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### Best Practices for Improving the Vocabularies of Students Who Live in Poverty

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# Best Practices for Improving the Vocabularies of Students Who Live in Poverty

## Abstract

Students need to have well-developed vocabularies to succeed in language arts as well as in all other content areas. Student success and achievement can be attributed to in part to the difference between the vocabulary knowledge of students who live in poverty and students who do not. This action research project looks at different methods of vocabulary instruction to determine the best practice. This study took place in a fifth grade classroom at a Title One school. The methods of instruction tested were explicit instruction, teaching vocabulary in context, and a combination approach. This study concluded that vocabulary should be taught to students in a variety of ways, including through explicit instruction and in context.

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Best Practices for Improving the Vocabularies of Students Who Live in Poverty

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

M.S. Literacy Education

Supervised by

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School of Arts and Sciences

St. John Fisher College

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### Abstract

Students need to have well-developed vocabularies to succeed in language arts as well as in all other content areas. Student success and achievement can be attributed to in part to the difference between the vocabulary knowledge of students who live in poverty and students who do not. This action research project looks at different methods of vocabulary instruction to determine the best practice. This study took place in a fifth grade classroom at a Title One school. The methods of instruction tested were explicit instruction, teaching vocabulary in context, and a combination approach. This study concluded that vocabulary should be taught to students in a variety of ways, including through explicit instruction and in context.

### **Best Practices for Improving the Vocabularies of Students Who Live in Poverty**

This paper will examine the effects of poverty on vocabulary and literacy development and the best practices to develop vocabulary skills for students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The topic of vocabulary development is important because students need to have well-developed vocabularies to succeed as readers and writers in language arts as well as in all other content areas. Students need to be able to read words and also know what they mean. Research has proven that students who are able to comprehend text typically have strong vocabularies (Cowen and Albers, 2007).

Reading comprehension is directly impacted by knowledge of word meanings. According to Lubliner and Smetana (2005), “the ultimate challenge of a vocabulary intervention is not merely to teach a set of words or a skill, but to positively affect reading comprehension” (p. 189). In addition, Cowan and Albers (2007) note that for struggling readers, “beyond the sheer paucity of words they understand, the superficiality of their understanding of words impacts their ability to comprehend text” (p. 35). 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” (Cowans and Albers, 2007).

Children who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds often have limited vocabularies, which contribute to poor school performance. According to Hemphill and Tivnan (2008), “children whose family incomes are at or below the poverty level are especially likely to struggle with reading, a pattern that emerges early and strengthens in the elementary school

years” (p. 426). According to Blachowicz and Obracht (2005), there is “a significant body of research that suggests wide differences in concept and vocabulary knowledge exacerbate the achievement gap seen in so many schools, especially those with large numbers of students living in poverty.” The difference in vocabulary knowledge and reading achievement can be attributed to “the Matthew effect- the sad reality that having a well-developed vocabulary allows you to learn new words more easily than classmates who have a smaller fund of word knowledge” (p. 262). Similarly, Lubliner and Smetana (2009) state the following:

This problem begins in early childhood and becomes increasingly evident over time. Children with larger vocabularies find reading easier, read more widely, and do better in school. Conversely, children who enter school with limited vocabulary find reading difficult, resist reading, learn fewer words, and consequently fall further behind. (p.163).

Studying the effects of poverty on the literacy development and vocabulary development as well as the best practices to increase students’ vocabularies will help to find ways to increase the vocabularies of students who may come to school with more limited vocabularies than their peers. Developing the vocabularies of students who live in poverty may also help to combat the achievement gap and the Matthew effect.

To address the need for development of the vocabularies of students who live in poverty, I conducted a study that tested different methods of vocabulary instruction. This study was conducted in a fifth grade classroom at a suburban Title One school. I spent one week teaching students following one strategy, then tested their knowledge of the words. The methods of vocabulary instruction that were used were explicit pre-teaching, introducing words in context, and a combination of the previous strategies. This study found that while students preferred a

combination approach, there was not a significant difference in their scores on the weekly assessments. Each strategy was effective in helping students learn the definition for some, but not all words.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Gee (1989) argues that in order to be literate, one must have fluent control over their secondary discourse. Gee defined the terms discourse, primary discourse and secondary discourses in order to give the definition of literacy. According to Gee, a discourse is a socially acceptable way of using language. A person's first or primary discourse is typically learned from one's family. A secondary discourse draws upon one's primary discourse but extending it in order to interact with different social groups. Gee uses the example of English language learners and his own experiences to show how language is acquired and learned. He states that "it is sometimes helpful to say that individuals do not speak and act, but that historically and socially defined discourses speak to each other through individuals" (p. 20). Gee argues that literacy is acquired by a combination of acquisition and learning. Acquisition is how one acquires something by being exposed to it and from it being modeled. Learning occurs when something is broken down and the parts of it are explained. Most people acquire their first language through acquisition.. Students acquire learn new words and expand their vocabularies as they are exposed to new words when they hear others using the words in conversation, see the word in a text, or when they are explicitly taught the definition of the word.

Freebody and Luke (1990) claim that "literacy is a multifaceted set of social practices with a material technology, entailing code breaking, participation with the knowledge of the text, social uses of text, and analysis/ critique of the text"(p. 19). They state that a reader has many roles: code breaker, text participant, text user, and text analyst. To be a successful reader and

writer a person must know when to take each role and what each role requires of them. Literacy is complex and has many dimensions.

Literacy is impacted by various factors. Students' backgrounds, the culture in which they live, their dialect, and various developmental principals all impact the way in which students acquire literacy. These factors also account for the cultural and linguistic variations among students. It is important to acknowledge these factors and use the funds of knowledge that each student brings to school to help them gain the literacy skills that will serve them in the future. Every student comes to school with a unique vocabulary. The words that a student knows are a result of the words the student hears their family and community members using and words that they learn through the literacy experiences they participate in at home, such as being read to by a family member.

