How Can Teachers Enhance The Acquisition And Retention Of Vocabulary In Their Urban Learner?

Sarah K. Norenberg

Hamline University

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HOW CAN TEACHERS ENHANCE THE ACQUISITION AND RETENTION OF VOCABULARY IN THEIR URBAN LEARNER?

By

Sarah K. Norenberg

A Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of a Master of Arts in Education.

Hamline University
Saint Paul, Minnesota

July 2017

Primary Advisor: Thereasa L. Gluek
Secondary Advisor: Susan Harmon
Peer Reviewer: Tyanna Delmedico
To my teacher friends. You inspire me to always learn, try new things and to never be afraid of failure. Our students deserve our best and you remind me of that, daily.

To my son, Felix. Keep working and learning every day. Do things you love.

To my husband, Matt. Thank you for your unquestioning support.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“Words are not just words. They are the nexus—the interface—between communication and thought. When we read, it is through words that we build, refine, and modify our knowledge. What makes vocabulary valuable and important is not the words themselves so much as the understandings they afford.”

Looking back at my teaching career I have worked with many cultures different than my own. My students are diverse culturally, linguistically, religiously, and academically, but they do have things in common: most have been born and raised in poverty, they are not part of the dominate culture, and they are scoring below proficiency on state standardized tests, except for one school. I believe their lack of success on the standardized tests is in part due to limited vocabulary. Ultimately, I want myself, all the teachers at my current school, and my students to feel success in the classroom. This capstone focuses on what I believe is one of the key indicators of students' success in school, on standardized tests, and most importantly, in life, their vocabulary. My work history and passion to improve student achievement leads me to the capstone question: How can teachers enhance the acquisition and retention of vocabulary in their urban learners? It is important that before researching this question I first discuss my experiences teaching diverse students as well as the type of research I hope to do in this project.

Why I Teach

I have taught in urban schools for twelve years. I received my elementary teaching license from Bemidji University and completed my student teaching on a reservation where 90% of the student body is Native American. In addition to standard K-12 curriculum, Indian studies classes in language, history, and culture are offered to students in all grades. It was important to me, that after graduation, I worked in areas that needed good teachers. To me a good teacher
needs to balance rigor with cultural understanding to close the achievement gap. I felt that one thing that made me a good teacher was the fact that I celebrated cultures different from my own and tried to incorporate students' culture into their learning while keeping high expectations.

Equally important, is the systematic racism in our schools and ethnocentrism in our curriculum that I believe has contributed to the achievement gap. It is upsetting to me that, as a teacher, I can predict your score on an MCA test due to your race. I went into teaching with a passion for equity and a bit of distrust in the system of education itself. Through teaching, I wanted to make a difference.

**My Teaching Experiences in Urban Settings**

I moved and continued to work on a reservation, located in a large urban city. I was hired by a non-profit center to run the school-age summer program during the summer and the after-school program during the school year. The goal of the center is to eliminate barriers that prevent kindergarten readiness and to empower parents to be involved in the early and ongoing education of their children. The program offered things such as Ojibwa language immersion and provided activities that reflected Native American culture. I truly enjoyed my job and loved being able to mix traditional western education with Ojibwa culture and it was powerful to be able to help parents navigate the educational systems with my support.

Following this job, I took my first full-time classroom position at a charter school located in a first ring suburb. The K-8 school’s mission was to preserve the students’ values and achieve academic excellence. I worked as a 5th grade teacher and became a mentor teacher my third year in the building. As of the 2006-2007 school year, 302 students attended the school. The majority were Black (83%), with Asian (14%) and White (2%) being the other major ethnic groups. 80-90% identified as Muslim. Seventy-seven percent of students qualified for free and reduced-price
lunch, an indicator of poverty, and most students (81%) were considered EL. In 2005, the school's math proficiency was 23 percentage points higher than the state average and the school's reading proficiency was 3 percentage points higher than the state average, at 67 percent. The staff felt immense pride in the fact that our students were performing above state averages even though we had a lot of deficits to overcome. I feel that a large part of our success was two-fold; a rigorous curriculum with a large focus on vocabulary along with a school culture that mimicked our student's home culture. Many teachers looked like the students, the school calendar revolved around the student's religious holidays rather than the traditional school calendar and that helped students bridge the gap between their home culture and school culture. Unfortunately, mixing religion and free public education can get tricky, especially when the religion is non-Christian. The school came under investigation and there was a lawsuit filed in 2009 by the American Civil Liberties Union stating the school had violated the separation of church and state.

The tumultuous atmosphere let me to a job change. I took a job at a K-12 charter school in a neighboring urban city. Most (99%) of the student body were Asian, with 43% identified English Learners and 84% qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The school is home to many Karen and Karenni immigrants who fled from the Burmese Government. I taught fifth grade and was the chair of the middle school math department. In 2009, 33% of students scored proficient in reading and 22% scored proficient in math. This was very disheartening for the staff because we worked so hard with the students and had small class sizes. On one hand, our students had made a lot of growth, as indicated by growth based assessments, but they were not yet grade level proficient. This school took pride in welcoming families who were new to country and recognized the fact that children had to walk between two worlds in life. One world being their home culture and the other being mainstream American culture. They tried to bridge this gap by
infusing surface culture into the school, like food, clothing and art, but there were many areas that were overlooked. As a newer elementary school, it was still struggling to establish its curriculum. This along with the many changes in the staff and administration made me move onto another job.

My next job was at another charter school located on the east side of the capital city. The student body was diverse with Asian (41%), Hispanic (33%), White (13%) and Black (12%). Eighty-three percent of students qualified for free and reduced lunch and 62% were considered English language learners. This charter school aimed to educate the whole child in a safe environment that valued diversity and promoted world culture with a focus on Hmong and Spanish languages. I worked there in many areas; 5th grade math, 5/6 language arts and social studies and 7/8 language arts. I was on the leadership team and served on the school board. In 2010, 55% of students in grades 3-5 were proficient in reading while 50% were proficient in math. I really enjoyed the diversity of the students, as my past few jobs had me working with a homogeneous student body. Here the culture piece became trickier due to the many different cultures represented and again the students showed good growth but not proficiency. I felt that the school culture valued diversity but did little to bridge the home and school connection. There was a strong focus on vocabulary and I had the opportunity to team teach a 7/8 language arts class with an ELL teacher and a special education teacher. This was one of the best experiences of my teaching career because we took each lesson, pulled out vocabulary words and scaffolded the learning for different types of learners. Unfortunately, this was the year the state switched to the Common Core Language Arts standards and we saw a drop in our MCA scores, and even though this was typical across the state, it was really disheartening to us, because of all the time and effort we placed into our teaching.
Finally, I took a job with a district which serves first ring suburbs. Currently in my fifth year there I teach 5th grade at a district elementary school. In addition to my classroom assignment, I am also on the leadership team, school improvement team, and have mentored teachers. Being a part of the leadership team and school improvement means that I have access to school wide and district wide data. This position also affords me many opportunities for professional development in education and leadership. Afterwards, I can take part in planning and presenting professional development for the staff, bringing ideas to teachers that I think would best help our students. I enjoy solving problems and critical thinking so this part of my job is very meaningful to me.

Although, our MCA scores are better than most schools with similar demographics, there is still a large achievement gap between students of color and white students. I feel that better vocabulary instruction paired with culturally responsive teaching is the key to closing the gap. My current school really focuses on equity and cultural responsiveness by using data to drive decisions but also being mindful of bias when making decisions. For example, the district noticed that most students in the gifted and talented program were white, so they adopted a new program which identified students as being gifted and talented through other methods than just a test score. This resulted in a much more diverse group of students being serviced by a gifted and talented teacher. The district has also partnered with Dr. Sharroky Hollie who specializes in providing professional development to educators wanting to become culturally responsive. My school was one of the first schools in the district to pilot a cohort where teachers were observed and worked one on one with a mentor to develop their teaching. I really enjoyed this experience and felt that it has helped me become a better educator for my students.

I believe that working with so many diverse students has given me a unique perspective
on teaching. I see how limited vocabulary has impacted all my students' achievement on standardized tests and I see how cultural competency is important to their success. One student told me that if she didn't feel comfortable, she couldn't learn. Because of my history teaching in a variety of schools with diverse students, and my leadership role in many of the schools I have worked in, I feel comfortable and credible researching ways that teachers can enhance the acquisition and retention of vocabulary in their urban learners and creating and presenting professional development in the fall.

**Vocabulary Development in Diverse Classrooms**

What drives me to research my question is that I am passionate in my belief that all students can learn and grow and that vocabulary is a missing piece to the puzzle. It is disappointing for my students and me to work so hard in class only to get the scores back from the high stakes tests and see how many students are not scoring proficient.

Having worked with many different types of students, I noticed that typical approaches to teaching vocabulary were not successful. I grew up with using a dictionary to look up words but when I tried that with my students-some just balked, stating it was too boring while others would comply, but there would be no retention. I would place words on the wall for students to reference in their writing or speaking, but not many used it. When I asked why, they would say they forgot what the words meant and didn't know how to use them correctly in their writing or speaking. I noticed that my students, when reading, would misunderstand scenes in a story if larger words were used (woeful instead of sad, irate instead of angry). Also, my students who had so much to say, stumbled when writing, because they would not be able to express what they wanted due to lack of words. I knew that I was not doing my best to increase my students’ vocabulary but I was frustrated because I didn't know what to do.
There are two types of vocabulary instruction; indirect and direct. Indirect vocabulary learning refers to students learning vocabulary when they hear and see words through conversations with adults, through being read to, and through reading on their own. Direct vocabulary instruction refers to intentionally choosing words to teach and then teaching specific techniques and word learning strategies. "One of the most crucial services that teachers can provide, particularly for students who do not come from academically advantaged backgrounds, is systematic instruction in important academic terms". (Marzano & Pickering, 2005). Knowing this, I want to shift most of the vocabulary instruction not only in my classroom, but in my school, from indirect to direct instruction.

**Vocabulary Instruction for my Staff**

Looking over our school’s curriculum, I have noticed a lack of intentional and targeted vocabulary instruction in the upper elementary grades. The curriculum we use focuses on indirect vocabulary instruction. It is widely thought that students will just pick up vocabulary if they are exposed to it through reading and listening. This is common practice at my school where the curriculum promotes “wide reading”. “Wide reading” is where students read across many different genres and types of text, which in turn is supposed to automatically increase vocabulary.

However, I believe that intentional vocabulary instruction is needed by our urban learners and the little direct vocabulary teaching I see is ineffective and outdated. Most teachers have been taught techniques that encourage students to quickly memorize words out of context, instead of gain true knowledge and understanding of the English language. Sometimes teachers turn to the old standby of, use a dictionary to look up words you don’t know, which doesn’t help the student really learn and remember new words. Finally, there has been a tendency to skip over
both direct and indirect vocabulary instruction to cover more topics at a faster pace, but I think that this impacts students negatively. The teachers at my school are overwhelmed by the vast amount of curriculum and standards they need to cover. Teachers could really benefit from professional development regarding specific direct vocabulary instruction techniques they could use immediately in their classroom. Therefore, I am on a quest to teach the staff at my school how important vocabulary is and to bring them easy to implement strategies to use in their classrooms with their students that will have a lasting effect on vocabulary retention.

