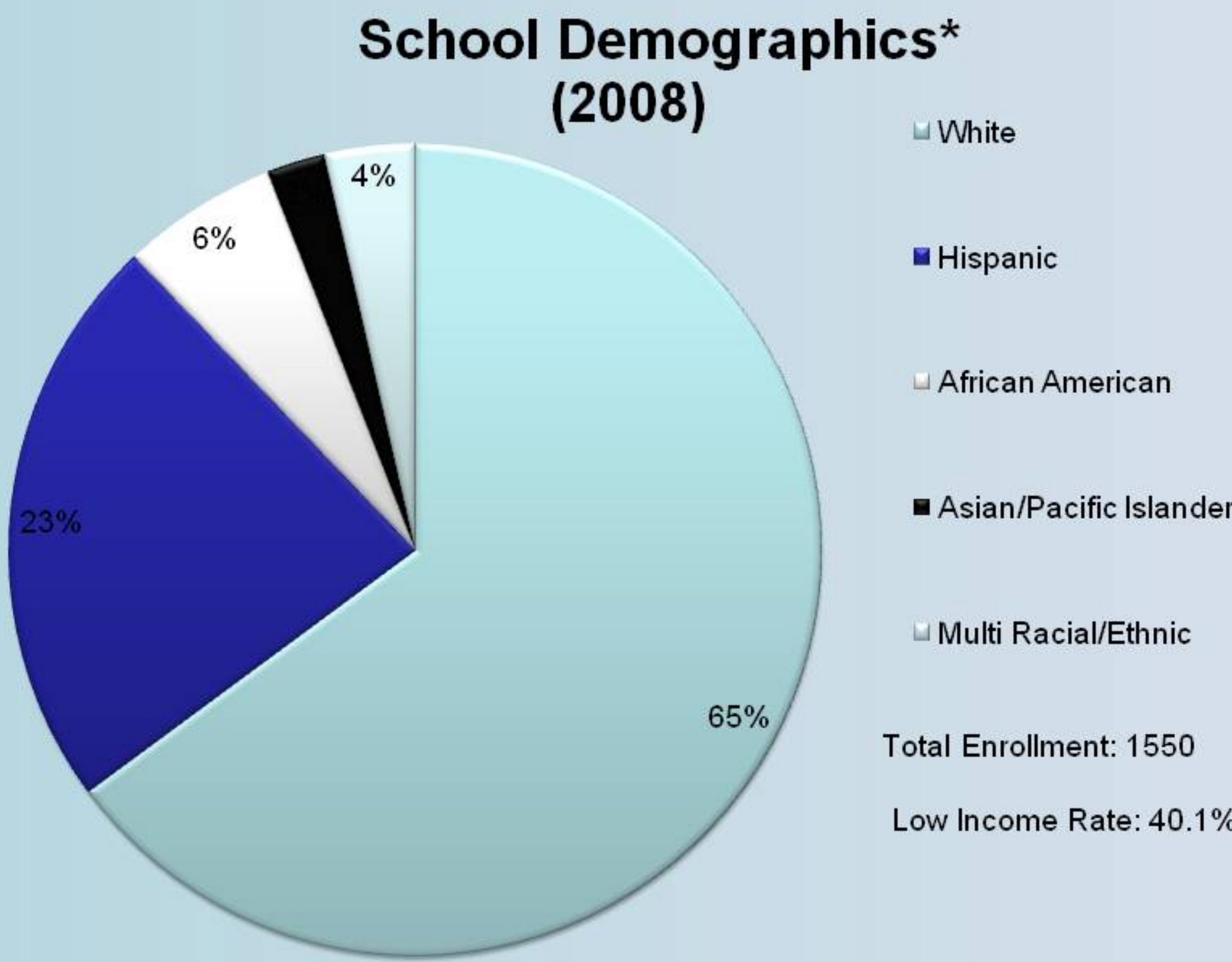
- Students from low-income households are the most at risk of dropping out before graduation (Johannessen, 2004).
- Low-income struggling students have traditionally been taught using scripted, basic skills based instruction programs that allow for very little creativity and autonomy for both students and teachers (Cummins, 2007).
- Students from low-income household often have fewer support structures and resources at home (Payne, 2008).
- Providing low-income students with creative outlets and a supportive classroom community can increase student performance (Cone, 2006)

Research Questions

- How does access to technology improve students writing ability? Do non-text technology based compositions increase student engagement?
- How do low-income students perform when given autonomy and freedom to choose paper topics? Does small group and partner work increase student performance when revising and proofreading?

Methodology

- Conducted in the fall of 2009 at a local high school during student teaching experience (see graph).
- Took place in a 12th grade English Composition Class consisting of 29 students.
- Implemented specific lessons (see list) designed to test research questions.
- For the first unit, students created a digital multimedia composition using MS PhotoStory.
- For the following unit, students wrote a traditional essay, but were given a wide variety of choice of possible topics for the paper to give students a level of autonomy.
- Revising and proofreading for the essay took place with partners and in small groups.



**Information comes from Illinois School Report Card 2008*

Class Lessons

1. 9/21/09 Introduction to PhotoStory unit
 - New technology introduced, provided a model, students free to choose topic
 - Familiarity with applicable technologies, increased student engagement
2. 9/30/09 PhotoStory peer edit and revision checklist
 - Student's evaluated peer's PhotoStory using a checklist
 - Familiarity with criteria and guidelines used to grade assignment, practice editing and revising
3. 10/02/09 PhotoStory unit closure
 - Students shared compositions with class
 - Real audience created a strong classroom community
4. 11/9/09 Brainstorming and Outlining
 - Students chose topics of interest for their papers
 - Engaged with a topic important to students' own lives
5. 11/19/09 Revision strategies
 - Small group work, students evaluated samples from student papers
 - Internalized paper criteria and apply to sample papers before revising their own

Results

- Students' access to technology beyond a word processor when writing a paper increased student engagement and had a positive effect on their written compositions.
- Students were highly engaged and motivated during the PhotoStory unit (see image below). Many students mastered the technology skills and created exceptional compositions.
- Some students thrived when given freedom over paper topics, but many struggled with direction and focus. Many needed more guidelines and structure to the writing process.
- Students benefitted from seeing and correcting their peers' papers and the feedback they received from fellow students, but needed a highly structured format to follow.



Still image from one student's PhotoStory composition

Conclusion

- Teachers of low income students should find meaningful ways to incorporate technology into writing instruction.
- Students respond positively to non-traditional forms of composition that are more applicable to their everyday lives.
- Low-income students often need highly structured guidelines and processes to follow in order to be successful; yet still require a degree of autonomy in their education.
- Peer review and revision sessions provide students with an audience to write for and to internalize paper criteria.