The sociocultural theory states that individuals are members of a community where knowledge is constructed by larger cultural systems. According to Larsen and Marsh (2005), the learning of literacy occurs "through participation in social, cultural, and historical contexts that are mediated by interaction"(p. 105). Children learn literacy in their day-to-day lives, both in and outside of school, by interacting with and observing other members of their communities. In order for effective sociocultural instruction to take place, teachers must know their students. Moll and Gonzalez (1994) argue that cultural resources, such as funds of knowledge, should be emphasized strategically in order to help develop students into literate learners. The authors state that children come to school with "funds of knowledge," which are resources that they learn from their families and communities that help them with social, academic, and intellectual issues. When teachers know their students' backgrounds and interests, this knowledge allows teachers to connect their instruction to their student's funds of knowledge. Bhattacharya (2010) challenges



conventional literacy practices and emphasizes sociocultural literacy practices that “capitalize on poor students diverse literacy experiences, language practices, and personal interests to promote literacy learning” (p.132). According to the sociocultural theory, students will learn new vocabulary words as they observe and interact with their teachers and peers in the classroom.

Another theory that will guide this study is community cultural capital theory. The effect of poverty on literacy and vocabulary development should also be examined with a community cultural capital perspective. Yosso (2005) argues that we live in a hierarchical society where the knowledge and values of the middle and upper classes are considered as capital. This theory views schools as tools that can allow access to this capital if students are not born with it. It is based upon the assumption that children who do not belong to the middle or upper classes will not succeed because they come to school lacking the knowledge, skills, and vocabulary that are valued by schools.

Yosso states that “Deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value or support their child’s education” (p.75). According to Yosso, communities possess at least six forms of capital. One form of capital that communities possess is linguistic capital. Heath’s study shows that literacy skills can vary between communities (Heath, 1982). For example, some communities and culture value storytelling more than others do. This form of literacy should be considered as linguistic capital, just as reading a book is. When looking at vocabulary development with a community cultural capital perspective, some students come to school lacking the vocabulary that is valued by schools. Students can learn the words that are valued by schools through a variety of vocabulary acquisition strategies.

### **Research Question**

Given that literacy is a social practice and students from different backgrounds bring different funds of knowledge with them to school, this action research project asks, which vocabulary strategies are the best practices to help increase the vocabularies of students who live in poverty?

### **Literature Review**

The following is a review of literature that examines the effects of poverty on students' vocabulary development and the best practice for improving student's vocabularies. Vocabulary instruction is a well-researched topic. As I reviewed the literature that surrounds the topic of vocabulary, three reoccurring themes stood out. These themes include the importance of improving the vocabularies of students who live in poverty, the types of words that should be selected for vocabulary development, and the best practices for increasing students' vocabularies. The research concluded that while poverty influences some aspects of literacy development, there are some components that do not seem to be affected. The research also finds that a comprehensive approach to teaching vocabulary is the best practice to improve students' vocabularies.

### **The Importance of Improving the Vocabularies of Students Who Live in Poverty**

One effect of poverty is that children who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds often have limited vocabularies, which contribute to poor school performance. Winters (2009) claims that:

Because limited vocabulary has been recognized as a key factor in the achievement gap for students with disabilities, students of color, and English-language learners, teachers

need to seek out and employ vocabulary development activities that provide access to students of all backgrounds and abilities.(p. 688).

According to Blachowicz and Obracht (2005), there is a large amount of research that indicates that the differences between student success and achievement can attributed to in part to the difference between the vocabulary knowledge of students who live in poverty and students who do not. “The Matthew effect- the sad reality that having a well-developed vocabulary allows you to learn new words more easily than classmates who have a smaller fund of word knowledge” can be one explanation of this difference in vocabulary knowledge and reading achievement (p.262). Similarly, Shanklin (2007), states that schools are under increased pressure to meet academic yearly progress (AYP) goals. She claims that in order to meet AYP goals and close the achievement gaps, research and educators in the field agree that students need to have stronger vocabularies.

Kellet (2009) attributes the difference in vocabulary knowledge and reading achievement to the lack of enjoyment that many students who live in poverty experience when reading. She finds that poor students tend to enjoy reading less than students from high socioeconomic backgrounds; therefore they tend to spend less time reading. Kellet states that motivation is an important factor in the development of literacy skills and vocabulary. Similarly, Lubliner and Smetana (2009) state the following:

This problem begins in early childhood and becomes increasingly evident over time. Children with larger vocabularies find reading easier, read more widely, and do better in school. Conversely, children who enter school with limited vocabulary find reading difficult, resist reading, learn fewer words, and consequently fall further behind. (p.163).

On the other hand, some authors disagree that poor students spend less time reading and are less motivated to read than others. Children who live in poverty often read but are motivated to do so by reasons that may be different than their middle and upper class peers. Bhattacharya (2010) states students from poor neighborhoods are motivated to read but instead of reading for pleasure they “read to obtain access to social networks and relationships, to seek models for self-improvement, and to get information about certain kinds of people. They also read to obtain facts, to prepare for college, and to follow news stories” (p. 132). She states that teachers can combat the Matthew effect by examining the reasons that motivate their students to read and using them to build their lessons around. Bhattacharya asserts that reading certain types of texts or for specific purposes may motivate students who live in poverty. When the reading students engage in at school mirrors the type of reading that they engage in outside of school, reading achievement can be increased.] By providing students with authentic literacy activities, teachers can use their students’ motivation to help develop their literacy and vocabulary skills.

Ricketts, Nation, and Bishop (2007) argue that while vocabulary is important for some reading skills, it is not associated with every reading skill. Their study tested the relationship between vocabulary development and reading comprehension, text reading accuracy, recognizing words, and deciphering nonwords . Eighty-one students aged eight to ten years old participated in this study which aimed to assess which reading skills are predicted by oral vocabulary and to further examine the link between oral vocabulary and exception word reading in children who struggle with reading comprehension. This study also tested the students who were determined to be poor comprehenders in the areas of orthographic knowledge and experience of print.

The findings of this study determined that there is a relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, as well as between exception word reading and between exception reading and reading comprehension. The study also found that some of the students who showed poor reading comprehension did not have a vocabulary deficit. The authors claim that their study “provides evidence for vocabulary playing an important role in both reading comprehension and exception word reading, but clearly additional data from longitudinal studies and training studies are needed to explore causal mechanisms” (p. 255). Therefore, the conclusion of the study completed by Ricketts, Nation, and Bishop is that while some aspects of reading are affected by vocabulary, other aspects remain unaffected.