**Culture is Key**

Another idea became apparent to me as I looked back on my career, schools that were culturally competent had a strong impact on learners. I believe that teachers need to be more culturally competent to effectively teach urban students. Research confirms that the most important factor contributing to a student’s success in school is the quality of teaching and building relationships with our students. My current district has subscribed to Culturally Responsive Teaching (CLR), and has welcomed Dr. Sherroky Hollie's strategies to reach our students more equitably. As a mentor and part of the leadership team, I want to make sure that his culturally responsive teaching strategies are used in every classroom. I want myself, the entire staff and my students to feel success in the classroom. My work history and passion leads me to the capstone question: *How can teachers enhance the acquisition and retention of vocabulary in their urban learners?*

**Rationale for Study**

My school's classrooms can be challenging work environments in many ways. One of the challenges is the differing abilities in each classroom. For example, I may have reading levels that vary from a first-grade ability to a ninth-grade ability all within my fifth-grade setting. Some
students are new to the country or have reading disabilities that are stunting their achievement, but on the other hand I have some students who are considered gifted and talented. I need to be able to serve all my students equally, which means focusing on growth. The range of abilities in my classroom is no different than that of my colleagues. When researching strategies to include in the professional development, I wanted to find vocabulary strategies that can be used with any text, because as a staff, we do a lot of small flexible grouping to make sure everyone is working at their appropriate level. Our teachers also value whole group instruction so the vocabulary strategies I am planning to explain must be usable in both formats. It is my hope that the knowledge I gain on vocabulary instruction will be implemented through staff development appropriate for teachers of kindergarten through 5th grade.

In this chapter, I told my own personal story of teaching students from diverse cultures. I shared the joy and passion I felt teaching along with the frustration at seeing the inability of my students to score proficiently on standardized testing, which I believe is partly due their limited vocabulary. I am a teacher but also a leader in my school, and strongly believe that professional development needs to be well researched and the strategies shown should be quick and easy to implement without adding more work to an already full plate.

In chapter two, the literature review, I first want to learn about current research that explains why vocabulary acquisition is important and how it helps increase student achievement in all areas. Next, I will read research about children growing up in poverty and what effect that has on vocabulary. Then, I will research English language learners and their vocabulary needs. Looking at both sets of students, I will identify common best practice vocabulary strategies. Following that, I will research culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, because I believe that this is the best way to teach vocabulary and acquisition strategies to Urban students. I predict
it will use all the previously identified best practice strategies and add in a cultural competency piece that I feel is vital for the urban classroom. This will be a way to close our achievement gap because it takes non-dominant culture into consideration when teaching vocabulary acquisition.

In chapter three, I will describe what my district and school is like. It will also outline the two workshops that I have designed for the staff. Finally, it will include research on adult learners, since I am creating professional development to be presented for the teaching staff.

Chapter four will talk in depth about the professional development sessions that I have created for the staff along with my expectations and hopes following the workshops.

Finally, chapter five will be my reflection on the process and what I would do differently next time.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

“The size of a person’s vocabulary is one of the best predictors of how well he or she will comprehend while listening or reading. Simply stated, having a bigger vocabulary will make you a better reader.”
-Patricia M. Cunningham (2009, p. 6)

The Important Question

This literature review will work to answer the question: How can teachers enhance the acquisition and retention of vocabulary in their urban learners? This question is important to me because I have worked my whole career with urban learners who have scored well below their majority culture peers on reading according to high stakes standardize tests. Through research, I have come to believe that vocabulary is deeply tied to comprehension, so to improve student's reading comprehension I need to strengthen their vocabularies.

First, the research in this literature review will reveal what vocabulary is, how important vocabulary acquisition is, and the vocabulary needs of urban (English Learning students, students of poverty, non-dominant culture) students. Secondly, I will identify any common needs and find the “best practice” strategies for developing vocabulary learning in the classroom. In the end, I will show how culturally responsive teaching is the best way to reach urban learners.

Defining Vocabulary and Its Importance

The size of students’ vocabulary has long been determined to predict whether they will be strong readers (Biemiller, 2003). Students need to have a rich vocabulary to read and write effectively. But what exactly is vocabulary? According to the Cambridge Advanced Learners
dictionary (1995, p 234), vocabulary is, ““all the words known and used by a particular person.” My goal is to expand the words known and used by urban students. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan’s (2002) Three Tier Model places vocabulary words into three categories. First is, Tier 1 which consists of basic or common words in English. They consist of sight words, e.g., table, swim, cars and dog. Then there is Tier 2, which involves words that are used across the curriculum and multiple meaning words. Tier 2 words are found with high frequency and are important to understanding text, e.g., analyze, conclusion, summary. This tier also includes multiple meaning words like, set, base and bat. Finally, there are Tier 3 which is content specific vocabulary. Tier 3 words are found with less frequency. They consist of content specific words, e.g., kilometer, habitat, and emancipation.

To create the best curriculum for urban students, it is essential to first identify what exactly constitutes vocabulary learning. According to Biemiller (2003), vocabulary learning differs in several main ways from learning other reading-related skills. The following are crucial, yet limited sets of literacy skills that, once learned, can be used throughout life:

- **Word identification** - phonemic awareness plus decoding
- **Morphological analysis**-applying knowledge of suffixes and prefixes to extend word knowledge
- **Context Clues**-the ability to find the definition by inference, prior knowledge, the understanding of synonyms and antonyms

Vocabulary learning is important because limited vocabulary is tied to poor reading comprehension. When a student lacks academic vocabulary, it is hard for him or her to decipher meaning from text. Students need to be able to read words and know what they mean. Research
has proven that students who are able to comprehend text typically have strong vocabularies (Cowen and Albers, 2007). Students’ lack of vocabulary knowledge makes it hard for them to understand what they read. Students who find it difficult to read and understand what they have read tend to read less and choose easier books. When students read less, the gap between them and their peers who find reading easier and read more books grows. The gap between students who are proficient readers and struggling readers is also known as the “Matthew effect” (Cowan and Albers, 2007).

The Common Core State Standards in Minnesota emphasize vocabulary development as an important factor in reading comprehension and academic achievement. Wasik and Iannone-Campbell (2012) agree that “vocabulary development is one of the most important skills young children need to acquire to be successful in learning to read and in school” (p. 322). Thus, helping students expand their vocabulary will have a positive affect overall on their literacy. What teachers have come to learn is backed up by research that emphasizes how vocabulary is highly related to comprehension.

If students come across words they don’t know in a text, and they do not have the tools to connect that word to meaning, then they have a hard time comprehending the big ideas in the text. The relationship between vocabulary and comprehension is especially evident when students read informational text, which is often rich with specialized vocabulary (Chall & Conard, 1991). Looking at the results of over 40 studies of the impact of vocabulary instruction on comprehension, Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) reported an average effect size of .91—an effect size which would theoretically raise the comprehension of an average child from the 50th percentile to the 83rd percentile (Biemiller, 2003). Thus, there is evidence that vocabulary does
affect comprehension. When the rate of vocabulary acquisition is increased, gains in reading comprehension are also obtained. The reverse is also true—increasing reading practice can increase vocabulary and comprehension (Shany & Biemiller, 1995; Block, Cooper, Lapp, et al.).

Johnson O'Connor, a researcher who has studied the impact of vocabulary on people’s lives, has come up with the same result time and time again: a person’s vocabulary level is the best single predictor of occupational success (1951). The larger your vocabulary the better you can communicate with others both orally and written. The more words you can identify and use correctly will enable you to read and write at a higher level. When you are reading and writing you are expanding your thinking and can analyze and reason at a higher level (Connor, 1951). By increasing your vocabulary, you can become successful at reading, writing, listening and speaking which are the tools you need to achieve your dreams. Therefore, I believe that increasing urban students’ vocabulary will help close the achievement gap.

**Students of Poverty and Their Vocabulary**

Achievement disparities are often attributed to socioeconomic factors. Research states that students born into poverty come to school vastly behind their peers in terms of vocabulary (Jensen, 2009). Sadly, we have many children living in poverty in the United States. According to 2009 data from the Census Bureau, “15.5 million children live in poverty, as defined as a family of four making less than $21,947 per year. This includes 4.9 million, or about 10 percent, of non-Hispanic white children, and one in three black and Hispanic children, at 4 million and 5.6 million, respectively “(Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011). You can see that poverty affects children of color at a much higher rate than white children. Unfortunately, growing up in poverty is correlated with a small vocabulary, which in turn leads to lower achievement in school.
The effects of growing up in poverty are severe and seen very early on. According to Eric Jensen, the author of *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, toddlers from middle and upper income families used more words in talking to their parents than Mothers raising their children in poverty used in talking with their own children. In one study of toddlers, ages 10 to 36 months, babies born into poverty were learning three new words for every six new words that babies from professional families were learning (Brookes-Gunn, Klebanov, & Duncan, 1997; J. Campbell, Bell, & Keith, 2001). According to a seminal study of language development in 1995, by age 3, children living in poverty have smaller vocabularies and lower language skills than children from middle-income families (Jensen 2009)

The gap continues to widen as they grow. Poverty can be detrimental to reading and vocabulary acquisition (Jensen 2009). By age 3, when many children enter early preschool, youngsters from well-to-do families have a working vocabulary of 1,116 words, compared to 749 words for children in working-class families and 525 words for children on welfare, according to a seminal 2003 longitudinal study by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, authors of the 1995 book *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. Neuman and Wright have referred to this language deficit as, “The 30-million-word catastrophe”, which refers to children from high-income families experiencing 30 million more words than children from low-income families, on average.

You would then hope that entering school would make a difference but unfortunately, the gap never closes throughout school. Students who come to school with a deficit in their vocabulary typically stay far behind their peers. In several studies first graders from higher socioeconomic backgrounds knew at least twice as many words as lower-socioeconomic
background students (White, Graves, & Slater, 1990). It was also stated that high school seniors at the top of their class knew about four times as many words as their lower-performing classmates (Smith, 1941).

One reason students of poverty never catch up, may be the quality of teaching happening in different areas. According to a study done in Michigan, during the 2009-10 school year, which looked at 55 kindergarten teachers, observers noticed differences in vocabulary teaching in districts with differing poverty levels. The researchers noted that there were few formal, structured vocabulary lessons on vocabulary, and most of the vocabulary teaching was done on the spot, as a “teachable moment”, usually during read aloud or when students were having discussions about books.

