VERTICAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY: A FOCUS ON VOCABULARY

INSTRUCTION

By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this systematic qualitative research investigation was to pilot a vertically aligned professional learning community (PLC) to improve teacher collaboration across grade levels and to inform effective vocabulary instruction. This research intervention was conducted at the Dream Big primary school, which serves a large population of English Language Learners (ELL). Reading can be a challenge for the ELLs at the primary school because of limited English language acquisition and lack of basic and academic vocabulary. In order to meaningfully design and implement vocabulary instruction that better meets the needs of the students, teachers need to understand the progression of vocabulary instruction. For this type of cohesion to occur, teachers need time to collaborate across grade levels. A collective case study design was utilized to explore and examine teacher experiences with participating in a vertically aligned PLC focused on vocabulary instruction. A case study design allowed for an in-depth exploration of the vertical PLC sessions. Data sources in the study included an initial questionnaire, facilitator observations of each session, a collection of documents and artifacts, participant reflection forms, and two final focus group interviews. The participant sample included one ESL teacher from each grade from kindergarten through third grade, two ESL teachers who work across different grade levels, and one ESL teacher that works with the Special Education classrooms.

Keywords: communities of practice, professional development, professional learning communities, vertical professional learning community, literacy, vocabulary, English as a second language (ESL), English language learners (ELL)

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the Dream Big school district, in particular to the supportive administration for encouraging teachers to step into teacher leadership roles. The empowerment I received as a teacher leader led me towards pursuing my doctorate and the design of this study. Specifically, this study would not be possible without the Dream Big primary school administration's support. The administration provided me with the setting and flexibility necessary to conduct the PLCs and collect all of the necessary data. This dissertation is also dedicated to the seven ESL teachers from the primary school who voluntarily participated in the vertical professional learning community. The study would not have been possible without their participation and ambition towards professional growth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I encourage all educators to continue to identify problems of practice within their settings and work towards solving them so that we can ensure all students reach their highest potential.

"Dream big. Start small. But most of all, start." - Simon Sinek

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this systematic qualitative research investigation was to pilot a vertically aligned PLC to improve teacher collaboration across grade levels and inform effective vocabulary instruction. The research intervention was conducted at the Dream Big Primary School. The Dream Big Primary School serves a large population of English Language Learner (ESL) students. There are significant variations in English Language Development (ELD) among the student population, ranging from no English language to native English speakers. For the ELLs at Dream Big Primary, reading presents itself as a challenge due to their limited English language acquisition and lack of basic and academic vocabulary. This vocabulary gap has a tremendous impact on students' reading achievements. However, in order to meaningfully design 4and implement vocabulary instruction that better meets the needs of the students, teachers need to not only focus on what they are teaching within their grade but also understand what is being taught in prior grades and upcoming grade levels. For this type of vocabulary instruction cohesion to occur, teachers need time to collaborate across grade levels. One way to help address this problem is to create time for vertical PLCs. Articulating, planning, and discussing student learning a teacher's vocabulary instructional practices across grade levels will allow for a continuum of instructional improvements and teacher learning.

There is a belief that knowing more is equivalent to better teaching, and that better teaching leads to higher student achievement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Teachers in today's schools are confronted with ongoing changes to their practice and student diversity within their classrooms. These ongoing changes to practice and diverse student needs require schools to provide teachers with ongoing professional learning and growth opportunities. Seeing

as teachers and schools are faced with high stakes accountability to demonstrate student

achievement, professional development becomes an important vehicle for promoting continuous

learning for teachers which will hopefully lead to positive impacts on student learning outcomes.

Sustainability and effective implementation of innovations in schools requires ongoing

professional development for teachers.

There is research on what constitutes effective professional development (Darling-

Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Little, 2006; Garet, Porter, Desimone,

Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Postholm, 2012), but less is known on how to sustain effective

professional development. It has been demonstrated that for effective learning to occur,

professional development should be intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice. (Darling-

Hammond, Chung Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Effective professional

development should also focus on student learning and address the teaching of specific

curriculum content. Additionally, effective professional development must align with school

improvement priorities and goals while building strong working relationships among teachers

(Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Cultivating a strong

professional community conducive to learning, reflection, and sustaining teachers' commitment

to teaching can result in a school culture centered around teachers learning and constructing

knowledge together (Little, 2006; Wood, 2007). Ultimately, a school culture that supports

healthy inquiry-oriented professional learning communities (PLCs) will be more effective in

creating knowledgeable teachers and stand a greater chance of impacting student achievement.

A PLC can enable robust and ongoing professional development among teachers. The

term PLC describes a group of individuals with an interest in improving educational outcomes, a

common purpose, and shared activities. These groups of teachers can include grade-level

teaching teams, school committees, subject-specific departments, school districts, and national professional organizations (DuFour, 2004). PLCs have become more common in elementary schools throughout the last decade. Schools attempt to embed PLC time into their school as a means of enhancing student achievement and teacher collaboration (Servais, Derrington & Sanders, 2009).

Successful teacher professional communities develop a shared trust through collaboration focused on developing norms, improving practice, and exemplification of shared beliefs of core principles relating to student learning (Strahan, 2003). PLCs explore how shared resources among a group of practitioners can impact teachers' work with colleagues and students (Levine, 2010). Shared resources become a way of collaborating on best practices related to their work and transferring teacher learning back to the participants' classrooms. The theory that supports PLCs is Wenger's theory of communities of practice, in which teachers are working together to improve practice relevant to their work (Wenger, 1998; Lave, 1991). Professional communities can be an effective professional development approach to improve student achievement and overall school success (Servais, Derrington & Sanders, 2009). PLCs can allow teachers from different grade levels to collaborate when they are implemented vertically, not just within the same grade levels.

However, while many schools claim to have incorporated PLC structures within their buildings the effectiveness of the meeting times amongst teachers is not well documented. It seems likely that quite often PLCs are not being used as spaces for teacher learning; instead, they become meetings with an agenda dedicated to discussing school and district-wide initiatives (Graham, 2007; Hipp, Huffman, Panake and Olivier, 2008; and Strahan, 2003). In addition, vertical articulation across grade levels tends to occur less frequently than single grade groups,

especially at the elementary school level (Burton & Frazier, 2012; Nagel, 2008; Suh &

Seshaiyer, 2015). When appropriately implemented, vertical PLCs can become a means of

improving curriculum and impacting teacher and student learning as a result of teachers working

across the grade levels and viewing student learning as a larger school responsibility and not just

segmented by each grade level. Teachers can gain a better understanding of the progressions of

learning and plan instruction that is purposeful, coherent, and builds on itself throughout the

grades (Burton and Frazier, 2012). The following section will discuss the context at the Dream

Big Primary School and the purpose of the research study.

Problem of Practice

Throughout the 2014 – 2015 school year, I had the opportunity to co-design a

kindergarten curriculum guide for the Red Bank Primary School. My colleague and I involved

our grade level in many aspects of the curriculum design during our grade level PLC meetings.

The need for a new kindergarten curriculum stemmed from low student achievement in literacy,

attributed to the lack of focus on crucial literacy components including phonemic awareness and

phonics instruction (Nelson, Dole, Hosp, & Hosp, 2015; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Following

this change in the kindergarten curriculum, the school district has seen a significant shift in

curriculum writing. The district moved away from purchasing programs that did not meet the

needs of our students, to designing curriculum aligned to best practices and standards. More

recently the district has begun to adopt teaching practices from the Reader's and Writer's

Workshop model. The various changes occurring have resulted in curriculum writing and

implementation becoming fragmented and grade-specific as opposed to cohesive across grade

levels. It is possible that this lack of cohesion may contribute to the learning gaps and

inconsistencies in student achievement as they move through the grades.

The five components of reading instruction that researchers consider most effective are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary instruction (Nelson, Dole, Hosp, & Hosp, 2015; Stahl & Fairbanks,1986). As previously mentioned, the Dream Big Primary School has implemented the Reader's Workshop framework in first through third grade, as well as restructured and created a systematic, multimodal phonics sequence targeted towards phonemic awareness and phonics instruction for kindergarten through third grade. Although phonics seems to be a strength in both the classroom instruction and reflected in student data, many students struggle in reading once they reach second and third grade.

Vocabulary acquisition is an area in which students continue to struggle as indicated by their reading assessment scores and this gap seems to increase as they move through the grades. There is a need for teachers to collaborate around how to expose students to more strategies that will enhance their depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge. Evidently, the Dream Big Primary School may lack cohesiveness with effective vocabulary instruction across grades. The gap in cohesion may be a result of a lack of vertical professional learning opportunities in which teachers from different grades work together and get a deeper understanding of what vocabulary instruction should look like across grade levels. Vertical collaboration among grade levels could help build on best practices for vocabulary instruction. The Dream Big Primary School currently focuses on providing teachers with PLC time to work within their grade but no additional structured time to work with teachers outside of their grade level.

Although teachers do not currently engage in vertical articulation, it is evident that the Dream Big Primary School values professional learning as they provide each grade level with 80 minutes of PLC time once every six days. Also, the school administration recently allotted staff meeting times to be utilized as additional grade level PLC time. Although the school provides

ample time for horizontal collaboration among grade levels, it lacks vertical professional

learning time, in which teachers from different grade levels can meet to learn from one another

and discuss systematic literacy instruction. Designing and implementing effective vocabulary

instruction that better meets the needs of students requires not only a focus on the teaching

within each grade but also an understanding of teaching across grade levels. For cohesive

vocabulary instruction to occur, teachers need time and resources to collaborate with their

colleagues in other grade levels. One way to attempt to address this problem is to allow time for

teachers to meet in vertical PLCs. A vertical PLC would enable articulation, planning, and

discussion of student learning and teacher reading practices across grade levels and help create a

continuum of instructional improvements and teacher learning.

   The purpose of this systematic qualitative research investigation was to pilot a vertically

aligned PLC to improve teacher collaboration across grade levels and inform effective

vocabulary instruction. The research followed a case study design to gain an understanding of a

group of teachers' collaboration and professional learning experiences as a result of participating

in a vertical PLC model intervention. A case study "involves in-depth study of instances of a

phenomenon in its natural context while conveying both the researcher's and the participants'

perspectives and using procedures that test the validity and applicability of findings" (Gall, Gall,

& Borg, 2015). This research methodology allowed me to study PLCs within my school as the

broader phenomenon and gain participants' perspectives through questionnaires, feedback forms,

observations, document collection, and focus group interviews. The vertical PLC model allowed

teachers from different grade levels to meet and work collaboratively by learning about and

sharing best practices in vocabulary instruction.

Research Questions

The research questions helped highlight the experiences teachers had when participating in a vertical PLC model and how they perceived their experiences with vertical collaboration to influence their vocabulary instruction. The overarching research question for the study was: how might participating in a vertical PLC help teachers address inconsistencies in vocabulary instruction across grade levels and improve their understanding of effective PLCs? The following research questions guided the study design:

(1) What does the vertical PLC look like in practice?

    (a) How do teachers engage in the vertical PLC sessions?

(2) What are the perceptions of the teachers while working together in the vertically aligned PLC with a focus on vocabulary instruction?

    (a) which aspects of the vertical PLC do they discuss as being most effective for their own learning?

    (b) How do the teachers think the PLC could be improved or expanded?

(3) How do teachers make use of the vertical collaboration to inform their vocabulary instruction and teacher practices?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the process of identifying my sources, I used the Rutgers University databases to search for peer-reviewed articles. I narrowed the selection of articles after examining their validity through closely reading their methodologies, taking notice of the sources cited, and by taking into considerations the contexts of the settings. When selecting literature to inform my study, I looked for studies conducted in elementary through high school settings to gain a broader understanding of how different PLC models are implemented and studies that reflected the experience of ELLs. Studies that had clearly designed methodologies that could inform the design of the research study were also taken into consideration. Overall, the literature that informed the research study focuses on elements of effective PLCs, vertically aligned PLCs, professional development in reading instruction, and vocabulary instruction for ELLs.

This review will first speak to the theoretical framework that situates teacher learning and PLCs within the large theory of communities of practice as discussed by Etienne Wenger. The literature review will begin with a synthesis of effective professional learning communities. I then discuss the limited literature on vertical PLCs followed by a review of the literature of professional development in reading instruction. The literature review concludes by examining vocabulary instruction for English language learners. The first sections of the literature review discuss effective PLCs, which helped inform the design and planning of the vertical PLCs for this study, followed by research on effective vocabulary instruction that informed the content of the vertical PLC work.

Theoretical Framework

A body of research used to inform this study has attended to defining communities of practice and PLCs. They provide definitions of what communities of practice should look like,

who participates in them, and why they are an integral part of an organization. Research on communities of practice offers a broader and more theoretical description of what individuals might do in the company of colleagues (Levine, 2010). Many of the articles used to inform this study define communities of practice as groups of people who share their experiences and knowledge based on a common concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on a frequent basis (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger, White & Smith, 2010; Wenger, 1998; DuFour, 2004; Lave, 1991; Hord, 2009; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). In particular, this study will draw on Etienne Wenger's theory on communities of practice as the central theoretical framework to analyze the role of PLCs in sustaining teacher learning. Wenger's work on communities of practice provides important definitions and elements that may benefit the establishment of successful and sustainable PLCs.

Wenger's social theory of communities of practice is a conceptual framework from which to derive a consistent set of general principles and recommendations for understanding and supporting adult learning (1998). The primary focus is on learning as social participation. He argues that a social theory of learning must integrate the components necessary to characterize "social participation as a process of learning and of knowing" (Wenger, 1998, p. 27). This theory of social learning defines learning by examining the individual, community, and organization:

> For individuals, it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities. For communities, it means that learning is an issue of refining their practice and ensuring new generations of members. For organizations, it means that learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice

through which an organization knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and

valuable as an organization (1998, p. 31)

Wenger's description of communities of practice is broad and encompasses various

groups to which people may belong. The focus of the vertical PLC for this research proposal is

specifically on PLCs, and many of the principles and elements of communities of practice that

Wenger describes are directly applicable to PLCs in schools. Much of the relevant research cites

Wenger's work with an emphasis on his argument that practice defines a community through

three dimensions: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Bezzina &

Testa, 2005; Owen, 2014; Webb et al., 2009; Levine, 2010; Little, 1993). These dimensions

directly link to characteristics of successful PLCs in school. The idea of joint enterprise and

values renegotiated by members over time relates to shared values and norms needed for a PLC

to function and mutual engagement binding long-term members and newcomers into a social

entity. Commitment to shared ideas reflects the collaboration of teachers within their PLCs. A

shared repertoire of communal resources including artifacts produced over time reveal the tools

needed for sustaining PLCs such as assessment data, samples of student work, and teacher-

produced materials and curricula (Owen, 2014). These dimensions may also be linked to

qualities of effective professional development: (1) active learning for teachers, (2)

sustainability, (3) integration with school-improvement plans, (4) collaboration, and (5) job-

embedded work (Ferguson, 2013).

Wenger's theory is well matched to this research study because the elements he defines as

present in communities of practice directly align with designing PLCs to be sustainable and

promote both teacher and student learning. My study draws on Wenger's theory to inform the

effective design of the vertical PLC sessions. I examined how teachers collaborated within the

PLC sessions to share ideas reflective of best practice, mutually engage in problem-solving around challenges and questions, and how those collaborations can lead to deprivatization of instruction and allow for the social learning and knowing reflective in Wenger's social theory of learning. This theory provided the primary theoretical frame of this study.

Effective Professional Learning Communities

PLCs, when effectively implemented, can provide teachers with ongoing, job-embedded, and sustained professional development. Common across studies on PLCs are lists of critical components of effective PLCs including: shared values, collective responsibility for student learning, collaboration focused on learning, deprivatized practice, and reflective dialogue (Ferguson, 2013; Bezzina and Testa, 2005; Louis and Marks, 1998; Owen, 2014; Webb et al., 2009; Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1997). The importance of shared norms and values appear extensively throughout the literature on PLCs.

Louis and Marks (1998) expand the notion of shared norms and values in their research. The study, which included 24 schools, involved surveying 910 teachers and 5,943 students and collecting classroom observation data, assessment tasks, and samples of student work. An example provided from one of the school case studies reflects the significance of shared norms and values and how the presence of those shared values and norms directly impact student learning. Teachers in the school that displayed these shared values, which align with authentic pedagogy, were successful in helping to develop self-motivated, independent learners who could think for themselves (Louis & Marks, 1998). Shared values and collective responsibility for student learning provide teachers with common ground. When professionals share responsibility, they are more accountable for the outcomes. Louis and Marks (1998) argue that when teachers share the same values, they are more likely to engage in evocative collaboration.

Research on the significance of the establishment of shared norms and values was essential to inform how to effectively set up the vertical PLC sessions at the Dream Big Primary School.

Similarly, collaboration is also an essential component that spans research on effective PLCs. However, teachers becoming isolated in their practice can hinder effective collaboration and teacher learning. Research shows PLCs can support effective collaboration by discouraging isolation. For example, a study conducted by Lujan and Day (2009), in a school located in the southwestern US, examined perceptions of teachers and staff members on the roadblocks to collaboration while implementing a PLC model. The study collected data from an open-ended survey, one-on-one teacher interviews, and direct observations of PLC meetings. The data showed improvements in the collaborative culture of the school after PLC implementation. Prior to the PLC model teachers met inconsistently and their meetings involved discussing "superficial things such as field trips and fundraisers" (Lujan & Day, 2009). The roadblocks identified throughout this study included: time restraints, isolation among teachers, divergent views among teachers, and resolving of conflict. Implementing the PLC model alleviated the roadblocks to collaboration. Teachers in the study indicated that the PLC met more often and that the meetings were more focused, structured, and effective than they had been (Lujan & Day, 2009). PLCs alleviated isolation among teachers by providing regularly scheduled times to meet, promoting collaboration, and assisting teachers in building collegial relationships. Understanding the roadblocks for collaboration was important to the design of the vertical PLC for this study as it allowed me to anticipate and plan for such roadblocks.

Isolation among teachers was one of the roadblocks identified by Lujan and Day's (2009) study. Deprivatized practice, referring to teachers opening up their classroom doors and welcoming colleagues to observe, sharing best practice, and sharing artifacts to enhance teacher

professional knowledge and growth, can prevent isolation among teachers. Effectively implemented PLCs can lead to deprivatized practice, which can improve pedagogy and teacher relationships through activities such as peer coaching, team teaching, structured classroom observations, collegial learning and engaging in reflective dialogue about teaching and learning (Louis and Marks, 1998; Owen, 2014). Reflective dialogue allows for opportunities to "share alternative perspectives within a context of shared values" and to sustain "the intellectual culture of professional communities" (Louis & Marks, 1998). This research informed my study as deprivatization of teaching enables teachers to have meaningful conversations around teaching and learning by sharing their teaching practices with their colleagues, which was anticipated to occur throughout the vertical PLC meetings. Understandably, external supports are needed if teachers are to successfully build on shared values, establish collective responsibility for student learning, and participate in deprivatized practice and reflective dialogue.

External supports including organizational factors and structural supports are important for establishing effective PLCs. Bezzina and Testa (2005) explain that structural supports that enable the development of PLCs include time for groups of teachers to meet, and school plans that address common goals, teacher empowerment, and institutional identity. An example of these factors is presented in a case study (Servais et al., 2009) that examined how a PLC model could be put into practice to enhance learning within the school culture. The staff from the case study participated in a book study PLC utilizing the book *Learning by Doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work.* The participants included 16 teachers spanning grades kindergarten through fifth grade, a differentiation specialist, and a reading specialist. The PLC was facilitated by the principals and met once a week for a total of six sessions. The book study had multiple goals: (1) to create a shared purpose; (2) to focus on learning; (3) to

determine how to respond when students were not learning; (4) to build a collaborative culture;

(5) to create a results-oriented PLC; and (6) to understand consensus and conflict in a PLC

(Servais et al., 2009). The book study allowed for a structure to implement concepts of the PLC

in a smaller group setting to then disseminate this practice into the broader school community.

Similarly, by piloting one vertically aligned PLC, I was able to develop a structure and design

that can be sustained and further improved to hopefully one day include the entire school. The

findings from Servais et al., 2009 case study concluded that the PLC model gave teachers time to

discuss, engage, build and sustain relationships. Those elements were considered the key to the

success of a PLC and align with the previously discussed studies on components for effective

PLCs.

In addition, research highlights other significant components of effective PLCs that are

important to consider. Individual and collective professional learning successfully occurs when

openness, networks, and partnerships of teachers collectively work together. For such collective

work to occur, mutual trust, respect, and support must be present (Webb et al 2009; Bryk et al,

1997). Other components worth mentioning include having a shared vision, involvement in joint

practical activities, supportive and distributed leadership, and engagement in collaborative and

sustained teacher-led inquiry (Owen, 2014; Bezzina and Testa, 2005). For sustaining such

effective PLCs the collection and use of assessment and other data is essential as a basis for

shared inquiry into, and evaluation of, performance over time (Bryk et al, 1997; Thompson et al,

2004). Attention needed to be given to the types of activities that occured within the meeting

times of my vertical PLC in order to implement the essential elements of an effective PLC. In

fact, Stewart (2014) identifies promising practices in professional development targeted

explicitly at learning in a professional community: (1) content focus, (2) active learning, (3)

coherence, (4) duration, and (5) collective participation (Stewart, 2014). Content focus refers to the understanding of learning objectives and a deep understanding of how students learn the content. Active learning suggests the reviewing of student work and data, leading of discussions, observing other colleagues teach, and being observed with feedback provided afterwards. Coherence refers to establishing relevance both to teacher's work and to state initiatives so that learning is connected. Duration is the idea of working as a group for an extended period. Lastly, Stewart (2014) refers to collective participation as working with teachers in similar settings and concentrations. This research provides schools with elements that, with sustained implementation, can contribute to effective PLCs and help to meet the long-term goal of increased teacher and student learning.

The components that researchers have shown that contribute to effective professional development and PLC experiences are only successful when sustained over time. Research studies have mostly focused on recommendations for how PLCs can be sustained but lack empirical evidence on achieved sustainability. One of the factors that are said to contribute to supporting effective professional learning is empowering teachers to have ownership over and responsibility for identifying their own professional development needs (Webb et al., 2009). Achievement of sustainability is possible by providing opportunities to engage in sustained conversations that focus on teaching and learning and a collaborative culture (Servais et al., 2009). If effective PLCs are sustained, it is assumed that they can lead to increased teacher collaboration and learning which can contribute to improved student learning. The studies reviewed on effective PLCs provided a research based framework for designing the vertical PLC at the Dream Big Primary School. Although it is important to consider effective practice and possible roadblocks when designing and structuring a PLC, for this study it was also essential to

consider research specifically focused on vertical PLCs as vehicles for teacher learning since the

study will included teachers from various grade levels.

