

Sabbatical Report- Spring 2011  
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Improving Writing through Intensive Vocabulary Intervention

**Summary of Sabbatical Semester:**

I used the time during my sabbatical leave to conduct a research project investigating the impact of an intensive vocabulary intervention on Middle School student writing. The intervention was conducted at University Charter Middle School(UCMS) in collaboration with Dr. Mary Adler and her University 498 students. This intervention study builds on my previous scholarship focused on interventions for students who are struggling readers. Dr. Adler and I modified the Core Intervention Model presented in my text "Early Reading Interventions" to examine the effectiveness of the model for improving middle school students writing skills.

**Project Overview:**

Writing in middle school is at a critical stage in the United States. For example, 75% of 8th grade students in California are below proficient in their writing skills, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Salahu-Din, Persky & Miller, 2008). Vocabulary is an integral component to writing proficiency as measured by these and similar assessments. For example, the most recent specifications for scoring NAEP writing prompts explicitly address word choice and lexical awareness: successful writers have the ability to "decide what words will most precisely and clearly express their ideas and what words will support their purpose for writing" (Act, Inc., 2007, p. 67).

Despite this explicit emphasis on vocabulary complexity, the field of research has been largely silent on the best way for teachers to increase students' productive, *written* vocabulary. Teachers have been offered a number of best practices for teaching *receptive* vocabulary, including the use of word families, teaching words in context, teaching word parts such as prefixes and suffixes, and providing word walls where language for a new topic is clearly displayed and used. These instructional practices are largely designed for whole class instruction and for the purpose of improving reading comprehension. Information for teachers on ways to teach students vocabulary to enhance their writing performance is largely absent.

Many students have developed a strong written vocabulary not through instruction, but through reading high quality literature and then trying out the words they use in their writing. For students with persistent gaps in their vocabulary knowledge, more support is needed. Students may have gaps for a variety of reasons including lack of regular exposure to quality literature, problems interfering with reading comprehension, or difficulty translating vocabulary from reading to writing. Regardless of the source, we believe that students with these gaps need additional assistance beyond regular instruction to improve their ability to access, select and use more effective vocabulary in writing.

To meet this need, we combined an effective intervention model, the Core Intervention Model (CIM; Gerber et. al, 2004; Richards & Leafstedt, 2010) with three different strategies for improving vocabulary. We conducted the interventions in small groups over a six-week period in a Middle school class at UCMS. The results of our study are currently being examined, however the initial analysis provided sufficient evidence to state that one of the three intervention strategies was highly effective in improving students writing abilities.

### **Summary of Work/Outcomes:**

The sabbatical period offered me the opportunity to fully engage in running a school-based intervention project. This type of project requires intensive amounts of time preparing tutors and implementing the intervention. During the sabbatical period the intervention was prepared, conducted and completed. Data has been entered and partially analyzed. Three products have been completed or partially completed as of the writing of this report. First, Dr. Adler, myself, and the 498 presented the intervention at the Sage research forum in May, 2011. The project was well received. Secondly, I have submitted an article for peer review to *Intervention in Schools and Clinic* and hope to have a publication date in 2012. Lastly, a conference proposal was submitted for the Council for Exceptional Children National conference to be held in April 2012.

This project will continue to inform my teaching and scholarship. The successful intervention methods will be integrated into my teaching methods course, SPED 544. The project will provide pilot data to support a grant proposal revision to be submitted to the Institute for Educational Science at the Department of Education.