Because there was no single program being followed there were major discrepancies in both the number of words being talked about and the different tiers of words being explained. For example, due to the words being chosen from the stories, they had little connection to the other words being taught.

Another inconsistency was the words being chosen on the spot means that the teacher has not given any thought to tiering Research has shown that students learn words better when they are grouped with related words and with intentional tiering.

Because of the discrepancy of teaching vocabulary, researchers found that the districts with more students in poverty—the ones prior research shows enter school knowing 10,000 fewer words than their peers from higher-income families—were the least likely to get instruction in academically challenging words. Unbelievably, in schools with fewer than one in
four students in poverty, researchers found teachers explained the meanings of nine words per day, compared with only six words a day in schools with the most students in poverty. Similarly, teachers in wealthier schools discussed the meaning of five challenging words per day, compared with only three challenging words per day in higher-poverty schools (Sparks 2016).

The vocabulary gap in school has far reaching effects outside of school as well. Research has also shown that dropout rates tend to be higher for children who live in poverty. A recent study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that children who both live in poverty and read below grade level by 3rd grade are three times as likely to not graduate from high school as students who have never been poor (Hernandez, 2011). There are more dire statistics, according to the U.S. Department of Education’s 2011 Condition of Education report, about 68 percent of 12th-graders in high-poverty schools graduated with a diploma in 2008, compared with 91 percent of 12th-graders in low-poverty schools (NCES, 2011). It seems that from birth to adulthood, poverty has a negative impact on vocabulary (Jensen 2009).

It is well known that early literacy development in children is linked to becoming literate (Lapp, Block, Cooper, et al., 2004) and one step in early literacy can be provided at home by parents. Parents can read books to their children, have conversations with children, and play games that support their child’s literacy at home. But, when looking at families who live below the poverty level, many parents feel that the school is the place where their students will learn literacy, not at home. Many are single parent households, where the parent is very busy with working and day to day responsibilities, which leaves little time for literacy activities at home. Some parents stated that they didn’t feel confident enough in their own reading ability to teach their own children; therefore, they felt it was a job better left to the school. (Lapp, Block,
Cooper, et al., 2004). In a study conducted by Block, Lapp, Cooper, et al, 99% of low income parents surveyed reported teaching children how to read was the school’s responsibility.

Unfortunately, even here in Minnesota, you can often use a child's zip code to predict their MCA scores. Minnesota has a large achievement gap between students of color and white students. For example, the average Black-White achievement score gap in mathematics for public school students at grade four in 2007 was 26 points, but Minnesota’s was even larger at 31 points. (Center for education reform). In 2016, The St. Paul Public Schools district did not meet any of its goals aimed at closing gaps in achievement on math and reading tests. It will need to increase its graduation rate by nearly 15 percent to meet the state’s goal that at least 90 percent of all students graduate by 2020.

In my personal experience, I was read to constantly and my parents always talked to me. I was not considered a student of poverty due to my family's income. My mom could stay home with me until I went to kindergarten and this had a positive impact on my learning. Many of my low SES students do not have the luxury of a stay at home parent and/or culturally reading and talking with young children is not happening at the same rate it did with me.

As a teacher, I know that I can do more in my classroom to teach context clues, word parts and synonym development but it is hard to know where to start. Getting students talking, reading and discussing is key to developing vocabulary but teachers need quick and easy to use strategies at their fingertips. I believe that increasing low SES students' vocabulary is a problem that can be solved. To do so, I will look at current researchers who have examined students of poverty to find and explain commonly identified best practice strategies for helping students of poverty acquire and retain new words. There is a way to close the language gap between students
of poverty and their wealthier peers and it starts with teacher friendly vocabulary activities that are easy to incorporate into your classroom.

**Best Practice for Students of Poverty**

Biemiller states, that unlike phonics and other literacy skills, building basic root word vocabulary requires *continuing* support, especially for less advantaged and lower-vocabulary children (2001). If we are to increase vocabulary knowledge of children, there must be an ongoing effort to introduce and explain new vocabulary, from kindergarten at least through grade six. Once students have learned word identification and morphological analysis—the dictionary skills (context clues) are a never-ending effort. He states that vocabulary instruction can occur both through direct explanation of words (words encountered in oral and printed text and making them meaningful); and indirect explanations through response to questions about words, analyzing the context through which the words are used in and through use of dictionaries and computerized data bases. After reading through much research I have found four important aspects of vocabulary instruction that needs to be present for helping low SES students close the vocabulary gap. Raising students’ curiosity around words, repetition, modeling, and intentional vocabulary teaching are four practices that stood out as critical when emphasizing vocabulary growth.

Curiosity is needed for learning. Biemiller wants children to ask and be curious about words. Not only do you introduce vocabulary in context, children must be encouraged to *ask about words they don’t know*. Students need to be cognitive that words they don’t know are important to their learning and they need to want to learn new words. Getting students invested in learning new words is key to increasing their vocabulary. Preliminary investigations suggest
that building curiosity for words works well (Biemiller, 2003). This has also been called expanding word consciousness, Winters (2009) defines word consciousness as “a fascination with new words that prompts ongoing student inquiry and exploration” (p. 688).

Repetition is another way to help students of poverty become familiar with new words. Children need to have opportunities to hear words several times in meaningful context so they can begin to solidify the association between a word and its meaning and come to understand how the word can be used in communicating with others (Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012).

Modeling thorough conversation is the third way to engage students of poverty in learning new vocabulary. Students can learn new words by talking with articulate adults who give feedback back on students’ remarks and encourage them to talk (Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012). For example, in a longitudinal study examining teacher–child conversations, high-quality conversations during free play and book reading were linked to gains in children’s language production and comprehension (Dickinson, 2011; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

Finally, intentional vocabulary teaching benefits students from structured and formal vocabulary teaching. When teachers intentionally choose words to teach based on research and plan vocabulary lessons and activities to use throughout the day, it ensures that students are truly building up their vocabulary.
Vocabulary Strategies for Students of Poverty

The following activities are highly effective and easily implemented in the classroom. They are meant to raise students’ curiosity around words, and use repetition and modeling, which I found to be best for students who live in economic poverty. I believe that if we weave card games and word of the day activities into our daily instruction we can make progress in closing the vocabulary gap that exists in our classrooms.

**Card games.** Card games work on the idea of making a pair or a match. You can make a match when a student pairs a word with a synonym, antonym, definition, a cloze sentence that makes sense, a picture, or any match appropriate to your class. There are a variety of games students can play like Go Fish or Old Teacher. Card games meet all four aspects of vocabulary instruction identified earlier; curiosity, repetition, modeling, and intentional teaching. Games are fun to students so they peak curiosity. Teachers make the cards so they are intentionally choosing words from the unit they are working in, across subject areas, and targeting vocabulary from tier 2 or 3. When the students play they hear these words repeated therefore, they are more likely to be learned. All games should be played with an adult the first few times so students learn to have high quality discussions during the game (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002)

**Word of the day.** A teacher chooses a tier 2 or 3 word that she uses throughout the day. She makes sure that she uses it at least three times that day. Then, at the end of the day she asks all students to identify the word of the day and define it. Students become keen listeners for new words when this approach is used. As a variation, you can do “word of the day” in a guessing game format. Each day a set of clues is prepared and put on the board. An envelope is taped on the board for students to deposit their guess. Word of the day meets 4 important aspects of
vocabulary instruction because it is fun and motivating, the teacher intentionally chooses the words, also she is modeling the word throughout the day and repeating the word (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002).

Using card games and word of the day are rich vocabulary experiences for students in your classroom and will especially benefit low SES students. Creating a language rich environment spurs students’ curiosity of words.

**English Language Learners and their Vocabulary**

Researchers agree that a giant obstacle faced by English Language Learners (ELL) is a lack of vocabulary. Insufficient vocabulary knowledge stands in the way of learning. Many ELL students who come to school with limited English-language background find that vocabulary is what usually stands in their way when attempting to comprehend information from classroom texts (August & Hakuta, 1997).

When ELL students struggle with reading comprehension, it is often because they have a difficult time understanding the vocabulary. Many studies report that low academic language skills are associated with low academic performance (Baumann, Edwards, Font, Tereshinski, et al, 2002; Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Carlo, August, McLaughlin, Snow, et al, 2004). Students who are struggling with vocabulary words will often miss the main ideas of the text and therefore fall further behind in their learning.

As students move through grade levels, typical vocabulary acquisition increases to almost 40,000 words by the time they finish high school (Flanigan, Templeton, & Hayes, 2012). This means there is a lot of catching up that our English language learners need to do for them to
become “typical”. Studies have found an average two-grade deficit in many second-language children by the time they reach the fifth and sixth grades (Biemiller, 1999).

ELL students may often be recent immigrants, as well, which can come with other struggles than just language learning. They may be adapting to a new culture, looking for housing, and have other stressful situations outside of school to deal with. Some students are refugees who have fled their home, survived wars, political oppression, religious oppression and some have even lived in refugee camps (Cummings, 2000).

Research indicates that ELL students need explicit and systematic core reading instruction (such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency with connected text, vocabulary, and comprehension strategy instruction (Fien, Smith, Baker, Chaparro, Baker & Preciado, 2010). ELLs must not only be able to define the words but must also be able to understand these words in context as well as use the words in discussions and integrate the words in their writing.

My teaching career has been working closely with many ELL students. I see all their hard work and effort and want them to make the academic gains that they deserve. I will look at many sources of peer reviewed and published work to pick out commonly identified best practice strategies for helping ELL learners acquire and retain new words.

**Best Practice for English Language Learners**

Incorporating the home language into vocabulary instruction is key in academic success (Cummins 2000; Thomas and Collier 2002; Brown, Sanford, Turner 2012). Teachers can pre-teach concepts in the native language or ask the students to find similar words in their native language to help scaffold the learning of new English words (Sanford, Brown, Turner 2012,
Sibold, 2011). In addition, there are key practices that teachers should incorporate into their teaching practices including:

- Association
- Reading aloud
- Explicit teaching of new words
- Using visuals
- Using graphic organizers
- Games
- Repetition
- Modeling

These key practices will add more and more words to a child’s vocabulary. Vocabulary knowledge is cumulative, so the more words you know at any point in time, the more words you can add. Using the following techniques teachers can weave rich vocabulary instruction into all we do.

Associating new words with familiar words will help ELL students remember newly acquired vocabulary. Once students have gained a level of vocabulary knowledge, new words are learned through explanations using familiar words and definitions (Cunningham, 2009).

Reading aloud has been shown to help ELL’s learn new vocabulary (Sibold, 2012). Studies indicate that children do learn words from books read aloud to them. Most helpful will be reading aloud books and other materials (such as magazines or websites) that have some, but
not too many, words that are new to children. Read-aloud of storybooks is important, but also important is read-aloud of other types of text, such as information books (Chall & Conard, 1991).