### **Word Consciousness and Word Selection**

Another topic that showed up in the research regarding the best practices for vocabulary instruction was the selection of the words to teach students. Teachers often struggle with determining what vocabulary words to introduce to students. Graves (2006) claims that the traditional focus on individual word knowledge should be shifted to the development of word consciousness. Winters (2009) defines word consciousness as “a fascination with new words that prompts ongoing student inquiry and exploration” (p. 688) According to Phillips, Foote, and Harper (2008), in order for students to fully comprehend a word, it needs to be contextualized and practiced in multiple situations and in other subject areas. The authors argue that it is important to select words that students can connect to words that the students already know or will be learning. Additionally, Shakin (2007) recommends that new vocabulary be embedded in units of study. She claims that to facilitate this process, it makes sense for teachers to select words from the current unit or curriculum.

In order to involve the students more fully in their vocabulary development, Phillips, Foote, and Harper (2008), also suggest that the students themselves select their own words based on the degree of difficulty of the words in their reading assignments. Similarly, Shakin (2007) claims that adolescents' personal interests should be used to enhance their vocabulary as they develop independence' and a personal responsibility for their learning of new words. She states that adolescents should become more involved in the process of developing their own vocabularies and understand how their increased word knowledge affects their learning in all subject areas. In addition, students should also be able to communicate the meanings of the new words that they learn to their peers.

Ohanaian (2006) also states that students should be given time to develop their vocabularies through their independent reading. To foster word consciousness, she recommends that teachers provide students access to books that will interest them and sufficient time to read independently. It is also important that time is provided for students to enjoy, think about, and examine vocabulary. Like Shakin (2007), Ohanaian believes that this new word knowledge should be shared with other students. Ohanaian cautions against the practice of requiring students to keep vocabulary journals. She argues that this interferes with a student developing a fascination with words. Instead, she states that once students find a particular word engaging, this interest can translate into further word study. Students will be self-motivated to discover the meaning of new words as they become curious and interested in new words.

### **Best Practices for Increasing Students' Vocabularies**

There is a plethora of vocabulary instruction strategies that researchers recommend. These include vocabulary field trips (Blachowicz & Obrachta, 2005), sentence expansion (Cudd & Roberts, 1994), and using scaffolded approaches (Proctor, Dalton, and Grisham, 2007). The

use of technology in vocabulary development is also becoming a popular area of research (Stoner, Beck, Dennis, & Parette, 2011). Many vocabulary programs combine one or more strategies to increase students' understanding of words. Winters (2009) claims that teachers' approaches to vocabulary instruction should be multipronged and include direct instruction of key words, incorporation of student driven word learning strategies, and extensive reading. Studies by Baumann, Ware, and Edwards (2007) and Lubliner and Smetana (2009) show the effects of a balanced approach to vocabulary instruction, where a combination of strategies was used.

Baumann, Ware, and Edwards (2007) studied the effects of "a comprehensive vocabulary instructional program on students' word knowledge and appreciation" (p.108). The authors based their experiment on the vocabulary instruction program designed by Graves (2006). This program consists of four major components: exposing students to wide-ranging vocabulary opportunities, encouraging word consciousness, giving students the opportunity to learn specific words, and multiple approaches to developing vocabularies. The authors designed a formative experiment which attempted to measure the effectiveness of these four concepts over a one year period with fifth grade students.

This study was conducted at a low-income school, with a diverse population, in a medium sized community. Data was gathered on twenty-fifth graders from pretesting in August until post testing in May. The classroom teacher, Donna, followed Graves's (2006) framework, and integrated the four concepts. In order to provide rich and varied language experiences for the students, Donna and the authors read aloud frequently, provided time for students to independently engage in the reading of texts that were of interest to them, facilitating literature circles, and used writing activities to encourage word study and exploration. Vocabulary work

was “selectively and naturally” infused into read alouds (p.111). Students were provided opportunities to develop expressive vocabulary during daily writing workshop. .

Vocabulary instruction integrated all four of Graves’ components for vocabulary instruction. Donna provided explicit vocabulary instruction through teaching vocabulary words that were relevant to the students writing assignments and units of study in multiple subject areas. The class also used graphic organizers, such as semantic maps to learn word definitions. Students were taught strategies to use when they came across an unfamiliar word. Instruction of word consciousness was through word play, read alouds, shared reading, and other activities designed to help students “acquire an interest in words, develop an appreciation of word choice, and expand their vocabulary” (p.117).

Lubliner and Smetana studied the effects of Comprehensive Vocabulary Development (CVD), a metacognitive approach, on disadvantaged fifth graders. According to Lubliner and Smetana (2009), the goal of their instruction was ultimately to have students internalize and manage their thinking and word knowledge. The goal of CVD instruction was to give students a better understanding of their own vocabulary knowledge. Another aim of CVD instruction was to help students develop methods that help them achieve greater vocabularies. The authors designed a classroom based research study to evaluate the effectiveness of CVD on reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition and measure the progress of the Title 1 fifth graders and fifth graders with a higher socioeconomic status prior to and following the CVD implementation. The experimental group was made up of students from one of the lowest performing Title 1 schools in California. This group of students received CVD instruction. The control group was a class of fifth graders from an above average school in the same school district. They continued to receive normal vocabulary instruction.



Lubliner and Smetana (2009) reported that every CVD lesson followed a similar format. The teacher began each scripted lesson by giving a rationale and explaining to the students the importance of the strategy or method and how it would help them develop their vocabularies and increase their reading proficiencies. The teacher would then use simple text passages to model the strategy. The students were given a chance to practice implementing self-monitoring methods and clarifying strategies while the teacher coached them. The teacher would then use vocabulary from the social studies text book to demonstrate the newly learned strategies could be used to make sense of the words. The students would implement the new strategy while they read their textbook. Finally, the teacher would discuss the text and the vocabulary words students identified.