Vertical PLCs as a Vehicle for Teacher Learning

Much of the research on vertical articulation focuses on demonstrating the need for

teachers across grade levels to collaborate in order to ensure coherence, progression of learning,

and sharing of context and pedagogical knowledge. Vertical articulation is defined as "the

consistency and building complexity of content addressed at each progressive grade level"

(Burton and Frazier, 2012, p. 181). Studies on vertical articulation focus for the most part on

articulation among elementary and secondary teachers (Burton & Frazier, 2012; Nagel, 2008;

and Suh & Seshaiyer). The lack of research available for vertical PLCs in elementary schools

presented a challenge for planning my research study. However, findings from vertical PLCs

within other settings help fill the gap in current research and inform the planning of vertical PLC

in an elementary school settings.

Burton and Frazier (2012) conducted a mixed methods study to examine the impact

vertical articulation can have on helping teachers understand the progression of learning across

grade levels. The researchers used both qualitative coding of national reports and quantitative

data analysis of survey responses, to gain insight into the learning experiences that nationally

award winning science teachers had over their career and to examine the alignment of their

response with calls for science education reform from a selection of prominent commissioned

government reports spanning 27-years. Drawing on prior experience, and linking his arguments

to content standards of the National Council for the Social Studies, Nagel (2009) argues that "by

participating in cross-grade level, interdisciplinary cooperative learning meetings, teachers at

[preservice and in-service elementary and secondary] levels can learn to solve problems together,

reduce gaps and redundancies in education" (363). Nagel found the diversity in the grouping of

teachers to be conducive to greater teacher learning. This study highlights the potential vertically

aligned PLCs in elementary schools can have for teacher professional development and to

improve curriculum and instruction. A vertically aligned PLC could, as Nagel states, reduce

gaps and redundancies in curricula.

Suh and Seshaiyer (2015) performed a qualitative case study to examine elementary and

middle school teachers' understanding of the mathematical learning progression as they

participated in a 6-month professional learning project. Their research examines how these

teachers from different grade levels designed, taught and learned from a Lesson Study cycle.

They found that working across grades in a lesson study improved teachers' understanding of the

mathematical learning progression and helped them strengthen their teaching of these concepts.

Although this study was done in a middle school with a focus on mathematics, the findings held

promise for implementing a vertically aligned PLC in an elementary school setting focused on

improving vocabulary instruction. Similarly, to what Suh and Seshaiyer found, a vertically

aligned PLC focused on vocabulary instruction helped provide teachers with the beginning

knowledge necessary to understand the language progression of learning across grades.

Understanding the progression of learning has great implications for improving the structure of

the curriculum and teacher and student learning. The common theme across these studies is the

positive outcomes that vertical articulation can have on coherence, understanding the progression

of learning, and sharing of content and pedagogical knowledge.

Vertically aligned communities of teachers can work to build coherence by understanding

the progression of learning. The Lesson Study that teachers engaged in throughout Suh and

Seshaiyer's (2015) case study aimed to promote algebraic connections aligned to the elementary

and secondary school curricula to ensure coherence with the standards of learning. The

researchers found that as a result of participating in Lesson Study, teachers saw the coherent

structure and recognized that there was a pattern in the development of mathematical ideas as the

concepts become more complex. Similar to Suh and Seshaiyer, Burton and Frazier (2012), found

that using existing research on learning progressions as a framework can support the

development of coherence during the vertical articulation. Vertical articulation becomes a means

of linking the existing research-based on students' learning, content standards, and assessment

practices across grade levels. Working in vertically aligned professional learning communities

has the promise of helping teachers understand how skills develop through the grades and how

patterns build on one another in order to ensure a coherent progression throughout the curricula

at different grade levels.

Vertical articulation can ensure that content and pedagogical knowledge is shared across

grade levels. Teachers certified in elementary education possess more pedagogical knowledge on

teaching and learning, whereas secondary teachers tend to possess more content knowledge. Due

to this difference in expertise among elementary and secondary teachers, Nagel (2008) argues

that vertical articulation among elementary and secondary teachers can lead to teachers using

more cooperative learning activities in secondary education. This is because cooperative learning

tends to be more common in elementary school settings. If teachers from the elementary grades

have opportunities to articulate this idea with secondary teachers, they can learn from and

influence each other (Nagel, 2008). Similar to Nagel (2008), Burton and Frazier (2012) argued

that although high school science teachers come to the classroom with content knowledge, they

have little knowledge about how to get students engaged meaningfully in activities to learn the

content. Expanding Nagel's argument, through observation data Burton and Frazier (2012) also

reported that elementary school teachers were more successful in maintaining their students'

curiosity and engagement. Allowing time for teachers to vertically articulate can help close the

gap between pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge while also ensuring that teachers

are aware of the progression of learning. Although these studies reflect the positive impact of

collaborating across grade levels, they do not specifically take place within an elementary

school. Some limitations when applying this to an elementary school setting had to do with

adapting the findings to fit the new setting.

Professional Development and Reading Instruction

Although there is an extensive body of research on the elements of effective professional

development (PD), a gap remains in research on literacy-focused PLCs. Schools are faced with

high stakes accountability to demonstrate student achievement. Research shows that the more

substantial impact on student reading achievement is teacher quality (Bean & Morewood, 2007).

As a result, PD has become the vehicle for promoting continuous learning for teachers because it

has the potential to improve student-learning outcomes. Much of the research on literacy PD is

grounded in a sociocultural perspective on teaching and learning and examines the learning of

both adults and children (Lai et al., 2009; Oberg De La Garza, 2011; McIntyre et al., 2010).

In her study, Oberg De La Garza (2011) argues for the need for improvements in literacy

instruction, particularly in urban schools. She states that PD can be the vehicle to impact student

learning and literacy instructional practices. The study took place in a Pre K through sixth-grade

school with no specific mention as to how many students or teachers participated from that

school. Oberg De La Garza (2011) addresses the significance of coherence in her study by

creating a connection between the broader initiative, Question Answer Relationship (QAR), and

other PD initiatives introduced in the study site to avoid disruptions in the enactment of QAR.

Findings revealed, "extended instructional coaching was the vehicle by which teachers had time and opportunity to receive feedback and reflect on their understanding and uptake development" (Oberg De La Garza, 2011, p. 102). The study concludes that utilizing an observational instrument to inform PD, such as the QAR, fostering coherence and connections in PD, and supporting teachers' development through the use of instructional coaching increases the effectiveness of professional development for literacy instruction.

Similarly, Lai, McNaughton, Timperley, & Hsiao (2009) claim that literacy achievement gains are possible with intervention and that intervention needs to be sustained, especially in contexts where substantial disparities in achievement need overcoming. Lai et al. (2009) utilize research on PLCs to highlight the significance of organizational learning focused on engaging in inquiry that leads to producing changes in teaching practice and improved student achievement. The study represented a larger participant group of seven schools with the school's size ranging from 251 students to 641 students and involving 14 school leaders and 134 teachers. Lai et al. (2009) address the significance of coherence through utilizing PLCs as a vehicle to analyze reading achievement data and use the data to inform instruction. Through analyzing meeting transcripts, Lai et al. (2009) discovered that the PLCs were developing a shared meaning around factors that led to acceleration in student reading achievement and that there was a sense of collective responsibility in the way the schools were discussing their issues within the PLCs. The study also implies the noteworthy role PLCs can play in the sustainability of school initiatives through ongoing inquiry into solving problems from teaching and learning and how these communities can promote organizational learning.

McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Muñoz, & Beldon's (2010) discuss a need to build a research base on the effectiveness of instruction for language minority students. They argue it is essential that

literacy educators become aware of the widespread instructional models being implemented for

ELLs to reflect on the coherence of these models with research-based literacy practices. The

study included twenty-three classroom teachers ranging from kindergarten through upper

elementary. In implementing the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model,

McIntyre et al. (2010) also draw significance to linking PD to the curriculum materials already in

use and relating it to district and state academic standards. McIntyre et al. (2010) imply that to

enhance teacher development in working with ELLs, teachers need to participate in a

"personalized, small group setting in which collaborative relationships and focused dialogue can

occur, receiving ongoing support and scaffolding of specific instructional strategies" (p. 348).

The researchers found that the teachers who experienced the most growth were the ones who

committed to collaborating within the 50 hours of PD by bringing samples of students' work

from the SIOP lessons being implemented.

     The findings of the three studies previously discussed relate to the more prominent topic

of PD centered on literacy instruction and the implications for student achievement. These

studies helped inform the content of the vertical aligned PLC designed for my case study. The

studies were each conducted in elementary school settings, mostly serving culturally and

linguistically diverse communities, similar to the population at the Dream Big Primary School

that serves ELL students primarily.

     A common thread among the findings of all three studies is the significance of coherence.

Coherence in these studies speaks to deliberately linking PD experiences to the broader school

initiatives and to teacher practice to maintain consistency. The vertical PLC for this study aimed

to begin to address the current lack of coherence across vocabulary instruction at the Dream Big

Primary School. In addition to discussing the implication of coherence, Oberg De La Garza's

(2011), Lai et al. (2009), and McIntyre et al. (2010) concluded that collaboration and adaptive teaching and learning are important for student growth in literacy proficiency. Shared purpose is essential in getting teachers to collaboratively work together to improve practice and student learning. For my study, vocabulary instruction was selected as the context for the vertical PLC work. This is based on an identified need among our ELL students and the gaps in sustained reading achievement. Before implementing a vertical PLC with a focus on improving vocabulary instruction it was essential to review best practices in vocabulary instruction for English Languages Learners.

Vocabulary Instruction for English Language Learners

Vocabulary is an essential component of reading instruction and reading achievement. Research states that the comprehension of complex texts is dependent, in part, on the size of the reader's vocabulary (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986). There is a strong research base on effective vocabulary instruction, however, only a limited amount of studies have focused on actual classroom practice in vocabulary instruction for ELLs. As the study took place in a primary school with a high percentage of ELLs I chose to review studies that discuss the impact of vocabulary interventions and instruction for ELLs.

A study about vocabulary instruction in k-3 low-income classrooms included teachers from 15 elementary school in 7 school districts resulted in 337 teacher observations over a three-year span (Nelson, Dole, J. Hosp, and M. Hosp, 2015). The researchers found that for effective vocabulary instruction to occur an instructional framework should include the following components: "(a) specific word instructing, (b) word- learning, (c) word consciousness, and (d) explicit instruction of the other components" (Nelson et al., 2015, p. 147). However, the researchers found that teachers observed for the study spent less than 5% of their ELA block on

vocabulary instruction. Moreover, for the time that was used for vocabulary instruction, more time was spent teaching individual words than spent on word-learning strategies. Ninety percent of the instructional time was spent on teaching individual words, 9% was spent teaching word-learning strategies, and 1% focused on word consciousness (Nelson et al., 2015). The researchers found that although teachers appeared to be teaching vocabulary in ways consistent with some research-based methods, the amount and variation of instruction was not sufficient for the population of low-income students, who need to know many more words than they do to be successful. Evidently, vocabulary instruction needs to become a larger part of teachers' classroom practices in order to meet the needs of the large population of ELLs. Research on robust vocabulary interventions has shown positive results for developing ELL's depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge.

In a study of the long-term effect of a tier 2 kindergarten vocabulary intervention for ELLs, researchers found the treatment benefits of a 20-week long vocabulary intervention were maintained when students were reassessed after 6 months (Vadasy, Nelson, and Sanders, 2011). Students that participated in the interventions showed gains in root word vocabulary and distal vocabulary. The intervention targeted word blending and spelling, word meanings, word reading skills with short passages, sentence completion, word meaning matching, and sentence activity production (Vadasy et al., 2011). In their discussion of the study, the authors found that independent reading alone is not sufficient for ELLs, that in fact, students need explicit and direct vocabulary instruction.

As previously mentioned, the Dream Big Primary School adopted the Reader's Workshop framework, which places a large emphasis on independent reading. In their discussion of best practices for vocabulary instruction, Blachowicz and Fisher (2007) discuss some guidelines for

meeting the needs of students through vocabulary instruction. One of the guidelines they highlight is tightly linked to the idea of independent, or wide, reading. "The effective vocabulary teacher builds a word-rich environment in which students are immersed in words for both incidental and intentional learning and the development of word awareness" (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2007, p. 179). The idea is that students build their vocabulary through reading and therefore need practice with various texts to build their background knowledge and vocabulary (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Wide reading simply refers to providing students with plenty of opportunities and encouragement for independent or guided reading. "If students read 60 minutes per day, five days a week, they will read more than 2,250,000 words per year" (Fisher & Frey, 2014, p. 595). Reading for extended periods of time develops a wide, flexible, and usable general vocabulary (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2007).

Although wide reading is a research-based method for vocabulary development, it is important to consider the ELL students at the Dream Big Primary School. Research on ELLs reading achievement provides strong arguments for not solely focusing on independent reading and instead placing a larger emphasis on direct and explicit vocabulary instruction (Vadasy et al., 2011). There are various strategies and methodologies for effective vocabulary instruction making it important to focus on specific tools all students can use when learning new vocabulary. One tool that spans the research on effective vocabulary instruction for ELLs is morphology (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan., 2013; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2007; Kucan, 2012; Fisher & Frey, 2014; Kieffer and Lesaux, 2007; Carlo et al., 2004; Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986). According to Kieffer and Lesaux (2007) morphology, which includes knowledge of root words, prefixes, and suffixes, is an important tool when teaching vocabulary. In their study, they examined 111 students' "ability to break down words related to their vocabulary knowledge and reading

comprehension in fourth and fifth grade" (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2007, p. 137). Of the 111 students,

87 were Spanish-speaking ELLs and 24 were native English speakers, all belonging to a large

urban district. Kieffer and Lesaux's (2007) study resulted in two major findings: (1) students

with greater understanding of morphology also had higher reading comprehension scores; and

(2) students with larger vocabularies had a greater understanding of morphology. These findings

show a reciprocal relationship between vocabulary and morphology knowledge.

The research conducted in this study holds great promise for the Dream Big Primary

School contexts considering the similarity in student population and the positive impacts that

resulted from focusing on morphology as a tool for teaching vocabulary. Kieffer and Lesaux

(2007) recommend four principles for teaching morphology to improve students' vocabulary and

reading comprehension: (1) teach morphology in the context of rich, explicit vocabulary

instruction, (2) teach students to use morphology as a cognitive strategy with explicit steps, (3)

teach the underlying morphological knowledge needed in two ways - both explicitly and in

context, and (4) for students with developed knowledge of Spanish, teach morphology in relation

to cognate instruction. Professional learning focused on improving vocabulary instruction and

student learning should focus on tangible tools and instructional methods that will make the

process both achievable, applicable, and sustainable for classroom practice.

Although the research previously discussed focuses on ELLs, the strategies used for

teaching vocabulary to ELLs have also been successful for all learners including native English

speakers. Carlo et al.,'s (2004) research findings from working with fifth-grade students show

feasibility for improving comprehension outcomes for mixed groups of students (ELL and native

English speakers) by teaching word analysis and vocabulary learning strategies. Additionally, the

study also found that "a challenging curriculum that focused on teaching academic words,

awareness of polysemy, strategies for inferring word meaning from context, and tools for analyzing morphological and cross-linguistic aspects of word meaning" improved the performance of both ELLs and native English speakers (Carlo et al., 2004, p. 203). Although the Dream Big Primary School serves a larger population of ELLs, studies such as the ones presented throughout this review argue that strategies to enhance ELLs vocabulary knowledge also have positive impacts on native English speakers. Implementing robust vocabulary instruction to meet the needs of the ELLs at the Dream Big Primary School will also ensure that teachers are meeting the needs of their native English speakers.

Based on the need identified at the Dream Big Primary School and the research on improving ELLs vocabulary knowledge, it is evident that the teachers at the Dream Big Primary School need to participate in professional learning experiences that allow them to target both breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge in their reading instruction. Tools and strategies alone are not enough to impact student reading achievement. Research shows that the larger impact on student reading achievement is teacher quality (Bean & Morewood, 2007). Therefore, to impact teacher quality teachers need to be provided with continued, sustained, and effective professional learning. Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a great vehicle for impacting teacher learning earning.

Discussion

The literature synthesis provides valuable insight into how vertical PLCs can impact vocabulary instruction across grade levels at the Dream Big Primary School. This synthesis examined the research on PLCs as vehicles for teacher learning and best practices for vocabulary instruction for ELLs. The literature presented reveals limitations as to what research is currently available regarding PLCs, and in particular, vertically aligned PLCs at the elementary level with

a focus on reading instruction. Much of the research on this topic focuses on offering

prescriptions for what schools should do rather than aiming to produce an empirical account of

how communities of teachers learn and change (Levine, 2010). Also, there is insufficient

research on vertically aligned PLCs within elementary school settings. The research that does

exist focuses on elementary and secondary science, math, and social studies teachers. Results

from my research study, a pilot of a vertically aligned PLC model with a focus on vocabulary

instruction within my school, could contribute to addressing some of these limitations in the

field.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to pilot a vertical PLC module with a focus on vocabulary instruction. A collective case study design was utilized to explore and examine teacher experiences with participating in a vertically aligned PLC focused on vocabulary instruction. A case study design was appropriate, as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the vertical PLC, which I organized and facilitated. The vertical PLC met October 2018 through January 2019. This design supported a detailed exploration of teachers' professional learning experiences within the vertically align PLC and allowed me to dig deeper into the motivations of the respondents and the reasons behind their responses. Also, a case study calls for a collection of detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period (Creswell, 2009).

Data sources in the study included an initial questionnaire, facilitator observations of the vertically aligned PLC sessions, a collection of documents and artifacts created and utilized, participant feedback forms, and two final focus group interviews with the participating teachers. The purpose for including multiple sources of data-collection was two-fold, first, it is a hallmark of case study design, and second, it allowed for triangulation of data to confirm the research findings and to resolve any discrepant findings (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2015). The following research questions guided the study design: (1) What does the vertical PLC look like in practice?; (1a) How do teachers engage in the vertical PLC?; (2) What are the perceptions of the teachers while working together in the vertically aligned PLC with a focus on vocabulary instruction?; (2a) which aspects of the vertical PLC do they discuss as being most effective for their own learning?; (2b) How do the teachers think the PLC could be improved or expanded?;

and (3) How do teachers make use of the vertical collaboration to inform their vocabulary

instruction and teacher practices?

Participant Sample

Dream Big Primary School has a student population of 562 students comprised of 86%

Hispanic, 8% Black, 10% White, and 2% two or more races. There are 61% of students in grades

kindergarten through third identified as English Language Learners (ELLs). The breakdown by

grade level of ELLs includes 71% in kindergarten; 70% in first grade; 71% in second grade; and

51% in third grade. The school is identified as a school-wide Title I, the economically

disadvantaged percent as determined by eligibility for free and reduced lunch is 89%. The staff at

the Dream Big Primary School include one principal, one vice principal, one bilingual guidance

counselor, 34 classroom teachers, six special area teachers, seven English as a Second Language

(ESL) teachers, two reading interventionist teachers, and 30 instructional support staff.

Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that the participants chosen would best help me

understand the problem and the research questions (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2015). The participants

for the vertical PLC model were selected based on equal representation of grade levels, years of

teaching experience, and their role as ESL teachers. The sample included one ESL teacher from

each grade who currently provides ESL instructional support services. The sample also included

two ESL teachers who work across different grade levels, and one ESL teacher that works with

the Special Education classrooms. Purposeful sampling allowed me to include a group of

teachers who have a varied experiences participating in grade level PLCs and would be open to

piloting a new PLC model, in addition to having experience teaching ELLs. Two of the teachers

included in the sample are new to the Dream Big Primary School. The sample of teachers

allowed for a broad representation of teaching experiences and professional knowledge (See

Appendix A). Chart 1 illustrates the diversity of the participants including their grade level,

roles, and years of teaching experience. The participants' teaching experience ranged from 3

years to thirty years allowing for a span of knowledge and experience to help inform the group's

work. In addition to years of teaching experience, the sample allowed for a range of grade levels

and content knowledge expertise.

Chart 1. Participant Sample

Vertical PLC Sample for the Study *One teacher represented by each grade level, totaling 7 teachers.*		
Grade Level	Teacher Role	Years of Teaching
K	ESL push-in (ELA)	3
1st	ESL push-in (ELA)	30
2nd	ESL push-in (ELA)	5
3rd	ESL push-in (ELA)	18
2nd and 3rd	ESL push-in (ELA/Math)	3
K-3	ESL push-in LLD (language learning disability) classes	17
K-3	ESL Pull-out Bilingual/newcomer students	6

Intervention Design

The content of the vertical PLCs focused on building robust vocabulary instruction. This

content was informed by research supporting vocabulary instruction for ELLs, best practices for

effective professional development, and adult learning theories. The structure of the sessions, the

teacher involvement, and the ongoing reflection allowed for a professional learning experience

that have potential for being ongoing and sustainable when implemented appropriately. The PLC

design supported conditions for collegial work and exemplified characteristics of effective

professional learning. Specifically, three behaviors of collegial work present throughout this design included, teachers: (1) having frequent, continuous, concrete, and precise talk about their teaching practice; (2) collaboratively working on curriculum by planning, designing, researching, and evaluating their curriculum work; and (3) becoming comfortable sharing their new craft knowledge by teaching each other what they have learned. (Little, 2003; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008).

PLC Setting and Design

The intervention consisted of a total of six 80 minute vertical PLC sessions. The sessions took place throughout the month of October through January during either the first two periods of the school day or staff meeting times. The teachers participating in the pilot study were given release time to attend the PLC sessions when necessary. The vertical PLC sessions followed a familiar structure but did not follow a strict agenda to better reflect the needs of the participants and allow for teacher autonomy. Each session introduced teachers to content regarding robust vocabulary instruction and encouraged teacher participation through the use of specific protocols. Each session concluded with a participant reflection form that helped inform the following session and better address the groups' needs.