Explicit teaching of new words is recommended for ELL’s. The teacher should preselect and pre-teach words he or she has selected to be important to the main ideas of the text, as well as have student self-identify troubling words. We want children to notice when they encounter new words and to want to learn them. Some researchers refer to this as word consciousness (Graves and Watts-Taffe, 2002). It is helpful avoid the lexical dictionary definition as it will often include other words that are equally difficult and unknown by the ELL student. (Bimiller, 2003; Sibold, 2011).

Using visuals is a recommended strategy for helping ELL learners learn and retain new vocabulary. Using real objects, pictures, photographs, can help ELL students make sense of the new words. Even the use of facial expressions, body movements, charts, highlighters, graphs and manipulatives can help students learn and remember new words (Sibold, 2011; Sanford, Brown & Turner, 2012).

Using graphic organizers is another great strategy for helping ELL students add new words to their repertoire. The use of graphic organizers such as, Venn diagrams, Frayer’s vocabulary model, word trees, concept maps, and relational charts, help students understand concepts and the related vocabulary. Graphic organizers also help to link the definitions to examples (Colorado, 2007). Graphic organizers are also highly effective because they link content to language use (Sanford, Brown & Turner, 2012).
Games can be a fun way to incorporate vocabulary learning into a classroom. Games can be powerful tools for reinforcing ELLs’ vocabulary. Commercially published games such as *Apples to Apples, Balderdash, Scrabble, Bananagrams*, and *Words with friends* promote general vocabulary usage; however, other interactive games and teacher-created games are extremely useful in reinforcing students’ understanding and encouraging enthusiasm for learning new words (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002).

Repetition and multiple exposure is key for learning and remembering vocabulary for ELL students (Sibold, 2011; Sanford, Brown & Turner, 2012). Clearly, knowledge of a word is likely to be stronger after three encounters than after just one, and more thorough after encounters in multiple contexts than just one (Nagy and Scott, 2000). Do not just use and repeat the vocabulary words out of context, as repeated readings of the text are essential for learners with more limited vocabularies. This will help them link the pronunciation of new words with their meanings. By hearing the new words in context, it will help cement the meaning. (Sibold, 2011).

Modeling is guided practice and provides independent but structured pre-planned opportunities for practice will ensure that ELL students will be more successful in learning and retaining new vocabulary. Teachers should create word walls, use sentence stems, sentence frames, shared writing, to engage students. Students need to both encounter and use words in meaningful activities, conversations, and texts. Use all 4 domains of the English language (reading, writing, listening and speaking, to create lessons and give students’ time and opportunity to practice the newly acquired vocabulary to ensure success (Sibold, 2011; Sanford, Brown & Turner, 2012; Nagy & Scott, 200).
Keep in mind these 8 key components when designing vocabulary lessons and strategies for your ELL learners, as they are researched based best practices. As teachers, we want to work smarter not harder in our classrooms so I will outline two of the best strategies for ELL learners.

**Vocabulary Strategies for English Language Learners**

The following activities are highly effective and easily implemented in the classroom. They are meant to raise students’ curiosity around words, and incorporate the 8 key components that I found to be best practice for ELL learners. I believe that if we use Story Impressions and Word maps on a regular basis, we can make progress in closing the vocabulary gap that exists in our classrooms.

**Story impression.** This is a prediction activity in which teachers give students phrases and words from a story or article about to be read and students try to create the story line themselves before reading the original (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002). For example, before reading *Wilma Unlimited: How Wilma Rudolph Became the World’s Fastest Woman* by Kathleen Krull (1996), a teacher would give the following words and phrases:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wilma</th>
<th>Olympics</th>
<th>Overcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>obstacles</td>
<td>leg brace due to polio</td>
<td>never gave up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peers</td>
<td>Tease</td>
<td>hard worker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students would work out that Wilma Rudolph had to overcome many hardships in life, including polio before she made it to the Olympics. When the students read the text (or hear the text) and find that the gist of their stories matches the original, with some variation, they will be
thrilled that they “got it right”. This activity uses many of the strategies that found to be best practice for English learners. For example, multiple exposure because the words will be seen again in the reading, the book is read aloud to the students, students view it as a game because they get to see if they are “right”, it is also modeling as it is a pre-planned reading and writing activity that can be done independently.

**Word maps.** The components of a word map are synonym, antonym, example and non-example (Cunningham 2009). The word map is simple to complete, quickly done and flexible. Approximation works and still shows understanding. For example, for *leap*, a synonym would be *jump*, but students tend to choose words like *sit* or *stand* antonyms. Since both still show understanding of the word, complete accuracy is not important. The graphic organizer will help them connect new words to words they know, and students can even draw pictures in boxes to help students retain new vocabulary.

**Word: Leap**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synonym: Jump</th>
<th>Antonym: Stand still</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example: What I do when I jump rope or when I am really happy</td>
<td>Nonexample: When I am too tired and can't move.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This activity fits the criteria of best practice for EL students because students are connecting new words to familiar words, it is a graphic organizer and it is an example of intentionally teaching vocabulary.

**Using Story Impressions and Word maps are exciting vocabulary experiences for students in your classroom and will especially benefit ELL students. Creating a word rich environment spurs students’ curiosity of words.**
Similarities in Statistics

Research evidence confirms that both students of poverty and ELLs are lacking academic vocabulary. When a student’s vocabulary is limited by poverty, learning English, or both, it is difficult to comprehend grade level text. For example, studies indicate that as many as half of the sixth-grade students in urban English language arts classrooms struggle with reading comprehension and that most of these students have limited vocabulary (Deshler, Palincsar, Biancarosa, & Nair, 2007; Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010). In such classrooms, large numbers of ELLs have limited vocabularies and poor reading comprehension, but so do many native English speakers (Freeman & Freeman, 2008; Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010; Zwiers, 2008). This limited vocabulary makes itself apparent in the low reading scores in many urban classrooms. Among fourth grade English language learners (ELLs) in the United States, 70% of students failed to score at the basic level in reading, while only 29% of native English speakers (and former ELLs) failed to reach this benchmark (NAEP, 2009). In 2011, students who were eligible for free/reduced-price school lunch, an indicator of poverty, had an average score that was 21 points lower than students who were not eligible for free/reduced-price school lunch (NAEP, 2011).

Clearly, reading failure continues to be a serious problem particularly among ELLs, and children from low socioeconomic status (SES) families. Urban schools typically service most students that fall into one or more of these categories. When working in an urban classroom there is a need to develop effective instructional techniques that will address the vocabulary needs of everyone. The common best practice strategies identified for both low SES and EL learners were:

- Curiosity/games-Making learning fun and garnering genuine interest from the students
- Repetition-Hearing words repeatedly helps with pronunciation, context, meaning, and linking to prior knowledge.

- Modeling-All children benefit from instruction, but low SES and EL learners need incredible amounts of careful, personal instruction, with clear and repeated demonstrations of how readers and writers go about reading and writing (Duffy, 2003; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

- Intentional Vocabulary teaching/explicit teaching of new words-When teachers take time to identify important tier 2 and tier 3 words and plan vocabulary strategies into their lessons. Students have a better chance of learning and retaining new vocabulary words. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), explicit instruction of vocabulary is highly effective. To develop vocabulary intentionally, students should be explicitly taught both specific words and word-learning strategies.

**Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Vocabulary Teaching**

While looking for best practices in vocabulary to meet the needs of my urban learners, I came across culturally and linguistically responsive vocabulary teaching. Dr. Hollie (2011) brings a systematic approach to teaching vocabulary that reflects what both students of poverty and students learning English need. He recognizes SELs which he defines as Standard English Learners.

“A student who comes from a home where the home language differs enough from Standard English and Academic English in all the dimensions of a language-phonologically, morph-syntactically, syntactically, semantically, pragmatically and rhetorically. Many of these "home languages" are commonly known in the linguistic
research as the non-standard languages: African American Vernacular, Chicano English, Hawaiian Pidgin English and Native American dialects.” (Holley & Orange, 2014, p 105)

These are representing the languages of many underserved students. By bringing students' languages from their homes into the classroom, we validate their culture and their history as topics worthy of study.

Holley reminds us that the vocabulary that the students come to school with, their home languages, have value. There are no right words and wrong words, just that different situations require different vocabulary words (Hollie, 2015). Just as the research of Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) states that there are tiers for words; Tier 1 is basic words, Tier 2 words are high-frequency words for mature language users, Tier 3 are words that are specific to a certain domain. Holley has created his own names for the Tiers; Tier 1 - Already Know, Tier 2 - Need to know and Tier 3 - Should know. Holley wants students to use their home language as a starting point to increase their vocabulary. Students need to know that their home language is valid and affirmed to build and bridge their learning of a richer academic vocabulary. Holley wants teachers to use responsive vocabulary teaching. Responsive teaching is a mind shift for teachers; instead of viewing students through a deficit lens they use the student’s prior knowledge as a positive and use it to build upon.

Responsive vocabulary means three things need to happen, first, students' home language needs to be honored and acknowledged. Second, teachers need to teach their students word attack skills, using researched based strategies for decoding unfamiliar words. Finally, teachers need to give students tools, such as graphic organizers, personal thesauruses and dictionaries, along with instructions on how to use them effectively (Holley, 2014).
In my opinion, this is exactly what needs to happen in today’s classroom and it is a perfect blend of the research I have already done. Personally, I have had much experience working with many different cultures of students and Dr. Holley’s approach to teaching with culture in mind seems like common sense. We know that the students bring a wealth of information into the classroom but that it doesn’t quite fit into the typical dominate culture way of doing things. Students need to be taught how to take their knowledge and shift it into an academic setting without feeling ashamed of who they are and where they come from. The dominate culture and school culture are extremely close so many people who come from the dominate culture don’t understand what it is like for our students coming from different minority cultures. I want to use Dr. Hollie’s culturally and linguistically responsive teaching to help the staff understand how to validate and affirm our students home culture while building and bridging their vocabulary.

Dr. Hollie recommends focusing on acquisition of words through effective vocabulary strategies, not on memorization (Holley 2015). His recommended practices include:

- Building on the conceptual knowledge of the students (what they bring to class), which is validating and affirming.
- Providing planned and explicit synonym/antonym development
- Utilizing slang, profanity and racially charged terms as opportunities to expand students’ academic vocabulary when appropriate.
Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Strategies

The following activities are highly effective and easily implemented in the classroom. They are meant to raise students’ curiosity around words and incorporate Dr. Holley’s recommended practices. I believe that if students learn how to create and use a Personal Thesaurus and a Personal Dictionary, and use them on a regular basis, we can make progress in closing the vocabulary gap that exists in our classrooms.