At the conclusion of Baumann, Ware, and Edwards' (2007) experiment, the quantitative results revealed that student's word knowledge increased. Students' expressive vocabulary grew more than the authors expected, as shown by comparison of the pretest and posttest. The students' scores on the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test*, which measures receptive vocabulary, "suggested that the students initially below average in vocabulary may have benefited from the program more than students initially above average in vocabulary. Students wrote thirty-six percent more words in a writing sample done in the spring than they did in the fall. From fall to spring, the number of low-frequency words that students included in their essays increased by forty-two percent. The author's qualitative findings revealed that students used more sophisticated and challenging words, students' interest and attitudes toward vocabulary learning increased, and students demonstrated use of word learning strategies independently and engaged in word play. The authors' concluded that the students increased their word knowledge because

they were taught methods to acquire new words as well as their placement in a “vocabulary-rich environment” (p.120).

Lubliner and Smetana’s study of CVD instruction (2007) concluded that both the control and experimental periods experienced significant reading comprehension growth. However, the magnitude of growth distinctly favored the experimental period. At the end of the experimental period, the authors report that differences in student scores were minimal in their affect on reading comprehension and vocabulary development. This evidence shows that CVD instruction is effective in narrowing the gap between low income students and students of higher socioeconomic status.

Early intervention is also a common practice for improving the vocabularies of students who live in poverty. While the CVD program focuses on teaching students vocabulary skills in a direct manner, Benhard, Winsler, Bleiker, Ginienevicz (2008), argue that the literacy experiences of emergent readers, specifically young children, is an area that needs to be further studied. One example of focus on young children’s vocabulary development of young children is the Early Authors Program (EAP), a literacy intervention program that the authors studied over a 12 month period. The EAP approached literacy skills and attitudes through meaningful, empowering activities involving children and families. Part of this intervention program consisted of collaboration between literacy specialists and classroom teachers to improve literacy events and materials in the classroom and to incorporate the language that students speak at home in the classroom. Technology was also utilized and book making equipment, such as digital cameras, computers, printers, and laminators were brought in the classroom. The main tenant of the program was that the young students self-authored books with guidance from literacy specialists, classroom teachers, and their parents. Their books were frequently shared and displayed in the

classroom as well as the community. Parents were involved in group meetings where they could read stories with their children and make books based around them.

The authors state that the purpose of this study was to measure the effectiveness of “a literacy intervention program that was implemented on a large scale in an ethnically and linguistically diverse sample of young children in poverty receiving subsidies to attend community-based childcare programs in an inner city, urban environment” (p.99). The study found that the group of three and four year old participants who received “3- and-4- the EAP intervention made more growth than the control group of children in the development of their language and literacy skills. Caregivers, who found that it could be implemented on a wide basis, liked the program. The caregivers also stated that they could continue it without assistance. The quality of literacy supported teaching practices and literacy materials in the classrooms also improved.

Increasing students’ vocabulary knowledge requires a balanced approach. Research by Baumann, Ware, and Edwards (2007), Winters (2009), and Blachowicz and Lee, (1991) shows that a comprehensive vocabulary program includes teaching individual words through direct vocabulary instruction, fostering word consciousness, a variety of language experiences, and teaching students word-learning strategies . Researchers agree that teachers must approach vocabulary instruction multiple ways. Approaching vocabulary instruction through one approach does not ensure that students are learning words. For example, while students have opportunities to learn words through wide reading, “contextual reading does not automatically result in word learning” (Blachowicz & Lee, 1991). Therefore, it is important that teachers use a combination of vocabulary instruction approaches in their classroom.

Vocabulary instruction is especially important for struggling readers. Struggling readers and ELL students need to learn word meanings in order to comprehend text. To best teach struggling readers, once again a balanced approach is recommended. The more exposure students have to words, the more they will come to understand their meanings. According to Cowan and Albers (2007), reading is the language experience that has the greatest impact on vocabulary development. To combat the Matthew effect, the authors recommend that in order to improve students' vocabularies, the amount of reading that the students engage in must increase.

It is important for all students to have strong vocabularies, because knowledge of word meanings affects other areas of literacy. Cowen and Albers (2007) note the correlation between vocabulary development and reading comprehension. They note that their students who are voracious readers have more advanced vocabularies than students who read less. Researchers agree that a balanced approach to vocabulary is necessary for success. Direct vocabulary instruction, teaching students word-learning strategies fostering word consciousness, and providing a variety of language experiences are all needed to improve student's vocabularies. Research proves that improving student's vocabularies, especially struggling readers, students who live in poverty and English language learners is possible and can improve other literacy skills, such as comprehension. In conclusion, research states that vocabulary is an essential part of literacy that should not be overlooked.

## **Method**

### **Context**

This study was completed at Dolphin Elementary School, located in Greece, NY. The Greece Central School District is the largest suburban school district in Monroe County, and

the ninth-largest district in New York State. Dolphin Elementary School (pseudonym), with 752 students, is the largest pre K-5 school in Greece. Students coming to the school are culturally diverse with the demographics of the school varying slightly from the rest of the district. As reported by the 2009-2010 New York State School Report Card, 114 (15%) of the students were Black or African American, 77 students (10%) were Hispanic or Latino, 17 (2%) were Asian or Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander, 544 students (72%) were White. According to the 2009-2010 New York State School Report Card, 290 students (39%) qualified for free lunch and 135 students (18%) were eligible for reduced lunch. Due to the number of students who are economically disadvantaged, Dolphin Elementary School receives Title One funding.

As reported by the 2009-2010 New York State School Report Card, 46% of third graders at Dolphin Elementary School scored at or above a Level 3, 52% of fourth graders scored at or above a Level 3, and 43% of fifth graders scored at or above a Level 3 on the New York State ELA assessment. A score of a Level 3 indicates that a student is meeting state learning standards. There is a strong focus on English Language Arts at Dolphin Elementary School. Each class is required to spend two and a half hours per day on ELA studies, including guided reading, word work, and writing. The school is beginning to implement the new Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS), which emphasize writing about reading, increased text complexity, and close reading of texts. Test taking skills are also an area of focus at Dolphin Elementary School. The school has implemented an ELA testing strategies block for 30 minutes, three days a week, where student practice answering multiple choice questions about short passages that they read. To monitor student progress, students in the intermediate grades at Dolphin Elementary School are given interim assessments. According to data collected from an ELA

interim assessment given on February 17, 2012, the average score for fifth graders was 70 percent. A passing score for the assessment was considered to be 75 percent.