The structure of the vertical PLCs followed a five-step process: debrief, define session goals, explore and experiment with new practices, and reflect and plan (See Appendix B). During the debriefing step, participants had an opportunity to share experiences from their own practice and discuss anything they may have implemented from a previous session. Following the debriefing step, the group defined session goals and stated a shared purpose for the session. After being presented with a new strategy or resources for supporting robust vocabulary instruction, the participants explored and experimented with new practices and discussed how

the practices could fit into a larger progression across grade levels. Finally, the sessions concluded with an opportunity to reflect and plan. Protocols were utilized to support teacher collaboration. Protocols are deliberately designed to promote participation, ensure equity, and build trust (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2013). Throughout the vertical PLC session, protocols were introduced and applied in hopes that teachers take some of the protocols back to their grade level PLCs. A detailed outline of the sessions' goals, objectives, and activities can be seen in Appendix B.

In an attempt to make this learning experience as effective as possible, affective, behavioral, and cognitive learning goals (Silberman, 2006) were considered. The overarching goal of the PLC was to enhance teachers' knowledge and practice on how to promote students' breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge throughout the grade levels to maintain effective progression and coherence. A secondary goal was to enhance teachers' understanding of how to implement and participate in effective PLCs.

Data Collection

In keeping with a case study design, multiple sources of data were collected throughout the study including an initial questionnaire, facilitator observations of the vertically aligned PLC sessions, a collection of documents and artifacts created and utilized throughout the sessions, participant feedback forms and two final focus group interviews. The PLC sessions and focus group interviews were audio-recorded using two different recording applications, transcribed, and coded to identify strands and themes. Audio recordings allowed me to remain present during the PLC sessions and reflect back on anything that may have gone unnoticed. Chart 2 illustrates the data source alignment to each research question to show which data collection sources specifically helped inform each research question.

Chart 2. Research Questions and Data Sources Alignment

Research Question	Data Sources
What does the vertical PLC look like in practice? (a) How do teachers engage in the vertical PLC?	● Facilitator observation ● Documents and artifacts ● Session feedback forms ● Session audio transcriptions

What are the perceptions of the teachers while working together in the vertically aligned PLC with a focus on vocabulary instruction?
    (a) Which aspects of the vertical PLC do they discuss as being most effective for their own learning?
    (b) How do the teachers think the PLC could be improved or expanded?
	● Questionnaire
	● Session feedback forms
	● Focus group interview
	● Facilitator observation
	● Session audio transcriptions

How do teachers make use of the vertical collaboration to inform their vocabulary instruction and teacher practices?	● Focus group interview ● Facilitator observation ● Session feedback forms ● Session audio transcriptions

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed with questions that helped gather information on the

participants' years of teaching experience, current grade level they teach, the role vocabulary

instruction had within their classroom, the role vocabulary instruction had within their

curriculum, and their experiences collaborating with teachers in their school or district (See

Appendix C). The questionnaire served as a needs assessment to gather information about the

participants but also to inform the first vertical PLC session. A needs assessment is a tool that

allows facilitators to identify content, activities, or programs they should offer participants to

best meet their educational needs (Queeney, 1995; Silberman, 2006). When designing the

questionnaire I considered "not only program content but also format, delivery mode, and

audience" (Queeney, 1995, p. 8). The rationale for giving the participants of the PLC an initial

questionnaire was to help determine the training content, obtain case material from the personal

situation of the participants, and develop a relationship with the participants (Silberman, 2006). The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and shared with the teachers through email encouraging teachers to complete the questionnaire, along with an additional follow up email as a reminder to complete the questionnaire. A questionnaire survey was appropriate because it allowed me to reach all of the participants in a short time, allow the participants to share their honest feedback without fear of embarrassment, and yielded data that was easily summarized, analyzed, and reported (Silberman, 2006). The questionnaire included multiple response questions and short response questions. Specific information revealed from the questionnaire will be further discussed in the findings section.

Observations

Observations of the sessions were an ongoing data-collection process and were appropriate for this study because they allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of behaviors and gather detailed information about what was happening during the PLC sessions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). I observed, audio recorded, and took notes on the behaviors, interactions, and activities of the teachers by filling the role of the participant as observer considering I participated and facilitated the vertical PLC sessions (Creswell, 2009). Observations allowed me to gain insight into what topics and issues teachers discussed.

An observation protocol (See Appendix D) was used for recording field notes during and after my observations. The protocol focused on observing evidence of teacher learning related to vocabulary instruction aiming to answer all three research questions. Field notes of the observations were recorded using Google Docs on a personal laptop. After reviewing my field notes at the end of PLC sessions, I added additional behaviors or topics not already recorded.

Documents and Artifacts

The documents and artifacts collected from the vertical PLC sessions helped inform the purpose of my study by allowing me to examine what the group produced during their collaborative time together. Documents included vocabulary shared resources, meeting agenda (see Appendix E), protocols implemented, and vocabulary instruction activities. In judging the value of the documents collected, I assessed whether they contained information or insights relevant to the research questions and whether I would be able to acquire them in a reasonably practical and systematic way (Merriam, 2009). To ensure effective data collection of documents, I dated each document, created summaries to detail their significance, and filed them by scanning and saving them on a laptop for easy accessibility. The document collection allowed me to track changes and developments in teacher learning throughout their participating in the vertically aligned PLC (Merriam, 2009). Documents provided evidence of shared resources used for professional learning and vocabulary instruction. Specifically, the meeting agenda detailed what the group accomplished and informed what needed to be covered during the following session.

Participant Reflection Forms

Utilizing teacher reflection forms allowed participants to share their perspectives, experiences, and learnings periodically throughout the process. Reflection forms were shared with the participants after each PLC session. The forms were created using Google Forms and consisted of Likert-Scale and open-ended questions. Feedback forms were emailed to all participants at the conclusion of each session, utilizing their work email addresses, while also maintaining their identity anonymous. Participants were encouraged to complete their reflections immediately following the session. At times when all forms were not completed I followed up by emailing all participants a reminder to fill out the feedback form before the following session.

The participant reflection forms contained questions that focused on the following topics: participants' perceptions of the sessions, the value and purpose of the sessions, collaboration with other teachers from other grade levels, and their perceptions of how the sessions are informing their vocabulary instruction (See Appendix F). After sessions one through four, I decided to add an additional question to see what components or strategies from our sessions they had shared with their grade level PLCs. The final reflection form reflect similar questions from the previous forms, with minor changes aimed at getting feedback on how their experiences within the sessions could expand into their grade level PLCs. The reflection forms were piloted with my dissertation group prior to implementation to ensure validity and inform any necessary changes. The three slightly different versions of the feedback forms can be found in Appendix F separated by the sessions they corresponded to.

Focus Groups

Focus group interviews, a group of participants who are interviewed together and encouraged to share their opinions on a particular topic (Lauer, 2004), assist in gathering a deeper understanding of teacher experiences and perceptions. All seven teachers participated in a focus group interview following the last PLC session, which provided them with the opportunity to express feelings or opinions that might not have emerged in individual interviews (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2015). The participants were split into two groups for the interviews to allow every voice to be heard and minimize the group size. The first focus group interview consisted of four of the teachers and the second focus group interview consisted of the remaining three teachers. Dividing the focus group interview into two sessions also allowed me to better accommodate to the individual teachers' schedules.

The questions asked throughout the focus group interviews were aligned with the research questions and informed by the theoretical framework (See Appendix G). An open-ended interview protocol advised and helped guide the discussions of the teachers' experiences participating in the vertically aligned PLC. Chart 3 illustrates a summary of the data collection schedule stating specifically when the data was collected.

Chart 3: Data Collection Schedule

Date	Description of Data Collection Activity
October 28, 2018	Initial participant questionnaire
October 31, 2018	First PLC session Collection of artifacts/documents Session one feedback from
November 21, 2018	Second PLC session Collection of artifacts/documents Session two feedback from
December 12, 2018	Third PLC session Collection of artifacts/documents Session three feedback from
December 21, 2018	Fourth PLC session Collection of artifacts/documents Session four feedback from
January 9, 2019	Fifth PLC session Collection of artifacts/documents Session five feedback from
January 23, 2019	Last PLC session Collection of artifacts/documents Session six feedback from
January 28, 2019	Focus group interview sessions

Data Analysis

The data analysis process for this study was ongoing and began upon first data collection because "qualitative data collection and analysis must occur concurrently" (Hays & Singh, 2012). Creswell (2009) reminds researchers that there are six steps for analyzing data. They are: (1) organize and prepare the data, (2) read through all of the data, (3) code, (4) develop categories/themes for analysis, (5) determine how themes will be represented, and (6) interpretation (p. 189). My analysis process followed the steps for qualitative data analysis explained by Hays and Singh (2012) while also taking into consideration the six steps for analyzing data provided by Creswell (2009). The data analysis was arranged by research question and grouped by the following larger categories: building a vertical PLC; participants' perspectives; and vocabulary practice.

Organizing the Data Set

The data was collected and organized using a password protected Google Drive account. The process of analyzing and organizing the data occurred simultaneously. I recorded field notes and summaries immediately following the PLC observations. Writing memos and summaries to accompany the documents collected and after each PLC session allowed me to organize and analyze as I collected data. Following each session I listened to the audio recording with my facilitator observation notes for that session and added in any important interactions or occurrences I found to be noteworthy and that I had missed while participating in the sessions. After audio recording the observations and the focus interviews, the recordings were transcribed and saved in a Google Drive folder. The data was imported into a Google Drive folder and uploaded to Dedoose. I first organized the data chronologically to describe what the PLC

sessions looked like in action. After creating the first set of codes, the data was reorganized by code to look across all data sets.

Creating Codes

Once I had typed transcriptions of the audio recordings, I read through the transcripts and marked comments that were interesting and related to my research questions. By using open coding I selected content by reading through the interview transcripts multiple times and marking words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs of the responses. A list of all the labels throughout the transcripts was created. A codebook was created for my data collection. In creating a codebook, I described the codes thoroughly, using examples to illustrate them. This way another researcher could readily identify the code for a data source, based on my detailed operational definition (Hays & Singh, 2012).

In thinking about the theoretical framework and the literature that informed this study, there were codes I anticipated looking for within my data set. Some of the codes I anticipated looking for to help answer my research questions focused on collaboration included teachers' perceptions of their current PLC meetings and how these sessions might be improved to include more vertical collaboration. I also anticipated coming across codes related to current grade level PLCs having no defined structure and being focused predominantly on lesson planning. In addition, I also anticipated a code related to identified needs to improve teacher collaboration and learning by allowing time to articulate with teachers in other grade levels. I anticipated these previously stated codes related to collaboration based on my own personal knowledge of the context and on the research synthesized in the literature review. In regards to vocabulary instruction, some codes that I anticipated developing from the data analysis focused on teachers' successes and challenges with vocabulary instruction. Based on the context of this study, I also

anticipated a code related to the challenges of meeting the needs of diverse learners across grade levels.

After analyzing the data for preliminary codes I found that my first set of codes were broader than what I had anticipated prior to data analysis. The initial codes were structure and design, engagement and participation, participant perspectives, effective PLC aspects, opportunities for improvement, and implementation of new knowledge. These codes emerged from the data and were aligned to the research questions.

Developing Themes

After finalizing my codebook, I sorted the data by the codes previously listed in Dedoose. Meaning, the data was rearranged by common code so that I could begin to identify similarities and relationships across the data. There were six codes in total, therefore there were six documents of transcriptions represented each code. Several common categories were determined from the patterns found in the units coded. This process involved examining codes and brainstorming ways in which my codes chunked together, creating themes and patterns that more fully described the phenomenon. I implemented constant comparison to develop a strong codebook by using earlier coding system to code my future data sources (Hays & Singh, 2012). I decided to start with a deductive approach by summarizing the transcriptions to look for similarities and differences as pertaining to the research questions. Additionally, I highlighted quotes the would help strengthen my summaries. Throughout the last phases of my data analysis I began to move from descriptive themes to more analytical themes. The larger themes that emerged from the conclusion of my data analysis included: designing a vertical PLC, the role of the facilitator, participant engagement, the value of a vertically aligned PLC, the building blocks

for effective collaboration, practitioners left wanting more, and efforts to improve practice with robust vocabulary instruction.

Interpretation and Writing

Interpretation and the writing up of the findings was the final step of the data analysis. I will brought together the patterns identified in my multiple data sources and methods, and examine how these categories or concepts relate back to my research questions and how they relate to each other. The finding narrative was written to represent the three different research questions. The final narrative was written as three sections, each one answering one of the research questions. The three sections include rich descriptions thoroughly portraying the experiences and perceptions of the teachers engaged in the vertical PLC.

Timeline

The study, beginning with the dissertation proposal and ending with the dissertation defense, began in fall 2018 and continue through the summer of 2019. Chart 4 offers a timeline of the study in its entirety.

Chart 4: Research Study Timeline

Date	Activity
October 19, 2018	● Proposal Defense
October 26, 2018	● IRB Approval ● Invitation email sent to participant
October 28, 2018	● Initial questionnaire sent to participants
October 2018 - January 2019	● PLC sessions ● Ongoing data collection and analysis
January 28, 2019	● Focus group interviews ● End of data collection
February 2019 - August 2019	● Data analysis and writing
August 27, 2019	● Dissertation defense

Reliability and Validity

In order to address the issues of validity and reliability that are presented when using qualitative methods I incorporated procedures that were in keeping with the qualitative research paradigm. Reliability of the study was assessed by the assurance that the accounts provided by me and the participants are accurate, can be trusted and are credible (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Validity in this study was addressed by using triangulation and member checking. To triangulate my data I built evidence for my codes and themes from several sources and several individuals. This triangulation included data from observations, session transcriptions, documents and artifacts, participant feedback forms, and a focus group interview. Using multiple sources of data allowed for triangulation, which increased the validity of the study (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2015). I also conducted member checks to validate my study. I took summaries of my findings back to the participants and ask them whether the findings were an accurate reflection of their experiences (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Maintaining a research journal and writing memos for the documents and artifacts collected provided me with a structure to ensure accurate representation of the data. Additionally, I kept a detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decisions carried out through the study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The primary goal of this study was to examine the perceptions, experiences, and opinions of the participants in a vertically aligned PLC focused on vocabulary instruction. I will begin by presenting an analysis of the vertical PLC structure. In this section, I will highlight my role as the facilitator focusing mainly on how I aimed to meet the teachers' needs through planning and facilitating each session. Following the analysis of the PLC sessions, I will proceed by analyzing teachers' perceptions as they participated in the vertically aligned PLC, focusing specifically on which aspects they discussed as being most effective for their own learning and how they felt the PLC sessions could be improved or expanded. I will conclude by examining how teachers made use of vertical collaboration to inform their vocabulary instruction and teacher practice.

Vertical PLC Design and Participant Engagement

The first section of this chapter describes the findings as they relate to answering the first research question and sub question: what does the vertical PLC look like in practice? How do teachers engage in the vertical PLC? Data analysis revealed three major themes that helped answer this question: designing a vertical PLC, the role of the facilitator, and participant engagement. Each theme is described further throughout this section with specific sub-themes that help illuminate the findings and tell the story. The key findings in this section reflect how the design of the vertical PLC contributed to both teacher engagement and teacher learning.

Designing a Vertical PLC

It is 9:10 am, the coaches' office located in the main office of the primary school is set up with seven binders on the table, seven individual tiny buckets of candy, water bottles, and a projected slide on the large TV that reads "ESL Vertical PLC: Session 1". Between 9:10 and 9:15 A.M. the seven ESL teachers make their way into the office, coffee in hand, chatting about

events that had already occurred during the short span between student arrivals and the start of

our session. Teachers begin to find their seats around two large rectangular tables that are

joined together. The physical space is sufficient enough for everyone to sit comfortably and place

their materials within reach. We all share a good morning and a quick check-in to see how

everyone is doing. Some teachers share some quick anecdotes about home life and others share

some funny stories about students we all know. The time spent moving into the meeting area,

settling in, and sharing short anecdotes sets a relaxing and comfortable atmosphere for our first

PLC session.

The anecdote shared above depicts how the vertical PLC sessions began and the physical

space we shared during the six sessions. The vertical PLC design was purposeful to ensure the

participants gained as much knowledge as possible regarding both best practices for effective

collaboration and vocabulary instruction. Most importantly, the PLC design was intended to

foster a safe space where teachers felt comfortable and open to sharing and learning together.

Each session followed a similar format: debrief, define session goals, explore new practices,

reflect, and plan. Chart 5 illustrates the design and structure of the PLC sessions in addition to

the resources that supported the content of the sessions. In addition, chart 5 provides an example

of the goals, objectives and activities for session one. Four main findings emerged while

reviewing and analyzing the data collected from the facilitator observation notes, the documents

and artifacts from the sessions, and the session feedback forms that exemplified specific

components of the PLC structure. These findings include a predictable structure to maximize

time, the power of protocols in allowing all voices to be heard, participant ownership over goals

and objectives, and content that reflected teacher interest and practice.

Chart 5: Intervention Design Structure

Design Structure: (1) Debrief; (2) Define goals; (3) Explore new practices; (4) Reflect; and (5) Plan	
Number of total meetings: 6	**Session duration:** 80 minutes
Session Materials: Projector, pencils/pens, paper, sticky notes, devices, protocols, PLC binders	

Session Resources:
Protocols
- National School Reform Faculty
- *The Power of Protocols* - McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald

Professional Texts
- *Bringing Words to Life, Robust Vocabulary Instruction* - Beck, McKeown, & Kucan
- *The Writing Strategies Book* - Jennifer Serravallo
- *The Language-Rich Classroom* - Himmele & Himmele

Websites/Videos
- Colorin Colorado Website
- Reading Rockets Website
- Teaching Channel

Session One Date: Wednesday, October 31, 2018

Goals and Objectives:	Activities:
Goals: • Develop an understanding of components that lead to effective collaboration within a PLC. • Expand your understanding of how to select words to teach. Objectives: • Develop a shared set of norms for our professional learning community. • Collaborate on creating shared goals and objectives for future sessions. • Participants will feel able to implement vocabulary strategies that best fit their students' needs.	• Goal Setting Protocol • Forming Group Rules Protocol • Critical Friends Group Purpose and Work • Meetings with Protocols vs Meetings Without Protocols • Four Square Vocabulary • Think-Pair-Share • Reflection on a Word • Identifying Tier 2 Words • Semantics Gradient

Predictable structure to maximize time. The predictability of the sessions provided the participants with a road map and a set of expectations for group learning. The participants felt that the predictable structure contributed to their learning. This structure included the following components: debrief, define session goals, explore new practices, reflect and plan. As the

facilitator I was deliberate in communicating to the teachers what the predictable structure of our sessions would look like right from the start:

> The structure of our sessions is always going to have a debrief moment, where we get a chance to discuss something we did in the previous session or something that is occurring in your setting. Then we're going to define our session goals and we're going to try to come up with those together to address what we want to accomplish when we're working together. We'll explore new practices, meaning we'll start to share strategies that you can implement in your settings. These strategies can come from you if you have something that you want to share with the group or they could be something I will introduce to the group. Then we'll reflect as a group and you will reflect individually by filling out a questionnaire (L.Lakata, session one, October 31, 2018).

This quote is an example of how as the facilitator I was making it clear to the participants that there would be practical aspects to each session that they could take with them and use immediately in their classrooms. Additionally, the quote also exemplifies how I made the predictable structure clear to the participants right from the beginning so that they knew what to expect from our time together and what they would be able to take with them from each session.

After the first session, the participants had an understanding of what the expectations and the format for each subsequent session would look like. This predictable structure seemed to stand out as something new for the group because it was unlike the structure of their grade level PLCs. For example, during session one, the group participated in an activity in which they had to compare critical friends group purpose and work to their current grade level PLCs. Critical friends group (CFG) is another term for a professional learning community. "The purpose of a CFG is to provide professional development that translates into improved student learning. This

adult learning is accomplished through formal, ongoing interactions of small groups of staff that

participate voluntarily" (National School Reform Faculty, 2019). The CFG definition came from

the National School Reform Faculty protocol *Critical Friends Groups Purpose and Work* that

the participants had to read during our first session. This activity revealed that teachers saw their

current PLCs as focused too much on broad topics and not related to their own practice.

Additionally, teachers shared that their current PLCs, because of "time logistical constraints"

seem to focus "more on administrative issues that apply at the grade-level, and not specifically

on classroom teaching" (Session one, October 3, 2018). These led to teachers feeling less

productive in their grade-level PLCs and feeling like a lot of time was spent on administrative

tasks. The design of our vertical PLCs provided an example for the teacher of how a predictable

structure can help alleviate what they identified as "time logistical constraints".

It was evident from the focus interviews that the predictable structure of the PLCs stood

out to the participants as an effective component of our PLC. They voiced that the sessions were

"very well planned, organized and time-efficient" (Focus group interviews, January 28, 2019).

The predictable structure also allowed us as a group to "discuss and accomplish a lot" (Focus

group interviews, January 28, 2019). The components that the participants discussed as being

most important in maximizing their learning and their time were the debrief and the defining

session goals. Having a specific design and an agenda that reflected the components of that

design allowed the group to set goals and meet those goals. This made the participants feel like

their time was valued and they were engaging "productively" (Participant feedback forms, 2018)

in the sessions.

The strategic use of time made participants feel that their time was well spent. One

participant stated: "I felt like each session we really worked on whatever we were supposed to,

and we got everything done, which sometimes doesn't happen at our own PLCs that we go to

every week" (Anna, focus group interview, January 28, 2019). The design components

contributed to focused and purposeful work, allowing teachers to feel successful and

accomplished after the sessions. The debrief component of the session also allowed the group to

manage their sharing sessions so that all participants were heard and so that we still had time to

work towards the remainder of the session goals and objectives.

The power of protocols in allowing all voices to be heard. During the debrief portion

of each session the participants had the opportunity to share successes and/or challenges they

were currently experiencing. The first two debrief sessions were less formal to allow a more

organic sharing experience that helped the teachers feel more comfortable in the new setting and

build trust within the group. During the less formalized debrief conversations it was evident that

not all participants would share and that some voices were heard more than others. The transcript

from the audio recording of session one reveals three teachers dominated most of the

conversation and participation. One other teacher chimed in a few times and the rest of the

teachers were fairly quiet. The teachers that remained silent for most of the session participated

when we engaged in a protocol for creating norms in which teachers had to share throughout

each round.

One example of hesitation to participate occurred during session one after the group

reviewed a side by side comparison of PLCs with protocols versus PLCs without protocols. As

the facilitator, I asked: "Are there any comparisons, in particular, that stands out to you when

you look at the side by side comparisons that the benefits could be to using some protocols" (L.

Lakata, session one, October 31, 2018). This question was followed by long silence to which I

responded by encouraging everyone to share out: "You can all just share out, this doesn't have to

be a formal" (L. Lakata, session one, October 31, 2018). This less structured sharing approach

did not encourage all teachers to equally participate.