**Personal thesaurus.** This is a graphic organizer that relies on the students’ own vocabulary, which is made up of tier one words, to grow their learning of tier 2 words. It works because it validates the students go to word while at the at the same time building their vocabulary and bridging the gap into using the new words in a school setting. This is a powerful and popular tool for reading, writing and speaking in academic settings. Students place their own word in the top box, then the teacher and peers help come up with tier 2 synonyms written below the students' word, finally the column is finished off with an antonym (Holley 2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BIG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humongous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hefty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gigantic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enormous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMALL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The students own their words. When writing or speaking, they can look up the word they would usually use, because it is on top and highlighted, and then intentionally choose a higher tiered word to use. Entries in the thesaurus can be phrases, slang words, or even inappropriate words. This is a tool that uses both the student's knowledge and the teacher’s knowledge to come together in a partnership.

**Personal dictionary.** A personal dictionary is a way for students to learn and keep track of tier 3 words. Tier three words are content specific words like chlorophyll, emancipation and ambassador. These words are not usually heard in speech or read in text and synonyms for these words are not easily generated. Students will have no concept of the words so the teacher must supply the technical definition. The personal dictionary is based on the Freyer Model (Frayer, Frederick, and Klausmeier 1969).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Term:</th>
<th>Personal Illustration:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erudite</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Connection:</th>
<th>Personal Definition:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My erudite hath teacher was able to answer every question I asked. It is like he is a college professor.</td>
<td>Erudite means having or showing great knowledge or learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students used a personal dictionary after building the concept of the word through direct instruction from the teacher. Teachers can give students sentence starters for their personal definition, for example: *It is a thing that*...*/It was a time when*...*/It is a place where*... They must
then make a personal connection and draw a picture. The personal dictionary is meant to be cumulative and is recommended for each subject area.

Teaching students to create and use a personal dictionary and thesaurus is a meaningful vocabulary experiences for students in your classroom and will especially benefit Standard English learners. Creating a word rich environment where students’ culture is validated and affirmed while bridging the gap between their home culture and school culture, is priceless.

**Summary**

In the beginning of my research, I wanted to explore the vocabulary needs of an urban classroom. I am passionate about this topic because I have worked in urban classrooms my entire teaching career and watched my hard workers fall short on high stakes standardized testing. I had an idea that it was connected to vocabulary. I love working with diverse students; students whose backgrounds are like mine, white and middle class, and those who are different, students of color, students of poverty, and students whose first language wasn't academic classroom English. I researched students of poverty and their vocabulary needs along with traditional English language learners and their vocabulary needs and found that there were many strategies considered to be best practice that overlapped both types of student. Finally, I realized that using Culturally and Linguistically Responsive teaching to teach vocabulary would work best for my urban students because it uses all the best practice strategies for students of poverty, students who are learning the English language and students who do not speak standard /academic language and adds a cultural piece. This way of teaching embraces who students are, validates their culture and doesn't look at their lack standard/academic English as a deficit.
In Chapter Three I will describe the setting I work in and my plan for sharing with staff the information that I have learned about best practices for vocabulary growth with urban learners. I am going to pick out three responsive academic vocabulary strategies to teach the staff, so they can easily and intentionally teach vocabulary to students that will truly help our learners expand their vocabulary.
CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Because each new word has to be studied and learned on its own, the larger your vocabulary becomes, the easier it will be to connect a new word with words you already know, and thus remember its meaning. So your learning speed, or pace, should increase as your vocabulary grows. -- Johnson O'Connor (1939)

Introduction

What are the vocabulary strategies one must focus on to enhance elementary urban students’ acquisition and retention of vocabulary? After examining current literature, statistics, and research, there exists a gap in vocabulary for students of poverty, ELL students, non-dominant culture students and those students who fit into all three categories. As stated before, as many as half of the students in a sixth-grade urban classroom struggle with reading comprehension and that most of these students, both native English speakers and ELL’s have limited vocabulary.

Another challenge teachers’ face is when your urban classroom also includes students who do not fall into any of these categories. In every classroom, there are students who are proficient in grade level vocabulary and I want to help teachers ensure that all their students are learning and making adequate growth. Therefore, I chose vocabulary strategies that are beneficial for all students, not just students of poverty, ELL students and minority students. The strategies that I am focusing on will meet the needs of all students in an urban classroom.

I am developing two workshops for teachers in my building. The first workshop I will be highlighting three vocabulary strategies that can be used with any text as teachers do a lot of small flexible grouping to make sure everyone is working at their appropriate level. Teachers also value whole group instruction so the vocabulary strategies in the Google slides will be
usable in both formats. The second workshop will highlight a quick vocabulary strategy but will focus on how the implementation of the first strategies went.

This chapter will outline best practices for teaching vocabulary and highlight the theories behind why they will work best in an urban classroom. I want to make this as easy for teachers to implement in their classrooms as possible.

After analyzing my data, I found there were similar best practice approaches to teaching urban students. The similarities I found were:

- Intentional teaching of tier 2 words
- Curiosity/motivation/engagement
- Repetition
- Modeling
- Linking to prior knowledge
- Validating and affirming students ’ culture

These are the six principles behind the vocabulary strategies that I have placed in my Google slides. After introducing each vocabulary strategy, we will talk about how each principle is emphasized in each activity. I will now outline my staff and school in order to give a better idea of who will be receiving my vocabulary professional development.

**Setting**

My district includes all or parts of seven communities in a large metropolitan area. We serve more than 75,000 residents with nine elementary schools, two middle schools, two high schools, along with an early childhood center and an alternative learning center. The mission statement of our district reads, “A community collaborative dedicated to educating and
empowering all learners to excel in our changing world.” This mission statement guides our work with our 10,660 students in grades k-12. 41% of the students in our district are minorities, speaking 35 different languages. About 47% of the students in our district receive free or reduced-price lunch and we have identified 205 homeless whom attend school here.

My school is in a first ring suburb. We serve students pre-school through fifth grade. We are considered to have the highest poverty school in our district at 78 percent of our students receiving free or reduced-price lunch and are also considered the most diverse school in the district with 54.4 percent students of color. The demographic breakdown is as follows; Black students (34%), White students (23%), Asian students (20%), Hispanic students (17%). 18% of our students qualify for English language services. We have a very mobile population with more than 150 students moving in and out of our school during the school year.

We have a parent teacher association comprised of a few parents that put great effort into fundraising and putting on fantastic events at our school. For example, our school has hosted a color run, holiday shop, carnival and many student dances to encourage parent participation and to raise funds for our building. These events are very well attended by students' families, and we can also boast about our high attendance rates at conferences. The parents and families are encouraged to apply for our backpack program which allows students to bring home back packs full of food on the weekend to bridge the gap between Friday's school lunch and Monday morning school breakfast. We also have a part time social worker who connects families with community resources whenever possible.

Participants

There will be 24 teachers attending my professional development training. 5 teachers have been teaching 6 years or less, 6 teachers have been teaching 6-12 years, 4 teachers have
been teaching 13-19 years and 9 teachers have been teaching 20 years or more. Age wise there are 5 teachers are between the ages of 20-30 years old, 4 teachers are between the ages of 30-40 years old, 11 teachers are between the ages of 40-50 years old and 3 teachers are over 50 years old. The staff community is very strong and many staff say that they love coming to work every day.

Our school hosts staff-run events like STEM night, Literacy night, and a school BBQ where everyone volunteers their time to run activities for students and their families. I have never heard one single complaint from staff about volunteering their time. Everyone I work with loves their students and doesn't mind going the extra mile for them. Our passion for education is rooted in the whole child development philosophy which greatly extends beyond academics. Our staff has chosen to read up on trauma informed teaching, culturally and linguistically appropriate teaching strategies, and is always open to trying new things. I have high hopes that my vocabulary strategies will be well received and tried in classrooms.

Procedure

I am going to hold two professional development workshops at my school in September. Before attending the first workshop teachers will have filled out a pre-assessment asking them what vocabulary strategies they regularly use in the classroom. They will also answer why/where they have learned to use the strategies.

At the first meeting in September I will show a self-created Google Slide presentation that highlights and explains three vocabulary strategies that work well with our students along with my research and theory behind it. We will then practice three strategies as a group and then participants will be given an exit slip asking which strategy they are going to try in their classrooms.
We will reconvene after two weeks to have our second session. During session two we will sit in a circle and talk about what strategy we tried and how it went over in our class. I will promote honest discussion about what worked and what didn’t. I will then collect feedback from the staff to see if they would like more PD on vocabulary strategies that enhance urban students’ acquisition and retention of vocabulary.

**Adult Learners**

Teachers need a wide variety of ongoing opportunities to improve their skills. Teacher professional development is the instruction provided to teachers to promote their development in a certain area, and the area I am focusing on is vocabulary. Teacher Professional Development is the tool by which visions for change are broken down and conveyed to teachers. Though the recipient of professional development is the teacher, the ultimate intended beneficiary is the student. Highly effective classrooms can result from highly effective professional development.

Recent research (Butler et al., 2004) tells us that effective professional development includes creating classroom content, modeling techniques for teachers to use in their classrooms, and feedback on lessons (Harris, Graham, and Adkins, 2015). Teachers do not like being lectured just like our students don’t stand for that either. The best way to train teachers is using hands on strategies just like they would do with their students.

I am going to structure my PD in a such a way that the teachers will move and practice exactly how we want their students to move and practice. It will be modeled as “we are in this together” rather than “I have all the answers, listen to me”. Teachers at my school always go above and beyond to help their students and will take every opportunity to learn something if they believe it will truly make a difference. I have such a strong belief that intentional teaching
of vocabulary strategies will help our students thrive and I know my passion will be present in my presentations.

**Summary**

To create access to linguistically rich experiences that promote vocabulary acquisition you need to provide opportunities for your students to be reading, writing, speaking and listening always. In an urban classroom, you are trying to close the gap in vocabulary that exists in students of poverty, minority students and English language learners. Students need to have more intentional and targeted vocabulary instruction which has been proven to increase vocabulary. My hope is that through expanding their vocabulary, they will become more fluent readers, more complex and interesting writers; therefore, they will have increased comprehension and higher test scores. Ultimately, this achievement will boost their self-confidence and set them on a course for life-long success.

As teachers have so many demands put on them already, I want to show them easy to use and highly effective, vocabulary strategies that involve little prep. I have compiled what I feel to be the three best vocabulary teaching strategies that will work for an urban classroom. This is not a magic pill that will fix all problems, but the activities and graphic organizers provided are simple to use and grounded in thoroughly researched theory that combines the best strategies for reaching those kids who struggle with vocabulary and pushing the learning of those who do not. It is my hope that the teachers will enjoy learning, apply what they have learned, and ask for more ideas in the future. In Chapter Four the structure of the workshops and the selected strategies will be discussed.
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

“If we are serious about “increasing standards” and bringing a greater proportion of schoolchildren to high levels of academic accomplishment, we cannot continue to leave vocabulary development to parents, chance and highly motivated reading.”

-Biemiller (2000)

Introduction

The question, how can teachers enhance the acquisition and retention of vocabulary in their urban learners? has driven me to find the best vocabulary strategies, based on research, to share with my staff. I want my staff to believe my credibility so I will first outline for them the scope and sequence of my research. Next, I will highlight some big learning and mind shifts that I feel are at the core of my findings.

