

# VOCABULARIANS

Integrated Word Study in the Middle Grades

Brenda J. **Overturf** with Leslie H. **Montgomery** and Margot Holmes **Smith**



# Contents

Acknowledgments • v
Introduction • 1
Chapter 1: Why Focus on Vocabulary Development? • 9
Chapter 2: Organizing for Middle Grades Vocabulary Development • 31
Chapter 3: Words and Context • 53
Chapter 4: Developing Morphological Awareness • 71
Chapter 5: A Deeper Dive into Words and Phrases • 89
Chapter 6: Creative Practice for Vocabulary Prowess • 117
Chapter 7: Assessing Vocabulary Learning • 141
Epilogue • 163
Appendix A: Crystal Ball Words • 173
Appendix B: Concept of Definition Map • 174
Appendix C: Semantic Feature Analysis • 175
Appendix D: Adapted Frayer Model • 176
Appendix E: Vocabulary Journal Organizer • 177
References • 179

# INTRODUCTION

A bright June sun beckoned as the academic year slowed to an end at Eastside Middle School in Mt. Washington, Kentucky. Anticipation permeated the room—a mixture of excitement that the semester was almost over and early nostalgia for the kids and teachers who would soon disperse. I recognized the feeling, as the building began to transform from a place where students live and learn every day to an almost haunted space during the empty summer months.

Kerrigan and I were tucked into a corner of the library. She sat on a sofa across from me, cheerfully chatting about her vocabulary experiences during that spring of her eighth-grade year. After she explained why she thought it was important to learn new words, our talk turned to challenges.

“So, was there any particular word that gave you a hard time this year?” I asked.

Kerrigan tossed her long braid and thought a minute. “I don’t know . . . Yeah, it was a word like coll . . . ? Cloak? Colloak?”

I took a guess. “Colloquial?”

She brightened. “Yes! *Colloquial*—I still can’t pronounce that word! Like, I had never heard it or seen it before. So I was like, I don’t even know what this is! And then when I found out, I thought it was ironic that it was such a big word and it just means something casual.”

I hid my smile at the example of irony in her statement. Only a middle schooler could be so naive and so wise at the same time! And even though Kerrigan still had a hard time pronouncing this particular challenging word, she certainly knows what it means. She can recognize it in text and interpret the meaning in context, and she can use the word in her own writing. She also now knows the meaning of many other terms that will help her in high school and beyond. Kerrigan has learned to be fascinated by words and the turn of a phrase.

# The Birth of a Vocabulary Plan

When Leslie Montgomery, Margot Holmes Smith, and I wrote *Word Nerds: Teaching All Students to Learn and Love Vocabulary* (2013), we set out to describe the strategic, intentional vocabulary plan we had implemented in their elementary school classrooms. I worked with Margot and Leslie for more than two years, observing lessons and working as a team to refine vocabulary instruction and assessment.

These two teachers are, quite frankly, remarkable at what they do. On our journey, we observed culturally diverse elementary grades students developing an enthusiastic desire to tackle the meanings of unfamiliar words in reading and to use the new words in their speech and writing. Most of Margot's and Leslie's students are growing up in poverty, and many had experienced little academic language outside of school. Before we began our vocabulary study, the students had rarely been challenged to learn the often sophisticated terms used in texts from various content areas. Because Leslie and Margot care deeply that their students are prepared for higher learning, they recognized that weak vocabulary knowledge was a major barrier to their success. Their kids did not have "word confidence" and were afraid to take risks with language.

Although there are many excellent resources available on both vocabulary research and vocabulary strategies, *Word Nerds* showed teachers how to implement comprehensive vocabulary instruction in ways that engage students. Leslie, Margot, and I described an easily adapted, research-based, five-part plan for teaching vocabulary and word-learning strategies. No special materials were needed—just good planning and teaching that meets the needs of all students.

The two-week word study cycle for elementary students described in *Word Nerds* includes the following:

1. Introducing, in context, five to seven carefully selected words and relating these words to the students' lives as they begin keeping vocabulary journals.
2. Adding two appropriate synonyms/examples and two appropriate antonyms/non-examples of each word and completing vocabulary journal entries.
3. Practicing vocabulary using active and engaging strategies involving art, music, drama, technology, literature, writing, movement, games, and test-taking skills.
4. Celebrating word learning with a vocabulary party, which secretly serves as a review.
5. Assessing students' knowledge of words from the two-week vocabulary cycle, as well as some words from previous cycles.

Leslie's and Margot's students thrived within this framework. They began learning and loving vocabulary, recognizing and relating words to concepts from subjects other than language arts, and using new vocabulary in their conversations and writing. And here's more

good news: Teachers throughout the country, in varied schools and grade levels, shared how they used and adapted *Word Nerds* in their own classrooms to achieve similar results. Other high-poverty schools, including schools with large numbers of English language learners, as well as schools serving more affluent students have contacted us. Teachers of hearing-impaired students, speech language pathologists, and special education teachers have also shared their successes. We have found that all elementary children can learn and love new vocabulary when teachers learn and love teaching word study in ways that make sense to students.