Throughout sessions three through six the debrief was formalized by using a protocol

called *What? So What? Now What?* (National School Reform Faculty, 2019). This protocol

allowed the teachers to connect to one another and to each other's work, while at the same time

allowing all group members to get productive feedback. Additionally, the protocol allowed the

group to focus on the needs of one teacher at a time and gave each individual teacher the

opportunity to bring a challenge or success to the group in order to work through it as a cohesive

unit. One participant described the group experience with this protocol when stating: "I feel like

the role of every single participant, including me, was quite active. Everyone had a chance to

express their concerns as well as some positive moments in their instruction" (Fatima, focus

group interview, January 28, 2019). Implementing this protocol shifted the roles of the

participants from always being the speakers to now being receptive listeners. One teacher

reflected on participating in this protocol by stating in her session feedback form: "I listened

...After listening I was able to ask questions and give recommendation" (Participant feedback

forms, December 12, 2018). Protocols helped distribute the role of the speaker to everyone in the

group by encouraging silent participants to speak and encouraging strong voices to listen.

The protocols were instrumental in developing a collaborative environment and in

exposing teachers to how effective PLCs can be established and sustained. "We took turns

participating, no one dominated the discussion, we collaborated." (Participant feedback form,

October 31, 2018). This sentiment echoed throughout all of the participants' feedback forms.

After using protocols in each session the participants unanimously described their own

participation and the participation of the group as "respectful", "productive", and

"collaborative". A shift in active participation was also noted through the feedback forms as the responses went from superficial descriptions of participation as previously stated to more descriptive examples of participation. One example of this is seen when tracking a teacher's response to the same question from session one through session six:

Question: How did you interact with the other members during today's session?

Session 1: Interacted very nicely.

Session 2: Productively

Session 3: Professionally

Session 4: I was one of the presenters sharing some of the aspects of my vocabulary instruction. First, I shared what the focus of my instruction is what strategies I implemented. Then, my colleagues asked some questions and made some suggestions.

Session 5: I shared connections to chapter highlights [from the book study]. (Participant feedback forms, 2018 - 2019)

In addition to the previously mentioned protocol, during the first session, the group participated in a protocol to develop group norms which ended up being the protocol that left the greatest impression on the group and allowed each member to feel heard and valued. The format of the protocol included some individual reflection where teachers had a couple of minutes to write down what they each would need in order to work productively in a group. The protocol encouraged all voices to be heard by having each participant name one thing from their written list by going around in a circle, with no repeats, for as many rounds as necessary to have all the ground rules listed. The specific structure of the protocol was valuable to the group because it exposed the participants to the idea of group consensus. Participants felt strongly about everyone being heard and respected in each session and in their work together. When discussing

norms to add to the list one participant stated: "Active listening should be expected. Not just everyone waiting their turn" (Daniela, session one, October 31, 2018). Another member of the group linked the importance of active listening and everyone being heard to respect among the group: "Show respect to one another and that showing respect would be like, not being on the phone, listening, participating" (Edith, session one, October 31, 2018). The experience of working with that protocol to create group norms and revisiting those group norms throughout our sessions was something the teachers felt truly contributed to their trust and effective work together as a group. As previously mentioned, prior to using the protocols during session one only three teachers were actively participating in discussions.

Participant ownership over goals and objectives. Following each debriefing session, the group would review and define the goals for the session. The session goals provided the group with guidelines and purpose for each session and allowed the teachers to see value in each session. The teachers expressed a sense of ownership over the sessions as a result of their role in contributing to the overall objectives and goals. One participant stated: "It was a luxury to be able to sit and have goals that we created, and to be able to talk through them at a pace that we set" (Daniela, focus group interview, January 28, 2019). Having participants' feedback reflected in the goals for each subsequent session helped the participants see a shared purpose for their work together and ownership over their own learning and the group's learning.

At the conclusion of each session, the teachers individually reflected on the session by completing a participant feedback form. The participant feedback forms were valuable for the planning of each session and for teacher buy-in. The data collected from the feedback forms informed the subsequent PLC sessions and ensured that teachers' voices were heard and reflected in the following sessions' goals and objectives. Specific questions on the feedback

forms that encouraged teachers input into the planning of future sessions included: "(1) Share an instance from today's session that was the most valuable; (2) Share something you found to be least valuable, and (3) What is something you would like to see happen during our next session?" (Participant feedback forms, 2018 - 2019). Responses to these questions were reflected in the planning for the following sessions. For example, after session two many participants shared that they wanted more strategies for vocabulary acquisition. One teacher, in particular, stated in her feedback form: "I would like to continue to brainstorm with my colleagues regarding effective strategies for building meaningful vocabulary" (Participant feedback form, November 21, 2018). The goals for session three addressed participants needs based on those responses: "(1) Discuss vocabulary strategies implemented in your classroom and reflect on their successes or challenges; (2) Gain an understanding of how protocols can help us examine individual students needs, (3) Explore strategies for making new words accessible to students" (Lakata, 2018).

Additionally, group planning was also valuable in making the teachers feel like contributors to their own learning. Before the teachers went their separate ways we ended our sessions by planning next steps. These actions shifted the vertical PLC from being viewed as just another professional development workshop to an actual community of learning coming together and planning their own learning. Although at times certain portions of the session were pre-planned to include exposure to new vocabulary instructional strategies, the participants knew the plan could change based on what they shared in their participant feedback forms and that the sessions would reflect their needs. The opportunity to participate in creating goals for their own learning within a PLC seemed to be a new concept for the teachers and this shifted their understanding of what effective PLCs look like. The participants went from viewing PLCs as a passive experience to viewing them as an active learning experience.

Content that reflected teacher interest and practice. The sessions varied in content for each meeting but they shared some overall similarities. Sharing best practices for vocabulary instruction was part of each session which included sharing strategies, research, practice, and making connections to classroom instruction. During the first PLC session, the content was more focused on building teachers' knowledge around effective practices and components for PLCs and group collaboration. The main content for the vertical PLC was vocabulary instruction. The strategies selected for the sessions ranged from kindergarten through third grade to meet the needs of each teacher within the group. The strategies also had to be appropriate for the type of content instruction that the teachers were supporting. Since most of the teachers in the group pushed in during the writing workshop block, the vocabulary practices had to be adaptable and general enough to be applicable to what the grade levels were working on within their writing units and what the students might be working on within their own independent writing.

A key finding when analyzing the content for the PLC sessions was that the participants found great value in learning more about vocabulary practices because of their roles as ESL teachers. After participating in the six sessions, teachers voiced that they now realized throughout the course of the sessions how little attention was currently placed on explicit vocabulary instruction. The PLC sessions were designed to present the teachers with new strategies and resources that they could implement in their settings. One important finding when planning the vocabulary instruction content for the session was that practicing the strategies in our sessions and giving the teachers the tools they would need to go off and use that strategy in their own classroom was crucial for implementation. When teachers had the chance to practice the strategy in our session and then were given the materials needed, they would go back to their

classrooms and implement the strategy almost immediately. An example of this direct

application can be seen in one teacher's response to the feedback form:

> The jigsaw word clue game was the most valuable because I was able to turn around and
>
> use it in class after lunch on the same day. We were playing Thanksgiving BINGO and
>
> rather than just calling out the word for the picture on each card, we gave the students 4
>
> clues about the word (first letter, number of syllables, last letter, and definition) to make
>
> it more challenging. The kids were very engaged! (Participant feedback form, November
>
> 21, 2018).

In addition to practicing the activities in our sessions and receiving the materials needed

to implement that specific strategy, another finding was that teachers were more likely to

mention wanting to implement a strategy if a colleague had implemented it and shared their

success of that strategy with the group. For example, after Edith shared her experience

implementing the Roll-a-Word activity during session three, one teacher commented on wanting

to incorportate that acticity into her instruction: "Edith's success with Roll-a-Word reminded me

to make room to try out that strategy soon" (Participant feedback form, December 12, 2018).

Encouraging teachers to share their successes with strategies learned became a valuable addition

to the content of the PLCs.

Vocabulary strategies and games were a large portion of the content delivered to teachers

in each session. However, the teachers also received research-based resources to continue to

inform their practice. Three main texts informed most of the content presented to the teachers:

The Writing Strategies Book by Jennifer Serravallo; *Bringing Words to Life, Second Edition:*

Robust Vocabulary Instruction by Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, & Linda Kucan; and

The Language-rich Classroom: A Research-based Framework for Teaching English Language

Learners by Pérsida Himmele and William Himmele. Additional resources were also shared with the teachers that reflected best practices from the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model. Strategies that would be versatile and reflect robust vocabulary instruction were the focal point of the session content. The combination of practical strategies and research on best practices for working with ELLs was instrumental in helping the teachers understand the link between research and practice and why the strategies were effective not just how to implement them. This balance of practice and research led the teachers to state that they believed this "PLC was more focused on professional development" in comparison with other PLC experiences they've had (Gloria, focus group interview, January 28, 2019). Conclusively, an effective design aspect of the PLCs was selecting content that reflected teacher interest and practice.

The Role of the Facilitator

The workday is over, it is 8:00 p.m. and I am sitting in my living room with seven 1-inch black binders, tabbed dividers, and printed out resources all surrounding the area around the couch. As I placed each binder cover with the individual names of the participants into the clear slot of each black binder I cannot help but feel pure excitement and anticipation for our first ESL vertical PLC sessions. As each printed resource that will be covered during that first session is put into each binder, I run through the activity in my head and rehearse how the session will flow. I make sure that our first session focuses on establishing our PLC and some practical takeaways the group can see as useful to their practice.

The preparation for each vertical PLC session was more time consuming than I had anticipated when first designing the study. Although a lot of time and effort went into planning the six sessions, the planning and facilitating of the sessions were by far the most rewarding

experiences for me as the facilitator. Three key findings relating to my role as the facilitator

surfaced through analyzing my facilitator observation notes, documents and artifacts collected

from the sections, and the session feedback forms. One key finding was that as the facilitator I

designed the sessions and content to respond to and meet teachers' needs. I also discovered that

my role should focus more on being a facilitator and not on being the expert among the group.

Lastly, reflecting on my role as the facilitator of these PLC sessions I discovered that a challenge

I faced was developing multi-grade level content to address ESL teacher working in grades

kindergarten through third.

Responding to and meeting teachers' needs. As the facilitator, it was my responsibility

to ensure the teachers' time was maximized and they walked away with effective and practical

strategies for vocabulary instruction that related to their current classroom practice. A major role

as the facilitator was ensuring I met the needs of the teachers participating in the sessions. In

order for professional learning to be most effective, it has to be job-embedded and meaningful to

the group of teachers. The information gathered from the participants' reflection forms helped

inform each subsequent session and ensure that I was addressing what the participants found

valuable. I discovered that the most valuable tool I had as the facilitator to help me assess the

groups' needs were the feedback forms they submitted after each session. The specific questions

used in the feedback form were precise enough to give me an idea of what the teachers were

looking for.

After session one, participants filled out their feedback forms and when asked *what is*

something you would like to see happen during our next session the participants responded with:

"Resources and activities"; "Discuss specific ways to incorporate vocabulary instruction into

writing workshop"; "Sharing ideas/activities to help students learn vocabulary more quickly";

Find strategies and resources to use with our students"; "more activities on vocabulary"; "more strategies and hear what others are doing in their settings"; and "continue going through more strategies and resources, and hear what's working for other teachers" (Participant feedback forms, October 31, 2018). Based on those responses it was evident that teachers wanted time to share what was occurring in their settings, more vocabulary strategies, and some specific vocabulary strategies for writing. I responded to these needs when designing session two by first including time for teachers to take turns sharing something that was going really well in their setting and one challenge they were experiencing. Since sharing classroom practice was important to the teachers based on evidence collected from the feedback forms, I also implemented a protocol for the remaining four sessions that allowed teachers to share a struggle or a challenge. To address teachers' comments about wanting more vocabulary strategies that they could bring back to their own teaching, I incorporated three new vocabulary activities: roll-a-word, vocabulary jigsaw, and vocabulary paint chips (Lakata, 2018). Since one teacher expressed they wanted vocabulary strategies specific to writing, I also introduced teachers to three vocabulary strategies they could use in writing across grade levels. As described, the content planned for session two was structured in direct response to what teachers expressed wanting to see more of in their participation feedback forms. This is just one example of how I used the feedback forms to respond to teachers' needs.

In addition to the feedback forms, I also found it valuable to take the pulse of the group throughout the sessions and assess when we needed to stay on a topic for a longer amount of time or when we were ready to move on. During session three the group participated in the *Descriptive Review of a Child* protocol. The teachers were actively engaged in the protocol, therefore, we spent more time on the rounds than anticipated. As the facilitator, I noticed that the

teachers were gaining a lot from participating in this protocol and that it was important to extend

the amount of time dedicated to the conversation. In order to respond to teachers' needs, I moved

what we did not get to in that session to the following session. The flexibility to respond to the

group's needs proved to be very valuable in maintaining teacher engagement and learning.

Being a facilitator, not the expert. As the ESL Instructional Coach for the district, I

provided the research and expertise for the content selected for each session. Additionally, I was

responsible for helping the group create a collaborative environment where they felt safe and

willing to share. As the facilitator, I selected the times and dates for each of the six sessions and

made sure to clear those dates with our administration so that the teachers had uninterrupted time

to collaborate. Additionally, I developed the design for the PLC sessions to ensure the most

effective use of the 80 minutes we had together. These previously listed tasks I undertook to

create the PLC sessions at times unintentionally put me in the expert seat within the group.

Although I attempted to informally have the teachers bring their own strategies to share with the

group, the teachers often still relied on me to bring the content. For instance, after session two I

included a reminder for teachers stating: "reach out if there are any strategies you want to share

with the group during our next session" (Lakata, 2018). During the following session teachers'

shared successes they had with implementing strategies I had introduced during session two but

did not share any new strategies of their own. A major takeaway I had as a facilitator was the

importance of calling on the other teachers to share their expertise with the group. I discovered

throughout the six sessions that the teachers relied on me to provide them with vocabulary

strategies.

One important finding regarding my role as the facilitator was that when the participants

were asked to take the lead in certain activities it helped distribute the role of the expert among

the group. One activity in particular that helped shift the role of the expert from the facilitator to the group as a whole was when teachers were asked to select a Total Participation Technique (TPT) from a chapter in the book we previously used for our book study. They were asked to teach the group the TPT strategy and discuss how it could be used in their setting:

> So I had four corners and it's a strategy where you ask a question or you give them a prompt and then you put four different answers in the four corners and then they go to the different one and then they have to defend or explain why…Then have them just moving and then talking to the people who also feel the same way…you can also have them network with the people of different responses and make them defend why…It's great for practicing and assessment. (Gloria, session six, January 23, 2019)

Activities such as these helped the teachers see each other as valuable resources. I found that this activity gave each teacher more ownership over their learning and the learning of the group and in turn created a more dynamic group.

During the sessions, my primary role was to facilitate teachers' participation and their learning. I introduced the group to various protocols and facilitated their participation in each round. What I discovered as being instrumental in successfully facilitating the session was redirecting teachers to remain focused on the protocol or activity. At times, I had to redirect teachers and draw their attention back to our goals when they got lost in an anecdote or passionate about a specific comment made, which often triggered a longer side conversation. For some teachers, it was difficult to stick to the purpose of each round.

For example, during our third session, the group participated in a protocol called *Descriptive Review of a Child* (National School Reform Faculty, 2019). During the pop-ups round the participants were supposed to take turns making simple statements from their notes

about what they had heard about the child. The teachers had a difficult time with this round. Instead of making statements, the teachers immediately began sharing recommendations. Although it is a natural instinct to want to share recommendations right away, it can take away from truly understanding the presented information. As the facilitator, I reminded them which round we were in and what the expectation and purpose were for that round: "We're going to take five minutes and make some simple statements of things that you've heard about the student. Some pop-up statements or things that resonated. Not a question, but a burning statement that you've heard" (L. Lakata, session three, December 12, 2018). This simple clarifying comment helped shift the comments from recommendations to statements.

When directing teachers, I found it important to validate their contributions while also steering them back on track. At times having to facilitate a protocol can be challenging and can put the facilitator in an uncomfortable position; however, I found teachers responded fine to redirections when it was handled respectfully. Conclusively, I discovered it was more valuable when I served as an expert in facilitating the PLCs and using protocols, but less valuable when I acted as the sole content area expert. Although the participants found value in the content knowledge I provided during the PLC sessions, I discovered the group worked better when they were engaging in learning and contributing their own expertise. It could be said that the time spent presenting them with new content might have reflected what we know as the typical teacher professional development that occurs so often in schools. Ultimately, the true asset was the combination of bringing new learning to the group as the facilitator while also having the teachers engage with the learning and see the connection to their practice.

One size does not always fit all. As the facilitator and PLC designer, I discovered the challenges of developing multi-grade content. The development of the presentations and the

content for each session was the largest task when designing the vertical PLC sessions. When

selecting the content to present to the teachers I turned to the research and to my own personal

expertise as the ESL Instructional Coach. What made these sessions so different from any other

collaboration already occurring in the school was the representation of teachers from different

grade levels. In turn, this is also what made planning these sessions challenging. The content had

to be applicable to a span of four grade levels, kindergarten through third grade, it had to be

specific to our population of English Language Learners, and it had to fit within the context of

their teaching. This was challenging because the ESL teachers pushed into different grade levels

and different content areas. The table below illustrates the diversity in the teachers' roles.

Chart 6: Participants' Teaching Roles

Teacher	Grade Level(s)	Content Area(s)
1	Kindergarten	● Word Work
2	First	● Writing
3	Second	● Writing
4	Third	● Writing ● Content block
5	Kindergarten through third LLD (language learning disability) classes	● Small group literacy ● Writing
6	First and Second	● Readers Workshop ● Small group math
7	Kindergarten through third Bilingual/newcomer students	● Writing (push in K) ● Intervention (pull out K - 3rd)

What I learned as the facilitator was how to bring rich resources into our sessions that

would provide both the research and practical strategies for a span of grades. One text in

particular that I used heavily was *Bringing Words to Life, Second Edition: Robust Vocabulary*

Instruction by Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, & Linda Kucan. This text provided both

the rationale for why vocabulary instruction needs to be robust, what that looks like and practical

strategies on how to engage students with vocabulary. The strategies I took from this text were

some of the groups' favorite strategies, as one teacher reported: "I think minimum prep ways of

introducing, deepening understanding of, and practicing key vocabulary are always great to have

in your back pocket" (Session feedback forms, 2018 - 2019). The reason I selected some of the

word instruction strategies and introducing words strategies, and the reason teachers seemed to

hold on to them, was because the strategies did not require material preparation and they could

be applied to any vocabulary instruction across grades. Multiple teachers felt that it was

beneficial to have these strategies in their "back pocket".

The purpose of the content selected was to help teachers gain a better understanding of

the importance of vocabulary instruction and how to manage such a daunting task. Although it

was challenging at times to find strategies that would meet everyone's needs, I made a point to

verbalize to teachers that any strategy introduced could be modified to fit their grade and content.

"...And of course you're all in different grade levels and different experiences, so not every

single activity or every single game is going to be applicable to your setting in the way it's

presented. But you can always take something from everything." (L. Lakata, session two,

November 21, 2018) A key finding that stood out from activities such as the one previously

discussed was that every teacher was able to find value and applicability in the content presented.

Participant Engagement

The teachers took on different roles throughout the six sessions. Mainly, they received

knowledge from the session content and also from other members of the group. The participants

also constructed their own knowledge as they made sense of the new practices introduced and

used this reflection to make sense of their own practice. Additionally, the teachers applied new knowledge learned from the sessions into their own practice. Much of the construction of knowledge stemmed from solving problems and sharing successes and challenges as a group. The PLC created a space for teachers to practice with and explore content before bringing it into their classrooms. This allowed them to reflect on possible successes and challenges and plan for them with their students. Teachers engagement was evident by how they participated reflectively and did not just go through the motions of each session.

Teachers as receivers of new knowledge. What was discovered from the data collected from all six sessions was that knowledge played a large role in the PLC sessions. Throughout the sessions, new knowledge was shared with the teachers relating to both vocabulary instruction and effective PLC practices. Teachers received new knowledge through various forms during our PLC sessions. A large body of knowledge they received came from the content of each PLC session. This content included specific vocabulary strategies and resources that I as the facilitator shared with the group. This form of knowledge also included learning from the research by engaging in a book study.

For example, the fifth session was dedicated to a book study in which each teacher received a copy of *The Language-rich Classroom: A Research-based Framework for Teaching English Language Learners* by Pérsida Himmele and William Himmele and was assigned one chapter to read. Later, participants followed a specific protocol, *Three Levels of Text* (National School Reform Faculty, 2019) when sharing about their chapter. They were given the protocol along with the text and their assigned chapter during session three so that they could prepare. The protocol had each teacher share for three minutes by first reading aloud a passage they selected, then saying what they thought about the passage, and finally saying what they saw as

the implications for their work. Following each round, the rest of the group had an opportunity to respond to what was said. One example of what this sounded like can be seen in the transcription of this teacher's participation round:

> On page 48 there's a strategy called I AM poem. I typed it up and put it on our team drive as well in case anybody wanted to try something like that. But we've been doing a lot of nonfiction texts on bats, and volcanoes, and spiders, and frogs, and things like that. And I thought these I AM poems, would be a really nice way to have kids engage in a low-risk activity where they could show their comprehension but also engage their English in processing what they've learned. And the science example struck me on page 49. I AM a dormant volcano, I wonder when my time will come, I heard the rumbling beneath the earth's surface, I see the clouds out of my vast crater, I want to explode. I am a dormant volcano. And it goes on. I could imagine them writing very successful works about bats or frogs or volcanoes that would be nice to read and simple. But it would produce something that would draw out what they've learned in a very non-threatening low-risk kind of way. (Daniela, session five, January 9, 2019).

This excerpt exemplifies how teachers shared new learning with the group but also how they enhanced their own knowledge of practices they could connect to what they were currently working on with their students. Participating in the book study helped give teachers ownership over their own learning and helped them take a closer look at their practice. The teachers found the text to be a great resource and discussed the book study as being one of the sessions they gained the most knowledge from. Although the book itself was a great resource, the learning came from participating in the protocol. Assigning a text to read does not guarantee the teachers will engage with the text in a meaningful way. The three steps they had to take to truly interpret

and apply what they read yielded a true learning experience. Additionally, what made this activity even more powerful was the responsibility of having to share ones learning with the group.