The study took place in a general education fifth grade classroom, made up of nineteen students, ten males and nine females. Fifteen students are Caucasian, three students are Black or African American, and one student is identified as being more than one race. Twelve of the nineteen students are identified by the district as being economically disadvantaged.

Of the seventeen students in the class who took the fourth grade New York State English Language Arts test in the 2010-2011 school year, seven students met or exceeded standards. Ten of the students did not pass the state ELA test for the 2010-2011 school year. Four of the students receive intensive Academic Intervention Services with a reading specialist four times a week for 30 minutes. Six students receive moderate Academic Intervention Services by participating in guided reading groups in the classroom four times a week for twenty minutes. On an ELA interim assessment given on February 17, 2012, eight students score at or above the passing score of 75 percent. The class average on this assessment was 71 percent.

### **Participants**

Bella, Drake, Mia, and Dalilah, all members of my fifth grade class, participated in this study. All students are Caucasian and between the ages of 10 and 11. Three of the students receive free or reduced price lunch. None of the students who participated in this study receive any academic intervention services. On an ELA interim assessment given on February 17, 2012, Mia scored a seventy-nine percent, Bella scored a seventy-five percent, Dalilah scored a seventy percent, and Drake scored a fifty-seven percent.

**Researcher Stance**

I am a twenty-three year old Caucasian woman currently in my first year of teaching fifth grade. Prior to this year, I have worked as a long-term substitute teacher in a second grade classroom for ten weeks at Dolphin Elementary School, and for twelve weeks as a long-term substitute kindergarten teacher at another school in the same district. I have also worked as a per diem substitute at various schools in the Greece Central School District and the Rochester City School District. I have a Bachelor's degree in Childhood and Special Education, and am in the process of earning my Master's degree in Literacy Education. According to Mills (2007), I am an active participant observer in this study, as I will be conducting my research in my fifth grade classroom. One implication of conducting the research in my own classroom was that I was able to make the decisions regarding the type of instruction that was occurring. I made sure that the methods were followed by only teaching using the designated method for each week. One of the difficulties that I encountered because of my role as an active participant observer was that it was difficult at time to record anecdotal notes as I was busy teaching.

**Method****Quality and Credibility of Research**

According to Mills (2007), validity is the degree that data measures what it was intended to measure. Aspects of validity that I addressed in my data collection included: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For a study to maintain credibility, the researcher needs to account for "complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained (Mills, p.105)." To ensure the credibility of my study, I

debriefed with my mentor teacher who spends approximately two and a half hours a week in my classroom. She observes the learning that goes in my classroom, and we spend time afterwards reflecting on the situations that arise. I also debriefed with other fifth grade teachers on my team, as we have all identified vocabulary as an area of need for students at our school. Additionally, I practiced triangulation by using multiple data collection methods to crosscheck my results.

Transferability in a study means that the results are concept bound and the goal of the research was not to make claims that can be generalized to other groups of people. In order to address the issue of transferability, I collected detailed descriptive data about the school and the students in my classroom who are participating in the survey. Multiple forms of data will allow recipients of my work to compare and contrast it to other contexts.

In order to address the dependability, or stability of my data, it was beneficial to use multiple methods of data collection. For example, interviewing students about the teacher made assessments provided additional information about their written responses to test questions. I also established an audit trail, which allowed an external auditor (my mentor teacher or critical colleague) to examine my data collection process, analysis, and interpretation.

Confirmability is the neutrality or objectivity of the data that is collected in a study (Mills, 2007). In order to ensure confirmability in my study, practicing triangulation allowed the different data sources and collections methods to compare and crosscheck the data. I also practiced reflexivity, which means I exposed underlying assumptions or biases that cause me to formulate questions in a certain way or to present my findings a certain way. I kept a journal that I used to record reflections about my data collection procedures and findings.

### **Informed Consent and Protecting the Right of the Participants**



I distributed assent forms that the students signed, and consent forms to their parents or guardians to provide permission and a signature if their child participated in the study. Students or their parents were able to choose not to participate in the study if they wish. I gave the school and the students pseudonyms and removed all names or identifying marks from the data that I collected.

### **Method**

During this study, I tested the best practice for teaching new vocabulary words to students. One way to introduce students to new words is to explicitly teach them to students. When utilizing this method, I presented the written definition of the words to the students before reading a text with the words in it. I did not stop and discuss the meaning of the word as it is read in the text. I continued this process over the course of the week, introducing new words prior to reading texts that are a part of our curriculum unit. At the end of the week, students were tested on the definitions of the words that they were explicitly taught through a multiple-choice assessment.

Another way to teach vocabulary is through the context of literature. I did not preview any of the vocabulary words with the students. Each time we came across one of the words that I wanted the students to learn, I stopped and asked the students to use the context of the sentence or sentences around the word to determine the meaning of the word. We discussed the correct meaning and the clues around the word that led the students to the definition. I continued this process over the course of the week, using texts that are a part of our curriculum unit. At the end of the week, students were tested on the definitions of the six words that they learned in context through a multiple-choice assessment.

The third way that students learned new vocabulary words is through a combination of explicit teaching and learning words in context. Prior to reading, I presented the written definition of the words to the students. We then read a text with the words in it. As we read each of the words that I wanted the students to learn, I stopped and asked the students to use the context of the sentence or sentences around the word to determine the meaning of the word. We then referred back to the definition that the students were explicitly taught. I continued this process over the course of the week, once again using texts that are a part of our curriculum unit. At the end of the week, students were tested on the definitions of the six words that they learned through a multiple-choice assessment. In addition to the assessments, which were a portion of the assessments that are part of our curriculum, I also conducted interviews the students and collected student questionnaires.

### **Data Collection**

I conducted weekly assessments of students through a portion of an assessment provided from the textbook company that supplies our curriculum. The test presented the vocabulary word to the student and had four choices from which the student could select the correct definition of the word. At the end of each week I conducted an interview with the students, where I asked them questions about how the strategy that they learned that week helped them. After all three strategies have been taught, I distributed a questionnaire to each student in the study to complete anonymously. The questionnaire asked students to rate the effectiveness of each of the strategies.

