What Reading Teachers Say About Vocabulary Instruction: Voices From the Classroom

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Results from this study indicate that teachers' major concern with vocabulary instruction is not what materials to use or what practices to select but how to develop a coherent building- or district-wide program.

Interest in vocabulary research and instruction has ebbed and flowed over the decades in the United States. As far back as the 1950s, researchers bemoaned the lack of research and instructional interest in the topic, and this sentiment has been repeated over the years (McKeown & Curtis, 1987; Petty, Herold, & Stoll, 1967). In the past decade, research interest has re-emerged, yet passion for the topic in practitioner circles has just begun to reach the levels of excitement that arise from discussions of comprehension, phonemic awareness, or children's literature. In fact, participants in a 2002 conversation on the RTEACHER listserv asked why vocabulary instruction had almost disappeared in many classrooms and was fast becoming a neglected area in teacher education and professional development programs (Brabham & Villaume, 2002). Some of these listserv participants attempted to rally their colleagues to refresh their interest in the topic.

A recent examination of what's "hot" in elementary and adolescent literacy noted that, until the most recent year, vocabulary had been described as "cold" every year since 1997, when the list began (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2005/2006; Cassidy, Garrett, & Barrera, 2006). The fact that the National Reading Panel (NRP; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) did not name vocabulary as a practice worthy of a unique section (instead folding it into the section on comprehension) probably did little to forward its cause. Teachers, schools, and districts attempting to respond to the NRP report have gone to great lengths to focus their attention on phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension, the four instructional areas highlighted in the report. Although vocabulary is an element of all of these—and has its own set of discrete recommendations—its absence as its own category is conspicuous.

However, the tide began to turn in teacher discourse when the categorization of the NRP report was offset by the assessment requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and Reading First. The latter legislates that vocabulary is one of the foundational "pillars" of the curriculum and must be assessed in schools receiving Reading First funding. The difference in incoming vocabulary knowledge between students with high or low socioeconomic status is also well documented (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001) and likely contributed to the Reading First policy. Research by Graves, Brunetti, and Slater (1982) revealed the paucity of usable vocabulary of kindergartners with low socioeconomic status (SES), arguing that higher SES kids come in with almost twice the usable vocabulary words as low SES kids. This gap is even more distressing when one looks at the link between early vocabulary knowledge and early reading achievement (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The teaching of vocabulary is not a luxury; it is an equity issue, and teachers are coming to know that, as evidenced by the 75% of the current "what's hot" survey respondents who believe vocabulary "should be hot" (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2005/2006).

Although the interest in vocabulary has fluctuated within schools, the research on the connection between vocabulary and reading and other academic

skills has slowly accumulated. From the early and seminal work of Davis (1944, 1968) through research in the 1980s (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986), researchers found a strong and persistent link between vocabulary instruction and comprehension-based tasks.

Decoding skills, fluency skills, and comprehension skills all draw upon a known bank of words. Teacher cues to encourage the decoding of words are useless if the word at hand is not part of the student's listening vocabulary. Repeated readings, a research-validated practice for increasing fluent reading, will always be hindered if the words to be read are unfamiliar, and obviously, literal and inferential comprehension rely almost completely on the recognition of a good portion of the word meanings in a text. Though this is an obvious oversimplification of a complex set of relationships, it is meant only as a summary. Readers interested in this link are urged to read further. Please see, for example, Baumann and Kame'enui (1991), Beck and McKeown (1991), and Nagy and Scott (2000).

As teacher educators working in urban and suburban schools at elementary, middle, and secondary levels, we have seen a growing consistency in the teaching of phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension. There is certainly a long way to go before research-validated practice becomes the norm in all classrooms, but the energy toward certain practices (i.e., guided reading, comprehension strategy instruction) has converged. This is not the case with vocabulary instruction. We see teacher instruction in vocabulary across the grades range from almost nothing to systematic, elaborated, and scripted models and everything in between (Blachowicz, 1987; Durkin, 1978/1979; Watts, 1995). In addition, our informal conversations with classroom teachers suggest to us that they aren't confident about best practice in vocabulary instruction, and at times they don't know where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on word learning or to change one that they feel is ineffective.

Because vocabulary instruction is now emerging as a "hot" topic, and because our work with teachers often results in long question-and-answer periods about such instruction, we decided to undertake a survey. Our goal was to find out what questions and concerns teachers had about vocabulary instruction to see if we could generalize about what teachers want to know about school instructional practices.

