

# Oral Language Project Boosts Preschoolers' Vocabulary in St. Louis



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DEPARTMENT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING | SUSAN B. NEUMAN, CHAIR  
239 Greene Street, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor | New York, New York 10003-7599 | [www.steinhardt.nyu.edu/teachlearn](http://www.steinhardt.nyu.edu/teachlearn)

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## TEACHERS REPORT GREATER INTEREST IN BOOKS AND RICHER CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

*During the 2013-14 school year, 10 pre-K teachers in the St. Louis Public Schools participated in a pilot project designed to increase the oral language development of their students. Using an engaging set of fiction and non-fiction books, the teachers introduced new vocabulary to the children, built lessons around topics in science and social studies and watched as children began to incorporate the new words into their own play. The project is informing pre-K teachers' practice across the district and serves as a model for other schools looking to create language- and content-rich early-childhood classrooms.*

Kathy Collins used to fall back on the vocabulary words she knew that her pre-K students could understand. After all, she didn't want to lose their attention.

But now this teacher at Hamilton Elementary School in St. Louis incorporates new and challenging words and phrases into her lessons on a daily basis to engage the preschoolers in detailed discussions about everything from plants to dinosaurs.

"Leaves, stems, roots, photosynthesis, life cycle," the students say as they review the vocabulary words they've been learning as part of their study of plants. But they're not just repeating what she says. They understand the concepts.

"It means there is sun and light and it goes to the flower and it grows," one of the girls says with confidence, giving her definition of photosynthesis.



Ms. Collins, center, lets her students touch the dry soil in the pot as they talk about how plants and other living things need water to grow.

“And they are using those words at home, and that is beautiful,” Ms. Collins says. “One girl, she is talking now. When she came in, she wasn’t.”

Ms. Collins’ excitement—and the new emphasis in her classroom on building students’ vocabulary—is part of a research project focused on giving teachers the tools they need to develop young children’s oral language skills. Expanding children’s vocabulary and building their knowledge of what those words mean better prepares them to comprehend text when they begin reading, experts say. And with the Common Core State Standards bringing a shift toward more non-fiction and “informational” text, a project like this serves as a timely model for other early-childhood classrooms.

Called “Promoting Content-Rich Oral Language Development,” the initiative is a partnership between the Albert Shanker Institute in Washington, D.C. and Dr. Susan Neuman, a professor of teaching and learning at New York University. The project has been an effort to encourage more “deliberate and systematic use” of language in early-childhood classrooms, Dr. Neuman says.

“We picked oral language because it’s a foundation for anything that teachers will teach in preschool,” she says. “We want to see teachers use more sophisticated words with kids, to not be afraid of using complex language. Kids listen when they hear unusual words.”

The project was also an excellent fit for the St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS) because of several other developments that were taking place to improve and expand early-childhood education in the city.

First, the district—with the urging and support of the local teachers’ union, AFT-St. Louis—began expanding its pre-K program in 2011, hoping to reach the many children in the district who were not receiving any early learning services. Annual enrollment in school-based pre-K classrooms has increased from about 1,300 to over 2,300. And now the trend of children not enrolling in school until the compulsory attendance age of 7 is beginning to reverse.

Second, AFT-St. Louis received a three-year grant from the AFT Innovation Fund that was focused on providing pre-K teachers with targeted professional development that would meet their needs. Prior to the grant, the pre-K teachers—if they received any professional development at all—would participate in sessions geared toward those teaching the other elementary grades.

A pre-K working group was created to give the teachers more say in designing their own professional development. This created a forum in which educators could ask for training that is specifically geared to their work with young children, such as ways to help strengthen students’ oral language skills. The resulting professional development sessions have also included paraprofessionals in an effort to increase their instructional skills and create a more team-oriented approach in the classroom. In Collins’s class, for example, teaching assistant Ebony Sanders brings up the right displays or videos on the Promethean white board that coincide with what Collins is teaching the students.

Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon, who has made expanding preschool a priority of his administration, has even recognized the district’s focus on early learning as a strong example of pulling together “toward a shared goal.”

It was within this new environment that Dr. Neuman and the Albert Shanker Institute began their work in St. Louis. At the district's request, Neuman and colleagues designed and helped administer an assessment instrument that could be used to document classroom improvements in the coming years.

"I'm impressed with how the district is using data to make fundamental changes in children's achievement," she says. "Oral language development is the foundation for literacy learning, and these teachers are making a difference in children's lives."



Teachers participate in one of the summer institutes.

But the heart of the effort was the Shanker Institute's "Let's Talk! Oral Language Development" professional development program, designed by Dr. Neuman. The two-day seminar for teachers and paraprofessionals was offered during the summers of 2012 and 2013. The seminar focused on how to address the "word gap" that affects many children from at-risk circumstances, such as those growing up in poverty, from non-English-speaking homes or whose mothers have low education levels.

In the seminar, participants learned about the key concepts of language development, language diversity and bilingualism, and how to better organize their classrooms and classroom instruction to be more successful. The teachers also learned about research on effective classroom arrangements, activities to enrich circle time, ways to enhance children's dramatic- and free-play activities, how to make "read-alouds" more helpful, and how to make informational texts more engaging and use them in combination with fictional storybooks.

Dr. Neuman stresses that to build children's content knowledge, it's not just important that they learn words, but that they learn "networks of words" related to particular topics—such as the words related to plants in Collins's classroom.



## A CONCERTED EFFORT

Building on the summer seminars, the Shanker initiative also launched a pilot project to test whether a more systematic focus on children's oral language skills would lead to stronger than average gains in literacy.

Ten control classrooms were randomly selected along with 10 "treatment" classrooms, all of which employ the Project Construct curriculum. In addition to the summer seminars, all of the treatment teachers had been given an additional day of advanced training in oral language development, preparing them to help train additional peers within the district.



A sign made by students at Columbia Elementary School

In the treatment classrooms, teachers were given access to sample lesson plans and theme-based text sets—including both fiction and non-fiction books—focused on subjects such as autumn, dinosaurs, plants, ponds, oceans and bugs. "To get 50 to 60 books at one time is a delight for our teachers," says Marilyn Bohnsack, a consultant on the project who worked as a special education coordinator and in early childhood before retiring from SLPS. She was also a Head Start director. The project, she added, was a concerted effort to build a variety of content-rich books.

But incorporating the text sets into their classrooms was somewhat of a challenge for the teachers—especially if they are accustomed to following a routine, Ms. Bohnsack adds. "It's not a book that you've read to the kids for the past 15 years on the same week in October," she says.

Despite these adjustments, the teachers say their students responded enthusiastically to the books—particularly to the vibrant pictures—and have shown as much interest in the non-fiction selections as they typically do the storybooks.

The children in Stephanie Winters' class at Hickey Elementary would ask for the books to read more than once.

“This oral language pilot project has made me more aware of the vocabulary that my students are using in their daily conversations while at play,” she says. “I noticed that during their play they incorporated more of the vocabulary from our units than they did prior to this program.”

Ms. Collins says that she especially liked the way the books and lessons connected to other subject areas, especially science, giving her multiple opportunities to incorporate the vocabulary words into activities throughout the day. In fact, the lessons, Dr. Neuman says, were “designed to focus on children’s natural interest in science.”

Other teachers also report that they are seeing a heightened interest among their students in both the books and in using the words they are learning.

“Those books are making them want to go to the library more. They’re even going on their own,” adds Sarah Demezier, a second-year teacher at Sigel Elementary.



One of Mr. Demezier's students leads the class discussion on the calendar.

Sharing a book with the students on how a pumpkin grows, Ms. Demezier takes the time to talk about the features of the book itself. While the official name for the page Ms. Demezier points to escapes one girl, she is still eager to explain its purpose.