## Turning to the Middle Level

*Word Nerds* focuses on grades kindergarten through five and is ideal for teachers who have access to their students most of the school day. Since *Word Nerds* was published, however, many teachers, principals, curriculum directors, and staff developers have reached out to us and asked, “Are you planning to write a middle school version? We need to know how to adapt this for our older kids!”

Of course, we know that middle grades students greatly need vocabulary development. But the typical schedule of forty-five- to sixty-minute classes with a range of teachers looks very different from an elementary school schedule. This presents distinct challenges to the unified and comprehensive vocabulary model shown in *Word Nerds*. Students at the middle level are also different from elementary students in significant ways as they grow physically, emotionally, psychologically, and socially. This means a unique set of instructional needs must be met if students in the middle grades are going to be successful. While teachers of students in grades five through nine may understand that vocabulary is important, they often need to know more about how to teach students to become word learners beyond assigning vocabulary lists to memorize each week. And then there is the question of who should actually be responsible for vocabulary teaching in the middle grades as students travel from teacher to teacher.

How do I know? I spent twenty years in the classroom, teaching grades one through eight in city, suburban, and rural schools. I taught fifth and sixth grades in a self-contained elementary classroom and grades six through eight in a departmentalized middle school, and I was the leader of an interdisciplinary middle school team that was known for innovation. My classes have contained gifted students, students with disabilities, and students whose first language was not English. I also have some experience teaching middle grade mathematics, science, and social studies, but for the most part, I concentrated in English language arts. I am all too familiar with the juggling act of trying to balance reading instruction, writing instruction, and language development—while meeting the varied needs of students in one

## WHY FOCUS ON VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT?

*The limits of my language are the limits of my mind. All I know is what I have words for.*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

It is an indisputable fact: Knowing more words usually leads to better success in school. At least one hundred years of research has demonstrated the importance of vocabulary development to academic progress. In one of the most prominent vocabulary studies, Keith Stanovich found that students who have a solid word base get ahead faster and achieve more in school, while students with a less-developed vocabulary tend to progress more slowly (Stanovich 1986). He named this theory the Matthew effect, after the Bible verse that is often paraphrased as, “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.”

Students with strong vocabulary knowledge make more extensive connections to words they already know, so they learn more new words at a faster pace. Students who do not possess such a vocabulary base also learn words but not as quickly or as extensively. This achievement gap often grows as students advance through school. Gaps in reading performance are typically associated with gaps in vocabulary knowledge (Anderson and Nagy 1991; Stahl and Fairbanks 1986).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), considered the nation’s report card, began assessing vocabulary as part of reading passage comprehension in 2009 and conducted a further study to understand the results (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 2012). The NAEP study showed that students who scored higher on vocabulary questions also scored higher in reading comprehension and that students’ ability to determine the meanings of words was directly related to reading achievement. Instead of testing words in isolation, NAEP asks students to read passages and determine how words are used in particular contexts. As the report states, “a reader may understand the meaning of ‘acute’ in the context of mathematics to describe the angles of a triangle, but may not

of additional words. Developing word consciousness means an awareness and appreciation of the myriad words in the English language. When we take delight in words and play with language, we create a sense of significance as well as fun around words and word learning (Bromley 2007).

For students to become more word conscious, we can create vocabulary floods where classrooms are inundated with interesting words and phrases (Blachowicz and Fisher 2010; Brabham et al. 2012; Pressley 2008). In literacy-rich classrooms flooded with vocabulary, students are surrounded by a wealth of words even in content areas.

### Adding Synonyms and Antonyms

One way to generate a vocabulary flood and begin to expand our students' web of words is to add synonyms or examples and antonyms or nonexamples to the words we choose for deep study. If students learn six vocabulary words and then two synonyms/examples and two antonyms/nonexamples for each word, they are actually learning six vocabulary networks containing thirty total words during a two-week cycle. Adding synonyms and antonyms also reinforces word relationships and connections, which is key to learning new vocabulary (Mountain 2007). From those thirty words, students' word networks expand even further. This is an essential part of the vocabulary plan we described in *Word Nerds* and is described in more detail in Chapter 5 of this book.

### Concept Word Walls

A concept word wall is an alphabetical list of terms and phrases representing important concepts in the disciplines to be used as a reference. The words are often written on cards or sentence strips and then placed prominently on the classroom wall or on a bulletin board where students can refer to them in writing and discussion. When we create concept word walls and introduce the words to kids, we help them become more aware of words that are related to the topic under study. For instance, at Bowman content-area teachers posted word walls of important content words for the units that corresponded to their discipline. Teachers drew attention to the words throughout the unit of study, teachers and students used the words in discussion, and students were expected to use the words in written assignments.

Word walls have been found to be effective in providing a “conversational scaffold” about words and their meanings (Brown and Concannon 2014) and can be an important tool to help students to develop disciplinary vocabulary. An interesting idea that middle grade schools can replicate is to place a large word wall containing color-coded content-area words (science