Prior to my first workshop in August, a survey will be sent out asking teachers questions about how and when they teach vocabulary. During the first workshop, I will present my findings, teach them three sound vocabulary strategies, and finally have them choose a strategy to try in their classrooms. I will be available to help them with any implementation or questions they may have for the next few weeks.

In October, we will meet a second time to discuss how the experience of using the vocabulary strategy with their students went. I will start the session with a quick vocabulary exercise, next we will share our experiences implementing the vocabulary strategies in our classrooms, and finally, I will poll the staff to see if they are interested in more professional
development on high impact vocabulary strategies for our urban learners. If that is the case; I will continue to offer workshops throughout the year.

Results of Survey

Before the first vocabulary workshop I will have sent a vocabulary survey through Google forms. The purpose of the survey is to collect data from teachers about when and how they teach vocabulary. My prediction is that most teachers are not teaching vocabulary or they are indirectly teaching vocabulary a few days a week. I hope that when teachers realize the importance of direct vocabulary teaching, on an ongoing basis, from listening to my professional development, they will be motivated to change their practices by adding more direct vocabulary instruction into their classroom.

Teaching Vocabulary Survey
Please answer these questions honestly. The data will be compiled and shown without names attached during a vocabulary PD.

Grade You Teach ______________
How many times during the week do you teach vocabulary? (on average)
   o I do not teach vocabulary
   o 1 day a week
   o 2 days a week
   o 3 days a week or more

Vocabulary teaching typically happens:
   o During small group instruction (guided reading/strategy groups)
   o During whole class instruction
   o During one on one instruction (conferring)
   o I do not teach vocabulary

When teaching vocabulary, I mostly rely on:
   o Direct vocabulary teaching
   o Indirect vocabulary teaching
   o I am unsure
   o I do not teach vocabulary
When teaching vocabulary...
- I focus on teaching words
- I focus on teaching strategies
- I teach both words and strategies
- I do not teach vocabulary

Do you think you should spend...
- More time teaching vocabulary
- Less time teaching vocabulary
- Not change my practice at this time

Any thoughts/feelings on vocabulary instruction that you would like to share

__________________________________________________________________________

**Workshop One**

The first workshop will be held during back to school week in August. I will have forty-five minutes to present my slideshow to the staff. I think it is important to start the year off with professional development that aligns with the school improvement plan. This year, as in every year, one of our school goals is to close the achievement gap that exists between students of color and white students on both the math and reading MCA tests. The gap is significantly wider at my school for our Black and Hispanic students. I truly believe that placing an emphasis on vocabulary building, along with culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, will set our staff up for success in the quest to close the gap. The workshop will start with a grand conversation where we talk about the findings of the vocabulary survey, next I will start the Google slides presentation where I explain to the staff what I have researched and why, following that we will try three vocabulary strategies that I have found to have a high impact on urban learners, and finally we will close with the teachers committing to try a strategy in their classroom. We will reconvene after a few weeks to discuss our findings in workshop two.
**Grand Conversation.** We will start by thinking about our own teaching and what vocabulary strategies we use in our classrooms and why. I will show the results of the survey and instruct the teachers to discuss anything they find interesting and surprising. I will also pass out the agenda for session one (Appendix A).

Tables and chairs will be set up to seat either four or six per table (there will be 24 teachers in attendance). On each table, there will be two copies of the results of the vocabulary survey which was sent out previously. I will have directions written on the board to discuss the results and write down any “Ah ha” moments. The tables will have post its, pens and pencils on them.

At the beginning of the session I will hold a grand conversation for five minutes where I ask the participants to share anything surprising or reaffirming about the results. I am assuming that there isn't a lot of intentional teaching of vocabulary words and/or strategies for learning new words, so when the teachers realize this they will be open to hearing how to incorporate quick and easy strategies, grounded in research, that will give them the greatest success with students.

After the discussion ends, I will share my thoughts; I believe we need to do a better job as a school teaching vocabulary and my hope is that through expanding students’ vocabulary they will become more fluent readers, more complex and interesting writers; therefore, they will have increased comprehension and higher test scores. I believe that this could possibly close the achievement gap.

**Google slide presentation.** Directing everyone’s attention to the smart board, I will start the Google slide show (Appendix B). First, I will begin by thanking everyone with their help and support throughout my capstone. Next, I will reveal my question; *how can teachers enhance the*
acquisition and retention of vocabulary in their urban learners? Following that, I will explain that during my presentation I will use the term urban learner, which, refers to students that qualify for free and reduced lunch, English language learners, and students whose home language is not Standard English. Shortly after, I will explain my literature review in which I preformed critical analysis of published sources on urban learners to identify research based best practice vocabulary strategies. Then, after doing thorough research on each category separately, I looked for commonalities in the best practices for each. This led me to realize that using Culturally and Linguistically Responsive teaching to teach vocabulary would work best for urban students because it uses all the best practice strategies for students of poverty, students who are learning the English language and students who do not speak standard /academic language at home plus it adds a cultural piece to the instruction. This way of teaching embraces who students are, validates their culture and doesn't look at their lack of standard/academic English as a deficit. Finally, I will outline three vocabulary strategies that I believe will be easiest to implement and have the highest impact on our students; the personal thesaurus, shades of meaning, and the concept cube.

**Strategy One-Personal Thesaurus.** I will introduce the personal thesaurus, which comes from Sherroky Hollie's *Responsive Academic Vocabulary Instruction*. Teachers will try out the personal thesaurus in a creative way which involves movement and their own words.

Teachers will have a blank personal thesaurus page (Holley, 2012) at their table and something to write with (Appendix C). On the smartboard, there is a picture of a man standing on a cliff considering a sunset. I will instruct the teachers to write down one word that comes to mind when they see this picture. We will then perform a 4 corners movement activity, in which teachers that used the term beautiful will stand in one corner, breathtaking stand in another,
gorgeous stand in a third and all other words used will stand in a fourth corner. When doing this activity with students I may change the names of the corners to reflect the vocabulary level of the class i.e., pretty, nice, and beautiful. Doing this movement activity is powerful because it gets participants up and moving also dividing them into like groups.

Next, the teachers are instructed to make three silent appointments with others who are not in their corner. When meeting for the appointment student’s must perform three tasks: greet each other, exchange vocabulary words, and then say goodbye and/or thank you before moving on to the next appointment. After collecting three new words to add under your original word you sit back down. This step is important because students are relying on peers to provide new vocabulary words that may be higher level synonyms for their target word.

As the instructor, I am recording all the words that I hear being talked about on chart paper and I can also offer my services as a partner giving and getting words appropriate to my student’s levels. For example, if a student comes to me and her adjective is pretty I would give her the adjective breathtaking. On the other hand, if a student comes to me with her word being breathtaking I may give her a word like awe-inspiring. This is one way to differentiate for your students. I am also recording the words on chart paper so students can look to it for a model, in case they have no idea what to write.

Finally, when all students are seated we can think about our words and see if we can generate an antonym for it. I will give students a chance to think and then place a thumb up if they are ready. Using a whip share, we will share our antonym and again the teacher will create a list. Whip sharing gives everyone a voice and makes repeats ok. It is a quick way for all to be involved. Participants would choose one antonym of their choice to place on the last line of their Personal Thesaurus. This step is important because the students are analyzing a list of synonyms
and then thinking about what an antonym would be for their target word. This forces student minds to think deeply about vocabulary. I end this activity, by having the staff discuss what makes this a high impact strategy and whether they can see themselves using this or some version of this in their classrooms.

The Personal Thesaurus is a way for students to have their own language validated yet provides scaffolding for them to use other higher-level words in their place. It is a tool they can refer to when reading, writing and speaking. Students keep and add to it throughout the year. It is a high impact strategy because it uses curiosity, repetition, modeling, affirmation, and links new words to their prior knowledge.

**Strategy Two-Shades of Meaning** (Appendix D). Next, I will introduce them to the strategy called shades of meaning, first introduced by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey. This strategy has students discuss and debate differences between the intensity of meanings in the synonyms that were generated from the previous activity the personal thesaurus (Appendix C).

Teachers will first start by finding a high-five partner. They will have to decide whose personal thesaurus entry to use, next they will write down their 4 synonyms on post- its. I will give a mini explanation about word intensity and how some words are more or less intense than others. The participants and their partners will have conversations about where their words fall on the continuum, physically moving the post-its around with their partners. When the pair can agree on the order of their words they will be given a paint sample and a marker on which to write their words directly onto the sample. When all pairs finish, the teacher will reveal, using the google slides how she placed her words and why. Pairs will then become quads as they share where they placed their words and why, keeping in mind there is no right or wrong answer if they can justify their thinking. I end this activity, by having the staff discuss what makes this a
high impact strategy and whether they can see themselves using this or some version of this in their classrooms.

Shades of meaning is a way for students to think deeply and talk deeply about words and their meanings. This is a high impact strategy because it peaks student’s curiosity about words. When using familiar words from the previous activity, it is low-risk and repetitive, also, students can use their prior knowledge to explain why they think some words are stronger than others bridging a connection between their lives outside of school and school. Also, working with peers where there are no wrong answers affirms and validates that they are learners and can be experts in vocabulary.

**Strategy Three Concept Cube.** Finally, I will introduce my last strategy called a Concept Cube (Appendix E). A concept cube is a great way to get students to think deeply about words. It combines many high-impact vocabulary strategies, like antonym/synonym development, student created definitions, game format, etc. all in one (Nickelsen, 1999).

To practice, teachers will receive a six-square net (which will eventually be folded into a three-dimensional cube). On each of the squares learners are instructed to write down one of the following.

- Target vocabulary word
- Antonym
- Synonym
- Category it belongs to/or your own definition
In this case, I will have the teacher’s pick one of the words from their personal thesaurus page. But, I will let the staff know that they can use any tier 2 word that is appropriate for each student. I will use a google slide to show the teachers my example and explain the ways you could differentiate the categories for your students. For example, in younger grades, you could include rhyming words, syllables, and cloze sentences. The next steps in the process are cut, fold and tape the cube to make a square. Then, with a partner or partners, they roll their cube and must tell the partner/s the relationship of the word that lands on top to the target vocabulary word. By doing this, students will be repeating their target word with every roll and explaining to a partner/s how the word/s that came up relate to the initial word. For example, If I roll my cube and the words, Eagles and Mountains, comes up, I would say, “Eagles and mountains are examples of things that are Majestic” or if insignificant came up, I would say, “Insignificant is the opposite of Majestic.” I will let the staff practice playing for 3-5 minutes. I end this activity, by having the staff discuss what makes this a high impact strategy and whether they can see themselves using this or some version of this in their classrooms.

