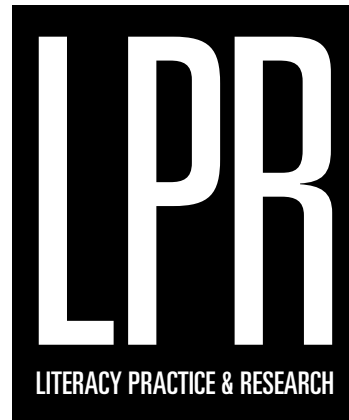
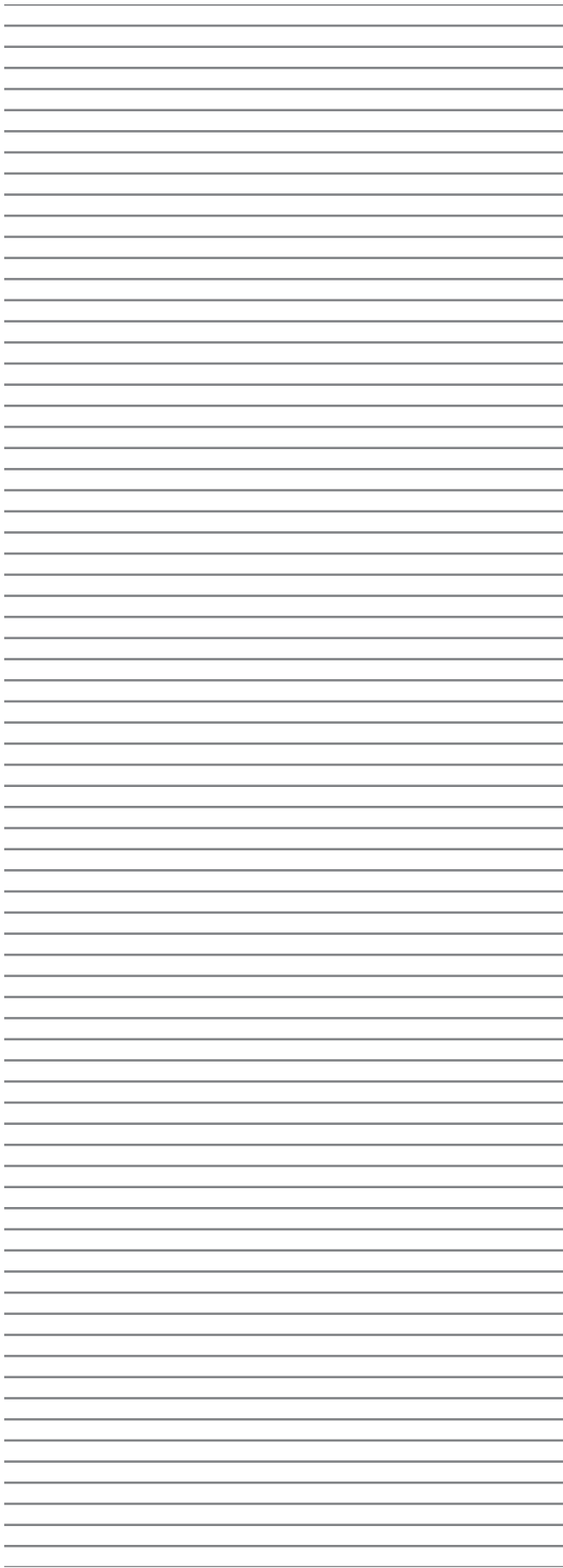


LPR

LITERACY PRACTICE & RESEARCH

Volume 42, Number 2 | Winter 2017





*An International Publication of the
Organization of Teacher Educators in Literacy*

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On the Cover: The cover for this issue was designed by Dr. Jerome C. Harste, Distinguished Professor at Indiana University. As a professor, now Emeritus, of the Department of Culture, Literacy, and Language Education, Jerry continues to be an advocate for arts-based education and an expanded view of what it means to be literate in the 21st century. Jerry is a member of the Indiana Watercolor Society, the Hoosier Salon, and holds “Signature Member” status in the Bloomington Watercolor Society and the Missouri Watercolor Society. He likes art that suggests both a story and a point of view and which, in turn, elicits both story and reflection on the part of the viewer. He likes playing with color, exploring various techniques, and using layering to invite viewers to take a second look.