Teachers not only received knowledge from texts and research, but they also received knowledge from the sessions I prepared as the facilitator. The content provided for the teachers was sometimes pre-planned and sometimes it was in response to teacher need. One example of how teachers received knowledge from the presentations I prepared was during session 6. In a previous session, one of the teachers had mentioned struggling with getting students to interact and participate. One strategy she mentioned using with little success was the turn and talk strategy. This required students to think about the question asked by the teacher and turn to a partner to talk about their response or their thinking. In response to this struggle I prepared some interactions to share with the group that would encourage more active participation from their students:

> I have some interactions that I found to share with you and I prepped them for you so you can take them with you...I know we talked a little bit about this last session too, like the importance of getting students speaking and listening to each other...going off of what [teacher's name] said...the struggle you mention when [students] are turning and talking but not talking to each other. So these are different strategies beyond just the turn talk strategy. (L. Lakata, session six, January 23, 2019)

In this example, teachers received knowledge directly linked to their expressed needs and also received the materials necessary to implement their new learning in their settings. This ensured that their learning was purposeful and practical.

In addition to learning from texts and learning from the facilitator, teachers received new knowledge from their colleagues. The knowledge received from colleagues came in the form of feedback during protocols, sharing strategies, and sharing diverse classroom experiences. One example of this form of learning was the group's participation in *The Descriptive Review of a Child* Protocol. During one of our first sessions, two teachers had shared that they had a specific challenge addressing the needs of one particular student that they both worked with. Instead of attempting to quickly breeze through this topic, I offered them the opportunity to participate in this protocol during the following session to get the chance to dive deeper into this one student. This protocol was not intended to solve a problem or change the child, rather it allowed the group of participants to know the student better and as a result use that knowledge to better meet the student's academic, social or physical needs. The two teachers described the student to the group and the group participated in rounds that included asking clarifying questions and providing discussion and recommendations. The presenting teachers found the experience very helpful, as one of the presenting teachers stated:

> I think it was helpful. There were different things that I thought, that I haven't put into motion yet. Reaching out and communicating better between us is something we need to work on. Now that I switched my prep we have the time to meet. (Gloria, session three, December 12, 2018)

Protocols such as the one previously described allowed the teacher the opportunity to receive feedback from each other and to gain new perspectives on how to work on a challenge they were experiencing. Teachers were able to gain new insight and knowledge from their colleagues by actively participating in these protocols whether they were on the receiving or the giving end of the feedback.

Teacher constructed knowledge. Throughout the sessions teachers not only took on the role as receivers of knowledge, but they also began to construct knowledge as they engaged with the content and the group members. Teachers engaged through participating in protocols, reflecting on different vocabulary strategies and their PLC experiences, developing and adhering to group expectations, and contributing to group resources. Two main findings that showcase the teachers' constructing their own knowledge include their roles in identifying and addressing group needs by creating group norms and their engagement with vocabulary strategies to strengthen their knowledge of practice.

The first form of actively constructing knowledge that the teachers' revealed was through their engagement with identifying and addressing group needs. This was evident in their participation in creating our group norms. The group had to actively reflect and create norms that would ensure the best learning environment for all participants. As previously discussed, this was a new experience for the group. Although they have norms in their grade level PLCs, those norms are pre-created by the administration and copied into their PLC agenda. In this case, the teachers had to construct the norms on their own. The result of which was the following conversation:

Daniela: Active listening should be expected, not just everybody waiting their turn to talk.

Edith: Show respect to one another and that showing respect would be like, not being on the phone, listening, participation, sort of includes a lot"

Gloria: Following up on the goals...not just making like, this is what we're going to do and never getting back to it.

Anna: Trusting that when you ask a question or when you're talking you don't feel judged by the people in your group.

Fatima: ...Determine clear and measurable goals that need to be achieved by the end of each session. I think we have to have a limited amount of goals. We can't be very abstract about our goals. So plan on how these goals can be achieved.

Carla: I think just like, giving each other specific strategies for how to implement those goals.

Fatima: I think we definitely need to...if we can walk about with particular resources I can use for instruction, that would be great.

Brittany: Friendly, light atmosphere.

In this example, it is evident that each member actively contributed to creating a valuable resource for the group. The teacher responses reflect thoughtful participating to create norms that everyone could benefit from and that would contribute to successful PLC sessions. The excerpt reflects the group's first contribution to expanding their own knowledge of how successful PLCs are implemented and sustained.

Teachers' construction of knowledge was also noted through their active participation and reflection while engaging with different vocabulary strategies. Teachers' engagement with vocabulary strategies worked to strengthen their knowledge of practice. This form of construction of knowledge occurred when teachers interacted and negotiated the implications of certain strategies on student learning. One example can be seen when teachers were introduced to creating student-friendly definitions and then asked to create student-friendly definitions on their own for words they selected for their own teaching. After creating a student-friendly definition, they were asked to apply one of the word introduction activities we discussed and

share how they might use this in their own practice. Throughout this activity two teachers furthered their understanding of vocabulary instruction by reflecting on their own application of these strategies and thinking about the implications this would have on student learning. We can see the process of constructing new knowledge they underwent by analyzing their think-aloud response when sharing with the group:

> In doing it I realized sometimes there's a definition that wasn't in the dictionary or in the student-friendly definition. The word "swoop" in the dictionary definition, "A movement downwards suddenly in the air, especially in order to attack." And the student-friendly definition is to fly down quickly, so then for the activity, I'm like have you ever, describe a time when an owl or bat might swoop but then I tried to personalize it. Can a person swoop? And how might a person swoop, and my first idea would be in a protective nature, like a parent swooping in to save a child who's falling off the swing or down the slide, so that added another layered meaning that I didn't even realize. (Daniela, session four, December 21, 2018).

This teacher deepened her understanding of the different layers of definitions some words have and how students need exposure to all of those layers to fully grasp the meaning of a word. This realization did not come from reading about this in a text or hearing about it, this teacher came to this new learning by reflecting on her own application of this strategy and realizing the multiple definition layers for the word swoop. By looking at another teacher's reflection to participating in this activity, it is evident she developed a new understanding of the complexity of teaching words to students and the complexity of developing word instruction activities that adequately depict the meaning of the word:

It also just makes you realize sometimes a word that you think would be easily

understandable is not because I can't even figure out a way to try to teach it. Like

"weak". Not being strong, I'm like...which word goes...I really couldn't think of

something to like describe being weak. How you might feel when you're sick, but that's

still hard. (Carla, session four, December 21, 2018).

These two excerpts show how teachers can construct their own knowledge when they deeply and

reflectively engaged in an activity versus passive participation. The teachers in both of these

excerpts furthered their own knowledge of vocabulary instruction by analyzing the process they

went through and what implications their experiences with the activity might have for their own

practice. The last form of knowledge teachers' engaged in was the application of new knowledge

to current practices. This theme will be discussed in detail when addressing the final research

question.

The design, content, and activities of each session contributed to how teachers engaged in

the vertical PLC. This section discussed the findings as they related to answering the first

research question and sub question: what does the vertical PLC look like in practice? How do

teachers engage in the vertical PLC? As mentioned in detail, the data analysis revealed three

major themes that helped answer this question: designing a vertical PLC, the role of the

facilitator, and participant engagement. The key findings in this section helped identify elements

of the vertical PLC design that contributed to both teacher engagement and teacher learning.

Participant Perspectives

This section describes the findings as they relate to answering the second research

question and sub questions: What are the perceptions of the teachers while working together in

the vertically aligned PLC with a focus on vocabulary instruction? (a) Which aspects of the

vertical PLC do they discuss as being most effective for their own learning? (b) How do the teachers think the PLC could be improved or expanded? Data analysis revealed three major themes that helped answer these questions: the value of a vertical PLC, the building blocks for effective collaboration, and seeking more collaboration. Each theme is described further throughout this section with specific sub-themes that help illuminate the findings and tell the story of the teachers' perspectives. The key findings in this section reflect the perceptions of the teachers while working in the vertically aligned PLC, including aspects they discussed as being most effective for their own learning and their thoughts regarding how the PLC could be improved or expanded. Some of the PLC design elements discussed in the previous section are revisited in the following sections but analyzed through a different lens that focuses on the teachers' perceptions.

The Value of a Vertically Aligned PLC

> *"I looked forward to every session, and I left glad that I participated, feeling like my morning was very productive. I left inspired. I left proud to be a part of a team that is so knowledgeable and passionate about what they're doing. And I left reflective in a very focused and useful way that did influence my practice on a daily basis"* (Daniela, focus group interview, January 28, 2019).

The quote above was a response from one of the teachers during our focus group interview when the group was asked: overall, if you had to reflect on the PLC, what do you think were some of the strengths of the PLC, or something you found to be the most effective? This quote reflects many of the terms used to describe the perspectives teachers' displayed while working together in the PLC sessions and while reflecting on their work together throughout their feedback forms and focus group interviews. Some terms that stand out from this quote in particular include:

inspired, knowledgeable, passionate, reflective, focused, useful, influence, and practice. These terms reflect not only this one teacher's perspective but a collective description of what made these PLC sessions valuable to the participants. Accordingly, four main findings that reflect the value teachers saw in participating in the PLC sessions include: the learning progression across the grades, replacing feelings of isolation with collegiality, professional development tailored for ESL, and shifting mindsets and changing the view of the ESL teacher.

Learning progression across the grades. Teachers' individual experiences with collaboration and initial needs were assessed through the use of a questionnaire given to each teacher prior to the first PLC session. The questionnaire asked teachers to respond to questions regarding the current role of collaboration within their grade level, the role of collaboration with teachers from other grade levels, and their personal goals for the vertical PLC sessions. The data collected from the questionnaires revealed a lack of structured collaboration among teachers from different grades.

Specifically, teachers reported having the opportunity to collaborate with teachers within their own grade level approximately once a week. When asked how often they had the opportunity to collaborate with teachers from different grade levels responses ranged from once a week to never. Two teachers reported having the opportunity to collaborate with different grade levels once a week, two teachers reported once a year and four teachers reported never (Initial participant questionnaire, October 28, 2018). The vertical PLC sessions gave the teachers the opportunity to collaborate with teachers across grade levels twice a month for three consecutive months. The teachers saw value in having time to collaborate with teachers from different grade levels and gained a better understanding of the progression of learning across the grades: "...that's probably the big picture, like, knowing where you fit in, and what

kindergarteners do, and where third grade fits in and what that might look like" (Daniela, focus

group interview, January 28, 2019). As teachers engaged in the vertically aligned PLC they

gained deeper perspectives on the importance of cross-grade collaboration and the implications

that understanding the progression of learning can have on teacher practice and student learning.

One teacher in particular perceived the vertical PLC as being "useful". She elaborated by

explaining: "Because I feel like it gave us the opportunity to share and discuss across grades and

subjects and to kind of get a better idea of what was going on for everyone else" (Carla, focus

group interview, January 28, 2019). This same teacher later commented on how beneficial this

form of vertical collaboration could be for all teachers, particularly with the school's

implementation of reading and writing workshop across kindergarten through third grade:

> ...but I also think now with reading and writing workshop being fully implemented that it
>
> would be really great to be having articulation about that. So that first grade understands
>
> and is able to understand where kindergarten is coming from and because it is such an
>
> integrated system. Where it goes like, a learning progression. And that you're able to see
>
> like, if my student, my second-grade student's at a kindergarten level, I'm able to start at
>
> the kindergarten level. And you can go to a kindergarten teacher and say, okay well how
>
> are you doing this and how can I best support this student that's coming in here? Because
>
> that's the best thing I've ever seen about the workshop structure. So if you were able to at
>
> least have this type of conversation going on about reading and writing workshop
>
> because it's all brand new. I think it would provide a lot of positive and effective
>
> conversation. (Carla, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

Bringing together teachers from different grade levels helped teachers develop their own

perspectives and understandings of the benefits that can come from vertical collaboration. In

fact, some teachers not only found value in the composition of the group being a representation of different grade levels, but also the range of teaching experience within the vertical PLC. When describing her personal learning experience during the focus group interview, Daniela commented:

> Not just across grade levels, but through the years of experience, having someone like [teacher's name] in the room who's lived it since it's beginning, and also as a classroom teacher on that side of it, and then moved into the ESL position; having the perspective that she has, and then the perspective of different grade levels was really useful to me."
>
> (Daniela, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

Teachers found value in collaborating across grade levels and across years of experience not only because it helped them better understand the progression of content, but also because it helped make them more aware of what students need as they move through the years. Furthermore, it helped this group of teachers see how vertically aligned collaboration could lead to consistency and cohesion of practice in addition to also broadening teachers' understandings of their students and their practice.

Isolation replaced with collegiality. The initial participant questionnaire also revealed that outside of formal PLC time within their grade level, teachers did not have much additional time set aside for collaboration. Despite the lack of additional planned time for collaboration, teachers did share other less formal collaboration opportunities with teachers within and outside of their grade level. These informal collaborations were described as briefly talking as they passed other teachers in the hallways, using e-mail communication, taking five to ten minutes at the beginning or end of the day, and short discussions before and after class periods. The group of teachers that participated in the vertical PLC were all ESL teachers that, previously, did not

have a structured opportunity to collaborate with one another because they all worked in

different grade levels. The vertical PLC gave these teachers the opportunity to replace a feeling

of isolation with newly formed collegiality.

Comments made by the participants as they reflected on their experiences participating in

the PLC sessions echoed a common perception that the vertical PLC sessions helped eliminate

feelings of isolation. Although the teachers did not use the term "teacher isolation" the evidence

in their responses supports this finding. For instance, on multiple occasions, teachers discussed

not feeling alone in their thinking as a result of being part of this group. When asked what their

biggest takeaway was from participating in the PLC sessions, one teacher responded: "Yeah, for

me [it] was definitely collaboration as a team, being able to put everything, what everyone's

going through and put it on the table and find out how we can fix that. And even after leaving

here we still continue the conversation" (Focus group interview, January 28, 2019). Ultimately,

teachers not only saw the value in coming together during the session but the PLC sessions also

encouraged collaboration outside of the structured PLC sessions.

For the teachers, these PLC sessions were more than just time to come together and share

best practices. More importantly, teachers saw these sessions as an opportunity to address the

doubts they had with their own practice. The participants mentioned that prior to participating in

the vertical PLC sessions they often doubted whether they were doing things the "right way".

> ...you just look at things differently from being with everybody, instead of thinking, "Oh
>
> my gosh, is this the right way? Am I doing it right?" And going into somebody else's
>
> classroom and thinking, "Is this the way it's supposed to be?" Rather than, when you hear
>
> from other people who have that same, "Oh, I'm feeling the same way...Yeah. So it helps
>
> because now you don't feel alone. Instead of just sitting there, you feel like you can talk

to somebody and say, "Well, this is what I'm going to do." And what you were saying

during the last session, that you're pulling kids out, might make somebody else say, "You

know what? I want to do that, too". (Anna, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

Evidently, creating a space in which teachers could come together and feel less isolated also

helped these teachers feel more empowered in their decision making.

The group found value in sharing struggles and in the opportunity to tackle these specific

struggles as a group instead of always on their own. In fact, solving problems and sharing

successes as a group was one of the factors that supported the move away from teacher isolation

and towards a feeling of collegiality. Throughout the focus group interviews, the teachers

provided a multitude of examples that reflected how the structure and design of the PLC helped

them understand that their struggles were common among others in the group and that they had a

safe space to share. To take a case in point, one teacher shared her reflection after the group

participated in the previously mentioned protocol *What? So What? Now What?*:

> ...it's really good when you present your problem. You let people know what you do
>
> about it, and then you ask them if they have any suggestions for you. So that does make
>
> sense when you share a problem and say, "So how do I do it?" So I don't know what
>
> vocabulary words I should be teaching, but this is what I'm doing. So you let me know if
>
> I'm doing the right thing, or you have any suggestions." (Fatima, session four, December
>
> 21, 2018)

In addition to in-person conversations and participation in protocols, one-way collaboration was

extended beyond the six sessions was by creating a google shared drive. The google shared drive

gave teachers an opportunity to continue to collaborate outside of the sessions and created a

space outside of the sessions where they could go to find resources and support from their

colleagues. Thus, it is evident that the teachers felt the PLC sessions provided them with the opportunity to build relationships with other colleagues both in and outside of the structured sessions and this form of collaboration shifted teachers' perceptions from isolation to collegiality.

Professional development tailored for ESL. As previously discussed in the first section of the findings, the vertical PLC sessions were intended to provide teachers with professional development targeted towards vocabulary instruction. To gauge teachers' background with vocabulary instruction, the initial questionnaire teachers responded to also included some questions regarding vocabulary instruction. When teachers were asked how often they collaborated specifically around vocabulary instruction 4 participants responded with never, 1 responded with rarely, and 2 responded with once a week. During their grade level PLCs, teachers did not experience much collaboration dedicated to vocabulary instruction because there were so many topics the grade level as a whole addressed.

The vertical PLC sessions were focused and targeted in order to provide ESL teachers with professional development tailored to their specific needs and their students' needs. Teachers saw great value in the vocabulary strategies and activities they learned by participating in the sessions. During the focus group interview, one teacher described her biggest takeaway being the bank of vocabulary strategies she acquired: "And the biggest takeaway for me was definitely particular strategies that I can implement in my instruction that we discussed earlier" (Fatima, focus group interview, January 28, 2019). Similarly, another teacher commented on how useful she perceived the vocabulary strategies to be for her own practice:

I think that... some of the strategies that were provided were super helpful, and that's something that I was easily able to use during instruction. Like, even doing last week the

book study and hearing everyone's take on it was helpful on how to guide instruction.

(Gloria, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

The vocabulary strategies and activities were directly related to the teachers' role and practice, which led to teachers describing them as useful and successful. As previously mentioned, the teachers were not used to this focus on language within their grade level PLCs. Therefore, the planned resources and content addressed their specific needs more directly which resulted in the teachers perceiving their participation as valuable.

In addition to learning specific vocabulary strategies that they could directly implement within their instruction, teachers also reported viewing the PLC sessions as professional learning experiences that helped shape what they placed emphasis on and how they continued to think about their practice. Specifically, teachers reported finding the research presented and the content of the sessions to push their thinking and anchor their practice:

Yeah, so the strategies were useful. I also liked that ... the time to share has been anchored in our own professional experiences, but also, I like the academic side of it. So I love that it's coming from protocols, and from textbooks, and from research. I like that it's anchored there, because it also makes me feel more confident in what I'm doing when it's not just my intuition guiding me, it's hearing other people's professional experience, and then also knowing that it's rooted in, maybe not outdated academics from when I studied 20 years ago, but current things that are still ... techniques that are still being talked about, that are still useful. (Daniela, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

Some teacher's felt like the content and focus of the sessions helped highlight what components should be present within their instruction that might not have been prior to participating in the sessions. More specifically, Carla stated:

Yeah and I think that fact that it had the vocabulary component made me really look at

the fact that within my role, I'm not really able to address vocabulary very much. And it

made me see, so much more, what was lacking than I didn't really realize as much prior

to that. (Carla, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

The fact that the PLCs were focused and specific to the group of participants provided teachers

with professional development targeted towards vocabulary instruction. Accordingly, the

teachers perceived the content to be more responsive to their learning needs and resulted in job-

embedded professional learning.

Shifting mindsets and changing the view of the ESL teacher. The work teachers were

involved in throughout the PLC sessions sparked conversations of shifting mindsets and

changing the view of the ESL teacher. The seven teachers saw value in coming together during

these sessions because it offered them the opportunity to voice their perspectives of how the role

of the ESL teacher had been, and was currently, viewed in the school. One finding that came up

during the sessions and during the focus group interviews was a shift from many of the teachers

feeling like they were not currently being viewed as experts in their field to a sense of

empowerment within the group to want to make a change. During the first session, two teachers

voiced their concerns with how the ESL teachers were currently feeling about their roles within

the school. Gloria summed up their thoughts about feeling less valued than other roles when she

stated:

We had also spoken about how the interventionists and RTI [response to intervention] is

held to such high regard. When it comes to ESL, it's not oh, these are like, the ESL

teachers who know language. And it's not always looked at that way. So if we can sort

of, maybe as a group, we can change that vibe and change that outlook, like yeah, we

know what we're doing ...We can give [teachers] suggestions, we all have different

experiences, and we all have different knowledge of language. (Gloria, session one,

October 31, 2018)

Later in the conversation, Fatima further explained how she felt the ESL teachers are in fact

experts in their field:

I also think that now, the role of [the] ESL teachers, definitely has changed. And we are

experts in content areas...Not only do we know [about] language, we also know every

content are we push into...So we possess as much knowledge and expertise as [the]

classroom teacher in that particular content are...and on top of that, we know a lot about

language acquisition. (Fatima, session one, October 31, 2018)

These frustrations were expressed mostly during the first PLC sessions. As the group worked and

grew together throughout the six sessions, the ESL teachers recognized that they wanted to have

more active roles within their grade levels. They expressed that the ESL vertical PLC sessions

gave them the voice they needed to feel validated enough to speak up within their grade level

PLCs in the future.

The teachers as a group expressed wanted more ownership over their instructional roles

and being able to voice their professional opinions based on their ESL expertise. Throughout the

remainder of the sessions, the ESL teachers gained more empowerment and began to see how

they might play an active role in shifting others' mindsets and stepping into the role of the

language expert within their grade levels. To take a case in point, during the focus group

interview, Daniela summed up how participating in the sessions resulted in her own professional

empowerment:

I think that gives us more confidence in our roles, too, when we're talking to our teams. If

we feel uncertain, like, you might have a doubt that "This isn't the best use of my time,"

or there might be another way to try. Like, if you know that other grade levels are doing

something differently, or you know that when you met as a group and used everyone as

your sounding board, everybody was nodding like, "Yes, of course, absolutely," and if

the books support it, other people's experiences support it, research supports it, then you

can approach your team a lot differently, having thought through different perspectives...I

think that's really helpful, being able to articulate our role together. Even though our roles

might look slightly different across grades. Then, knowing that as a team, you've talked

about certain things, and everybody's nodded in agreement, and things make sense.

(Daniela, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

The teachers found that there was power in numbers. When they came together they felt

empowered to make changes to their role and take on a more active role within their grade levels

in order to support the classroom teachers in meeting their students' needs.

As illustrated throughout this theme, the teachers found participating in the vertical PLC

session to be of great value. Specifically, they perceived the learning progression across the

grades, replacing feelings of isolation with collegiality, professional development tailored for

ESL, and shifting mindsets and changing the view of the ESL teacher as big takeaways from

their experience working within the PLC.