Concept cubes are a great way to incorporate many high impact strategies into one activity. Using one game, students are exploring many different concepts tied to one word, so it really makes them think deeply about and understand the target word. It is high interest, as it involves cutting and taping and game play. Because it is a high impact strategy, the students repeat the target word, it is motivating and self-driven which is affirming to the students as learners in charge of their learning.
**Expectations and hopes following the workshop.** Following the discussion of the last strategy, I will show a slide with this quote,

> Because each new word has to be studied and learned on its own, the larger your vocabulary becomes, the easier it will be to connect a new word with words you already know, and thus remember its meaning. So, your learning speed, or pace, should increase as your vocabulary grows. -- *Johnson O'Connor*.

This is to remind the staff that although it may seem overwhelming to add direct teaching of vocabulary to their already full plate, it is worth the effort. Eventually, as the students begin to build a larger vocabulary it will be easier and faster to add new words to it. Following the quote, the next slide asks the teachers to choose one vocabulary strategy they are going try in their classroom. Next, I will clarify that the teachers are to commit to trying one strategy in their classroom within the next month. The expectation is that when we return together we will share out about our experiences with the strategy. Finally, I will hand out a slip of paper that includes all my contact information and a link to my google doc (Appendix F), ensuring that I will be available for to answer questions or help with anything they may need.

**Exit slip.** Each attendee will receive a post it in which to write their name upon. When leaving the classroom, they will see a poster on the door that has boxes labeled with each strategy. Teachers will place their signed post-it into the box of the strategy they are committing to try. I will later place the poster in the teacher’s lounge so teachers can see who else chose the strategy they did in case they would like to contact each other for questions and tips.
Workshop Two

The second workshop will be held approximately three weeks from the first session. It will be 25 minutes long which is shorter than the first workshop. The purpose of the second session is to get accurate and authentic feedback from teachers on the implementation of my high impact vocabulary strategies. The format of the feedback session will include a reflection time, then a sharing time, ending with final check in by me. The reflection sheets will be pre-printed with different words written on the back. The sheets have a triple purpose, the first purpose being a vehicle for honest reflective feedback, the second purpose being exposure to more high impact vocabulary strategies that you can use with your students, and finally a way to match up teachers for sharing groups in a fun and equitable way.

Reflection time. As teachers come in the door, I will hand them a reflection graphic organizer (Appendix G) to fill out. The organizer is in a Frayer Model format with the center being the spot where they name the vocabulary strategy that they tried. The upper left box has space for them to write about what went well during the activity, then the upper right box has space to write about any areas that didn’t go well or as expected, next the lower left box asks how did the students react to the activity, and finally the lower right box the teacher explains why or why not they would use this strategy regularly and/or any changes they would make in the future. I will give teachers five to ten minutes to fill out the reflection sheet.

Sharing time. When the timer has gone off I will instruct the staff to turn their papers over. On the back of the reflection sheet teachers will find a word written. It will be up to the participants to find a small group that consists of two antonyms and one synonym of their word, thereby creating a group of four. I will walk around and help facilitate the forming of groups. Once all the teachers have found their groups, they will be instructed to number off one through
four in the order that they are going to share their reflection sheet. I will inform staff that we are going to practice reflective listening, where the speaker gets two full minutes to share uninterrupted, and the listeners just listen. Listeners may smile, nod and make brief comments but they may not interrupt, question or add onto what the speaker is saying. To ensure a two-minute share I will have a large timer on the SMART board. At the end of the individual sharing there will be a final two-minute time for active sharing where the small groups can then respond, comment and question each other about their experiences.

**Check in.** Finally, I will call the groups’ attention back to me and ask a person from each small group to share out, in one or two sentences, a quick summary of the experiences teachers had using the vocabulary strategies in their classroom. I think it will be beneficial for everyone to hear in general whether the experiences were positive, negative or neutral. It is my hope that everyone will have had a positive seamless experience implementing their chosen vocabulary strategy along with seeing the students’ interest and retention of vocabulary peak which would result in more frequent use of high impact vocabulary strategies in the classroom. I will also inform the staff that I will be sending out a post vocabulary survey through google doc a few months later to see if there is a want/need for further training in high impact vocabulary strategies (Appendix H).

In Chapter four I talked in depth about the two professional development sessions I will be holding for my staff. It is exciting to think about sharing my research and what strategies I have found to be most high impact. The first session outlines my research and the three strategies I am going to facilitate with the staff, while the second session is more reflective and uses some neat vocabulary strategies that are simple, quick but highly engaging to use with students. I want teachers to understand that this way of teaching vocabulary embraces who
students are, validates their culture and doesn't look at students’ lack of standard/academic English as a deficit. Finally, in chapter five I will revisit why vocabulary is so important to me, then I will return to my literature review to discuss what knowledge I took from there to create my workshop, next I will discuss my limitations and struggles with the process of me writing my capstone, and finally I will talk in depth about the implications of my work and any future research that I might want to explore.
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

“Lexis is the core or heart of language”-Lewis (1993, pg. 89)

Introduction

Throughout the capstone process, I was on a quest to answer the question, how can teachers enhance the acquisition and retention of vocabulary in their urban learners? I started by speaking about my own experiences in the classroom with students who were working hard but were not showing proficiency on state mandated tests. I believe that my history working in diverse classrooms has given me a unique perspective on teaching. I saw my students’ limited vocabulary impact their achievement and how cultural competency is important to their success. I wanted to find strategies that connected culture and vocabulary in a way that would be easy for teachers to implement in their classrooms. I hope that what I have found and put together will be able to be transferred into K-5 classrooms with the ease and impact that I imagine. In this chapter, I will reflect on all I have learned from researching and developing professional development. I will also discuss the limitations, implications and further research I would like to do on vocabulary acquisition in urban classrooms.

Return to the Literature Review

When I analyzed the classrooms that I had taught in, I used the demographic makeup to talk about them. I chose to use the demographics because when I look at test data it showed that my students were not scoring proficient on the MCA, and the purpose of the MCA is to measure Minnesota students’ achievement on the Minnesota state standards. When looking at the state’s proficiency rate there was marked achievement differences between students of color and white students and students who received free and reduced-price lunch and students who did not. I
looked at these gaps and my classrooms and saw a connection. When thinking about why this could be, I drew from my experience working with my students and realized there has been issues with vocabulary in their reading, writing, listening and speaking across the board. Also, teaching in urban settings for many years has lead me to attend many different trainings which emphasis vocabulary being key in learning. For example, SIOP, sheltered instruction observation protocol, which is a researched-based instructional model proven effective in addressing the academic needs of English language learner bases much of its focus on teaching vocabulary. I decided to look at my classroom of students and focus on enhancing the acquisition and retention of their vocabulary. I looked at my students three different ways, first, students who are English language learners, second, students who live in poverty, and third, standard English learners. Next, I read research about the best practices for teaching vocabulary in all three categories. Then, I would then look for similarities, finally identifying and synthesizing what works best for all three types of students, keeping in mind that the urban classroom has students that do not fit in the three previously identified categories, as well.

**English language learners.** For the past 20 years, the number of students who are English Learners in Minnesota increased by 300 percent, making them our state’s fastest growing student population (Minnesota Education Equity Partnership). Students qualify as English language learners if a parent or guardian says the student first learned a language other than English, or the student comes from a home where the language spoken is not English, and/or the student has been assessed to lack the necessary English to participate fully in class. According to my research, incorporating the home language into vocabulary instruction is key in academic success for El learners. In addition, there are key practices that teachers should incorporate into their teaching practices including:
- Association
- Reading aloud
- Explicit teaching of new words
- Using visuals
- Using graphic organizers
- Games
- Repetition
- Modeling

These key practices will add more and more words to a child’s vocabulary (Cummins 2000; Thomas and Collier 2002; Brown, Sanford, Turner 2012). Fortunately, vocabulary knowledge is cumulative, so the more words you know at any point in time, the more words you can add. Ultimately, these were the techniques I found to be best practice for teaching vocabulary to English language learners.

**Students of poverty.** Two major cities in Minnesota have the state’s largest concentrations of low-income students at about 68 percent for the districts combined. Across our state, minorities are disproportionately affected by poverty, according to the Minnesota Compass Project. About 41 percent of the state’s black children are poor; 23 percent of Asian children; 28 percent Hispanic children; and 8 percent of white children. To put these numbers into perspective a household size of four would have to make $45,510 a year or less to qualify for reduced lunch and $24,600 to qualify for free lunch. According to my research, intentional building of vocabulary is key for students of poverty. If we are to increase vocabulary knowledge of these children, there must be an ongoing effort to introduce and explain new vocabulary, from
kindergarten at least through grade six. Once students have learned word identification and morphological analysis—the dictionary skills (context clues) are a never-ending effort according to Biemiller. After reading through much research, I have found four important aspects of vocabulary instruction that needs to be present for helping low SES students close the vocabulary gap. Ultimately, raising students’ curiosity around words, repetition, modeling, and intentional vocabulary teaching are four practices that stood out as critical when emphasizing vocabulary growth in low SES students.

**Standard English learners.** SEL’s are ethnic native speakers of English whose mastery of the Standard English language used in the curriculum and classrooms of schools is limited due to their use of ethnic specific nonstandard dialects (LeMoine, 1999). These students’ home languages are English but differ from the academic and standard English used in the classrooms. Unfortunately, what appears to be happening, is this language difference is being looked at as a learning deficit and students are being placed in remedial classes to work on basic skills when there is no issue with higher level thinking or learning it is just an academic language proficiency issue. According to my research, students need to use their home language as a starting point to increase their vocabulary. More importantly, students need to know that their home language is valid and affirmed to build and bridge their learning of a richer academic vocabulary. The best research that I found in this field was Doctor Sherroky Holley. Holley wants teachers to use responsive vocabulary teaching to help SEL’s increase their vocabulary. Ultimately, responsive teaching is a mind shift for teachers; instead of viewing students through a deficit lens they use the student’s prior knowledge as a positive and use it to build upon.
In the end, I took everything that I learned from my research and created a Google slides presentation highlighting three vocabulary strategies that I felt embodied the results of my research. These high impact vocabulary strategies combine direct teaching, modeling, repetition, and presents them in a highly engaging format that validates and affirms students’ culture. I truly hope that the embodiment of my research is seen in my strategies.

Limitations

I started my graduate degree seven and a half years ago, and I know that date well, because that is when I found out I was pregnant! Taking the classes worked out well, even giving me a “break” from being a new mom because my husband would take over as I attended classes at Hamline University. The tricky part came when I was trying to do my research and writing with a small child. Being a mom and working full-time pushed my research to the back burner. I even had to request two extensions to complete the paper to my liking. I still am in awe of myself that I have finally found time to finish.