**Journal production is sponsored in part by
a grant from Verizon Reads Endowment.**

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Literacy Practice & Research

A publication of the Organization of Teacher Educators in Literacy



Literacy Practice & Research is a peer-reviewed journal published by the Organization of Teacher Educators in Literacy as a service to those interested in preservice and inservice reading teacher education. The journal is intended as a forum to reflect current theory, research, and practice. Its contents do not necessarily reflect or imply endorsement by OTEL or its officers or members.

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Literacy Practice & Research

VOLUME 42, NO. 2 • WINTER 2017

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a Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association.

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The Impact of a Vocabulary Focused PLC and Research Based Practices on Teacher and Student Learning

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a vocabulary-focused professional learning community (PLC) designed to better equip teacher participants as they plan and deliver comprehensive vocabulary instruction. Underpinnings of this approach include ongoing, collaborative discussion, experimentation with research-based approaches in the classroom, and a focus on student learning. The article describes the implementation and impact of this PLC at an elementary school.

In its review of research on vocabulary teaching and learning published over 15 years ago, the National Reading Panel highlighted the need for more research “in authentic school contexts, with real teachers, under real conditions,” (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 27) and since then, we have seen a growing body of studies in this realm. Notable large scale, multi-site, federally funded studies include the Vocabulary Innovations in Education (VINE) project conducted with fourth-graders (Scott, Miller, & Flinspach, 2012), the Multi-dimensional Comprehensive Vocabulary Instruction Project (MCVIP) conducted with nine- to eleven-year-olds (Baumann et al., 2013), and the Word Generation Project (Lawrence, Crosson, Pare-Blagoev, & Snow, 2015) and Academic Language Instruction for All Students (ALIAS) Project (Leseaux, Kieffer, Kelley, & Harris, 2014), both of which focused on middle schoolers. These studies have illuminated our understanding of characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction that can be integrated into teachers’ daily practices.

A common characteristic across these projects is the inclusion of long-term, in-depth teacher professional development, which was supported, at least in part, by the overall project funding. In some cases, teachers were provided specific materials and instructional procedures and in others they were provided examples of research-based instructional practices they could integrate into their daily routines. In all cases, professional development was designed to increase teacher knowledge and competency with respect to vocabulary instruction. That said, most publications related to these studies (with the exception of the VINE project) focus primarily on the nature of teaching and learning that occurred in classrooms, rather than the teacher professional development itself. The question of how teachers acquire the knowledge and competencies needed to engage in research-based effective instruction within the context of their classrooms has remained largely unanswered in the literature. What we do know suggests that carefully planned professional development can impact teacher practice. Kucan and her colleagues (2007) studied a yearlong

professional development initiative involving content area teachers and university faculty. Their report describes the nature of the collaborative effort and the ways in which participating high school teachers appropriated knowledge and practices. At the first grade level, Gersten and his colleagues (2010) found that a teacher study group model of professional development led to significant improvement in teacher knowledge and practice related to vocabulary instruction. In this large-scale study, teachers in the experimental group attended eight interactive sessions focused on vocabulary, each lasting 75 minutes, over the course of the school year and were compensated for their participation. While studies such as this provide great insight into the nature of effective professional development, it may be difficult for schools to replicate their conditions without the benefit of external funding. Further, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have been shown to have great potential in studies aimed at improving literacy outcomes in elementary (e.g., D’Ardenne, et al, 2013) and secondary (e.g., Lai, Wilson, McNaughton, Hsiao, 2014) school settings.

In this article, we describe an unfunded professional development effort involving elementary school teachers in a Professional Learning Community. We highlight the ways in which the model unfolded over a period of two years, including its structure, the ways in which teachers invested in the effort, and its outcomes.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study is grounded in sociocultural and sociocognitive learning theories coupled with research focused both on teacher change and on school change, with particular emphasis on the potential of PLCs. Informed by Wenger’s (1988) work on communities of practice, Lai, et al. (2014), state, “Learning is enhanced through the shared cognition developed in the PLC... enhanced through social interactions with others who bring different types and forms of knowledge to achieve similar

goals...” (p. 308). This theoretical perspective is aligned with research findings regarding effective professional development, and PLCs in particular.