We see this as a very preliminary attempt to get information. Surely there is more work to be done, especially in disaggregating the data by the kind of literacy professional (teacher or reading specialist), the level (elementary, middle or secondary), or the number of years taught (newer versus more experienced teachers). Nonetheless, this initial look provided us insight on vocabulary in specific and professional development of literacy educators more generally.

The Survey Process

We were interested in responses about vocabulary from classroom teachers and other reading professionals (specialists, coaches, reading coordinators) who had in some way identified themselves as ready to engage in thinking about the topic. Thus, we surveyed a group of reading educators attending a regional professional meeting where the topic was to be vocabulary. In addition, surveys went out electronically to a listserv of reading educators in our area. Participants who filled out the survey were entered into a drawing to win classroom materials if they chose to identify themselves. There was no attempt to blind the survey or to disguise teacher responses. As such, the data has to be considered with caution. We didn't feel that the topic demanded great anonymity, but we realize that the data may be confounded by some professional attempt to answer in a socially desirable, rather than purely authentic, manner. Though we didn't have a notion of what we wanted to hear, we believe teachers and reading specialists may have thought their responses would be evaluated negatively if they were or were not of a certain kind.

The survey gathered basic demographic information and asked the teachers for their questions and concerns about vocabulary teaching and learning, their strengths and the current practices they found effective in this instruction, and which resources they were currently using to support vocabulary growth in their classrooms. Beyond demographics, the survey asked the following questions: What are your biggest concerns about vocabulary instruction in your district, school, or classroom? If you could ask "vocabulary experts" up to five questions, what would they be? What do you think you are most successful with in your classroom/school/district with respect to vocabulary? What are the resources (books, videos, articles, materials, other) that have been most helpful for you in carrying out your work?

The Respondents

Seventy-two educators responded to the survey: 21 from the listserv and 51 from the professional meeting. The respondents came from the greater metropolitan area of a large Midwestern U.S. city, most working in schools with some degree of diversity. The survey respondents taught in grade levels ranging from pre-K to college with slightly over half (56%) in elementary grades. They had experience in education ranging from 1 to 15+ years with over 75% having 6 or more years of experience. The largest representation (47) was of classroom teachers and the second largest (24) was reading specialists or literacy coaches, who accounted for most of the respondents who taught multiple grade levels.

What Works for Teachers

When we questioned teachers about the practices that improved student vocabulary knowledge most, we got a wide range of responses. (See Table 1 for the most cited successful practices.) The responses included strategies designed to enhance vocabulary through explicit methods (e.g., preteaching) and those that took a more incidental approach (e.g., creating a word-rich environment). The National Reading Panel report (NICHD, 2000) noted that good vocabulary instruction should combine both incidental and explicit approaches, and Hucklin and Coady (1999) argued that different kinds of words demand different approaches, thus concurring that a diversity of methods is the wisest tack. Of the most often cited approaches from the teachers and other literacy leaders surveyed, two were incidental and one explicit. The examples cited in Figures 1, 2, and 3 are drawn from practices explicitly described in the surveys.

The most common answer to the question about what practices are already working well was "working with word relationships/word parts." We folded responses related to etymology, synonyms and antonyms, prefixes and suffixes, and root word study into this category. In contrast to the other large categories of agreement, this one requires explicit attention to vocabulary as a skill. Teachers help students learn about words by showing them how word parts and analogous words assist in meaning making when encountering unknown words. This is a practice based in research. Studies validate word analysis as a practice that does enlarge students' vocabulary knowledge (Graves, 2006; Graves & Hammond, 1980; White, Sowell, & Yanagihara, 1989). An example of a lesson on the prefix *un-* from Ms. Smith's fourth-grade classroom (all teacher names are pseudonyms) appears in Figure 1.

The second most cited practice was teacher read-alouds of high quality literature or informational texts. Researchers studying this have found empirical evidence to support the classroom-based data these teachers report. Kindergarten and first-grade students exposed to new words during oral storybook

Table 1
Most Frequently Cited Successful Instructional Strategies

Successful teacher practices	Number cited by
Focusing on word relationships/word parts	13
Using read-alouds and songs	11
Using games/play	9
Using talk/discussion/think-alouds	6
Using word walls/ word banks	6
Integration with units and content across the content areas	6
Exposing students to difficult words	5
Systematic, explicit instruction	4
Making connections to background knowledge	4
Engagement/collaboration/drama	4
Using context	3
Preteaching vocabulary prior to reading	3