The Building Blocks for Effective Collaboration

Throughout the analysis of the various data collection artifacts, specific aspects emerged

that the teachers perceived as being the most effective for their own learning. Some of the

aspects that will be discussed were already introduced throughout the Vertical PLC Design and

Participant Engagement section of the findings. In this section, I revisit some of the same PLC design elements but analyze them through a different lens by focusing on teachers' perceptions. The vertical PLC design and format allowed and encouraged teachers to solve problems as a group by sharing both challenges and successes. As was already discussed, the design of the PLCs included establishing a very specific time for teachers to meet, developing group norms and expectations, co-creating the content, objectives and goals, and using protocols to maximize effective collaboration. Based on the data analysis, two findings emerged that pointed towards what the teachers considered to be the most significant building blocks for effective collaboration. First, it was evident that teachers found value in the norms and protocols used throughout the sessions as they aided in creating and maintaining a safe, shared space for collaboration. Additionally, co-creating the content, objectives and goals provided the teachers with a shared purpose for learning and collaborating. Both of these findings are further explored in the two sections that follow.

   Creating and maintaining a safe, shared space. The session audio transcripts, feedback forms, and focus group interviews all revealed that the teachers found value in the group norms and the use of protocols as a means for creating a safe space for collaboration. More specifically, teachers found value in creating the norms together to contribute to the group's success. During the focus group interview, one of the teachers compared her experience participating in her own grade level PLCs to the vertical PLC. She described the vertical PLC sessions as "meaningful" and "purposeful". As a result, I asked a follow-up question to gain a better understanding of what exactly made these sessions more meaningful and more purposeful than her grade level PLCs:

   Facilitator: What do you think led to the PLCs being on task, like you mentioned? Or

   "meaningful" and "purposeful" were some of the words that you used.

Anna: I think that because we went over in the beginning, you went over the norms, and

you really explained, and you touched back on the norms, and we made them together,

that really made us think, like, "This is what we're supposed to be doing." And you

always remembered them, because you did it, just like we try to make the kids make the

rules, it was the same thing. In our [grade level] PLC, the first day we really didn't touch

on the norms…

The teachers perceived these norms as crucial to their overall experience participating in the

PLCs: In their grade level PLCs the teachers have a list of norms they are provided with from

administration and are the same for every grade level. For all of the teachers in the group, this

was their first experience having input and creating their own norms. Many believe that this

process of creating and revisiting their own norms led to the group's success.

Also important to the group's success was the implementation of protocols. Similar to the

norms, prior to participating in these six sessions, many of the teachers had little to no experience

using protocols to structure collaboration and conversation. Two veteran teachers in the group

remember using protocols for a little while a long time ago when grade-level PLCs were first

established. One of the veteran teachers commented on not only the importance of using

protocols but also sustaining their implementation:

And I also think that prior to PLCs, right, when they first implemented PLCs, they went

through protocols and so forth. But then, since then they hired new teachers and they

were just thrown into PLCs, so it's really important to kind of revisit so that, you know.

Sometimes you're brand new and you've never been involved in it, you have no idea of

your expectations or anything, so. (Brittany, session one, October 31, 2018)

Overall, the use of protocols led to teachers feeling like their time was being used purposefully and that each individual's opinions and ideas were respected. When commenting on what they believed made the collaboration throughout the sessions successful, one teacher reflected:

> I think that a big part of that is the respect that everyone had for one another because I do feel...I've been part of a few PLCs, and you could sense in different settings how your opinion isn't respected or isn't even wanted. So in this setting, I think all of us had a similar outlook, a similar goal, and we were able to talk to one another constructively, not talking down to anyone, I think that's another reason why it was successful. (Gloria, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

Since protocols helped structure conversations so that everyone could be heard and everyone's opinion counted, teachers inevitably felt more respected and valued among their colleagues. Protocols prevented one member from dominating the conversations and gave teachers that are not used to being heard within their grade level PLCs a space and a voice to share their thoughts. This, in turn, helped every group member see the value in everyone's participation.

Both the norms and protocols helped create safe and respectful spaces in which every teacher had the opportunity to be heard and to provide other teachers' with feedback. The scheduled sessions twice a month allowed the teachers to have a specific time set aside for collaborating void of any other distractions. The teachers valued this purposeful time set aside for them because this meant they did not have to find pockets of time to try to make space for such collaboration within their already hectic schedules.

> Facilitator: Describe your experiences broadly as a member of the Vertical PLC.
>
> Gloria: I think that the Vertical PLC was super helpful, especially with so many new people on the team. I think it was a good opportunity for all of us to talk about our

experiences and to hear what everyone else is doing, and see how we can sort of have

things in an order that makes sense.

Anna: I enjoyed doing the Vertical PLCs. I feel like I look forward to coming here and

talking about my experiences and hearing other people's experiences and getting to know

the background of everybody since we are new.

Daniela: I also looked forward to coming and found it really helpful, because having such

a large number of ESL teachers is new for the school, and articulating exactly what our

role is, and what form it's taken in each grade level, and how that can be very different

from grade to grade; just having a space to share that was good. It helped me get a bigger

picture of the school, and what's going on in other grades, and not feel isolated with my

little cart going from room to room, wondering what's happening with ESL in other

classes. (Focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

The shared space created for the teachers allowed them to see into one another's practice

and value everyone's experiences. For the teachers, this was a very different experience from

their grade level PLCs. What seemed to cause these vastly different collaboration experiences

was the use of group created norms and protocols. From the excerpts shared it is evident that

teachers found value in the norms and protocols used throughout the sessions and that they felt

the use of norms and protocols aided in creating and maintaining a safe, shared space for

collaboration.

A shared purpose for learning and collaborating. Based on the data analysis, two

findings emerged that pointed towards what the teachers considered to be the significant building

blocks for effective collaboration. First, it was evident that teachers found value in the norms and

protocols used throughout the sessions as they aided in creating and maintaining a safe, shared

space for collaboration which was discussed in great detail in the previous section. The second

finding, and the one that will be further discussed in this section is that teachers found value in

co-creating the content, objectives, and goals for the sessions. This provided the teachers with a

shared purpose for learning and collaborating.

As echoed throughout the findings, the vertical PLCs stood out to the teachers because

the sessions were vastly different from many of their grade level PLCs. The initial questionnaire

teachers asked teachers to rate the overall effectiveness of their current grade level PLCs. Most

of the teachers rated the overall effectiveness of the collaboration occurring within their grade

level PLCs as somewhat effective. Furthermore, the participants reported having very different

experiences within their grade level PLCs. When asked on the questionnaire to share what a

"typical PLC meeting" within their grade level looked like, there were only a few similarities

across grade levels. Teachers shared that in their grade level PLCs they mostly discussed issues

from school improvement team meetings and information from the administration. Additionally,

discussing grade-level related topics such as important upcoming events and lesson planning

came across in two participants' responses. Lastly, a common thread among more than one grade

level PLC was voicing concerns teachers might have in regards to the grade level and school.

Outside of those few similarities between grade level PLCs, the rest of the responses varied for

each participant. Collectively, a typical PLC as described by the participants included discussing

data; brainstorming strategies and resources; a grade level leader reviewing the agenda; and

sometimes other staff members coming into PLCs to offer training. Participants also mentioned

that PLCs did at times include time for collaborative lesson planning but they did not relate to

ESL instruction. Overall, it seemed like the grade level PLCs lacked a shared purpose for

collaboration that was equally viewed as important to all members of the PLC.

The teachers that participated in the vertical PLC sessions believed that the reason the sessions were so efficient and productive was that the group collaborated in setting clear goals and objectives set for each session. When asked during the focus group interview what exactly helped make our sessions more meaningful and more purposeful than their grade level PLCs, two teachers reflected on the importance of creating goals:

Gloria: I think that setting our goals altogether at the beginning was super helpful with that. Then, also, each session we were given two or three goals, something that's attainable. Because to have 10 goals for one PLC is not. So I think having those few specific, like, "We're going to talk about this, this, and this," that was also helpful. I think that's why [the sessions] ran smoothly.

Daniela: It was a luxury to be able to sit and have goals that we created, and to be able to talk through them at a pace that we set, whereas in regular PLCs, often things on the agenda come from outside, or above, or they're administrative tasks that just have to be dealt with as a classroom teacher, so that eats up a lot of the time. So that luxury is one I enjoyed. (Focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

Consequently, another factor that made the session goals and objectives an important element in the success of the PLCs was that the content of said goals and objectives was equally important to all members of the PLC. Teachers found a common shared purpose for collaboration through ESL specific topics. Having the opportunity to collaborate around a topic that was equally of importance to everyone in the group helped in developing a shared purpose for each session.

Me as far as vocabulary, it made me realize how difficult it is for me to address vocabulary in a writing setting because there is so much vocabulary that you're hoping

that they can use it. It's hard to hone in on just a few words. (Carla, focus group

interview, January 28, 2019)

As a result of not having common time set aside to collaborate regarding ESL across the grades,

many of the teachers voiced not realizing how a focus on vocabulary instruction was lacking

from their practice. It was this opportunity to collaborate on a topic of significance to their

practice that helped them realize what was missing and what they wanted to now place more

emphasis on in their instruction.

Similar to their reflection regarding their own vocabulary instruction, the teachers also

discovered that another shared purpose they had for collaborating was to reflect and

meaningfully adapt their practice as needed. The opportunity to hear about ESL instruction

across the grade levels provided teachers with more insight into changes they could make within

their grade level ESL instruction:

And I think it also, the opportunity to discuss also stimulated us to think more about what

we're doing and what should be adjusted. We're not just blindly going into the room, but

we're really assessing our role in how we can be effective. (Fatima, focus group

interview, January 28, 2019)

Allowing teachers the autonomy to create their own goals and objectives for their own

learning proved to be an essential component of the vertical PLC sessions as perceived by the

participating teachers. As reflected throughout the data in this section and the previous sections,

it is obvious that teachers found value in co-creating the content, objectives and goals for the

sessions. As a result, these goals and objectives provided the teachers with a shared purpose for

learning and collaborating that they said was lacking in their previous PLC experiences.

Practitioners Left Wanting More

Once the PLC sessions for this study concluded, the participants were left wanting more. Teachers voiced wanting more time to collaborate, more ideas of how to make future PLC even better, more vocabulary strategies that they could bring back to their classrooms, and more encouragement for stepping out of their comfort zone to help influence their grade levels. Both the session feedback forms and the focus group interviews allowed the participants to share their perceptions regarding how the PLC sessions could be improved or expanded in the future. From these data sources, two main findings developed. The first being that there were missed opportunities during our six-session for deeper application of vocabulary strategies. The second being that teachers wanted to sustain a vertically aligned PLC space moving forward.

Missed opportunities for deeper application. The vertical PLC sessions offered the teachers 480 minutes of collaboration that they did not have prior to participating in this study. Although a lot of content was covered through the six 80 minute sessions, the teachers felt that there could have been more opportunities to practice and reflect on different vocabulary strategies. Some missed opportunities during these short six sessions included giving the teachers more purposeful time to try strategies out and come back and share. Whenever new strategies or activities were introduced, teachers were encouraged to try them and report back to the group, however, this was done informally and more emphasis was placed on providing them with as many strategies and as much research relevant to their practice as was possible during our time together. During the focus group interview some teachers mentioned wanting more vocabulary strategies specifically to use during small group instruction:

...I would have liked to see more vocabulary strategies. I know that you gave us a lot, but

I think that I would have liked to spend more time on them, and seeing just different ones

I could use, because I'm always looking for something to do in my small group, which is

hard for me, because I'm constantly planning for so many kids, and so many levels, and

so many things. So getting as many strategies as I can, helps." (Anna, focus group

interview, January 28, 2019)

Other teachers mentioned wanting more time to further explore some of the vocabulary strategies

in their setting and coming back to the group to share their experiences and learn from the

experiences of others in the group:

Daniela: I'd be curious to see how spending more time on the strategies, what that

strategy might look like in kindergarten, or first grade, or second grade. Like, what do

five-year-olds do with that? What do seven-year-olds do with that? Because I'm not quite

sure. Like, the talking chips with adjectives, that seemed to work for third grade, but

that's probably not how you would use talking chips in kindergarten. So having a chance

to maybe talk about the strategies with a wider breadth that looked through the ages and

how to ... because they're all good strategies, and you can be very creative with them.

That's what makes them so useful; that you can turn around and use them, that you can

bend them and shape them to meet whatever goals you're going for.

Anna: I want to comment on what you said about the vocabulary strategies and seeing it

from each grade level. What would be cool is if you gave us a strategy and told us to try

to use it in our groups, or use it, and then coming back to the next PLC and explaining

how it went." (Focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

The teachers felt it would have been beneficial to dive a little deeper into specific strategies and

explore how these strategies might be adapted and used throughout the different grade levels.

What I discovered as the facilitator after reviewing the data from the reflection forms and the

focus group interview is that more time spent on fewer strategies might have fulfilled their

learning needs better than less time spent on more strategies. These findings also point to the

notion that teachers craved more PLC sessions. They were not dissatisfied with the content of the

six sessions, instead, they wanted more time to dive deeper into what they already learned.

Sustaining a vertically aligned PLC space. As is evident from the previously analyzed

findings, the teachers found participating in the vertical PLC very valuable to their own

professional learning and to building collegial relationships with other teachers in different grade

levels. One thing they all agreed on at the conclusion of our sessions was that they had a strong

desire to continue meeting in vertical PLCs. The teachers expressed wanting to continue the

work we started in the six sessions and sustain the vertically aligned PLCs. As stated previously,

they found that prior to these sessions they did not have a space or time to meet together as an

ESL team:

> Yeah. Well, I think it's a missing link overall with us as a team because we discussed
>
> that, there's never really the time to seek feedback, you know? With struggles that we
>
> might be having in our own situations. (Carla, session four, December 21, 2018)

The work they did as a group throughout the six sessions helped them realize how important this

form of collaboration was to their ESL team. During the focus group interview the teachers

began to offer ideas and plan for how this type of PLC could be sustained:

> Fatima: Like we would like to have them and obviously have a structured rotation and
>
> work within maybe smaller groups, depending on the subject if we all have the same
>
> subject. So exchange materials, resources, strategies and everything else.
>
> Carla: Right...it would be nice to at least every once in a while still meet so that we can
>
> kind of follow up on what we've already started...it would be great to really get

something more official in place so that we can make the best of it going into it. Without

like just saying, alright let's hit the ground running in September. Like, let's make a plan

for September. (Focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

In their offering of ideas, it was clear to see how passionate they were about the work

they were involved in and how determined they were to come up with a way to sustain this work

for the upcoming school year. In addition to just wanting to ensure they continued to receive a

time and space to meet, some teachers also felt strongly about maintaining the structure and

integrity for the work that had begun through these six sessions. Teachers did not want to

continue meeting just for the sake of meeting, they wanted to ensure the purpose of the PLCs

would be sustained so that the vertical PLCs did not just because another routine meeting they all

had to physically attend. Maintaining a shared purpose, goals, and objectives was crucial to

sustaining successful PLC sessions. Two teachers discuss the importance of maintaining the

PLCs focused in the following discussion:

Fatima: Yeah. I think it's more for the future if we will make it real and we will have the

PLCs for ESL. It has to be very, very efficient. It has to make sense. We can't just gather

together every week, like what are we going to discuss every single week, issues? No.

Are we going to discuss our instruction? We don't always have a lot in common because

we teach different grade levels. So somehow we need to think about how it can be really,

really effective. Time-wise, discussion wise and everything else.

Carla: And I think that that would be a great place to start. Like we might not have to

have it in the calendar as a cyclical day. More, just saying okay, this day, this day, this

day...Planning them ahead so that like what we do at kindergarten PLC one time, we do a

first grade PLC the next time, we use almost every minimum school day cause those days

are washes." (Focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

Evidently, the teachers reveal a more reflective approach to thinking about collaboration. As is

known from the research on professional development, time is always the number one barrier

teachers identify for collaboration. However, equally as important is preserving the integrity of

the meetings so that true and effective collaboration can be sustained. The exchange between the

two teachers illustrates the teachers placing more significance on the purpose of the PLC

meetings than on the frequency with which they meet. Although time is important to them, once

that time is granted they understand that importance needs to be placed on what occurs within

those designated minutes. Ultimately, the focus group interviews revealed that although the

teachers found the six sessions to be very successful they did not want them to end. Their desire

to sustain the PLC sessions is further evidence of how valuable the teachers found the vertical

PLC time to be for their professional learning.

The previous sections discussed the findings as they related to answering the second

research question and sub questions: What are the perceptions of the teachers while working

together in the vertically aligned PLC with a focus on vocabulary instruction? (a) Which aspects

of the vertical PLC do they discuss as being most effective for their own learning? (b) How do

the teachers think the PLC could be improved or expanded? As mentioned in detail, the data

analysis revealed three major themes that helped answer this question: the value of a vertical

PLC, the building blocks for effective collaboration, and seeking more collaboration. The key

findings in this section highlighted the perceptions of the teachers while working in the vertically

aligned PLC, including aspects they discussed as being most effective for their own learning and

their thoughts regarding how the PLC could be improved or expanded.

Teacher Application of New Learning

This section describes the findings as they relate to answering the last research question: How do teachers make use of the vertical collaboration to inform their vocabulary instruction and teacher practice? Data analysis revealed one major theme that emerged in response to this questions which was efforts to improve practice with robust vocabulary instruction. This theme is described further throughout this section with specific sub-themes that help illuminate the findings and tell the story. The key findings in this section reflect teachers' knowledge of practice application and vocabulary strategies in action.

Efforts to Improve Practice with Robust Vocabulary Instruction

As is evident through the previously discussed findings, throughout the six sessions the teachers demonstrated their engagement through active participation and reflection. The collaboration that occurred during the vertical PLC sessions encouraged teachers to make use of their new learning to inform their daily practice. Analysis of the session transcripts, participant feedback forms, and focus group interviews revealed that the teachers utilized the vertical collaboration to inform their vocabulary instruction and overall practice. This application of knowledge was present in two forms: one was by applying specific vocabulary strategies and sharing the results of those strategies with the group and the second was through the knowledge of practice application. These two specific forms of applying new knowledge are further discussed in the following two sections.

Vocabulary strategies in action. Analysis of the participant feedback forms revealed that some of the strategies introduced resonated more with the participants than others. The strategies that were discussed most often and that most teachers went back and implemented include semantics gradient, roll-a-word, and word introductions. Individual teachers

implemented other strategies shared during the session, however, the previously listed strategies were reported with more frequency and directly implemented by the majority of the teachers. Ultimately, students need vocabulary instruction that allows them to build rich representations of words, and teachers need to plan and implement vocabulary lessons that can support students in developing the kinds of high-quality lexical representations that will ensure and be available for reading and writing (Kucan, 2012). These strategies provided teachers with initial resources to implement the type of robust vocabulary instruction their students need. It was discovered that the reason these three strategies stood out was that they were easily applicable across grade levels and simple enough to turn around and use with little modification or preparation.

Semantics gradient. The semantics gradient activity was one of the vocabulary strategies that was introduced to the teachers during session one. I explained the purpose of the activity and showed the teachers a video of the activity in action. Additionally, the teachers received a printed description of how to use this activity in their own practice and some examples of what it may look like. The purpose of this activity is to ask students to think about what they know about words, examine the subtle differences among related words by laying them out in a continuum, develop vocabulary, extend what they know about words and think about relationships among similar words. When asked in their participant feedback form for session one, *what is something from today's session regarding vocabulary instruction that you can directly implement with you students*, four out of the seven teachers responded with wanting to use the semantics gradient activity with their students (Participant feedback forms, October 31, 2018). Teachers not only reflected wanting to try this activity, some of them immediately went back and implemented this strategy. One teacher directly implemented this activity after session one and shared her success with the activity during session two:

So I took the last PLC that we did and used that as actually one of the first small groups that I created and I did a gradient for other ways to say "said." But it was a really great vocab lesson. And I have all the stuff here and I can share it. It was interactive. First, we practiced how we would read the sentence. I chose "We have to go" because you can always change that to apply for everything. Read the word, say the word, change how we read sentences based on like, mumbled, signed, whispered, moaned, asked, answered, replied, exclaimed, shouted. Those are the ones I chose. But they did it. They organized them on the gradient based on quietest to loudest. And would give reasons why, make connections with the word, what it made them think of. Especially with "We have to go" because they can always think of a time when somebody would say "We have to go." It would make them think of "I have to leave somewhere I don't want to be" or when they would mumble, like "we have to go", they were mad that they had to go somewhere. It was really cute and they did it really well. I made an artifact of it to give to them...To use in their writing. So I had them find a word, a place where they wrote "said" and then the artifact showed instead of said you can use all these words to match how your character is talking. Across the board they all did it. (Carla, session two, November 21, 2018)

This teacher, in particular, was previously struggling to see how she could address more robust vocabulary instruction into the support she provides during writing. This activity helped her see how she could increase students' vocabulary knowledge by making connections to an already known word.

During our focus group interview Carla reflected again on her implementation of the semantics gradient activity with her students and how she was able to implement the strategy into writer's workshop:

Well considering I'm trying to like integrate writing workshop with ESL instruction, it gave me some ideas as far as vocabulary is concerned. Like right away I took the gradient and I incorporated that into other words to use instead of "said". And then talked about the meaning of all these synonyms. And that was like immediate...We talked about that one session and I went and ran with it. (Carla, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

The semantic gradient strategy also stood out as significant to the teacher because it was one of the few strategies the teachers reported taking back to their grade level and sharing with other teachers. One of the participants reflected on the practicality of the strategies introduced during the sessions and focused on her success with the semantics gradient:

A lot of the vocabulary strategies that we did in the group have been immediately applicable. I've done the four-square vocabulary development a few times. I've done the Roll-a-Word with the dice, the semantic gradient has been great. We do them with adverbs, adjectives...Ways to say "go", ways to say, "said". That's been excellent. The classroom teachers have also said that they really like that idea of the semantic gradient and plotting words on a line and having them understand the range of meaning. (Daniela, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

In fact, another teacher reported in her participant feedback form for session five: "The semantic gradient for vocabulary is a favorite among teachers in my grade level" (Participant feedback form, January 9, 2019). Therefore, teachers seemed to see value in this strategy being used across other content areas that they are not present for and so they found value in sharing this particular strategy with their grade levels. Teachers seemed to grasp onto the semantics gradient strategy because they saw it could directly be implemented in their specific settings.