### **Data Analysis**

This analysis is based on student assessment results, interviews, and survey. The assessment results were helpful in determining whether students knew the meaning of the word

after a week of instruction. The student surveys and interviews were helpful in determining the students' opinion and preferences regarding the method of instruction. After examining all of the data, I looked for commonalities. I compared the student's assessment results to what they had to say. I was especially interested to see if the students were most favorable to the method of instruction used the week that they scored the highest on their assessment. The recurring themes that I discovered were that explicit vocabulary instruction does not noticeably improve students' vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary instruction in context does not significantly improve vocabulary knowledge, and that the combination approach was most beneficial.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This study measured the effectiveness of three vocabulary strategies. As stated in the methods section, during the first week of data collection, I presented the written definition of the words to the students before reading a text with the words in it. I did not stop and discuss the meaning of the word as it was read in the text. During the second week of data collection, I did not preview any of the words with the students, but instead discussed the meaning of the words as we came across them in a text. During the third week, I presented the written definition of the words to the students then read a text and discussed the vocabulary words in context. The students were tested weekly on the definitions of the words. I also gave the students a survey and conducted an interview to collect more data about each strategy. This study found that while students preferred a combination approach, there was not a significant difference in their scores on the weekly assessments. Each strategy was effective in helping students learn the definition for some, but not all words.

### **Explicit Vocabulary Instruction Does Not Noticeably Improve Vocabulary**

During the first week of data collection, I wrote the definitions of the envy, fleeing, complex, strategy, blunders, inspired, and rustling on chart paper. The seven words were selected from a reading program that is currently being piloted at Dolphin Elementary School. The words are meant to go along with a text or group of texts that the students will read over the course of a week. In the reading program, there is a theme that stories relate to for a six-week period. The theme for the three weeks included in this study was, “How do artists inspire people?” As stated in the literature that I reviewed, Shakin (2007) recommends that new vocabulary be embedded in units of study. She claims that to facilitate this process, it makes sense for teachers to select words from the current unit or curriculum. All words selected in this study relate to texts about the ways that artists can inspire people.

I hung up poster with the definitions of the words in the front of the room. Each day, the students and I discussed the definitions that were written. After discussing the definition of a word, I would ask the students to use the word in a sentence and share it with a neighbor. Through my observations, I noted that all students were able to use the words correctly in a sentence by the end of the week. At the end of the week, students took a test in which they were instructed to read a sentence that contained one of the vocabulary words. The students were instructed to choose the word or words with the same meaning as the underlined vocabulary word. The vocabulary test was part of a weekly assessment to be given as part of our reading program. Table 1 shows the percent of students who chose the correct answer for each vocabulary word:

Table 1

*Vocabulary Test One Results*

Vocabulary word	Percent of students who chose the correct answer
Envy	100
Fleeing	100
Complex	75
Strategy	75
Blunders	100
Inspired	50
Rustling	100

All students were able to correctly identify a word or words with the same meaning for the following words: envy, fleeing, blunders, and rustling. Given the sentence, “The film’s plot was complex,” three students correctly chose the answer “hard to understand.” Dalilah student incorrectly chose “suspenseful.” During an interview following a review of the correct answers, Dalilah said “I got complex wrong because it sounded like it was right in that sentence, so it tricked me.” Mia said, “I almost picked that too, but then I thought about the definition.” Dalilah may have been relying on context clues to predict what the meaning of the word. She could also been relying on her background knowledge about movies, and thought about how movies can be suspenseful. When she inserted the word suspenseful in the place of complex, the sentence, “The film’s plot was suspenseful,” sounded right and made sense to her.

When presented with the sentence, “His blunders amused her,” three students correctly chose “mistakes.” One student incorrectly chose “methods.” This student could have been confused about the definition of methods, as it is a word that he doesn’t use often in his conversational vocabulary.

Given the sentence, “The sunrise inspired the artists,” two students correctly chose the answer “caused them to create.” Two students incorrectly chose “fascinated.” Drake explained that he missed the definition for inspired because “fascinated sounded right because I thought it meant the same thing.” A strategy that Drake may have been using was identifying synonyms. He chose the word fascinated because he thought it was a synonym for inspired. At times, students chose incorrectly because they did not know the definitions of all of the words that they had to choose from. They may have narrowed down the answer down to two choices and had to guess.

Table 2

*Survey Question One*

<u>Statement</u>	<u>It helps me a lot.</u>	<u>It helps a little.</u>	<u>It does not help me.</u>
Seeing new words and learning what they mean before I read helps me to better understand what I read.	100%	0%	0%

As shown in Table 2, given a survey following the three weeks of vocabulary instruction, one hundred percent of the students responded, “it helps me a lot” to the statement, “Seeing new words and learning what they mean before I read helps me to better understand what I read.” Therefore, students believed that explicit vocabulary instruction, where words were previewed with them before reading, was helpful. In an interview, following the three weeks of vocabulary instruction, the students stated that learning the definitions through discussion of the meanings and a visual reminder of the words and definitions was helpful to them. Bella stated, “It’s good when they are on the wall. Then I can look at them.” As a visual learner, Bella finds visual resources helpful when learning and using new words.

The students also stated that it was helpful to discuss not only the meaning of each word, but also to use it in a sentence. This helped students connect the word to their own background knowledge. They discussed the meanings of the words in relation to their own lives. Mia said, “putting it in a sentence means you know what the word means.” Phillips, Foote, and Harper (2008), stated that in order for students to fully comprehend a word, it should be contextualized and practiced in multiple situations and in other subject areas. The authors argued that it is important to select words that students can connect to words that the students already know or will be learning. Shakin (2007) also claimed that students should also be able to communicate the meanings of the new words that they learn to their peers. When students were able to use the vocabulary words in the correct contexts, they demonstrated an understanding of the definitions.

Through direct vocabulary instruction, all of the students were able to identify the definitions for the following four words: envy, fleeing, blunders, and rustling. Three out of the four students correctly identified the words “strategy” and “complex.” Two students correctly identified the word “inspired.” This shows that explicit instruction was helpful for more than half of the words. Through a student survey and interview, students reported that previewing the words before reading through explicit instruction with visual reminders was helpful to them. This shows that explicit instruction of vocabulary before reading is one strategy that can be helpful in increasing students’ vocabularies, but it does not ensure that students will master the definition of every word.