Characteristics of Effective Professional Development

Results of a multi-year study on teacher professional development in the United States confirm what previous studies have shown: that effective professional development is embedded within teachers’ daily contexts, takes place over time, and is marked by teacher investment and ownership. Specifically, the report states “Effective professional development is intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice; focuses on teaching and learning of specific academic content; is connected to other school initiatives; and builds strong working relationships among teachers.” (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009, p. 5). This same report indicates that compared to other nations that outperform the U.S. on international assessments, teachers here have fewer opportunities to share practices in a systematic, ongoing manner. Similarly, Desimone (2011) reports that content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation are hallmarks of effective professional development and impacts student learning.

The Potential of Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (DuFour & Mattos, 2013) offer a development opportunity that ensures collaboration focused on student learning, based on the premise that school improvement is directly related to professional development efforts that increase teacher capacity. That being said, many schools struggle to establish PLCs that operate in the manner in which they were intended. The core principles of the PLC approach, which are designed to improve student performance and change school culture, include the following as described by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many (2010):

- Collaboration. Teachers share their instructional practices and engage in critical conversations about their own and each other’s teaching, thus establishing a culture of continuous improvement wherein teaching is a collaborative, rather than an individual endeavor.
- Focus on student learning. Teachers and administrators share a commitment to ensuring that all students learn at high levels and thus engage in regular examinations of student work and other evidence of learning as a way to gauge current instructional practice and make tailored improvements.
- Collective inquiry into best practice and current reality. Teachers and administrators consult resources such as research reports and content experts in order to increase their knowledge and determine ways to align best practice with current, contextual realities.
- Action orientation: learning by doing. Teachers are active knowledge creators, as they try instructional practices to learn how they work and to what ends with regard to student learning.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the project unfolded in response to a review of literature and a needs analysis at the school where the PLC occurred. The guiding question was as follows: How did this vocabulary focused PLC impact teacher instruction and student learning?

Vocabulary as the Content Focus for the Valley View PLC

Effective PLCs have a clear content focus based on current student learning and goals for improvement. Building level reading assessment data led to the selected content focus on vocabulary for the PLC. Specifically, the building level SMART goal (O’Neill & Conzemius, 2005), designed to be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely, called for a focus on vocabulary development with the intent of increasing student achievement on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment in reading for the upcoming school year. This goal aligned with the state’s adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which places a premium on vocabulary knowledge in English language arts (National Governors Association & Council of Chief School Officers, 2010). Additionally, vocabulary knowledge has long been recognized as a critical factor in reading achievement and overall school success (Graves, 2006; Farstrup & Samuels, 2008).

With an established content focus, coupled with key principles of the PLC approach, the purpose of the Valley View Elementary School PLC was multi-faceted. At its core were commitments to teacher reflection and an increase in student proficiency related to vocabulary. More specifically, engagement in the PLC was designed to better equip participants individually and collectively, as they worked to do the following:

- Examine student work to monitor progress and determine levels of learning and understanding
- Tailor instruction based on what was learned from examining student work
- Satisfy building level reading SMART goal and build capacity to meet the CCSS
- Build upon prior professional development focused on vocabulary

Co-Construction of the PLC

The Valley View Elementary School PLC represents a high level of teacher investment and ownership, as evidenced in its expansion over time and its shared norms of practice.

PLC Composition Over Time

DuFour and Mattos (2013) highlight team composition as an important factor in PLC success. As previously mentioned, the Valley View PLC began with membership among intermediate grade Humanities teachers, a building-level instructional coach, and facilitator. Near the end of Year One, PLC members offered professional development for school level colleagues; they shared what they had learned and how these insights had impacted their teaching and student learning. The goal was to expand the collaborative approach to vocabulary instruction across the building. As a result, teachers in the building requested that the project be expanded. After a review of the

request by the building Staff Development Committee and support by the principal and assistant principals, the PLC expanded in Year Two. Corresponding shifts in teacher assignments, a common reality in schools, led to overwhelmingly new membership. One teacher, the instructional coach, and PLC facilitator from Year One were joined by eight new teachers in Year Two.