Roll a Word. The Roll-a-Word activity was one of the vocabulary strategies that was introduced to the teachers during session two. I explained the purpose of the activity, showed the teachers how to play the game, and gave them original copies they would need to try this game with their students. Additionally, the teachers had the opportunity to pick tier 2 words specific to their grade level and practice playing with a partner. This allowed the teachers to see the struggles and successes students might have with this activity and any modifications they would have to make for their grade level. The purpose of this activity is to have students show their understanding of a word in multiple ways by rolling a dice and landing on a number that has student either give a definition, give a synonym and antonym write a sentence, draw a picture, make a connection, or choose their own way of representing the word.

When teachers were asked in their participant feedback form for session two, *what is something from today's session regarding vocabulary instruction that you can directly implement with your students*, six out of the seven teachers responded with wanting to use and/or modify the Roll-a-Word activity with their students (Participant feedback forms, November 21, 2018). Teachers' responses on the participant reflection form included: "I will implement Roll-a-Word this week in my third grade class"; "I like the Roll-a-Word activity, I would like to find a way to implement that with my students, I think writing partners could do this together"; "I will modify the Roll-a-Word game and use it with my students"; "I think the Roll-a-Word game is also one that I can directly implement. I will adapt it by using an online dice roller with my iPad instead of a large dice. I like that the students feel suspense waiting to see what the roll. They feel like they 'win' the chance to work with the word in a specified way"; and "I can directly implement the Roll-a-Word game with my students" (Participant feedback forms, November 21, 2018). The teacher responses reflect not only the intention to try the strategy but also thought put

into the need to possibly modify the game for their students and how they might go about doing so.

Teachers not only reflected wanting to try Roll-a-Word, but some of them also went back and implemented this game. During the focus group interview teachers reported using the Roll-a-Word game with their students and finding success. For example, one teacher stated: "I took away immediately also a couple of activities. The one with the dice, that's about the word instruction...So that was very useful" (Fatima, focus group interview, January 28, 2019). Another teacher provided her success with using Roll-a-Word and a little more detail as to why she found this game to be effective for her students:

> Yes, definitely the one game, Roll-a-Word, I used it many, many times while instructing
>
> vocabulary and they loved that. I was able to see how, how they were grasping the word
>
> cause they had to use, not only the definition or a picture but also make connections and
>
> all that and give synonyms. (Edith, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

Teachers seemed to grasp onto the Roll-a-Word game because they saw it could directly be implemented in their specific settings. As illustrated in the teacher excerpts above, this game could be used across grade levels with little modification. The two teachers quoted throughout this section both teach different grade levels and both experienced success with the game because they saw how it required students to represent words in different ways and deepen their understanding of specific words.

Similarly to the semantics gradient strategy, the Roll-a-Word also stood out as significant because it was one of the few vocabulary activities that teachers reported taking back to their grade level and sharing with other teachers. In the participant feedback form for session five, when asked, *what is something from the past sessions you have brought back and shared at your*

grade level PLC, one teacher reported: "Roll-a-Word was shared with third grade" (Participant

feedback form, January 9, 2019). The teachers' reaction to share this activity shows they saw

great value and applicability across contents for their students.

 Word introductions. The last strategy that was discussed most often and that most

teachers went back and implemented was word introductions. Word introductions were

introduced to the teachers during session four. I explained the purpose of word introductions and

showed the teachers examples of how to introduce words to students. Additionally, the teachers

had the opportunity to pick tier 2 words specific to their grade level and practice developing

student-friendly definitions and using different word introductions. This allowed the teachers to

see the struggles and successes students might have with this activity and any modifications they

would have to make for their grade level. The purpose of this activity was to show teachers the

importance of using student-friendly definitions when introducing words for the first time and to

give teachers different activities they could use to further explore word meanings with students.

Some of the word meaning activities they explored included "word associations", "have you

ever..", "applause, applause", and "which would.." (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2013). Teachers

had the opportunity to practice applying some of these word meaning activities to words they

would be teaching their students.

 When teachers were asked in their participant feedback form for session four, *what is*

something from today's session regarding vocabulary instruction that you can directly

implement with you students, all of the teachers responded with wanting to use some of the word

introduction and word meaning activities with their students (Participant feedback forms,

December 21, 2018). The strategies were simple and required no preparation. The teachers liked

these strategies because they could be used anytime in conversation with students and added to

any lesson. During the focus group interview, one teacher reflects on the session when they were taught the word introduction strategies:

> ...also I definitely loved that one session about ... Remember when you offered us different strategies, how to question students by offering them…word introductions...Yes and that way we, I think it definitely helps teachers to dig deeper with their understanding of words or concept ideas. So that was very useful. (Fatima, focus group interview, January 28, 2019).

The teachers were introduced to a variety of vocabulary strategies, activities, and games throughout the six PLC sessions. The three mentioned in this section were discovered to be the ones the teachers applied the most in their practice. Analysis of the participant feedback forms, sessions transcripts, and focus group interviews revealed that the semantics gradient, Roll-a-Word, and word introductions were the most applied. It was discovered that these three strategies stood out because they were easily applicable across grade levels and simple enough to turn around and use with little modification or preparation.

Knowledge of practice application. As a result of participating in the vertical PLCs, teachers took with them some tangible and specific strategies but they also took with them a broad understanding of vocabulary instruction and practice. As the sessions progressed, teachers worked together to begin to solve problems of practice which in turn informed their daily practice and made them more reflective practitioners. There was evidence throughout the sessions and the focus group interviews that teachers were expanding their understanding of the implication vocabulary instruction could have on their practice. They also developed a greater understanding of the role they serve as advocates for language within their grade level. Teachers

began to show the application of this knowledge of practice through their interactions within the sessions and during their discussions in the focus group interviews.

One example of how teachers began to see themselves as advocates for language instruction was during a discussion that occurred in session six. In response to a discussion regarding their current roles and what content they, as a group, felt would be most appropriate for them to push in and conduct ESL instruction they debated the idea of all pushing in for guided reading. One teacher addressed how classroom teachers might object to students missing out on reading groups:

So in other words, what I think teachers are going to say is, oh they're gonna miss out too much on reading because you might not do reading with them, you might do language. So we have to counter with saying by promoting language you will increase your reading vocabulary. (Brittany, session six, January 23, 2019)

The teachers began to explore the implications for their ESL instruction and discuss how they could share their knowledge about vocabulary instruction with their grade level in order to defend their suggestions. Teachers were using what they learned in the sessions to make decisions and discuss the best plan for ESL instruction across the grades.

Furthermore, teachers were expanding their understanding of the impact vocabulary instruction could have on their practice when they engaged in the book study and began to apply what they were learning in the text to their own practice. As previously discussed, participating in the book study lead to deeper knowledge and insight into the language needs of their students as is illustrated in this one teacher's response to the chapter she read:

And so I personally really like that [chapter] because I'm a psychology person so I think that it highlights how deep this really goes and how challenging [higher order thinking]

really is because the complexity of us expecting [students] to perform on such a high

level ...In order to promote high order thinking it has to be something that is intentionally

done regularly. And the point where ... like something else they mentioned in the

chapter...allowing wait time, which is completely overlooked and I think that is the most

important factor with high order thinking. (Carla, session five, January 9, 2019)

Teachers were applying knowledge not only to their practice, but also to better understand the

needs of their students. The conversations, collaboration, and activities led some teachers to have

this internal dialogue with themselves as what was reflected by the excerpt from Carla.

Teachers also began to show application of knowledge of practice as they discussed how

the vertical PLCs changed their understanding of the importance of vocabulary instruction.

Through analyzing some of the discussion that occurred in the sessions and during the focus

group interviews it was discovered that teachers were expanding their understanding of the

impact vocabulary instruction could have on their practice. One teacher explained:

...because of the Vertical PLCs, and hearing what other people were doing, and also

hearing other people in our field agree that oral proficiency and vocabulary development

are also keys to building good writers, from that I got the motivation to reflect a little

more deeply, and also the confidence to say I really do think, even though I've been here

a short time, that I could be doing more from an ESL perspective with the students that

I'm supposed to be working with. (Daniela, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

The teachers began to show this knowledge through changes to their practice. This teacher, in

particular, shifted her small group instruction to be more focused on language development

because of the knowledge and support she received in the PLC sessions. Additionally, another

teacher echoed a similar realization of the implications for vocabulary instruction:

Me as far as vocabulary, it made me realize how difficult it is for me to address

vocabulary in a writing setting because there is so much vocabulary that you're hoping

that they can use it. It's hard to hone in on just a few words...So I've taken the approach of

introducing more and hoping that a few will stick than limiting it. Because it's also hard

to when you're planning for so many students to know who knows what ahead of time

and so if you're doing a strategy group. For example, using adverbs is what I been

recently did. I just have the different types of answering how, when and where and then I

chose a selective list that I think most of them knew what most of the words meant...But

then it was directly like how can we use these to add detail to our writing? So it's not just

vocabulary focused, but I am trying a lot more to at least bring that component into the

strategies more than I was. Just with exposure. I feel like that's if anything if they're

getting exposed it's better than nothing. (Carla, focus group interview, January 28, 2019)

The data presented illustrates the teachers' application of broader understanding of vocabulary

instruction to how they began to think about their practice and to some changes they began to

implement based on those new understandings. Teachers made use of the vertical collaboration

to inform their vocabulary instruction and practice through implementing both tangible strategies

and new knowledge of practice.

CONCLUSION

The major findings of this study are organized under the three research questions . The

first question dealt with the importance and details of the design and structure of the PLC

settings including my role as the facilitator and the participants' engagement in the sessions. The

structure and design of the vertical PLC sessions were found to be instrumental to their overall

success. The structures that appeared to be most effective were the predictability of the design,

the use of protocols, the role teachers had in creating the goals and objectives for the sessions, and the content which directly reflected teacher interest and need. The second question addressed the teachers' perceptions while participating in the vertical PLC sessions including what teachers perceived as being the most effective aspects for their own learning and what they felt could be improved or expanded. Conclusively, teachers found value in participating in a vertical PLC because they believed it helped them better understand the progression of learning, replaced their feelings of isolation with collegiality, and helped them collectively collaborate on how to shift other teachers' mindset regarding the view of the ESL teacher.

Ultimately, teachers felt like they wanted to extend the collaboration we started with this study and that they also would have liked a deeper application of some of the vocabulary strategies. The final question addressed the teachers' application of new learning. This theme highlighted how teachers made efforts to improve their practice towards more robust vocabulary instruction by implementing some of the strategies within their classroom contexts. Overall, the data suggests that the teachers benefited from working with other ESL teachers from across grade levels, regardless of the content area they supported. The overall findings of this study support the implementation of different types of professional learning communities outside of the typical grade-level specific PLC. Findings also support a need to build more robust vocabulary instructions across the elementary grades.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this systematic qualitative research investigation was to pilot a vertically aligned professional learning community to improve teacher collaboration across grade levels and to inform effective vocabulary instruction. This research intervention was conducted at the Dream Big Primary School, which serves a large population of English Language Learners (ELL). For six 80 minutes sessions a group of seven ESL teachers from various grade levels met in the coaches' office to create a vertically aligned PLC. Successful teacher professional communities develop a shared trust through collaboration focused on developing norms, improving practice, and exemplification of shared beliefs of core principles relating to student learning (Strahan, 2003). These elements were the building blocks for creating and sharing ideas within our PLC sessions.

A collective case study design was utilized to explore and examine teacher experiences while participating in a vertically aligned PLC focused on vocabulary instruction. The aim of the qualitative case study was to understand the experience of the PLC sessions from the vantage point of the participants. The research addressed three main questions:

1. What does the vertical PLC look like in practice?

   a. How do teachers engage in the vertical PLC?

2. What are the perceptions of the teachers working together in the vertically aligned PLC with a focus on vocabulary instruction?

   a. Which aspects of the vertical PLC do they discuss as being most effective for their own learning?

   b. How do the teachers think the PLC could be improved or expanded?

3. How do teachers make use of the vertical collaboration to inform vocabulary instruction

    and teacher practice?

Specifically, the participant sample included one ESL teacher from each grade from kindergarten

through third grade, two ESL teachers who work across different grade levels, and one ESL

teacher who works with the Special Education classrooms. Data sources in the study included an

initial questionnaire, facilitator observations of each session, a collection of documents and

artifacts, participant reflection forms, and two final focus group interviews. Data collection took

place over a four-month period. Prior to the first PLC, session participants filled out an initial

questionnaire which provided me with more information regarding their teaching experiences,

highlighted their thoughts about the current state of collaboration within the primary school, and

specified what each individuals' goals were for participating in the PLC sessions. After each

session, participants completed feedback forms resulting in a total of six feedback forms per

teacher. During the PLC sessions, I recorded facilitator observations, maintained a meeting

agenda, and collected artifacts and documents produced during our work together. After the last

session, I conducted two focus group interviews by splitting the group of seven teachers into two

separate interview sessions. Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently through the data

collection period and more in depth data analysis continued after the data collection was

complete. After reading through the data multiple times, coding, and identifying themes,

analytical interpretations were made. At the conclusion of the data collection and analysis,

findings reflected a new perspective on how to better structure and implement PLCs focused on

improving teacher learning and best practices for vocabulary instruction.

The major findings of this study fall were organized around the three major research

questions. The first research question includes the importance and details of the design and

structure of the PLC settings including my role as the facilitator and the participants' engagement in the sessions. The structure and design of the vertical PLC sessions were instrumental to their overall success. The second research question represents the teachers' perceptions while participating in the vertical PLC sessions. Throughout the findings of the second research question, significance is placed on what teachers perceived as being the most effective aspects for their own learning and what they felt could be improved or expanded. The final research question examined the teachers' application of new learning. In answering this research question, it was discussed that teachers made efforts to improve their practice towards more robust vocabulary instruction by implementing some of the strategies within their classroom contexts. Teacher comments suggest they benefited from working with other ESL teachers from across grade levels, regardless of the content area they supported. The overall findings of this study support the implementation of different types of professional learning communities outside of the typical grade-level specific PLC. Findings also support a need to build more robust vocabulary instructions across the elementary grades.

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings as they relate to, and inform my research questions and literature review. Additionally, this chapter discusses the limitations of my study, suggestions for future research, and outlines the implications of the findings for educators, administrators, and policymakers who want to develop effective PLCs as a form of sustained professional development. The chapter ends with a final conclusion.

PLCs as Vehicles for Sustained Professional Development

There is overwhelming evidence that PLCs, when effectively implemented, can provide teachers with ongoing, job-embedded, and sustained professional development. Research findings have demonstrated that for effective learning to occur, professional development should

be intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice. (Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). In fact, the findings from my research study further support what we already know about effective PLCs. Teacher learning should be grounded in what is occurring within daily instruction and should reflect and adjust to what groups of teachers need. Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a great vehicle for impacting teacher learning earning. For this reason, schools are relying heavily on professional learning communities to maintain ongoing collaboration and professional development.

The research also shows that cultivating a strong professional community conducive to learning, reflection, and sustaining teachers' commitment to teaching can result in a school culture centered around teachers learning and constructing knowledge together (Little, 2006; Wood, 2007). My research confirms these findings when examining teachers' perceptions of participating in the vertical PLC sessions. I found that the role of the facilitator is instrumental in cultivating a strong professional learning community. As the facilitator, I assisted teachers in creating a strong PLC through implementing group norms, introducing and implementing protocols, and providing them with space and time to meet. The norms encouraged teachers to voice their individual needs for collaboration while also coming to a consensus regarding the needs of the larger group. The group norms also gave the teachers ownerships over the expectations for each session. The protocols aided teachers in being heard and also encouraged teachers to listen to other perspectives and professional opinions. As a result, the teachers felt they had a safe space where they could come together for a shared purpose and where they could discuss both successes and challenges they might be having within their practice. This shared space encouraged teachers to learn from one another and to construct knowledge together. As the facilitator I not only ensured that the PLC sessions ran smoothly and remained on track, I also

brought new knowledge to the group by exposing teachers to research and best practices for vocabulary instruction. Each session was formed around objectives relating to vocabulary instruction. Consequently, this study revealed that cultivating strong PLCs requires a facilitator who is knowledgeable on how to implement protocols and lead a PLC session while also possessing expert knowledge to share with the teachers.

Ultimately, a school culture that supports healthy inquiry-oriented PLCs will be more effective in creating knowledgeable teachers and stand a greater chance of impacting student achievement. PLCs can alleviate isolation among teachers by providing regularly scheduled times to meet, promoting collaboration, and assisting teachers in building collegial relationships. For such collective work to occur, mutual trust, respect, and support must be present (Webb et al 2009; Bryk et al, 1997). My research confirmed that for a PLC to be effective teachers need time, space, a shared purpose, a voice in creating their own goals and objectives. Additionally, they need a space where they can reflect on their own practices and collaborate with colleagues on how to address certain challenges. The findings from the study revealed that our vertical PLC sessions had a more effective structure than most of their grade level PLCs because our PLC truly embodied what the research says about effective PLCs. The factors that made the biggest difference for teachers and that were not currently present in their grade level PLCs included having ownership over creating their own goals and objectives for their learning, participating in structured protocols and participating in a group that had a shared purpose for collaborating. Inevitably, these factors help ensure that the work being done in PLCs maintains its purpose and does not become just become one more thing teachers are forced to participate in.

Research has also identified promising practices in professional development targeted explicitly at learning in a professional community and these include a focus on content, active

learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation (Stewart, 2014). However, as they

stand, PLCs are often an untapped opportunity for professional development. The current PLCs

at the primary school are driven by agendas created by grade level leaders and mostly occupied

with grade-level logistics.

One alternative to the traditional school-based learning communities is integrating

professional development workshops into the work of professional learning communities. The

PLC sessions I created for this study were a hybrid of professional development and a learning

community. This model differs from the majority of PLCs currently established at the primary

school. The vertical PLC sessions for this study combined both teacher-led collaboration with

content delivery to help inform and improve ESL teachers' vocabulary instruction. The content

presented to the teachers during each session differed from what teachers typically experience in

large group workshops because it reflected their specific needs based on their responses to a

feedback form and based on their input during previous sessions. Additionally, the content

reflected a deeper knowledge of vocabulary instruction by relying on current research and

reputable texts. One of the ways the teachers expanded their understanding of the importance of

vocabulary instruction was by participating in a book study and sharing what they learned from

the research with the rest of the group. The content of the PLCs also exposed teachers to more

practical strategies and activities that directly related to their students' needs and to their

practice. Research shows that a larger impact on student achievement is teacher quality (Bean &

Morewood, 2007). Therefore, to impact teacher quality teachers need to be provided with

continued, sustained, and effective professional learning in addition to time to collaborate. This

form of collaboration contributes to building teachers' capacities to implement research-based

instruction targeted to their students' needs. A hybrid PLC that provides teachers with target

professional development holds great promise for sustained professional learning.

Building Knowledge of Learning Progressions Through Vertical PLCs

Much of the research on vertical articulation focuses on demonstrating the need for

teachers across grade levels to collaborate in order to ensure coherence, the progression of

learning, and sharing of content and pedagogical knowledge. Studies on vertical articulation

focus for the most part on articulation among elementary and secondary teachers (Burton &

Frazier, 2012; Nagel, 2008; and Suh & Seshaiyer 2015). Additionally, studies have found that

using existing research on learning progressions as a framework can support the development of

coherence during the vertical articulation (Suh & Seshaiyer 2015 and Burton & Frazier, 2012).

Vertical articulation becomes a means of linking the existing research-base on students' learning,

content standards, and assessment practices across grade levels. Working in vertically aligned

professional learning communities has the promise of helping teachers understand how skills

develop through the grades and how patterns build on one another in order to ensure a coherent

progression throughout the curricula at different grade levels.

My research added to the emerging knowledge base on the possible benefits of vertical

articulation by examining the perspectives of a group of ESL teachers working together in a

cross-grade PLC. There was value found in working with teachers from different grade levels

and with varying years of experience. Throughout participating in the vertically aligned PLC the

teachers stated feeling that they had a better understanding of what was occurring in the different

grade levels within the primary school. They developed a much deeper understanding of what

ESL instruction looked like beginning in kindergarten through third grade and what prerequisite

skills were instrumental for future success. Additionally, teachers also found it valuable to know

who they could go to if they needed support meeting the needs of a student that was performing either above or below their current grade level because they had the opportunity to collaborate with the teachers that were knowledge about the expectations at different levels. Vertical articulation not only holds great promise for increasing teachers' knowledge of learning progressions, it also supports teachers in better understanding the needs of their learners. The ESL teachers in this study participated in a protocol that had them look at one specific student that one of the teachers was struggling to reach. This experience allowed the teacher to collaboratively ask questions about the students to gain a deeper understanding of this particular student's needs. Hearing feedback and recommendations from teachers from different grade levels led to recommendations that reflected various factors without limiting the recommendations to expectations within that students grade level. Therefore, it is evident that vertical PLCs can create cohesion of teacher practice. For this type of cohesion to occur, teachers need time to collaborate across grade levels. Articulating, planning, and discussing student learning and instructional practices across grade levels can allow for a continuum of instructional improvements and teacher learning.

As is reflected in the research, vertical articulation across grade levels tends to occur less frequently than single-grade groups, especially at the elementary school level (Burton & Frazier, 2012; Nagel, 2008; Suh & Seshaiyer, 2015). Currently, the primary school only has structured PLC time for grade-level teachers to meet and collaborate. This form of PLC is not enough for teacher learning to be sustained and it does not effectively inform teachers' understanding of learning progressions. To enhance professional learning elementary schools need to consider providing time and spaces for teachers across grade levels to meet and collaborative around content and instruction. This study was just one small example of how vertical collaboration can

be designed, implemented and how it can contribute to teacher learning. Implementing vertical

PLCs can hold great promise for curriculum cohesion, addressing gaps in student learning, and

for developing a clearer understanding of the needs of students within a school.

Robust Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary is an essential component of reading instruction and reading achievement.

Research states that the comprehension of complex texts is dependent, in part, on the size of the

reader's vocabulary (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986). Selecting vocabulary as

the content focus for the vertical PLC sessions was based on the needs identified at the primary

school and the current research on improving ELLs vocabulary knowledge. Based on their

students' needs, the teachers at the primary school need to participate in PLCs that allow them to

target both breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge in their reading instruction. Tools and

strategies alone are not enough to impact students' vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, to impact

instructional quality teachers need to participate in professional learning that targets the

significance of vocabulary instruction and ties research to practice through tangible strategies

that can be directly integrated into teachers' practice.