### **Vocabulary in Context Does Not Significantly Improve Students’ Vocabulary Knowledge**

The following week our class participated in a close reading of a series of articles about special effects in movies. The students first read an article independently, and then followed along as I read it to them. I stopped and discussed each of the following words as we

encountered them in the text: explosions, miniature, prehistoric, reassembled, landscape, and background. Each time we came across one of the vocabulary words, I asked the students to use the context of the sentence or sentences around the word to determine the meaning of the word. We discussed the correct meaning and the clues around the word that led the students to the definition.

At the end of the week, students took a test where they were instructed to read a sentence that contained one of the vocabulary words. The students were instructed to choose the word or words with the same meaning as the underlined vocabulary word. The following chart shows the percent of students who chose the correct answer for each vocabulary word:

Table 3

*Vocabulary Test Two Results*

Vocabulary word	Percent of students who chose the correct answer
Explosions	100
Miniature	100
Prehistoric	25
Reassembled	75
Landscape	100
Background	100

All students were able to correctly identify a word or words with the same meaning for the following words: explosions, miniature, prehistoric, reassembled, landscape, and background. One student correctly chose “relating to times before written history,” for the definition of prehistoric. Two students incorrectly chose “found in several historical periods.” One student incorrectly chose “told about throughout history. Given the sentence, “He reassembled his model after it fell on the floor,” three students chose “made whole again.” One student incorrectly chose “repacked carefully.” This shows that instruction of vocabulary in



context is another strategy that can be helpful in increasing students' vocabularies, but it does not ensure that students will master the definition of all words.

During an interview following a review of the correct answers, Bella said, "I got prehistoric right because you said to think about what pre-means, like it's before, and I know what historical is." Bella was using her knowledge of prefixes and root words, a vocabulary strategy that we used prior to this study. Drake said that he guessed the wrong answer because "I knew it meant something about history but I forgot." Drake may also have been relying on his knowledge of prefixes and root words, but forgot the meaning of the prefix "pre." Mia said, "These words were easy and we read about them so I knew what they meant." Mia recalled the discussions that we had surrounding the meanings of the words in context and referred back to them to help her on the assessment.

Table 4

*Survey Question Two*

Statement	It helps me a lot.	It helps a little.	It does not help me.
It helps me when my teacher stops and talks about new words when we come across the word in the text.	100%	0%	0%

As shown in Table 4, students reported that learning words in context was helpful to them. Given a survey after the three weeks of data collection, all student responded, "it helps me a lot," to the statement, "It helps me when my teacher stops and talks about new words when we come across the word in the text." During an interview, students stated that they thought it was harder to remember the definitions if they were not written down. The students referred to the previous week when they were explicitly taught the definitions before reading, and were able to

refer back to the words written on chart paper. Drake said, “it was better when you wrote the words, so then we could look at them.” Dalilah said, “It was hard to remember what the words meant after we were done with the book.” In this way, students preferred the explicit instruction method, and when the words were presented on chart paper before they read the text. The students may have liked this method more if I had revealed each word with a written definition as we came across it in the text, so they would have a visual reminder later.

#### Combination Approach is Most Beneficial to Vocabulary instruction

During the third week of data collection, I wrote the definitions of the words slavery, released, teenager, appreciate, choir, barber, religious, famous, glorious, humorous, mysterious, and poisonous on chart paper. I hung up this poster in the front of the room. Each day, the students and I discussed the definitions that were written. After discussing the definition of a word, I would ask the students to use the word in a sentence and share it with a neighbor. Also during this week, our class participated in a close reading of an article about musicians and a biography of the singer, Mahalia Jackson. The students first read an article independently, and then followed along as I read it to them. I stopped and discussed each of the vocabulary words as we encountered them in the text. After five days of explicit vocabulary instruction combined with vocabulary words in context, students took a test where they were instructed to read a sentence that contained one of the vocabulary words. The students were instructed to choose the word or words with the same meaning as the underlined vocabulary word. The following table shows the percent of students who chose the correct answer for each vocabulary word:

Table 5

*Vocabulary Test Two Results*

Vocabulary word	Percent of students who chose the correct answer
slavery	75
released	50
teenager	100
appreciate	50
choir	100
religious	100
barber	100
famous	100
glorious	75
humorous	100
mysterious	100
poisonous	75

All students were able to correctly identify a word or words with the same meaning for the following words: teenager, choir, religious, barber, famous, humorous, and mysterious. When presented with the sentence, “Police released a picture of the man they were looking for,” two students correctly chose “made public,” as the words with the same meaning. There may have been confusion around the word “released,” as many students related it to a person being released from jail. The students’ own background knowledge provided them with one meaning of the word. However, students had trouble relating the word to another meaning, in a different context. Two students incorrectly chose “displayed” as the word with the same meaning. When presented with the sentence, “He doesn’t appreciate expensive clothes,” two students correctly chose the word “value” as having the same meaning. One student incorrectly chose “desire” and one student incorrectly chose “purchase.” Given the sentence, “It is going to be a glorious summer,” three students correctly selected the word “wonderful.” One student incorrectly chose

the word “tragic.” After reading the sentence, “Keep an eye out for poisonous snakes,” three students correctly chose the word “deadly.” One student incorrectly chose the word “inferior.”

During an interview following a review of the correct answers, Drake stated that he picked incorrect choices because he “thought that choice meant something else.” When asked which words he was confused about, he replied, “I picked tragic and inferior because I didn’t think they meant that.” It seems that in addition to not knowing the definition of the vocabulary word, Drake also does not know the definition of some of the multiple choice options. Having a limited vocabulary negatively impacted his scores on the assessments. Dalilah stated that she picked a wrong answer because “I forgot and it sounded right in the sentence.” Dalilah was using the context of the given sentence to determine the meaning of the word. Bella said, “I got them all right because I picked the answer that you told us that the word meant.” Mia said, “What helped me was I just thought about what the word meant and I picked it.” Bella and Mia were able to refer back to the discussions we had when we encountered each word in context.

