## **Background Information and Required Reflection**

## **for Action Research Project**

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**Statement/Observation**

Students in our poor, rural schools have difficulty acquiring a deep understanding of the content area vocabulary related to the concepts we are trying to teach them.

**Question**

How can we engage them in content area vocabulary study that is more meaningful and powerful, so they can internalize the meanings of words instead of just surface learning them?

**Self-Reflective Activities**

Theories: Based on our classroom teaching experience and professional reading, we believe deep understanding of content area vocabulary is key if students are to fully understand concepts they are asked to master. Our ideas about the importance of vocabulary have been influenced by Bloom's Taxonomy, which breaks learning tasks into types. Remembering and recalling words and facts (vocabulary) is the most basic type, and the one that subsequent higher order types are built upon. Another influence is Janis M. Harmon (of Word Wall fame). She writes, “Effective independent word learning strategies become even more critical as students encounter new words in more complex literary tasks across a variety of disciplines.” Since new learning must scaffold on what students already know, content area vocabulary is critical. It gives a foundation upon which to build students' new knowledge.

Educational Values: Vocabulary acquisition is most robust and sturdy when it follows a natural course of inquiry and exploration. The deepest understanding of the meaning of new words comes when students encounter them in context. We hold the educational value that the most important skills we can teach our students are how to learn by directing their own inquiry and how check their learning by monitoring their own comprehension. If students can do those things, then vocabulary acquisition will be a life-long and productive process.

**Larger Context of Schooling**

***(***Debra Hadley): My beliefs about self-directed learning and pursuit of natural curiosity fit into the Public Broadcasting Service motto of Learning for a Lifetime. I use many of their shows in my classroom because their model fits with my purposes and content. Also, life-long learning is one of the guiding principles of schooling in its larger context and of the American society. The person who can solve problems, explore curiosity and direct their own learning will succeed, not only in school, but in a career. In the past decade, I believe educational policy has diverted schooling from its finer purpose of teaching students to guide their own learning and moved to a teaching-to-the-test model fostered by end of grade and end of course testing. But if I'm going to have to prepare students for a mandatory state test (which I do), then part of my responsibility is to get them ready for that assessment, sometimes at the expense of my finer purpose.

**Historical Context of Individual Schools**

(Debra Hadley): My school was opened in 1977-78 and is the highest minority population school in a predominately white county. Its middle class population of students has declined as the economy of the county has suffered from a decline in manufacturing. It is now a poor, rural high school, which qualifies for Title 1 status, but declines the federal funding. Many students come to class every day with reading skills at middle school or elementary level, a lack of motivation and poor vocabularies. They also are trained to be force-fed the curriculum, which they learn only for the formal assessment. I consider myself to be a life-long learner, and so I find my students’ attitudes toward learning perplexing and sometimes offensive. I would like to find ways to bridge the gap between my ideal of learning and the practical needs to deliver the vocabulary and content of my course to my students in preparation for the required final exam.

**Historical contexts of personal beliefs**

(Debra Hadley): The historical context of vocabulary instruction has been on dictionary definitions, rote memorization, worksheets and pre-teaching key vocabulary before reading. Having been schooled in this fashion, I found it mind-numbing. My students feel exactly the same way. I earned my vocabulary through life-long passionate and voluminous reading, and recent study is proving that my way is most sound. But since my students are often poor readers, they are going to need some explicit strategies to use to negotiate content area texts I would like to help my students learn engaging and effective strategies to address the vocabulary of the content area. I would like to use this instruction as a springboard to increase the amount of content area reading that we do as a part of our studies.

**Descriptive Activities**

Situation to change or improve: Students' understanding of content area vocabulary.

Evidence of problem: Many students display only a superficial understanding of new vocabulary words. They often misuse words or misconstrue their meaning when using dictionary definitions. Another issue is long-term recall of the words and meanings. This can be demonstrated by probing or quizzing the class on terms or concepts after a few weeks have passed. Their understanding does not have sticking power. Most students are susceptible to this, but some particular groups even more so.

Who:Students who struggle most with vocabulary are also often the same students who struggle to achieve mastery on end-of-grade or final exams. Teaching experience has shown us that students most likely to struggle with vocabulary and assessment are English Language Learners, those identified as part of the Exceptional Children's program and those who are revealed as garden variety poor readers (reading below grade level).

What: This quotation sums up content area vocabulary difficulties perfectly. **“…** The complaint, at least of science educators, (is) that the bulk of text-centered science instruction is learning the meanings of hundreds of new scientific terms rather than experiencing the intellectual rush of hands-on inquiry (Pearson et. al in “Reading Research Quarterly” April/May/June 2007). That complaint can be heard in almost any content area discussion on vocabulary. How is there time to have students use the material? Poor vocabularies, poor reading skills and low motivation make it necessary to spend a lot of time teaching key terms, just so the conversations about content can begin.

When: Debra Hadley teaches Family and Consumer Science. All classes finish with a mandatory state exam. Each objective from the entire course guide is addressed on the test, so instruction MUST cover every unit. The exam is a state-mandated test that every student must sit for. It is not an exit standard, so students can pass the course without passing the test.

Where : Debra Hadley - Family and Consumer Science courses are organized by Standards (a big idea subject header) and Objectives (smaller more specific parts of the content of the standards). Each objective has a percentage of the course and the final exam. In the classroom, vocabulary is grouped and taught by objective. Apparel 1 has 31 objectives, and Foods 2 has 23 objectives. West Caldwell High School has an 18-week semester to get through all those objectives.

**Explanation**

Critical factors: Poor vocabulary knowledge is a common factor for many students. Weak vocabulary leads to difficulty in understanding content concepts. Reading is the most powerful way to improve vocabulary. The student groups of concern are often poor and/or resistant readers, so vocabulary is unlikely to improve without intervention. Also, as students progress through the grade levels, they encounter an increasingly complex and specialized vocabulary as they begin more in-depth content area study. Often this vocabulary could be classified as jargon.

These factors lead to the conclusion that a relationship exists between students' vocabularies and their performance in school.

Hypothesis: A relationship exists between the recall and remember aspects of Bloom's taxonomy and the higher order thinking that will let students fully understand the concepts in the content areas.

If students can be taught engaging strategies for learning content area vocabulary that lead to deep understanding, then this should increase increase content area performance. This success may begin a cycle of positive behaviors that increase motivation and chances for mastery on end-of-grade or state-mandated final exams.