As the facilitator, I designed the PLC sessions to include content on robust vocabulary

instruction to better equip the ESL teachers to teach the depth and breadth of vocabulary

instruction needed for our students. I introduced teachers to tangible strategies that they could

directly implement in their lessons. Additionally, I also exposed them to research on vocabulary

instruction and what research said about how ELLs learn vocabulary. I drew from credible

resources to provide this type of professional development to the participating teachers. As a

result of the content presented in the sessions, one teacher responded in her last feedback: "I feel

stronger in the area of vocabulary instruction". Another teacher responded to the same feedback

form by stating: "I have learned a lot of great strategies for building vocabulary skills and participation in the classroom." Evidently, there is a need for teachers to collaborate on how to expose students to more strategies that will enhance their depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge.

Studies have also shown that morphology, which includes knowledge of root words, prefixes, and suffixes, is an important tool when teaching vocabulary. Specifically, Kieffer and Lesaux's (2007) study resulted in two major findings: (1) students with a greater understanding of morphology also had higher reading comprehension scores, and (2) students with larger vocabularies had a greater understanding of morphology. These findings show a reciprocal relationship between vocabulary and morphology knowledge. Additionally, Kieffer and Lesaux's (2007) four principles for teaching morphology to improve students' vocabulary and reading comprehension is one example of how robust vocabulary instruction can improve teacher practice and student learning. These components include (1) teaching morphology in the context of rich, explicit vocabulary instruction, (2) teaching students to use morphology as a cognitive strategy with explicit steps, (3) teaching the underlying morphological knowledge needed in two ways - both explicitly and in context, and (4) for students with developed knowledge of Spanish, teaching morphology in relation to cognate instruction.

The length of time of my research study did not allow for as much focus on morphology as I would have liked to have included in the sessions. After the final PLC session, the teachers voiced wanting to continue to meet during the following school year to continue the work we had started during this research study. When expanding on the work already started with this study, I will focus on providing teachers with the research, knowledge, and application on how to teach

vocabulary through morphology. I believe that a focus on morphology will strengthen the work we already began for creating more robust vocabulary instruction within our classrooms.

Research Limitations

A case study design using only qualitative data collection methods presents issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). An important limitation to consider is the small sample size of the intervention group. Additionally, the context of the intervention and the length of the study could also be a limitation. As with any qualitative study, limitations can arise when accurately representing participants' perceptions and experiences. To address the aforementioned limitations I took specific steps as the researcher and facilitator. In order to ensure an accurate representation of the participants' perceptions and experiences, I utilized member checking after collecting and analyzing session feedback forms, session observations, and focus group interviews. Specifically, I gave transcripts of the focus group interview and copies of the observations to the participants to ensure that I have captured the essence of the meetings (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). To help ensure internal validity, I used multiple sources of data including participant feedback forms, session audio transcriptions, observations, document analysis, and focus group interviews. The multiple forms of data allowed for triangulation of the data to determine the consistency and accuracy of the codes and themes throughout the data analysis.

Additionally, I ensured that my own bias did not impact my role as a facilitator and an observer. As an observer, I could not help but affect and be affected by the setting (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). To ensure an accurate representation of the sessions, I audio-recorded the observations as well as took field notes and maintained a research journal. Audio recording and transcribing the sessions allowed me to fully be present during the sessions and ensure the data

collected represented the direct remarks of the participants. It is important to note that due to the way the group operated I was not able to record all of the group activity. When preparing for data collection, I did not take into account that we would break out into smaller groups for certain activities. The audio recording that was set up was not enough to collect the data from the small group interactions. Furthermore, it is important to note that I did not observe the teachers' classrooms and although teachers shared examples from their practice, I have no concrete data, aside from their own testimonies, to support the extent to which the vocabulary strategies were being implemented.

These limitations and the purposeful steps taken to address the limitations should be considered when attempting to replicate this study in a different context with a different sample of participants. Findings from this study provide an in-depth understanding for those seeking to further develop professional learning communities as a means for sustained professional development. The overall findings provide insight relevant to the structure of a vertical PLC and insight from the teachers' perspectives, which can serve as powerful tools when trying to implement vertical PLCs.

Research Implications

The findings of this study indicate multiple opportunities for further research studies in regards to vertical professional learning communities and sustained professional development for teachers. Additionally, more research needs to be done examining the supports teachers need to maintain professional learning within their PLCs. Further studies investigating the structure of professional learning communities implemented with elementary school teachers from different grade levels would strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings from this study.

This study helped build a collaborative learning community among teachers from different kindergarten through third grade. Throughout this work, the teachers were able to gain some insight into the progression of vocabulary learning and effective practices for collaboration. Currently, there is a little significant research that examines vertical professional learning groups within elementary schools. Further, studies that look specifically at vertical collaboration within elementary schools could provide additional insights for educational leaders and administrators on how to establish and sustain vertical PLCs within their schools. Establishing effective vertical PLCs holds great promise for helping to improve cohesion within school curricula and to inevitably impact student achievement. Examining elementary teachers' work within different vertical PLCs can help further define guidelines for effective implementation and support the need for these types of teacher collaboration groups.

Throughout the study, I found that my role as the expert facilitator was important to the success of the professional learning community. The vocabulary and resources I brought to the group helped establish and maintain a focused shared purpose for collaboration. Additionally, my role as a knowledgeable facilitator informed the structure and design of the PLC sessions, which led to the group maintaining focused on meeting the goals and objectives set for each session. There is abundant research that discusses and supports the components for establishing effective PLCs. However, most of that research neglects to focus on the support a group of teachers needs to sustain professional learning communities. The teachers involved in this study found that our PLC sessions were more focused on professional development than their grade level PLCs. Further studies that merge the professional development workshop model with the PLC model can help inform how targets professional development for the groups' needs can help sustain the purpose and integrity of a professional learning community.

Implications for Practice

This study revealed various implications for practice that can impact teacher and student learning. The implications for practice discussed include: (1) sustained vertical PLC for the ESL team, (2) more focus on vocabulary instruction within the ESL teachers' role, (3) creating PLC facilitators within each grade level by providing grade-level leaders with the knowledge, tools, and support they need to become effective facilitators, and (4) creating vertical PLC groups within the school to help inform curricular cohesion and integrate the progression of learning into the school-wide curricula.

At the conclusion of the study, the participating teachers expressed a strong desire to continue meeting in ESL vertical PLCs the following school year. They wanted to make these PLCs a part of their school year calendar. Prior to this study, the ESL team did not have structured time for collaboration. This study revealed the importance of giving specialists, not just classroom teachers, common time and space to collaborate. Schools with teams of ESL teachers, reading interventionists, or other student support roles should consider the value in providing these specific teams of teachers with their own time to collaborate. Prior to our vertical ESL sessions, the ESL teachers felt like their professional growth needs were not being completely met within their grade level PLCs. When establishing PLCs in schools, it is important to recognize that different teams of teachers require different professional learning experience and that grade level PLCs will not be sufficient as they only format for professional learning communities. This leads to the second implication for practice that is more focus on vocabulary instruction within the ESL teachers' role.

Having an ESL specific PLC space helped create a shared purpose for collaboration among the team. Future ESL PLCs should continue to focus on building cross-grade vocabulary

instruction cohesion. An important realization the teachers had when participating in a vertical PLC focused on vocabulary instruction was how little emphasis they were placing on explicit vocabulary instruction within their practice. Schools serving ELLs need to ensure that their ESL teachers had the knowledge and understanding necessary to provide students with robust vocabulary instruction that addressed both the depth and breadth of knowledge. PLC session that incorporates content specific to vocabulary instruction and the progression of learning words can greatly impact ELL student achievement, particularly in reading and writing but also across content areas.

Although this small study only focused on vertical PLCs with a group of ESL teachers, the findings present great promise for improving the structure of the current grade-level PLCs at the Dream Big primary school. School leaders need to consider the benefits of creating PLC facilitators within each grade level by providing grade-level leaders with the knowledge, tools, and supports they need to become effective facilitators. Some teachers within the Dream Big primary school already see the limitations with the current structure of their grade-level PLCs and are seeking support to change how their PLCs function. Specifically, at the conclusion of the 2018 - 2019 school, the year this study took place, a grade level leader approached me to help her better structure her grade level PLCs. She had heard about the work I was doing with other teacher and she wanted to make her grade-level PLCs more focused on professional learning. Additionally, she wanted to support her team in building a collaborative and respectful mindset for collaboration. This example reinforces the implication that grade level leaders need support and tools on how to facilitate PLCs in order to help create and sustain effective collaboration and professional learning within their grade level. Schools need to consider providing opportunities for grade-level leaders to participate in workshops on how to facilitate and lead effective PLCs.

This study reinforced my belief, and what few research studies on vertical professional learning communities have discussed, that vertical articulation can greatly impact teachers' knowledge of the progression of learning, which in turn, can have a direct influence on student learning. Creating vertical PLC groups within primary schools can help inform curricular cohesion and better integrate the progression of learning into the school-wide curricula. Vertical articulation holds great promise for curriculum planning across grade levels. This form of professional learning communities can help address inconsistencies and redundancies within the existing curricula and help develop a common language school-wide. Schools should consider encouraging teacher leaders from each grade level to collaborate on curriculum planning across the grades to better address the learning standards and to support instruction that meets the student needs with longevity.

Implications for Policy

Professional learning communities go beyond professional development by providing teachers not only with content and pedagogical knowledge but also with an ongoing community that shares a common purpose, values professional growth and focuses on student learning. The New Jersey Professional Standards for Teachers (N.J.A.C. 6A: 9C-3.3): Foundations of Effective Practice highlight a "need for teachers to participate as active members of a professional learning community engaging a variety of learning opportunities." The New Jersey Professional Standards for Teachers identify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that teachers need to practice responsibly. Standard Nine specifically addresses the teacher's role with professional learning by stating:

> The teacher engages in ongoing individual and collaborative professional learning
>
> designed to impact practice in ways that lead to improved learning for each student, using

evidence of student achievement, action research and best practice to expand a repertoire

of skills, strategies, materials, assessments, and ideas to increase student learning.

Admittedly, policymakers recognize the importance of professional learning and professional

learning must be ongoing and collaborative. I recommend that training for teachers leaders be

supported the state as a means of sustaining effective professional learning communities within

schools. Teacher leaders need to receive the appropriate training to effectively facilitate ongoing

professional learning communities within various groupings within a school or district.

Additionally, the state also recognizes the teacher's role as a content expert. Standard

four of The New Jersey Professional Standards for Teachers specifically addresses the teacher's

role and responsibility with content knowledge:

The teacher understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structures of the

discipline(s) he or she teaches, particularly as they relate to the Common Core Standards

and the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards and creates learning experiences

that make these aspects of the discipline accessible and meaningful for learners to assure

mastery of the content.

Specifically, standard four addresses the teacher's responsibility for understanding the

progression of learning: "The teacher has a deep knowledge of student content standards and

learning progressions in the discipline(s) s/he teaches" (4.ii.5). Therefore, both pre-service and

in-service teachers need supports and structures in place that continually allow them the

opportunity to engage with cross-grade content in order to gain a deeper understanding of the

learning progressions. It is not enough to strictly receive professional development specific to the

teacher's current grade level. Instead, schools need support from policymakers to sustain

professional development that addresses a shared responsibility for student learning. One way to

address this knowledge gap is by encouraging schools to enact content-specific instructional

coaches that can serve as professional development experts within their specific content area and

across grade levels. Many schools are moving towards hiring in-house coaches, but this practice

is still on supported across districts. As the ESL instructional coach within my district, I was able

to bring this level of professional knowledge to the ESL teachers within the vertical PLC

sessions. Having this type of inhouse professional expert has the potential to greatly impact

teacher learning by facilitating professional learning communities focused on content.

CONCLUSION

At the conclusion of the data collection and analysis, a new perspective was gained on

how to better structure and implement PLCs focused on improving teacher learning and practice

of vocabulary instruction. Likewise, the data collection and analysis provided insight on how to

proceed in sustaining successful, effective PLCs. The information gathered from observing the

vertically aligned PLC highlighted effective elements that can be implemented to improve grade-

level PLCs. The collection of documents offered materials that were shared among teachers and

can further be shared among other teachers outside of the vertical PLC to help inform their

instruction and their collaboration. The focus group interviews and session feedback forms

provided important teacher feedback and experiential accounts of working in a vertical PLC

along with tangible strategies for building cohesion across vocabulary instruction throughout the

grades.

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Appendix A

Participant Sample

Current Grade Level PLCs (# of teacher)			
Grade Level	Classroom Teachers	Instructional Support Teachers	ESL Teachers
K	7	7	1
1	8	1	1
2	8	1	1
3	7	1	1

* 3 additional ESL teachers that provide extra support to the bilingual classes, special education classes, and other grade levels.

Vertical PLC Sample for the Study		
One teacher represented by each grade level, totaling 7 teachers.		
Grade Level	Teacher Role	Years of Teaching
K	ESL push-in (ELA)	3
1st	ESL push-in (ELA)	30
2nd	ESL push-in (ELA)	5
3rd	ESL push-in (ELA)	18
2nd and 3rd	ESL push-in (ELA/Math)	3
K-3	ESL push-in LLD (language learning disability) classes	17
K-3	ESL Pull-out Bilingual/newcomer students	6

Appendix B

Intervention Design and Individual Session Outline

Design Structure: (1) Debrief; (2) Define goals; (3) Explore new practices; (4) Reflect; and (5) Plan	
Number of total meetings: 6	**Session duration:** 80 minutes
Session Materials: Projector, pencils/pens, paper, sticky notes, devices, protocols, PLC binders, etc.	
Session Resources: Protocols ● National School Reform Faculty ● *The Power of Protocols* - McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald Professional Texts ● *Bringing Words to Life, Robust Vocabulary Instruction* - Beck, McKeown, & Kucan ● *The Writing Strategies Book* - Jennifer Serravallo ● *The Language-Rich Classroom* - Himmele & Himmele Websites/Videos ● Colorin Colorado Website ● Reading Rockets Website ● Teaching Channel	
Session One Date: Wednesday, October 31, 2018	
Goals and Objectives:	**Activities:**
Goals: ● Develop an understanding of components that lead to effective collaboration within a PLC. ● Expand your understanding of how to select words to teach. Objectives: ● Develop a shared set of norms for our professional learning community. ● Collaborate on creating shared goals and objectives for future sessions. ● Participants will feel able to implement vocabulary strategies that best fit their students' needs.	● Goal Setting Protocol ● Forming Group Rules Protocol ● Critical Friends Group Purpose and Work ● Meetings with Protocols vs Meetings Without Protocols ● Four Square Vocabulary ● Think-Pair-Share ● Reflection on a Word ● Identifying Tier 2 Words ● Semantics Gradient
Session Two Date: Wednesday, November 21, 2018	
Goals and Objectives:	**Activities:**

| Goals:
● Continue to explore components that lead to effective collaboration within a PLC.
● Discuss vocabulary instruction across the grade levels.
● Engage in new strategies for vocabulary instruction in writing.
Objectives:
● Review our group norms and decide is there is anything we would like to add.
● Discuss what vocabulary instruction is occurring in our individual settings.
● Participate in various vocabulary activities. | ● Review group norms
● What? So What? Now What? Protocol
● Roll-a-Word
● Vocabulary Jigsaw
● Vocabulary Paint Chips
● Vocabulary writing strategies |

Session Three Date: Wednesday, December 12, 2018

Goals and Objectives:	**Activities:**
Goals: ● Discuss vocabulary strategies implemented in your classroom and reflect on their successes or challenges. ● Gain an understanding of how protocols can help us examine individual students needs. ● Explore strategies for making new words accessible to students. Objectives ● Reflect on the practically of some of the vocabulary strategies and game introduced in previous sessions. ● Participate in a group protocol, Descriptive Review of a Child. ● Practice creating student friendly definitions and using selected words to create a concept sort.	● Descriptive Review of a Child Protocol ● Word introductions ● Developing student-friendly definitions

Session Four Date: Friday, December 21, 2018

Goals and Objectives:	**Activities:**
Goals ● Discuss challenges occurring in classroom settings. ● Explore strategies for making new words accessible to students. Objectives ● Implement a protocol to help teachers share challenges in their settings: What? So What? Now What? ● Practice creating student friendly definitions and using	● Review group norms ● What? So What? Now What? Protocol ● Word introductions ● Developing student-friendly definitions ● Introducing word meaning activities

selected words to create meaningful word application activities.	● Jigsaw activity

Session Five Date: Wednesday, January 9, 2019	

Goals and Objectives:	**Activities:**
Goals ● Discuss challenges/success occurring in classroom settings. ● Participate in a group text protocol for a book study: The Language Rich Classroom. Objectives ● Implement a protocol to help teachers share challenges in their settings: What? So What? Now What? ● Share resources that will help teachers foster greater gains in students' language development, increase their comprehension across all subject areas, and build classrooms that are engaging and welcoming (The Language Rich Classroom).	● [What? So What? Now What? Protocol](#) ● [Three Levels of Text Protocol](#) ● Book Study ● Interactions

Session Six Date: Wednesday, January 23, 2019	

Goals and Objectives:	**Activities:**
Goals ● Discuss challenges/successes occurring in classroom settings. ● Share Total Participation Techniques (TPT) that can promote oral language development for ELLs. ● Explore some interactions and discuss how they might be applied in your setting. Objectives ● Implement a protocol to help teachers share challenges in their settings: What? So What? Now What? ● Learn about new TPT strategies from The Language-Rich Classroom. ● Discuss how certain interactions can enhance oral language for students in your setting.	● Total participation techniques ● Interactions ● Review and reflect on group norms

Appendix C

Participant Questionnaire

Participant Questionnaire *(sent via Google Forms)*

The questionnaire was sent out to participants prior to the start of the first vertical PLC session. The questionnaire was intended to gather baseline information on the participants and their current experiences collaborating with other teachers and the role vocabulary instruction has in their teaching currently.

1. How many years have you been teaching?

   (fill in the answer)

2. What grade levels and content areas have you taught (list all)?

   (short answer)

3. What grade level do you currently teach (select all that apply)?

   K   1st   2nd   3rd

4. How often do you get the opportunity to collaborate with teachers from your same grade level?

   2- 3 times per week   once a week   once a month   once a year   never

5. How would you rate the overall effectiveness of the collaboration occurring within your grade level PLCs?

   Highly effective   effective   somewhat effective   not effective

6. Describe a typical PLC meeting with your grade level.

   (short answer)

7. How often do you get the opportunity to collaborate with teachers from different grade levels?

   2- 3 times per week   once a week   once a month   once a year   never

8. What barriers might you anticipate for working across grade levels?

(short answer)

9. Please describe the types of collaborations (formally or informally) you have with teachers from different grade levels.

   (short answer)

10. How often do you talk across grade level about vocabulary instruction?

    2- 3 times per week   once a week   once a month   once a year   never

11. Please comment on your personal goals for participating in this vertical PLC. What aspects of vocabulary instruction are you wanting to learn more about? What do you hope to get out of this collaborative experience?

    (short answer)

12. Please comment if there is anything else you think I should know.

    (short answer)

Appendix D

Facilitator Observation Protocol

Session Number and Date			
Start and End Time			
Location			
Participants in attendance			
Interactions/Behaviors	**Observed**	**Not Observed**	**Notes**
Goals set for the meeting			
Use of protocols			
Adherence to established norms			
All participants' voices heard			
Discussing and resolving conflict			
Giving and seeking advice			
Collaborative review of artifacts			
Sharing ideas			
Positive nonverbal gestures			
Negative nonverbal gestures			
Vocabulary strategies			
Other comments			

Appendix E

Meeting Agenda

Date:	Attendees:
Date the session took place	*List of teachers present during the session*

Activity	Notes
Name and description of the activity	*Observations and notes on how the activity went.*

Appendix F

Participant Reflection Form

The reflection form was shared with the participants at the conclusion of each session. This allowed the participants to fill out the form directly after the session. The reflection form was intended to gather information on participants' experiences, their perception of the effectiveness of the sessions, and their thoughts on how to improve the next session.

Sessions one through four:

1. How did you interact with the other members during today's session?
2. Share an instance from today's session that was the most valuable.
3. Share something you found to be least valuable.
4. What is something you would like to see happen during our next session?
5. What is something from today's session regarding vocabulary instruction that you can directly implement with your students?
6. What is something from today's session regarding collaboration that you can bring back to your grade level PLC?

Session five:
1. How did you interact with the other members during today's session?
2. Share an instance from today's session that was the most valuable.
3. Share something you found to be least valuable.
4. What is something you would like to see happen during our next session?
5. What is something from today's session regarding vocabulary instruction that you can directly implement with your students?
6. What is something from today's session regarding collaboration that you can bring back to your grade level PLC?
7. What is something from the pst sessions that you have brought back and shared at your grade level PLC?

Session six:
1. How have your interactions with members evolved throughout the past 6 sessions?

2. Share an instance from today's session that was the most valuable.

3. Share something you found to be least valuable.

4. What is something from today's session regarding vocabulary instruction that you can directly implement with your students?

5. What is something from today's session regarding collaboration that you can bring back to your grade level PLC?

6. How has participating in the sessions contributed to your professional growth?

Appendix G

Focus Group Interview Protocol

The focus group interview occurred after the last vertical PLC session.

"Thank you for agreeing to participate in the last five sessions and for agreeing to share your experiences in this focus interview. We are meeting today because you have participated in a vertical professional learning community focused on vocabulary instruction. Before we begin I wanted to set some guidelines for the discussion. First, there are no right or wrong answers to the questions that I will be asking. Please be honest with your responses. This interview is an opportunity for you to share your experiences and perceptions of participating in the last five sessions. Second, the discussion will be audio recorded so please try to have one person speak at a time. Before speaking make sure to restate your name for the recording. Lastly, my role as moderator is to guide the discussion. I will not be a participant any further than moving the discussion along."

1. How would you describe your experiences as a member of the vertical PLC?
2. How does the group help inform your own instructional planning?
3. In what ways does the work of the group influence your approach to teaching vocabulary?
4. What did you find to be most effective?
   a. What are the strengths of the PLC?
5. What do you feel needs improvement?
   a. What are the weaknesses of the PLC?
6. What has been the biggest take away from participating in the vertical PLC sessions?
   a. How has the vertical PLC shaped the way you think about vocabulary instruction?
   b. How has the vertical PLC shaped the way you think about collaboration?
7. Moving forward, what would you like to see happen with our PLC?
8. In your expert opinion, what types of supports need to be in place to help foster vertical PLCs within the school?
9. How could you bring some of what you learned from these sessions back to your grade level PLCs?