Table 6

Survey Question Three

Statement	Yes	No
I learn new words the best when we see new words and learn what before reading and then discuss them when we see the word in the text	100%	0%

Given a survey after the three weeks of data collection, all students responded “yes” to the statement, “I learn new words the best when we see new words and learn what before reading and then discuss them when we see the word in the text.” In an interview following the three weeks of vocabulary instruction, the students stated that they liked to talk about new words before and during the reading of a text. Bella stated, “Looking at the chart paper with words is good when we read, and so is talking about a word when we see it.” Like in the previous weeks, students claimed that the strategy was helpful to them. However, the data collected shows that the strategy was effective for learning some words, but not all.

Researchers agree that teachers must approach vocabulary instruction multiple ways. Approaching vocabulary instruction through one approach does not ensure that students are learning words. As stated in the review of literature, while students have opportunities to learn words through wide reading, “contextual reading does not automatically result in word learning” (Blachowicz & Lee, 1991). This statement by Blachowicz and Lee is supported by the results of this study. Therefore, it is important that teachers use a combination of vocabulary instruction approaches in their classroom.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

The findings of this study have many implications for myself and other teachers. One of the things that stuck out to me was the strong effect that students’ backgrounds have on their understanding of words. Students relate words to their own experiences. It is my job as a teacher to take into account the students background knowledge and also expose them to new experiences and concepts. While many of the students in my class related the vocabulary word “released” to a person being released from prison, I also wanted them to understand other uses of the word. For example, in the story that we read, a famous singer released a new album. On the

test that the students were given at the end of the week, students were expected to be able to define the word released based on the sentence, “The police released a picture of the suspect.” Many students answered this question incorrectly, perhaps because of the way that they associated the word “release” with a person being allowed to leave prison. The discrepancy between the students’ context of the word and the accepted answer on the multiple choice test could show the bias that exists in the curriculum and tests from the program that we are using.

The findings also give insight about the best practices for vocabulary instruction. The research related to vocabulary instruction suggested that instruction should be comprehensive and include a variety of strategies. The data from my study suggests that a combination of explicit teaching of new words, along with discussion of words in context is the strategy that is the strategy that is most preferred by students of the three strategies tested in this study. Triangulation of data was shown because students’ scores on an assessment were slightly higher after receiving a combination of explicit teaching and discussion of words in context and students stated that this was the most effective strategy for them on a survey and through an interview. Similarly, the research suggested that effective vocabulary programs combine one or more strategies to increase students’ understanding of words. According to Winters (2009), approaches to vocabulary instruction should be multipronged and include direct instruction of key words, incorporation of student driven word learning strategies, and extensive reading. Studies by Baumann, Ware, and Edwards (2007) and Lubliner and Smetana (2009) show the effects of a balanced approach to vocabulary instruction, where multiple approaches were used.

These findings helped me to realize that I should continue to teach vocabulary through a variety of strategies. As a result of reviewing the extensive amount of research that surrounds vocabulary instruction, I would also like to add other strategies to my repertoire. In addition, I

would like to help my students take ownership of their vocabulary development. Shakin (2007) claimed that adolescents personal interests should be used to enhance their vocabulary as they develop independence' and a personal responsibility for their learning of new words. I would like to further investigate ways to increase the interest and motivation of my students in the process of vocabulary development, and reading in general.

### *Questions for consideration*

My findings have left me with some remaining questions. One question that still remains is the following: what words should be taught to students? The words that I selected to use in my study were words from a reading program that our school is trying for the first time this year. Many of the selected words, such as teenager, seemed to me like words that fifth graders would already know the meaning of. I would like to further investigate how to chose words to teach students. Another question that remains is how to best measure whether a student understands the meaning of a word. The test that I used to measure the students' vocabulary knowledge presented the word in a sentence and asked students to pick the best word or phase that matched the meaning of the word. I wonder if this type of multiple-choice test was the best way to measure whether they know the word or not.

### *Limitations*

I did not collect data that measured the number of words that the students knew before each week of vocabulary instruction. If I were to do this study again, I would give students a pretest of the words. That way, I would know whether students learned the words as a result of instruction, or if they were words that the student already knew. Another limitation on my study was that the students four who participated were a fairly homogeneous group. If I was

conducting this survey again, I would like to include a broader range of students including struggling readers and African-American students.

### *Conclusion*

The focus of this research project was to identify the best practice for vocabulary instruction. Given that literacy is a social practice and students from different backgrounds bring different funds of knowledge with them to school, this action research project asked, which vocabulary strategies are the best practices to help increase the vocabularies of students who live in poverty? As I reviewed the literature that surrounds the topic of vocabulary, three reoccurring themes stood out. These themes include the importance of improving the vocabularies of students who live in poverty, the types of words that should be selected for vocabulary development, and the best practices for increasing students' vocabularies. Through my review of literature related to vocabulary instruction, as well as the data I collected, I have come to the conclusion that new words should be taught to students in a variety of ways, including through explicit instruction and in context. In addition, because the differences between student success and achievement can be attributed to in part to the difference between the vocabulary knowledge of students who live in poverty and students who do not, vocabulary instruction should be emphasized for all students, especially students who live in poverty.



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**Appendix**

Student Survey

**1. I think that I need to improve my vocabulary.**

Alot

A little

Not at all

**2. I feel I already know all the words that I need to know.**

Yes

No

**3. Vocabulary study is important.**

Yes

No

**4. Seeing new words and learning what they mean before I read helps me to better understand what I read.**

It helps me alot.

It helps a little.

It doesn't help me.

**5. It helps me when my teacher stops and talks about new words when we come across the word in the text.**

It helps me alot.

It helps a little.

It does not help me.

**6. I learn new words the best when we see new words and learn what before reading and then discuss them when we see the word in the text.**

Yes

No

**7. Which activities help you learn the meaning of new words? Check all that apply.**

Writing the definition

Drawing a picture that represents the word

Looking up the word in the dictionary

Talking about the word with my teacher and classmates

Writing the word in a sentence

Other (please specify)

**8. Do you have any other comments or suggestions that will help me increase your vocabulary?**

**9. What do you do when you are reading independently and you come across a word that you do not know the meaning of?**