Shared Norms and Logistics of the PLC

In order to maximize learning, meeting logistics were thoughtfully considered. Participants met one or two times per month before school for 30 minutes. Building level commitments, such as parent teacher conferences and team meetings, influenced the PLC schedule. Sessions were consistently held in one participant's classroom, which allowed for easy reference to vocabulary-centered teaching tools and student work, some of which were on display. Participants were granted Continuing Education Units in recognition of their commitment to this work.

The following group norms were developed using guidelines provided by the National Staff Development Council (2006) as discussed by DuFour et al. (2010).

We will:

- be prepared and organized
- be punctual and honor each other's time
- engage in discussion, stay focused, and listen
- be open to the ideas of others, demonstrate respect, and stay positive

Individual meetings had a consistent meeting protocol, with the following three central foci: (1) acquisition of shared knowledge, (2) examination of student work, and (3) teacher reflection. The next sections provide details about the ways in which the structure of the PLC supported these key elements.

Developing Shared Knowledge. In this case, the focus was on developing a mutual understanding of what a comprehensive approach to vocabulary instruction is and what it can look like in a classroom. Focusing on a comprehensive approach reflects current research on the most effective way to impact vocabulary learning (Baumann, et al., 2013). In *The Vocabulary Book*, Graves (2006) describes a comprehensive approach as one characterized by teaching individual words, teaching word learning strategies, fostering word consciousness, and providing rich and varied language experiences. Developing a shared understanding of this approach was accomplished as participants dialogued about their reflections and raised questions in response to mutual readings, with the goal of applying insights to specific teaching contexts. As teachers experimented with applying what they were reading and discussing (what DeFour and his colleagues refer to as an "action orientation" focused on learning by doing), other sources of shared knowledge emerged, including two specific approaches for teaching individual words. One focused on character traits (Manyak, 2007), which had been part of an earlier professional development effort in the district, and the other on teaching individual words through direct explanation, active student engagement and extensions over time (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Watts-Taffe, Gwinn, & Neal, 2011). Teachers also developed shared knowledge related to the use of context

clues as a strategy for independent word learning. One group member created and distributed bookmarks to support context clue instruction, based on a suggestion in the Graves text. Beyond the PLC, these bookmarks were later shared with other teachers, students, and parents with the intent of promoting consistency across students' vocabulary learning journeys.

Examining Student Work. In addition to shared knowledge, there was an emphasis on the examination of student work, informed by four essential questions (DuFour, et al., 2010): (1) What should students know and be able to do with respect to vocabulary? (2) How will we know if they have learned these things? (3) How will we respond if students don't learn? and (4) How will we respond if students come to us with this essential understanding already in place? The examination of student work was critical to teacher learning and also reflected the impact of the PLC on student learning, which will be discussed later in this piece.

Reflecting on Practice: Individually and in Community. Finally, reflection was central to the work of this PLC. An essential component of the reflection process was the Instructional Grid. This grid, as previously described, provided a place for teachers to record their implementation of vocabulary instruction, indicators of student learning, and reflections prior to PLC meetings. The Instructional Grid, like the group norms and meeting logistics, lent consistency to the PLC practices and maximized the use of teacher time toward professional growth.

Methodology

This article describes a qualitative study of a PLC focused on vocabulary learning at Valley View Elementary School (a pseudonym) across its first two years of practice with an emphasis on the PLC process, characteristics of teacher participation, and outcomes related to teacher knowledge and instructional practice. Specifically, this was an intrinsic case study, as described by Stake (2003), which is an appropriate methodological choice for research designed to gain in-depth understanding of a particular situation or phenomenon in ways that are descriptive and inductive (Merriam, 1988).

