# Learning From Each Other:
## Making the VISITAS™ Process our Own

*by Kelly Bradley—Teacher, Lockwood Elementary School, Clovis, NM*

At the start of a new school year, teachers are scrambling to get everything ready and intent on settling in with our new students. We work hard to start the new year off right. The last thing we want to hear is that there is going to be another training to prepare for in-class observations! In school year 2017-2018, my colleagues and I were pleased to learn that this round of observations would be in our hands as teachers; we would be in charge of the focus and would decide how our observations would be used. The staff came together to use DLeNM's VISITAS™ process to find out how to make our school better as a whole and improve our instruction (for a detailed explanation of VISITAS™, please access the Winter 2016 issue of Soleado at *www.dlenm.soleado).*

I'm a first-grade teacher at Lockwood Elementary School in Clovis, a city of about 38,000 people on the eastern plains of New Mexico. Lockwood Elementary is a Title I school with 389 students, 38% of whom are labeled as English learners. Lockwood Elementary teachers and administrators are committed to providing our K-6 students with a high-quality education. With that goal in mind, our Instructional Council invited Dual Language Education of New Mexico to train the Council in Contextualized Learning for Access, Validation, Equity, and Success (CLAVES™). An important component of CLAVES™ is the VISITAS™ process by which small groups of teachers visit each other's classrooms for a non-evaluative opportunity to observe the classroom environment and watch their colleagues' instruction. The Instructional Council had the staff meet in small groups to discuss what professional development sessions we had attended and what areas of instruction we as teachers would like to improve. After much discussion, we decided to focus on language— teacher talk, student-to-student talk, and the development of academic vocabulary. Our students often struggle to express their higher-order thinking, giving the deceiving impression that they are unable to keep up with grade-level content. Rather, their academic English language skills are not yet developed enough to reflect their thinking.

I teach in an English classroom with students at varying levels of English proficiency. It can be very frustrating for young learners to be unable to fully express themselves, so I wanted to give them as much support as I could both in and out of the classroom. We also wanted our students to be able to use academic vocabulary correctly during class discussions and when answering written questions. We believe that all of our students would benefit from a focus on language—on producing well-constructed oral and written sentences. In VISITAS™ terminology, we now had our "look fors"!

The next step was to arrange for peer observations or classroom visits … this was the part that made everyone nervous. When teachers hear the word, "observation," we automatically get stressed and start trying to plan exactly what we are going to say and how and where we are going to stand. The staff was split into two groups: those being observed and those observing. The next time we went through this process, we flipped the roles. This gave all of the teachers the opportunity to be in both positions.

The observing group was split into two different groups and were given the specific classrooms their group was going to observe. Everyone had their look for instructional-focus forms, clip boards, and pencils in hand. The instructional-focus forms were very simple: most importantly, there were to be no teacher names recorded, each classroom was numbered by the first classroom visited, the second classroom, and so on. Our visits to each classroom lasted about 10-15 minutes. During that time, we were to record only what we saw and heard—were there sentence stems posted, what kind of language did the students use when they spoke to each other? We avoided any evaluative comments, even positive ones! Once everyone was done observing in the classrooms they were assigned, the group met to chart all of the quantitative data that was collected, for example, "2 out of 5 classrooms had sentence stems posted," "in 4 out of 5 classrooms the desks were arranged to maximize team or group

work," or "in 1 of 5 classrooms the teacher gave the students time to turn and talk to one another about information presented." At the end of the day, the staff would meet as a whole to see what the schoolwide quantitative data showed regarding the ways teachers helped students develop more academic language. As a staff, we needed to determine if our efforts were effective enough. Did we need more training? Did the staff believe that we had mastered academic language-development strategies and could start talking about our next goal or "look for" to help make our daily instruction more rigorous and give it more depth?



*A student in Ms. Bradley's class leads the students during a lesson in math.*

We devoted many staff meetings to studying the data we collected during our first VISITAS™. Since our meetings often took place in classrooms, we started to notice what was posted on classroom walls, how the rooms were setup, what charts were available as resources. Many of us started taking pictures of everything posted to reflect back on. Then we moved on to observing instruction with teachers using their planning time to visit colleagues' classrooms. We observed teachers using a variety of strategies in order to support students' use of academic language. In the accompanying picture, my students practice using sentence stems during a student-led activity. They were able to recognize and read the math vocabulary in sentence stems, discuss *What's My Place, What's My Value*, and break down the number of the day.

After observing teachers in action using different strategies, we were given time to go back to our classrooms and try them for ourselves—making adjustments according to our content and grade level. The VISITAS™ process helped keep teachers accountable for attempting new strategies and methods, which means that we had plenty of time to work on using various strategies, visit the same classroom or another to see how teachers modify

for their context and then go back and try it in our rooms. This was done over months, not days or weeks. We all knew and understood that we had to have time for observing our peers, practicing in our classrooms, and then practicing some more.

By the time we went back for our second round of formal VISITAS™, we were able to narrow down our "look fors" to the use of sentence frames as a highly effective way to promote both academic language vocabulary and more formal language structures. Our data showed that Lockwood teachers were using stems consistently across grade levels, giving our students a well-used scaffold. Sentences stems became something that teachers thought of and posted even when they weren't formally planned. As Lockwood staff became more and more comfortable with using sentence stems we were able to move on and find something else that we would like to work on as a staff to better support our students.

This year (SY 2019-20) will be Lockwood's third year of using VISITAS™; we all know what to expect and how to identify our instructional focus (planning for peer interaction), plan the observation schedule, and dump the data without stress or anxiety of being observed. We are able to talk and communicate openly with each other and volunteer our classrooms for teachers to come in and observe. We have also been able to share, without feeling like we are boasting, the strategies that we are using and want others to see. The VISITAS™ process brought us together as a staff to share thoughts and ideas, to collaborate, and even to build and expand on each other's ideas. The entire process was directed and run by Lockwood's teachers as a way to help us work together to come up with new ideas to help our students be successful. This is a program that Lockwood will keep using, because learning from each other is sometimes when we learn our best practices.