Figure 1
Ms. Smith's Fourth Graders Go on a Vocabulary Scavenger Hunt

It is a Tuesday in mid-winter, and Ms. Smith's fourth-grade class is gathered together to begin their vocabulary scavenger hunt. Today they are concentrating on the prefix *un-*, which Ms. Smith has explained comes from Old English and means *opposite* or *contrary to*. She asks them to think of words that they know that start with the prefix. After coming up with a robust list including the words *unsafe, unlikely, untie, unable,* and *unlucky*, Ms. Smith asks students to get up and wander around the room on an "*un-* scavenger hunt." They are to look through all the print in the room—in books, magazines, texts, on posters on the walls—to find any words that begin with this prefix. The student of the week takes a friend out to wander the hall and see if any *un-* words can be found in common areas around the school. After a few minutes, students gather back together, the wanderers return, and any new scavenged words are added to their original list. The students have been quite successful. They add *unnecessary, untidy, unwise, unhappy,* and *unnamed* to their list.

Ms. Smith shows them how to break these words into component elements. She reminds them that when they come across unknown words (and she is delighted when a student chimes in that *unknown* should be added to the list), word parts can help them to derive meanings. She asks them to be very aware of *un-* as a prefix and to remember that using prefixes to understand unknown words is a strategy they should use as they read during instruction in reading, across the curriculum, and at home. She also helps them understand that the two letters *un-* at the beginning of a word sometimes don't act as a prefix (as in the word *unify*). For homework, students are asked to search their environment outside of school to find more *un-* words to share tomorrow. Students have done this activity before with prefixes like *il-* and *re-*, and also with suffixes like *-able* and *-ic*. Thus, they are amassing a large store of affixes that they can use to help them decipher unfamiliar words.

readings were found to repeat these previously unknown words in retellings (Leung, 1992). Sénéchal and Cornell (1993) noted the appearance of words from recently read stories in oral vocabularies of 4- or 5-year-olds. Stahl, Richek, and Vandevier (1991) found similar results with middle school students who also seemed to gain new expressive and written vocabulary from repeated exposure to words during teacher oral reading. Teachers who use this practice do not do so accidentally. They carefully select books to read aloud that have words that students might find intriguing or appealing, and they emphasize those words in the text and in later discussions of the reading. An example of this is offered in Figure 2. Mr. Cornell's first-grade students hear and learn to use new words when he reads aloud *The Quiltmaker's Gift* by Jeff Brumbeau, a story with many magical words that work well with the equally magical pictures.

The third most commonly cited effective practice for student vocabulary growth was wordplay or word games. Blachowicz and Fisher (2004) noted the ways in which play contributed to student word engagement and subsequent knowledge and its connection to the research on the metalinguistic aspects of word learning and word knowledge. Teachers also see this play as valuable as they work with students to enlarge their understanding of words. It is of note that we categorize wordplay as a case of incidental word learning even though teachers may be quite intentional in their use of these games. Graves and Watts-Taffe (2002) reminded us that incidental need not mean arbitrary, that students must be primed to learn vocabulary through incidental exposure to words. We imagine that the teachers who listed independent reading and wordplay as potent strategies found ways to highlight the learning of words through these literacy activities rather than assuming or hoping students might pick them up. An example of second-grade students creating their own games in Ms. Towne's classroom appears in Figure 3.

Among the other areas cited as productive were use of word walls, classroom talk, integration with content area studies, and intentional creation of an environment ripe for exposure to challenging words. These suggest that teacher beliefs about instructional efficacy of strategies are consistent in many ways with research that calls for both explicit and implicit instruction, even though individual teachers may focus more on one than another.

Figure 2
Mr. Cornell's Students See How Words Make Magic

During story time, Mr. Cornell makes efforts to introduce his first-grade students to stories that will enchant them. He picks books with bold artistry and magical words. Early in the year, he explains to students that there are certain words that "magically" make you create pictures in your mind. He asks students to pay particular attention to those words and the images they help to create. He reminds them that, like the men and women who write the stories they read, they are authors too. They should feel invited to steal these words and use them in their own speaking and writing.

Before beginning *The Quiltmaker's Gift* (written by Jeff Brumbeau, illustrated by Gail de Marcken), Mr. Cornell reminds his students that there are many magical words in this book and that they should note them in their heads when they hear them. Sometimes, he tells them, words are wonderful and we don't even know exactly what they mean. That is fine too, that just makes them magical *and* curious! Mr. Cornell pays particular attention to his own reading when he comes to the page that shows all the gifts that have been given to the king to garner his favor. He reads and enunciates slowly: "Things that shimmered and glittered and glowed. Things whimsical and practical, Things mysterious and magical" (n.p.). Though he doesn't want to stop the story to highlight these intriguing words, he makes a mental note to return to this page and highlight the magical vocabulary with the students.