PLC Location and Participants

At the time of the project, the school, located in the Twin Cities region of Minnesota, served 1,370 Kindergarten through Grade 5 students. In Year One, the four participants were Intermediate grade Humanities teachers responsible for teaching English Language Arts and Social Studies, as well as a building-level instructional coach and PLC facilitator. In Year Two, there were 11 participants, with three of the Year One participants carrying over into Year Two. Across the two years, participants ranged in teaching experience from one to 32 years. Some had previous experience with a PLC and others did not. Leadership for the PLC was provided by Carolyn, the first author, who was an academic support teacher in the district at the time. As PLC facilitator, Carolyn drew upon an in-depth understanding of PLC implementation (both as a participant and a leader), the district English language arts curriculum, and vocabulary teaching and learning specifically. She assumed the research role of participant observer. Susan, the second author, assumed the role of researcher and

contributed to the design of data collection and analysis.

Data Sources

The following data sources were used in this study.

Anecdotal Records of PLC Meetings. The PLC facilitator prepared an agenda for each meeting and recorded notes during and after meetings. These notes included observations of teacher interactions around specific ideas, comments regarding teacher sharing based on his/her Instructional Grid (described later in this section), descriptions of any student work samples shared, and next steps as determined by the group.

Participant Interviews. Over the course of the study, participants were interviewed and responded in writing to open ended prompts. Both interviews and writing prompts were used to ascertain participant perceptions of the nature and impact of the professional development. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, as described by Rubin and Rubin (2012).

Participant Instructional Grids. Each month, participants completed a grid (see Figure 1) on which they provided details about their vocabulary instruction over the course of the month including student learning objectives, specific approach/instructional practice, evidence of learning, related work sample, future instructional plans, and reflections. These grids, based on a template used with early career teachers (Watts-Taffe & Gwinn, 2007), served as a record of the ways in which participants were translating research into practice within their classrooms. More specifically, this was a structured approach to recording and promoting reflection on practice. Just as work samples provided evidence of student learning,

the Instructional Grids provided evidence of teacher learning. These written records allowed PLC members, both individually and collectively, to take note of growth.

Data Analysis

Our analysis is in keeping with constructivist grounded theory (Strauss, 1987). We began by reading through all of our data several times, recording analytic memos, conversing about the data, and developing initial frames for analysis (Hatch, 2002). Based on our memos and discussions, we developed two analytic grids---one to support analysis of the interview and written response data and one to support analysis of the Instructional Grids. Using a constant-comparative approach (Charmez, 2003), we analyzed the data for similarities and differences within and between teachers, across time, and against our emerging coding scheme.

Impact of the Valley View PLC

Engagement in the Valley View PLC enhanced learning for both teachers and students. In this section, we provide examples of this impact.

Teacher Impact: Growth in Teacher Capacity to Affect Change

Participation in the PLC spurred observable growth in teacher capacity. Teachers exhibited increased knowledge of effective practice related to vocabulary instruction and they applied more sustained evidence-based approaches to vocabulary instruction. They also placed greater attention on

Figure 1. *Instructional Grid*

**Valley View Elementary School Vocabulary PLC
Instructional Grid**

Record of Vocabulary Instruction, Student Learning, and Teacher Reflections. Submit electronically to Facilitator

Name: _____ **Grade/Role:** _____

Month	Student Learning Objectives	Vocabulary Approach/ Instructional Practice Potential Link to Resource (e.g., colleague, text curriculum, own investigation)	Evidence of Learning: To what degree have student objectives been met?	Work Sample	Future Instructional Plans	Teacher Reflections
December						
January						
February						
March						
April						
May						

assessment, which offered them insights into student learning. Further, participants increasingly assumed leadership roles as they shared ideas with colleagues, both within and outside of the PLC.