“It’s the thing that takes you to the pages,” she says about the table of contents. “Anything you want to find, you go to the pages and you can find it.”

Ms. Demezier’s students also lead the morning “circle time” discussions on topics such as the calendar and the weather, while their teacher gives them small reminders if needed. This practice gives the students even more opportunities to practice the new vocabulary they have been learning, as they use the pointer and take on the teacher role.

"I knew I wanted to do that," Ms. Demezier says. "They are supposed to be in charge of their learning."

A handmade poster hangs on the wall outside the office at Columbia Elementary School. It reads "Words Matter" in bright marker ink and is a colorful reminder of the work happening in the two pre-k classrooms downstairs.



Ms. Bluett and her students rehearse a song for the end-of-the-year assembly.

"It's easier to teach someone if they're interested," says Christine Bluett, an early-childhood teacher since 1995 and one of the teachers in the treatment group. "Then I'm not directing it so much. I take a back seat."

She says her students were particularly drawn to the books on dinosaurs. She showed them small clips of "Jurassic Park"—in which the creatures

are shown peacefully grazing in a field—to give her students an idea of what the prehistoric animals might have looked like. And the children discussed whether they might see a dinosaur roaming the earth today.

Dinosaurs were also a popular topic in Robin Jung's class at Laclede Elementary. "I know

my students increased their vocabulary by using the text sets just by the discussions we have," says Ms. Jung, who was part of the pilot project. "When I say the word extinct, predator, humongous, paleontologist, habitat, nutritious, larva and even metamorphosis, several of my students are able to define these terms."

## FOUNDATION FOR COMMON CORE STANDARDS

The attention to developing children's language, however, has not been limited to the teachers in the treatment group. In fact, once the study was completed, Ms. Bohnsack gave a set of books to one of the control group teachers that had been eager to use the materials.

"You would have thought she'd won the lottery," Ms. Bohnsack said about the teacher's reaction.

At Laclede, Ms. Jung's two colleagues became interested in the books, and together the students in the three pre-K classrooms worked with 4th grade "buddies" on a dinosaur research project.



“The kids loved working with the older students and were very proud of the end results,” she says. Many others have begun to use the strategies from the summer seminars to blend more informational texts into their teaching in an effort to better prepare students for the Common Core.

Jane O'Donnell, a pre-K teacher at Ames Visual and Performing Arts Elementary School, says she appreciated the “guidance as to what vocabulary words we were to focus on and the fact that the text sets build on each other so the vocabulary, and concepts were repeated.”

“For pre-K students, it takes time to develop the background knowledge that leads to the students actually internalizing the concepts and vocabulary enough to use them themselves,” Ms. O'Donnell adds. “The repetition of concepts from text set to text set helped greatly, and as time went on the kids were asking deeper questions and making good observations based on the build up of knowledge.”



A student in Mr. Sanders' class waits for his turn to talk.

The emphasis on learning—and using—new vocabulary is especially clear in Albert Sanders' class at Adams Elementary. A member of the pre-K working group, Mr. Sanders has been a role model for other teachers and a strong advocate for seeing the work continue beyond the Shanker initiative and the AFT Innovation Fund grant.

He also recently participated in Teaching and Learning 2014, a conference of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, where he spoke on a panel about oral language development with Dr. Neuman, Barbara Bowman, one of the faculty founders of Chicago's esteemed Erikson Institute, and Libby Doggett, the deputy assistant secretary for policy and early learning in the U.S. Department of Education.

In his class, reading a story isn't only about following the plot. It's an open conversation, an exploration of new words and a chance to analyze the text— experiences that are preparing students for the Common Core standards that will require them to provide evidence from the text to back up their answers. This is the beginning of “close reading”—in which students spend extended amounts of time on shorter passages to grasp the important details that surround the main point of a text.