Once the story is complete, Mr. Cornell asks students if there were any words that were magical for them, that made them create pictures in their heads. One student relied on the word *rickety* to envision the old, worn wagon that the king travels in at the end of the story. Another noted that they were happy to hear the children crying with *delight*. Mr. Cornell puts those words on the chalkboard, helps students to derive their meanings from the context of the story, and asks students to think about using them sometime in the next few hours of class. This, he says, would be a *delight*. He also returns to the page that he noted had words that were, for him, magical, and shares those with the class. Mr. Cornell continues to marinate his students in words by reading a lot, by noting magical words, and by asking students to experiment in using these words and any other new words they come across inside the safe walls of the classroom.

Figure 3
Playing Games With Words in Second Grade

Ms. Towne's students have been playing word games all year. Some of their favorites are Blurt!, Outburst Junior, and Apples to Apples Junior. In May, they decide to invent their own word game that they can play to further their experiences with the fun of words. After several class periods of work, one small group introduces their game to their classmates. The rules are as follows.

- Player one rolls a die and picks a card.
- Card tells what kind of words player must name.
- Die tells how many of those words they must name.
- If the player is right, the player collects the card and continues to roll the die.
- When a player makes a mistake, it becomes the next person's turn.
- The first player to collect five cards wins.

Ms. Towne is impressed with the kinds of cards the group has invented. Examples include: Action Words That Begin With *A*, Words That Rhyme With *Place*, Words That Mean the Same as *Big*, and Words That Have More Than Three Syllables. She suggests that they might have some answer cards ready in case students are stumped, so they set to work on coming up with six examples for each task, and they put these on answer cards.

Once the game is further refined, Ms. Towne has the inventors explain the rules to fellow students and play a round or two as they are watched. Once she feels all students have a good understanding, she places this game in a center for students to play during center time. The other word games invented by other groups are cycled in and out of this center, as the professionally produced games had been earlier in the year.

Table 2
Most Frequent Concerns or Questions Noted by Respondents

Teacher concerns/questions	Number cited by
How can we develop a consistent approach to vocabulary learning in my building/district?	27
What is the best way to encourage vocabulary development in English Language Learners?	18
What are the best strategies/activities for vocabulary teaching?	18
How can I foster transfer and retention of taught vocabulary?	17
What are the best materials available to support vocabulary learning?	17
How do I know what words to focus upon?	14

Teacher Concerns and Questions

Although teachers listed many elements that they believed to be part of effective practice, they also had a good many concerns and questions. Interestingly, the concerns and questions were not as balanced as the productive practices. (See Table 2 for the most cited teacher concerns and questions.) Although three of the valuable practices were similar in response rates, one concern overwhelmingly presented itself. This concern was cited almost twice as often as the second one and thus warrants some careful consideration.

Specific Concerns

When we sat down to look at the surveys, we fully expected time to be the biggest concern. Although teachers did cite that as an area they worried about when considering vocabulary instruction, far more teachers expressed their concern about a lack of district- or building-wide consistency in vocabulary practices and the assumptions and shared vocabulary that underpin these practices. "We don't feel we are doing an outstanding job of vocabulary instruction. All teachers are not on the same page and approaching instruction in similar ways" (from a fourth-grade teacher). "Vocabulary is marginalized..." (from an elementary-level reading coach). "[I am concerned about] the inconsistencies of teacher training as to what denotes 'best practice'" (from a reading specialist). With a reasonably consistent voice, teachers expressed concern about how their own methods fit into a building- or district-wide plan.

The survey respondents were apparently not satisfied with doing good work on their own, but rather, they wanted to participate in and be a part of building-wide, perhaps district-wide, initiatives. We believe this speaks volumes about the need for community that teachers feel when they are faced with improving on previous practices. Like all changes, a change in stance toward the teaching of vocabulary requires considerable investment from a teacher.

Teachers may be concerned about what strategies to use, what materials are available to aid in vocabulary instruction, and how to foster and measure transfer, but they are most concerned about collaborating on shared practice. They are concerned about ways to implement a systematic program rather than a set of practices inside a single teacher's classroom.