Growth in Knowledge, Change in Practice. Observations during PLC meetings coupled with an examination of teachers' Instructional Grids reveals change across time in several areas. There was a move toward embedding effective instructional strategies within existing classroom practices or instructional routines. Over time, teachers moved away from merely trying a new strategy to integrating it into a larger, more cohesive "instructional whole." Related to this, teachers increasingly integrated vocabulary learning across content areas. Over time, they saw what they were doing with word learning as tied not only to reading and language arts, but also to the entire curriculum—a move that is in keeping with the emphasis on disciplinary literacy found in the CCSS. An examination of teacher practice and the CCSS reveals that as teachers in the PLC enhanced their instruction, so too did they close the gap between their current practices and the instructional practices needed to prepare students to meet the CCSS. Thus, teachers were not only tailoring their instruction to meet students' needs, they were also addressing the CCSS as related to student vocabulary knowledge. All in all, teacher growth promoted an intensified commitment to vocabulary instruction and the implementation of new ideas. Chris (third grade teacher during Year 1 and fourth grade teacher during Year 2) recorded the following:

I knew that my Word Work time during Daily 5 was lacking. I wanted to come up with a fun way to OWN our words. Each student has their own vocabulary notebook. Any words we put on our vocab wall (read aloud, spelling, content, character traits) are words they will put in their notebook. Then after modeling and brainstorming we came up with a list of ways we could OWN a word. The list is posted in our room. (Instructional Grid)

Focus on Assessment. Teachers paid greater attention to assessment over time. In particular, they wrote more at the end of each year about evidence of student learning and in ways more closely tied to specific student learning objectives, than they did at the beginning of each year. In an assessment of his own learning, Chris stated in an interview, "I have learned how important assessments are in driving your instruction! Don't assume! It is so important to know where every student is at, so you know where you need to take them next." As an example of this thinking, Chris strategically delivered instruction to increase student understanding of commonly used prefixes and suffixes, as part of a unit on word learning strategies. At the close of the unit, students successfully completed an assessment, which illustrated that they had an expanded understanding of how many words have prefixes and suffixes and how they can use strategic thinking to help them learn new words. As for Chris, he planned to use the assessment information to help him form intervention groups based on individual student needs.

Engagement in Leadership. PLC members reported that a benefit of engagement in the PLC was the opportunity to intentionally collaborate with colleagues in and across grade levels about a topic that was critically important to them and

their students. They also noted that conversations continued in between the sessions, in part during weekly collaboration meetings. Thus, collaboration that started in the PLC, expanded beyond the PLC, with teachers sharing knowledge and practices with colleagues across the school. At the close of Years 1 and 2, participants offered structured professional development for peers in the form of a presentation with active engagement. Specifically, PLC members shared examples of the ways in which they taught individual words, using extended discussion, their approaches to context clue instruction, and how they incorporated vocabulary notebooks and other approaches into their instructional routines. Time was allocated for teachers to make plans to apply insights gained and offer feedback, which revealed an appreciation for the examples shared. It was apparent that PLC members inspired attendees to be more deliberate about vocabulary instruction. For example, a Kindergarten teacher commented that it was helpful to know "*how* you teach vocabulary in grades 3-5 so I can figure out ways to prepare my kids so they're ready for you," (italics added). Although a clear benefit of cross-grade professional development opportunities is the potential for vertical alignment in teaching content, it is noteworthy that this participant is focused on the *how*, rather than the what of vocabulary instruction.

The experiences of the Valley View PLC participants mirror those of educators in other schools where PLCs have been established, according to DuFour and Mattos (2013). Citing several research studies, they point to assuming collective responsibility for student achievement as one of the hallmarks of schools in which the PLC model is used. In these schools, and at Valley View, teachers are empowered to become change agents, as they develop the skills and competencies characteristic of teacher leaders.

Student Impact: Growth in Student Capacity to Expand Vocabulary

PLC members reported that a benefit of engagement in the PLC was the impact on student learning. They witnessed students taking ownership and pride in knowing, using, and locating new words. First, students used strategies modeled to determine the meanings of new words. Teachers observed students using strategies to tackle difficult words rather than disregarding them and relying less on the dictionary and more on clues around the word and within the word. Anne, a fifth grade teacher, noted in her Instructional Grid,

One of my more average students who frequently was a 'sloppy' reader and didn't care so much about vocabulary earlier this year came up to me and said, 'Using the context clues has really helped me understand what I'm reading and reading is so much more fun and interesting! I really like using context clues!' Then he said, 'But when there are questions that just ask what a word means, I look at the chunks that have meaning and I can usually figure out the word's meaning!'