Reading “Afrotina and the Three Bears” by Fred Crump—a new take on the classic fairytale—Mr. Sanders asks his students to compare and contrast the book with what they know from the original. They learn that Afrotina's “flowery parasol” is similar to Goldilocks' umbrella, and that porridge is thicker than soup.

One girl provides an extended answer when contrasting the endings of the two books—how Goldilocks runs away and is never seen again and how Afrotina returns to the bears' home with food for Baby Bear and a mended chair.

"If that was a MAP question, you would get all your points," Mr. Sanders brags, referring to the Missouri Assessment Program. "You put all those details in there."

And when one girl interrupted the story to ask what it meant that Afrotina was "wailing," Mr. Sanders didn't even have to respond. "It means crying really loud," a classmate answered.



Albert Sanders and his students use a chart to compare and contrast "Afrotina" and "Goldilocks"

The oral language project has been especially beneficial to children who come into preschool with limited language abilities, the teachers say. Mr. Sanders talks about a couple of special education students in his class who have made remarkable gains.

"Before it was one-word answers," he says. "Now they're expanding on their answers."

## MAINTAINING PROGRESS AND MOVING FORWARD

As teachers prepare for next school year, they have begun to discuss how to maintain the progress that has been made over the past year and to give more teachers access to these rich curricular and professional development resources.

"It's a good model and it needs to be introduced to teachers early in their pre-service," says Bohnsack, who also served as a coach to the teachers throughout the project.

Teachers say they intend to continue using the text sets and hope that they become available across the district.

"We are already discussing how next school year we may need to spend more than two weeks on some of the subjects," Ms. Jung says.

Plans are in place to keep the pre-K working group together so the members can continue to have input into choosing the professional development that would be most useful to teachers of young children. Even if the district decides to target a particular content area or topic, the working group can suggest what strategies or approaches might work best for pre-K teachers, says Mr. Sanders. After all, notes Dr. Neuman, oral language is the primary means by which young children learn to comprehend all content areas.

Under the leadership of Associate Superintendent Paula Knight, the school district has also created teams of teachers to provide an early-childhood perspective on topics such as assessment, report cards and the teacher evaluation system.

Dr. Neuman adds that she would like to see other districts take advantage of the lesson plans. Burnie Bond, director of programs at the Albert Shanker Institute, said plans are under way to create an online portal featuring early-childhood education resources for educators and parents that will include materials from the oral language seminars.

"Early childhood education, generally, and the link between early oral language development and later school success, specifically, has been a priority issue for the Albert Shanker Institute for years," says Ms. Bond. We are glad to see that it's finally receiving the attention it deserves."

She recently spoke on a panel addressing the "word gap," organized by the Campaign for Grade Level Reading. The panel also included Ann O'Leary, director of the children and families program at Next Generation and Andrea Riquetti, director of Providence Talks, a citywide effort to close the word gap and improve children's readiness for school.

## "TEACHING IT FUN"



Ms. Collins' students sketch flowers as they talk about how plants grow.

After 30 years in the classroom—and seven in SLPS—Ms. Collins seems to be renewed by this project and hopeful about her students' success as they move into kindergarten.

Her enthusiasm shows in how she reads "A Dandelion's Life," by John Himmelman, one of the non-fiction books in the text set on plants.

She doesn't sit down when she reads. With outstretched arms, she demonstrates floating through the air like the dandelion seed in the book. She grabs a small flower from a vase and presses it into the fur of a stuffed animal to show how the seed "hitches a ride." And all of the students jump out of their seats with their arms raised over their heads when they hear the word "sprout."

"I bring in props to make my lesson pop," she says "If you teach it fun, they learn it and go with it."

### **Let's Talk Oral Language**

Learn more about the Albert Shanker Institute's oral language professional development module and other early childhood programs at this link:

[http://www.shankerinstitute.org/  
early-childhood-education/](http://www.shankerinstitute.org/early-childhood-education/)