Specific Questions

The survey read, "If you could ask 'vocabulary experts' up to five questions, what would they be?" These questions echoed the concerns highlighted and discussed in the previous section. The most common question was about the consistency of approach across classrooms, the second most common about best practices in vocabulary strategies. An elementary teacher summed up these kinds of questions when she asked, "What is a good whole-school approach to vocabulary instruction? Is there something we can all get behind so it could become part of the school?"

This question is so rich for the purposes of isolating teachers' relationships to vocabulary instruction because it highlights the two most common questions: *What* should we do? *How* can we all gather

Table 3
Most Frequently Cited Teacher Resources for Learning

Allen, J. (1999). *Words, words, words: Teaching vocabulary in grades 4–12.* York, ME: Stenhouse.
Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction.* New York: Guilford.
Blachowicz, C.L.Z., & Fisher, P., (2005). *Teaching vocabulary in all classrooms* (3rd ed.). Columbus, OH: Prentice-Hall.
Graves, M.F. (2006). *The vocabulary book: Learning & instruction.* New York: Teachers College Press; Newark, DE: International Reading Association; Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
Marzano, R.J. (2004). *Building background knowledge for academic achievement: Research on what works in schools.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.
Nagy, W.E. (1988). *Teaching vocabulary to improve reading comprehension.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
Stahl, S.A. (1999). *Vocabulary development (From reading research to practice, Vol. 2).* Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

around it and make it work schoolwide? We were gratified to learn that teachers had these questions. It is not surprising that other questions and concerns included those about student retention of words (e.g., "How do I reinforce words that I teach during vocabulary instruction so they transfer to other times and tasks?" "Kids learn new words and then forget them after the test."), great materials, and particular strategies for English-language learners. Table 3 lists the respondents' recommendations of resources important for their learning and growth.

Comprehensive Vocabulary Instruction

Our analysis of these surveys leads us to several broad conclusions:

- The wisdom of teacher practice is in line with empirical research on vocabulary instruction.
- Teachers want to know they are working in a context where there are shared understandings about best practices for enhancing students' vocabulary knowledge.
- Although teachers have particular strategies and practices they believe to be effective, they wish to weave together isolated practices into a systematic program of vocabulary instruction.

In turn, these conclusions lead us to a model of comprehensive vocabulary instruction that is consistent with both teacher wisdom and research, emphasizes the shared nature of good practice, and is systematic rather than incidental.

A Model for Consistency

We offer the outline of a professional development model that may help teachers to define and enact effective vocabulary practices. To aid us in doing so, we draw on both the professional development literature and what we learned about best practices in vocabulary learning from our survey participants.

Scholars concur that teacher collaboration is essential for success in a school and that "enabling encounters with very different practices...diversif(ies) teacher knowledge (Ball & Cohen, 1999, p. 15). When teachers are a part of a professional community, their own self-efficacy increases, and they become more invested in their own work. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003) asserted that teachers engaging in communities of learning can no longer be considered utopian but are essential to the work of effective education. Thus, any new practice must start with teacher collaboration toward a shared understanding of the foundations of vocabulary learning.

Our survey participants, largely experienced teachers and reading specialists, highlighted three practices that also have support in the professional literature. This is a reasonable place to start. All teachers might do an instructional audit of their own classroom habits to isolate their current practice relative to these three strands: study of word parts, highlighting vocabulary in read-alouds of high quality literature, and playing with words. Teachers are likely to find they have many effective practices that can be categorized in these three ways, and this effort can begin their examination of current practice.

In addition to reflecting on current practices, shared understandings and new ideas can be derived from book studies, from observation of practice (both of teachers in the building and of other teachers), and from sharing of information learned through professional conferences, professional development, or graduate courses in literacy methods and theory.

Once there are plenty of possibilities, teachers can discuss the practices they feel best suit the students in the grade, building, or district in which they reside. Though different grade levels will surely focus on different kinds of words, all can use similar techniques with slight modifications for very young or much older students. Teams of two or three teachers from different grades might volunteer to work with their students for a period, say a month, on a specific practice and report back on the results. This kind of teacher research is very helpful in seeing how ideas truly function in the classroom. Following this piloting phase, teachers can return to the discussion of various practices with new insights.

This process might go on for some months as new and old practices are tried, discarded, revised, and refined before teachers agree on the one or two practices under each category that they wish to pilot together as a building or district. Following this pilot experience, teachers return together once again to discard some ideas and further isolate those that seem the most promising for student growth in vocabulary and knowledge about words. A graphic of this process is found in Figure 4. Because this process is iterative, double arrows are present in places

where staff may find that information from one phase takes them back to a previous phase. It may take many months of piloting before a program begins to coalesce for the group. It is worth noting that dynamic groups of faculty don't go through this process once and then consider it finished. They may decide to review their program on a 3- or 5-year cycle so as to keep up with the freshest research. The graphic, thus, depicts a continuous cycle of improvement.