My job takes an immense amount of focus, patience, and learning to be able to balance academic rigor with classroom management. I am often exhausted when I pick up my son from after-school programming and I still must get home, take care of our two dogs, guinea pig, parakeet, and lizard all while making dinner. My husband only works four days a week but averages fifty hours a week. The one day that he is not working we often had to make time for meetings as he is a recovering alcoholic and marriage counseling because being married is hard sometimes. So, time was a major limitation when completing my capstone. If time would have permitted I would have given the pre-and post-vocabulary survey and done the workshops with my staff. Then, I would have reported my data in my results section.
Implications

My hope is that my staff will enjoy my professional development sessions and realize how important direct vocabulary instruction in the classroom is. I also want the staff to look at all our students as highly capable learners and not view their lack of vocabulary or different English dialect as a deficit or roadblock to their learning. Therefore, they will implement my high impact vocabulary strategies on a regular basis in their classrooms. Which in turn will lead to our students’ vocabulary improving, turning them into stronger readers and writers as well as improving their test scores. The staff will then welcome me back with open arms and I will continue to do professional development based on culturally responsive vocabulary strategies. Ultimately, if our school sees change then I may be asked to do district wide trainings, as well.

Future Research Projects

If given the opportunity, I would like to dig deeper into the achievement gap in Minnesota. I know that vocabulary is not be the only factor that is needed to be addressed to close the gap for my students, and I would be interested in researching the hidden biases held by standard English speakers (teachers) towards standard English learners (students). I am also excited to collect data from my teachers to see if they enjoy using the vocabulary strategies on the classroom, but I would like to extend the data collection by getting the students’ input, as well. Finally, there are vocabulary components of a reading progress monitoring program that my school subscribes to that I have not yet examined and I would like to. These would be other areas to explore when I am looking to do further research.
Final Reflection

Writing this capstone has been a true labor of love for me. I have dedicated over eight years of my life to working on my Master's Degree and completing this capstone. I am very glad to be finished and have learned so much. Working full time, being married and raising a child have left me with little time to read and research the things I love. So, I am very thankful that staying in school and pursuing my Master's has pushed me to keep learning, reading and growing. Sometimes you lose sight of what is important when you are caught in the fast-paced rigor of day to day living and being forced to pause and think has been a gift. The act of identifying my passion, urban learners, and pinpointing what I thought I could do to help, research-based vocabulary strategies combined with cultural responsiveness, was a process. I have always loved to problem solve. I especially enjoy looking at data and analyzing it in different ways. Unfortunately, I struggle when it comes to identifying my feelings and emotions and talking about myself. Writing this capstone became a journey of self-identify for me and has helped me become more confident in using personal stories to make the data more meaningful. Looking back at my many classrooms I was able, for the first time, to think analytically about my journey. I saw that most of my students struggled with reading and writing, and there was a limited number of words they were using to express themselves. This was a consistent strand throughout my career. I had been to many English language learner trainings and had read many of Eric Jensen's books about teaching with poverty in mind. I knew that my classroom was made up of many different students and what seemed to be successful vocabulary strategies for some was not successful for enough of my students to continue doing it. I truly hope that what I
created will be successful for my entire classroom and that my staff and students will reap the benefits of my research and hard work.
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Welcome

- Results of Survey
- Grand Conversation
- Google Slides on Vocabulary research
- Strategy One - Personal Thesaurus
- Strategy Two – Shades of Meaning
- Strategy Three – Concept Cube
- Expectations and Hopes Following Workshop
- Exit Slip
- Next workshop will be October TBD
My Capstone

Sarah Norenberg
How teachers can enhance the acquisition and retention of vocabulary in their urban learners
Urban Learners

*Students with low socioeconomic status.

*English language learners.

*Students representing non-dominant cultures.
Vocabulary is critical to reading success for these reasons:

1. Comprehension improves when you know what the words mean. Since comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading, you cannot overestimate the importance of vocabulary development.

2. A strong vocabulary improves all areas of communication — reading, writing, listening and speaking.

3. When students improve their vocabulary, their academic and social confidence and competence improve, too.
What I researched

- The importance of vocabulary acquisition and how it is tied to comprehension.
- The effect of low socioeconomic status on vocabulary. (poverty)
- Traditional English learner vocabulary needs.
- Standard/Academic English language learners/non-dominant culture vocabulary needs.
- How to create professional development.
Indirect - Indirect vocabulary learning refers to students learning vocabulary when they hear and see words through conversations with adults, through being read to, and through reading on their own. (wide reading)

Direct - Direct vocabulary instruction refers to intentionally choosing words to teach and then teaching specific techniques and word learning strategies.
"One of the most crucial services that teachers can provide, particularly for students who do not come from academically advantaged backgrounds, is systematic instruction in important academic terms". (Marzano & Pickering, 2005).
After analyzing my data, I found there were similar best practice approaches to teaching urban students.

I used these similarities to determine what is a high impact vocabulary strategy.
Similarities

- Direct Instruction
- Curiosity/games
- Repetition
- Modeling
- Linking to prior knowledge/ Validating Affirming their prior knowledge
Conclusion:

When I identified common needs and best practices among the different groups; I concluded that **Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Academic Vocabulary Instruction** combines identified best practices with a focus on cultural responsiveness.
Teachers must accept student’s non-standard English as an equal language, like a second language, instead of “slang” or “improper English”.

Teachers must stop viewing students home language through a deficit lens, and use the students prior knowledge as a positive to build upon.
Objectives

*I will show you 3 high impact vocabulary strategies

*We will discuss why they are good for our students

*You will pick one to use in your classroom over the next two weeks
1st Activity that combines both the mind shift best practices.

Personal Thesaurus
Use One word to Describe this Picture
When everyone is seated their entry should look like this:

Now together generate a list of possible antonyms to go into the bottom box. Students can add whatever antonym they choose.
Why is this a high impact vocabulary strategy?

Student’s word is on top-so adding new vocabulary words build on their conceptual knowledge which is VALIDATING and AFFIRMING.

If they didn’t have a word down-they could copy what the teacher wrote down before moving. That makes everyone comfortable and not panicked (MODELING)

This is PLANNED DIRECT TEACHING of synonym and antonym development

Everybody's voice is heard

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE connections are being made (home language, tier 1 to tier 2)

Students rely on each other for learning rather than the teacher.

It was a HIGH CURIOSITY/GAME format

It is differentiated so all children are learning using their OWN starting point (their first word) The teacher is available as a partner and will give words appropriate for each student who meets with her/him.
Can you see yourself using this in the classroom?

YES/NO?

WHY/HOW?
Shades of Meaning
After you have decided on 4 words place them on post-its

Astonishing

Beautiful

Awesome

Breathtaking
LEAST INTENSE

beautiful

awesome

astonishing

breathtaking

MOST INTENSE
Why is this a high impact vocabulary strategy?

Helps students develop their understanding that many words can be organized in gradients of meaning.

It is a high CURIOSITY or GAME format

The conversation between peers is safe because they are not coming up with words but are talking about subtle differences in the words which leads to rich discussion. MODELING

Using the same words as in the thesaurus is practice and REPETITION.

Good Video showing a teacher explaining a similar activity-great student talk

There is no right or wrong answers the students just need to justify their reasons.

Broadens and deepens understanding of related words.

It is intentional and lets children use their PRIOR KNOWLEDGE to reason which is AFFIRMING.

It is direct teaching of vocabulary
Can you see yourself using this in the classroom?

YES/NO?

WHY/HOW?
3rd Activity that combines the mindshift and direct instruction

Concept Cube
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The target word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Synonym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Antonym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>A category or categories it could belong to/your own definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>A picture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is my example:
You can copy mine or try to make your own with a word from your Personal Thesaurus.

1. Majestic

2. Impressive

3. Insignificant

4. Eagles and Mountains

5. A way to describe large, impressive things
How to play:

Cut fold and tape the cube Roll the cube
Say what lands on top
Explain the relationship of that word or phrase to the original word (target word)

Play with a friend

You can change the cube categories to fit your students needs. I.e., Write a cloze sentence with your word. The _____eagle soared gracefully in the sky.
Why is this a high impact vocabulary strategy?

It is direct teaching of vocabulary

It is a high CURIOSITY or GAME format

Teacher intentionally chooses tier 2 words

The students will repeat the target word every time they connect what lands on top to their target word.

The teacher will model the strategy first and when playing with peers they will model as well.

Form a deeper understanding of the target word by exploring relationships to other words

There is no right exact answers the students just need to justify their reasons.

Broadens and deepens understanding of related words.

It is intentional and lets children use their PRIOR KNOWLEDGE to reason which is AFFIRMING.

Students come up with student friendly definitions
Can you see yourself using this in the classroom?

YES/NO?

WHY/ HOW?
Because each new word has to be studied and learned on its own, the larger your vocabulary becomes, the easier it will be to connect a new word with words you already know, and thus remember its meaning. So your learning speed, or pace, should increase as your vocabulary grows. -- Johnson O'Connor
Exit slip

Personal Thesaurus, Shades of Meaning, Concept Cube

Which will you try?
APPENDIX D

Shades of Meaning

Common Core Standards addressed:

*CCS.1.L.5b: Distinguish shades of meaning among verbs differing in manner (e.g., look, peek, glance, glare, scowl) and closely related adjectives differing in intensity (e.g., large, gigantic) by defining or choosing between or by acting out the meanings

*CCS.2.L.5b: Distinguish shades of meaning among closely related verbs (e.g., toss, throw, hurl) and closely related adjectives (e.g., thin, slender, skinny, scrawny)

1. Students will be given closely related words.

2. Student will use some medium (post-its, paint samples, index cards) to rate the words from most intense to least intense.

3. Students will have the time to discuss their findings with others.

Adapted from Fisher and Frey, 2017
APPENDIX E

Cube Pattern
Cut on solid lines - Fold on dashed lines
What went well?

What didn’t go as expected?

How did the students react?

Would you use this regularly?
Why or why not?
What changes would you make?

Adapted from Frayer, 2017
APPENDIX H

Teaching Vocabulary Post Survey
Please answer these questions honestly. The data will be compiled and shown without names attached during a vocabulary PD.

Grade You Teach _______________

How many times during the week do you teach vocabulary? (on average)
  o  I do not teach vocabulary
  o  1 day a week
  o  2 days a week
  o  3 days a week or more

Vocabulary teaching typically happens:
  o  During small group instruction (guided reading/strategy groups)
  o  During whole class instruction
  o  During one on one instruction (conferring)
  o  I do not teach vocabulary

When teaching vocabulary, I mostly rely on:
  o  Direct vocabulary teaching
  o  Indirect vocabulary teaching
  o  I am unsure
  o  I do not teach vocabulary

When teaching vocabulary ...  
  o  I focus on teaching words
  o  I focus on teaching strategies
  o  I teach both words and strategies
  o  I do not teach vocabulary

Do you think you should spend...
  o  More time teaching vocabulary
  o  Less time teaching vocabulary
  o  Not change my practice at this time

Any thoughts/feelings on vocabulary instruction that you would like to share. Please let me know if you would like to attend more workshops.

__________________________________________________________________________