Second, students demonstrated their ability to embed new words learned into their reading, writing, and speaking. According to Chris, as recorded in his Instructional Grid, "... my students gained ... awareness of words in their daily lives. There isn't a day that goes by that students don't show me

vocabulary we have discussed in their own books, or use it in their writing or speaking.” Third, PLC members’ visible love for words transferred to students. Jen, a fourth grade teacher, suggested in her Instructional Grid, “They know I love words and that is extending to them. It has been fun to hear my students talk about how other fourth graders are LOVING words. They used to laugh at me for talking about words all of the time and they are now telling me that I’m right, they are pretty cool.” Scott, Miller, and Flinspach (2012) note that the teacher’s interest in and enthusiasm for word learning is crucial to building a strong foundation for vocabulary learning. Finally, teachers reported that students eagerly searched for words discussed in class, outside of school, which promoted home school connections.

PLC members reported that a benefit of engagement in the PLC was the impact on student learning. They witnessed students taking ownership and pride in knowing, using, and locating new words.

Conclusions and Implications

Our experience with the Valley View team illustrates the potential of a vocabulary-focused PLC to meet the needs of both students and teachers. Knowing others may share our vision of leveraging the successes of this learning opportunity in other school settings, we close with key aspects to consider in the design and implementation of a highly effective, literacy focused PLC. First, align PLC goals to those established district- and school-wide. In this way, the professional development is less of “one more thing to do,” and more of an alignment to something that teachers have already been called to do. Second, as is the nature of strong PLCs, the opportunity must be ongoing and job embedded, allowing participants to learn as daily work with students unfolds. Third, the PLC design needs to include a shared purpose, group-constructed norms, and a consistent operational protocol. For the Valley View PLC, a key feature of this consistent protocol was the use of Instructional Grids, which allowed PLC members, both individually and collectively, to take note of their teaching actions, learning, and growth over time with clear articulations of impact on student learning. Fourth, it is essential that collaboration is at the core of the PLC. At Valley View Elementary School, PLC participants shared their new knowledge and growing practices with others, inspiring colleagues to be increasingly diligent about the implementation of research-based practices in their classrooms. Finally, and specific to a vocabulary-focused PLC, attend to word consciousness which focuses both teachers’ and their students’ interest, enthusiasm, and knowledge on words meanings. Increasingly, word consciousness is viewed as central to all dimensions of word learning and studies of teacher

change in this arena highlight its role in the development of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Watts-Taffe, Fisher, & Blachowicz, in press).

Our project adds to the small, but growing body of work specific to vocabulary-focused, embedded teacher professional development. Recent studies point to the importance of such work in building teacher capacity to enhance student word learning (e.g., Buamann, et al., 2013; Kucan, Trathen, & Straights, 2007; Scott, Miller, & Flinspach, 2012). With respect to PLCs as a specific form of job-embedded professional development, D’Ardenne et al. (2013) reported on a successful collaborative approach to designing shared lessons for use in small group reading intervention. In this study, the PLC focus was on designing specific lessons to be taught across all participating teachers, with the understanding that teachers would modify lessons as needed. In a larger scale, quasi-experimental design-based study, Lai, Wilson, McNaughton, and Hsiao (2014) utilized PLCs within a broader Learning Schools Model (LSM) in seven New Zealand schools. PLCs operated in conjunction with professional development workshops. In both projects, student literacy achievement was significantly impacted, although neither project focused solely on vocabulary. Our project was unique in its focus on vocabulary as well as its focus on the characteristics of teacher and student outcomes---the qualitative ways in which the PLC impacted growth in teachers and students---in a setting that allowed each teacher to appropriate shared knowledge about research-based practices in her/his own way. Just as teachers grapple with meeting the needs of a wide variety of learners, instructional coaches, administrators, and professional development facilitators grapple with providing professional development opportunities to meet the needs of a wide variety of teachers. They are challenged to meet teachers where they are in order to foster sustainable professional growth that leads to enhanced student learning. The Valley View project sheds light on a way to achieve this goal. ■

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