Ultimately, the goal is to find a common set of practices that can be used across classrooms and grade levels. Though we often talk about this kind of instructional alignment in teacher professional development, it is rare that teachers go through enough iterations of trying something and reflecting upon it with the group so that the practices they select are truly best for that group and so that all teachers involved feel invested and heard.

Final Thoughts

This survey of teacher practice supports the idea that educated teachers are aware of the needs of their students, their classrooms, and their schools. They are also aware of the need to be systematic and comprehensive in their instruction and are anxious to work together to make good vocabulary instruction happen. As a reading specialist said, "We need more consistency in approach from classroom to classroom. Some teachers are wonderful with keeping the vocabulary presence front and center in their students' minds. In other classrooms, words might

Figure 4
Cycle of Professional Activities Leading to Proposal for Curricular Alignment
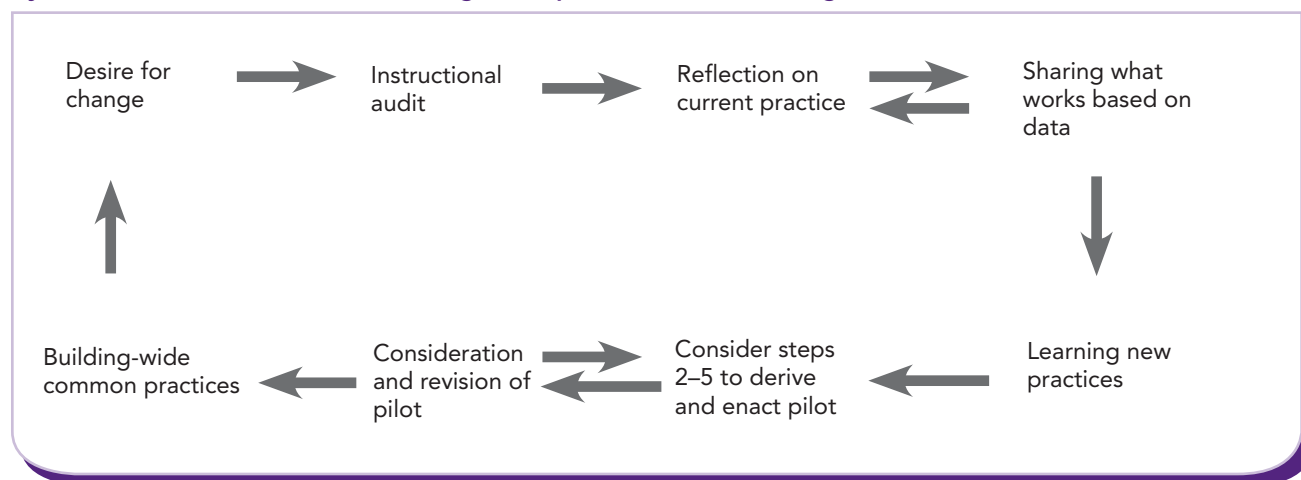
be placed on the walls but seldom/never revisited." To us, this is more a statement about the weaknesses in teacher professional development than about the weaknesses in particular teachers.

A concerted effort to gather around proven practices and develop shared knowledge requires the time and tools to do so. Without these things, teacher learning about vocabulary instruction will mirror their teaching of vocabulary in that it will be hit or miss, idiosyncratic, or uncertain. Teachers in this survey reflect the questions of many more educators, who are asking for a deeper and more thoughtful understanding of the school's role in vocabulary development. At the same time, the literature of vocabulary instruction is beginning to reflect an awareness of the need to propose models and guidance for developing schoolwide conversations, shared language, and shared bases of knowledge and practice about integrated and comprehensive approaches to vocabulary instruction (Blachowicz, Fisher, & Watts-Taffe, 2006; Graves, 2000; Nagy, 2005). We look forward to progress that moves issues of vocabulary from just being hot to shedding more light on schoolwide approaches to this important part of our students' learning.

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Lesson Link

For related lesson plans, visit ReadWriteThink.org and click Lessons to find

▸ Action ABC's: Learning Vocabulary With Verbs
▸ Acquiring New Vocabulary Through Book Discussion Groups
▸ Choosing, Chatting, and Collecting: Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy