

# Teaching With a Purpose in Mind: Cultivating a Vision

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## **Abstract**

*Across the nation, educators continue to face challenges as they work to individualize instruction to meet the specific needs of their students. However, theory suggests that teachers who possess a clear vision for teaching creatively weave their personal convictions for teaching with instructional practices. Drawing upon a teacher's (first author) account of her vision and the classroom literacy practices structured over the course of one year, a practical approach is taken to address teacher visioning as a way to sustain teachers' creativity despite the pressures associated with teaching in today's educational climate.*

Recent educational reform efforts (see Race to the Top, 2009) continue to pressure educators to teach according to standardized curricula despite the fact that such efforts have been proven to fail many of the nation's students (Good, 2011). In contrast, scholars contend that by following one's vision, teachers may be able to "speak back" to institutional directives and therefore more easily meet the individual needs of their students (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Duffy, 2002; Hammerness, 2003; 2006; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2011). By creating a vision for teaching, educators are able to craft an "ideal image" of what it is they wish to accomplish in their classrooms and use this to sustain them throughout their teaching career (Hammerness, 2006). Teachers who enact a clear vision are often able to "adjust, modify, and invent" (Duffy, 2002, p. 333) as they use their vision to guide their work. Much like "a mirror... teachers [use] their vision and recognize successes as well as identifying areas for improvement" (p. 3). Gambrell and her colleagues (2011) support this claim as they suggest that "without a vision the teacher is left to sway and sputter as a candle facing the winds of curricular change and federal, district, and school level impositions" (p. 18). A teacher's vision is therefore, arguably, an essential tool in classrooms today.

Like many educators across the nation, I (first author) was frustrated with my district and my principal's efforts to enforce prescribed educational policies that did not fit the individual needs of my students. I conducted this self-study research project as a way to explore my vision for teaching, the way it was enacted, and to understand the relationship between these foundational variables and my students' literacy experiences. At the time of the study, I was a beginning doctoral candidate at a university in the southeastern part of the United States. This study began as a course assignment and was then extended to further examine how I worked to enact my vision despite teaching in a restrictive climate. The research questions guiding this study include:

1. What were the salient dimensions of my vision?
2. How were classroom activities structured to meet this vision?
3. In what ways did my students experience literacy (both their practices and their responses) as my vision was enacted?

In this article, I share my reflections about my teaching over the course of one year and focus on the ways in which I negotiated my vision for teaching literacy within the curriculum, as well as the ways in which my students participated in these literacy activities. Although I taught in a school that recommended scripted curricula, I adapted and modified the curriculum based on my vision to meet the individual needs of my students. I provide insight into my understandings about my teaching practice and suggest that through doing research of one's classroom practice, educators may sustain their vision and continue to grow.

### **Related Literature**

Many scholars have noted the ways in which prescriptive literacy programs restrict teacher autonomy and creativity (Dooley & Assaf, 2009; Pearson, Raphael, Benson & Madda, 2007; Vaughn & Parsons, 2012). Although such prescriptive measures have served to limit teachers' instructional decisions, the impact on student achievement has also generated a dismal picture. Results from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that during the time federally approved prescriptive literacy programs flooded the nation, the achievement gap in reading grew wider from the start of kindergarten in fall 1998 to the end of 3rd grade in spring 2002. More recently, according to the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the average fourth grade and eighth grade reading scores remained unchanged from 2009 scores. Such results suggest that despite federal mandates to increase student achievement in literacy, the efforts have not produced significant gains.

In contrast, scholars theorize that teacher visioning may be a way to empower educators, giving them a voice against institutional directives that have limited teachers' instructional decisions (Duffy, 2005; Hammerness, 2008; Vaughn, 2013). These studies suggest that as teachers use their vision to make decisions, they work to provide instruction they believe best fit the individual needs of their students, classrooms, and school community. According to Hammerness (2006), visions "...can help reveal how teachers conceive of their subjects and their students and how much they pay attention to each" (p. 6). Taken together, visioning suggests a viable tool to empower today's educators to teach according to their personal convictions and beliefs of what works best for their students.

Researchers have begun to examine how even very young students participate in reading activities during teacher-led literacy activities, often examining how students perform during such activities (Davis, 2007; Sipe, 2000). Toth, Dobo-Tarai, and Revak-Moarkoczi (2007) found that first graders provided detailed knowledge of complex concepts when interviewed of their understandings. Similarly, Dyson (1997), in her important work with young kindergarten students, found that young readers and writers described detailed stories about their out-of-school lives and provided clear understandings and beliefs about literacy. Building from this, the current study explored first graders' reactions to literacy instruction through the use of interviews and observations as a way to fully explore their engagement in and reaction to literacy activities and to contextualize my vision within the classroom.

Like many educators, while I had confidence in my vision, my vision was at odds with my school's recommendations. At the time, my colleagues and I were strongly encouraged to use the same scripted literacy program and to level students according to designated labels (high, medium, and low) in an effort to send them to different classrooms for ability-based reading instruction. The school claimed this practice was grounded in research and would increase students' test scores on the state-mandated

Developmental Reading Assessments (DRA; Beaver, 2006) that were given to first graders. I argued against this practice because I was opposed to labeling students as low, medium, and high. Based on my teaching experiences, such designations lowered students' confidence, turning reading into a competitive activity, and it appeared to create barriers for students. Students seemed to live up to that expectation, often believing that reading was not something they could or should do.

Additionally, teachers in grades kindergarten through second grade were pulled from their classrooms in the spring to conduct test preparation with the third through fifth grades. The administration suggested these grades needed remedial support to pass the state's assessments. Because of this, K-2 teachers were pulled each day over the course of 3 weeks, during their literacy block, to conduct small-group "skills and drills" lessons with upper elementary students. This testing blitz sent a message to K-2 that high-stakes testing was perhaps more important than the literacy instruction in the lower grades. During this time, teaching assistants were asked to conduct literacy instruction. Additionally, I was opposed to this practice because I believed that a "skills and drills" approach was not providing students with the necessary support they needed. Moreover, this approach to teaching was very distant from instructional practices I believed fit with my vision. As such, the emphasis on testing and teaching using this approach proved to be an obstacle that conflicted with my vision for teaching. In contrast, I wanted students to develop at their individual pace while participating in the literacy curriculum. Thus, I did not use the scripted curriculum program recommended by my principal and used by my colleagues. In doing so, this brought conflict, but I worked to develop instruction to meet my vision.

### Methods

With self-study, the "aim is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20). As such, the findings from this study, although highlighting just one teacher's journey, offer insights to assist other educators who face obstacles as they teach in restrictive climates. Self-study provides a lens through which educators may research their practice and explore their work. As Loughran (2007) states, "researching practice through self-study, [makes clear] personal theories," and in doing so, provide a context within which educators may examine and reflect on their practice. (p. 13). LaBoskey (2004) explained that there are four methodological dimensions of self-study: framing of practice through reflection, interrogating assumptions, multiple methods to obtain a comprehensive perspective, and a professional community to share and reflect on work as a way to assess and clarify results. In keeping with these tenets of self-study, the following study served to critically examine personal beliefs within classroom practices and teacher-reflective journal entries.

After receiving Institutional Review Board permission to conduct the study, a letter was sent home with all of my students about my research project. Parents were asked whether they wished to have their child participate in the study. After parent and student consent was obtained, I began the research project to examine the research questions: (1) What were the salient dimensions of my vision? (2) How were classroom activities structured to meet this vision? (3) In what ways did my students experience literacy (both their practices and their responses) as my vision was enacted?

## **Participants**

Thirteen of the 18 students in the classroom were interviewed based on parent and student voluntary consent. Of these 13, 5 entered the first grade reading at the pre-primer to primer reading levels, as tested by the Developmental Reading Assessment (Beaver, 2006). The remaining students entered at the first grade level or about at the start of the year. One of the students entered as a non-English speaker, fluent in Spanish. The others were European American.

## **Setting**

The setting for this study was a K–5 public elementary school, located in the Southeastern region of the United States. Seventy-six percent of students were European American, 10% were African American, 8% identified as Hispanic, and 6% identified as Other. Of the total population of students, 30% identified as economically disadvantaged as outlined by the district's fiscal report.

## **Data Collection**

Throughout the duration of the study, students participated in a variety of literacy activities, such as creating books, peer and individual reading, collaborative story making, and listening to peer-recorded books. During the school year, I recorded my thoughts in a reflective journal about these classroom activities, which addressed my vision and goals and my reflection on classroom events. As part of my district's literacy assessments, I administered the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) (Beaver, 2006) at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. This assessment measured students' reading progress, as demonstrated by reading selected passages. Participants were interviewed concerning their feelings and beliefs about literacy and literacy learning (What was your favorite part of reading? What part of reading in school was your least favorite? What part of reading was your favorite? Why? What is the best way to teach someone how to read? Why is that the best?). These questions were adapted from the Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). Interviews were transcribed and coded for related themes. Such qualitative analysis of both my reflective journal and student interviews helped to provide a richer understanding of the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2007).

## **Data Analysis**

A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the data. A research team, comprised of two professors and myself, read the journal and transcripts individually. Researchers recorded notes and memos, looking for themes and patterns related to the research questions (Merriam, 2009). Themes related to the teacher's vision were coded from the teacher reflective journal. Responses to classroom activities taken from the reflective journal notes were examined in relation to the teacher's vision as well. Dominant themes included encouraging student empowerment and their skill development through meaningful literacy practices. After independent readings, the researchers collaboratively discussed themes in the interviews. Students' responses to the interview questions supported two emerging themes: (1) the creation of spaces, and (2) the ways students used reading as a tool. Within these themes, I explore my vision as it relates to my teaching practice, and I examine the ways in which my students experience literacy (both their practices and their responses) as my vision was enacted.

## Findings and Implications

### My Vision

Analysis of my reflective journal revealed two primary dimensions of my vision for teaching literacy: 1) for my students to become *empowered*; and 2) for them to develop skills and make consistent progress in reading and writing as they engaged in *meaningful literacy activities*. By empowered, I meant that I wanted my students to feel confident about their reading abilities and to view reading as something they could do. I structured literacy activities that I believed would help to develop literacy skills while supporting students' emotional growth. Moreover, I wanted my students to develop confidence so that they could be successful and had the agency to navigate the literacy experience. To accomplish my vision, I designed my classroom in such a way that students could: 1) support one another; 2) develop literacy skills at their own pace; and 3) engage in real-world, meaningful activities. By creating multiple opportunities for all students to collaborate with one another and engage in meaningful activities, I hoped my students would build upon their existing strengths and skills as readers and writers and be able to navigate classroom activities meaningfully. Taken from my journal at the beginning of the year, I explain this:

I just want students to be able to think about what they're doing. I don't want all of the high readers to dominate the classroom. I want everyone to feel and believe that they can contribute to what we are doing. (Reflective Journal, 8/27/06)

For example, before reading workshop, I reminded students about their work as readers and writers:

Now, remember you are authors—you've all made important books for our class. When you go to interview each other, make sure to ask your fellow authors the questions you want to know about their books. (Reflective Journal, 10/5/06)

In this exchange, I remind my students that they are authors. By encouraging my students to see themselves as authors, I sought to encourage them to view themselves as readers and writers as well. I structured opportunities like this to empower my students. Another example of a project illuminates how I sought to empower and build literacy skills in my students:

The NASA robot explorer, Phoenix, was scheduled to land on Mars today, and students were so excited about it. I thought, yes, a great way to begin a unit of study on space. So over several days, students volunteered for certain research projects. They worked with each other to learn more about space. One group met with the librarian, and another group wrote to scientists (some of my friends in the science department at the local university) about their questions about space. Then, working with a partner, students chose how to display the information they learned through posters, books, dioramas, labeled drawings, or sculptures. They were so excited. To celebrate our work, the local planetarium was having a show. We took a vote to see how many wanted to go on this field trip to see the show. All said yes! (Reflective Journal, 3/11/07)

Given that my vision was to empower students as they made meaning of their work as readers and writers, I worked to structure flexible, authentic learning opportunities like this. Moreover, during the 2-hour literacy block time, students worked independently and collaboratively participating in literacy activities while I conducted small-group, mixed-ability reading instruction. I veered away from the mandated prescriptive literacy program and instead used chapter books students found interesting, periodicals, and small trade books I purchased during the 9 years of my tenure.

Taken from reflective notes, I describe my purpose in structuring the classroom to provide multiple opportunities for students to work with friends of different or same abilities while having choice in activities.

The big thing is to get them to read and to write. I want them to feel excited about doing this. I want them to say, yes, I am a reader and I am a writer! I hope that by doing the work of readers and writers that they'll get that. (Reflective Journal, 10/15/06)

In a typical day, during the literacy block, students would participate in approximately eight literacy activities of their choice. These activities were designed to meet the needs of all learners. For example, within Topic Baskets there were a range of books in a variety of reading levels. Students selected texts based on their ability and interest. The Writing Center had a variety of writing materials for students to choose from to create their stories. Within any of these literacy activities, students could regulate their own learning. For example, students could choose to create books for the class library in Make a Book Center or interview peers about their published books in Interview an Author Center. After reading a book in Topic Basket Center, students could choose how to explain what they learned, either by creating a play, writing a book, or creating puppets or posters. During Read Anything (R.A.T.), students read a variety of books and magazines in the classrooms. Centers like these were structured to allow students to regulate their learning while offering choice in activities based on their interests. Ultimately, students had the freedom and choice to participate in activities based on their interests and needs.

### **Creation of Spaces**

Students reported the excitement of reading and writing books based on their interests. Students participated actively in making meaning of the literacy tasks at hand; they modeled their writing after their favorite authors, often making their own versions of familiar stories they knew and loved. Taken from interviews, students responded with their reactions about participating in these literacy activities. By structuring flexible, collaborative activities, "spaces" opened up in the classroom, allowing students to participate in literacy at their own pace. For example, Jack described how he liked to read and make his own books based on books he found of interest:

I love those books called Diary of a Worm... Yes, they make me laugh, and also those other ones Diary of a Fly and Diary of a Spider, and Duck for President is funny too. I like making my own books but changing it all up. (Jack, 7/02/07)

Similarly, Andre commented on how after discovering comic books, he was inspired to change the way he approached writing his own books:

I like making my own comic books because they're different parts of the book. It's a little bit more fun than just the regular ones because you get to read a little and then read other parts because they're in little squares. (Andre, 5/21/07)

Henry also expressed excitement about participating in activities that provided flexibility and freedom. "I like writing. I loved it! You get to make up something. I made up those mysteries because I used the ideas from Nate the Great."

I purposefully structured the class so students could have multiple opportunities to explore a variety of materials. Such opportunities allowed me to meet my vision.

### **The Case of Chicken Little**

The Case of Chicken Little revolves around two reluctant readers, Haley and Mackie. Taken from reflective journal notes, these were my perceptions about their reading abilities at the beginning of the year.

Haley: she is really nervous and hesitant about reading aloud. I wonder why she is. Interestingly she loves talking to her friends, is the first to go and pick a buddy to read with, and loves to write.

Mackie: What a risk taker! One of the strategies I've got to work with her on is learning how to slow down and check the print and pictures for meaning. She seems to struggle with comprehending what she reads, but wow, she's not afraid of anything! (Reflective Journal, 10/06/06)

When asked during the interview what literacy activities they enjoyed most and why, Haley and Mackie described reading activities where they could read aloud to their friends.

Me and Haley read that book about the sky is falling—you know, *Chicken Little*—and we worked together. I didn't know the word the first time, then she told me, and then she didn't know a word, and then I helped her again, and we reread it, I told her. We worked together. I liked buddy reading because you get to read with a buddy and it helps you not feel so scared of reading when you read to a friend. (Haley, 3/12/07)

Haley and Mackie joined forces and made a puppet show about the story of Chicken Little. Notes from my reflective journal about this:

Mackie and Haley are busy making puppets with popsicle sticks. One is making the hen and the other the chicken. They came by during reading groups and said they were making a puppet show and if at the end of literacy time they could share it with the class. (Reflective Journal, 2/13/07)

The Case of Chicken Little is, in fact, more than just two students putting on a play (although noteworthy). Indeed, during the interview, these students described how they felt protective about their ability to read and write when they first entered first grade. They viewed reading as insurmountable and were fearful of reading to others. Haley captured this feeling:

You know when you first are learning to read...you have to read to someone that you really don't know, and it's kind of hard to read to them because ...you don't want them to make fun of you or anything like that. (Haley, 7/10/07)

Mackie expressed this same feeling:

I felt nervous because reading was something new, and I was nervous—especially when reading. I was nervous to read a lot of books to my classmates that I was reading. I was nervous about reading to them. (Mackie, 7/12/07)

Such statements underscore their primary obstacle of learning to read and their hesitation to read out loud to others. Given this, it is interesting to note that at the end of the school year, Haley and Mackie enjoyed not only reading out loud to others but performing and sharing their work as readers and writers; these two once-reluctant readers were at first protective of their abilities and then appeared to transform. This shift from a “protective” reader to a “performative” one may indicate a shift in their perception of their reading abilities. That is, they viewed themselves as a “readers” and “writers.” Perhaps, one reason for this transition was due to the fact that students in Room 101 were encouraged to adapt and modify literacy activities to meet their individual needs and interests. By designing a flexible curriculum, “spaces” opened up that provided students the freedom to reshape literacy activities to fit their needs. Similarly, Ella seemed to capture the extent to which students had the freedom to reshape these activities: “I liked the reading center. I always wrote down what I thought and then went and read it to a buddy. This wasn't really part of the reading center.”

### **Reading as a Tool**

Another significant finding involved the ways in which students used reading as a tool to connect their interests to various texts and to build their literacy skills. For example, Kyle said, “I liked to read about the different characters that could talk, and they described how they looked. I like the books that are scary—*Ghosts* and *In a Dark, Dark Room*” (Kyle). Maci stated, “I like to read about science stuff with animals, planets, different planets.” During literacy instruction, students discovered how authors and titles supported their interests and promoted the development of new interests.

Interestingly, students had the confidence to shape and reshape literacy activities to fit their needs. Students appeared to connect reading to activities outside the classroom and as a tool to get them beyond where they were. For example, Ella described reading as a way to go to places.

I really like to read because it takes you on adventures far away, so you don't have to pack anything or move away from your house. You just pick up a book and you go there. It's kind of like the *Magic Tree House*—you know how the characters can get up and go places. (Ella, 7/26/07)

Jona described how he liked to work with others as a way to build his vocabulary. “When people read, it gave me ideas about what to read and write. I could use the words in their stories and put it into my stories too.”



Overall, this self-study demonstrated how I purposefully structured the class so students could have multiple opportunities to meaningfully explore a variety of materials. Such opportunities allowed me to meet my vision, and these findings suggest that it is possible to teach according to one's vision. Although it is difficult to directly correlate one's vision to student achievement outcomes, the students in my class all progressed to well above second grade reading level at the end of the year. This study provides valuable insight into the nature of teacher visioning and the ways in which one vision can shape instructional practices to meet students' individual needs.

The findings also suggest that it is possible for teachers to be creative, adaptive, and flexible in their classroom decision making. What seems apparent in this study is that within these opportunities shaped by the enactment of my vision, my students were able to explore literacy at their own pace. Because the curriculum was flexible and provided spaces for students to interact with books and literacy according to their interests, they chose appropriate reading materials, reread texts to develop their interests, and increased fluency and understanding. They also felt that I supported their efforts without criticism. Moreover, during the interviews and throughout my time with these young readers, I often noted the excitement and creativity that seemed to result from such a flexible curriculum.

### **Limitations**

It is important to interpret this study according to several important limitations. Researcher bias within qualitative research is relevant to note. Within this study, I was the sole researcher, reflecting on my vision and purposefully seeking insight into the ways in which my instruction matched my vision. My personal feelings about teaching are reflected in my vision. Also, this reflective study was conducted over the course of one year, so we cannot know for sure that the students' progress and above-grade-level performance on the end-of-year assessments was a result of the flexible curriculum. Rather, this could very well be due to the maturation effect (i.e., students matured during the course of the study). Ideally, future studies would include additional student assessments and interviews, parent questionnaires, and school personnel interviews to provide insight into classroom literacy activities and teacher visioning. Despite its limitations, however, this study does offer a first-hand account of literacy instruction that reflects a teacher's vision. It offers compelling evidence of a teacher's vision and the extent to which classroom literacy practices were structured to support this vision.

### **Future Directions**

I see the importance of linking student achievement to my vision. As seen in my students' reading growth, their reading skills dramatically increased while participating in activities where they could develop their interests and a love for reading. Although it is difficult to associate my personal vision for teaching and this increase, it would be beneficial to explore the ways in which teacher visioning intersects more directly with student achievement. For instance, I continue to think about the ways in which classroom teachers can structure their classroom so that their students will be able to negotiate and co-create spaces within the curriculum. In my classroom, too, I wonder how I could make literacy activities even more engaging and create opportunities for students of different reading abilities to work with one another.

### Conclusion

This self-study suggests that given the current emphasis on routinized instruction and “teacher proof” curricula, it is even more important to continue discussion about teacher visioning. This study serves to examine the ways in which literacy activities, driven by a teacher’s vision, influenced classroom instruction and students’ participation within the literacy curriculum. As research has continually found, the teacher is the most important factor in the classroom (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001). Given this, we must provide teachers with the space to develop and teach according to their vision. The teacher who is knowledgeable about what works for her students and who possesses a clear vision is most likely to lead students to higher levels of achievement. Despite district and policy mandates, today’s educators must work to clearly articulate their visions and align these visions with evidence-based research. A recommendation for teachers is to think critically about their instructional vision and to articulate it clearly so that it will ultimately develop their students’ skills. A future direction is to explore the relationship between teachers’ instructional visions and student achievement data. Through self-study, teachers can articulate their visions, the obstacles they run into, and the various enactments to teaching according to their vision. In doing so, educators can become their own best advocates, ultimately creating environments where everyone (students and teachers) will thrive.

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# Examining the Sustainability of Pre-service Teachers' Visions of Literacy Instruction in Their Practice

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## Abstract

*This is a study of teachers' visions. Five participants were followed through their pre-service years in the teacher education program and into their first year of teaching to see if their vision was sustained and whether it appeared in their practice. This paper describes the coding process for visions and discusses changes that occurred in the visions as participants made the transition from pre-service to in-service teachers. The paper discusses dissonance between visions and practice and presents implications for teacher educators.*

As a teacher educator, I continually explore how to more successfully prepare high-quality reading teachers who not only know how to teach reading effectively but also possess a vision of their practice and reading instruction. Teacher visioning is a concept in teacher education that has garnered significant attention from teacher education and literacy scholars in recent years (Bransford, Derry, Berliner, Hammerness, & Beckett, 2005; Duffy, 2002; Fairbanks, Duffy, Faircloth, He, Levin, Rohr, & Stein, 2010; Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2011; Hammerness, 2006; Kennedy, 2006; Shulman & Shulman, 2004; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2011). Visions are images of ideal practice that guide teachers' instructional decision-making and provide them with a touchstone for measuring their pedagogical efforts (Hammerness, 2006; Shulman & Shulman, 2004).

Research on visioning that follows pre-service teachers into their in-service years is currently limited to two studies: Rattigan-Rohr (2005) and Hammerness (2006). Rattigan-Rohr studied prospective teachers' initial and final vision statements during their introductory teaching class in their sophomore year prior to declaring education as their major. She found that the majority of prospective teachers did not have visions for teaching when entering the introductory class, and their visions seem to be shaped by the course experiences, particularly by the field experience component of the course. Rattigan-Rohr categorized visions as being moral or intellectual, based on the existing literature. Hammerness followed student teachers into their first few years of teaching and reported the focus of the visions and the influence of the visions' attainability on teaching. She found the distance between vision and teaching context either sustained or led to discouragement with teaching. The attainable vision sustained and inspired teachers, while visions that were seemingly distant from reality or in opposition with mandates led to discouragement and career moves (Hammerness, 2006, 2008).

As teacher educators, however, we have limited data regarding the sustainability of those visions, particularly those developed within teacher education programs. This article reports results from a longitudinal teacher education study that examines the visions of pre-service teachers in their junior and senior years through their first year of teaching.

### **Problem**

This study examines whether pre-service teachers' visions are enacted in the lessons they teach for literacy methods courses and whether their visions are sustained and enacted in literacy instruction during their first year of teaching. This study has implications for determining how teacher education influences teachers' visions (Shulman & Shulman, 2004) and whether visions developed in pre-service education are sustained. Two questions propelled this study:

1. What is the focus of pre-service teachers' visions?
2. How are pre-service teachers' visions evident in their reflections on the teaching of literacy and in their first year of teaching?

### **Theorizing Teacher Vision**

Over the past several years, teacher visioning has garnered significant scholarly attention (Bransford et al., 2005; Fairbanks et al., 2010; Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2011; Hammerness, 2006; 2008; Kennedy, 2006; Shulman & Shulman, 2004; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2011). Researchers have defined a "vision" in teaching in several different ways; however, a common theme emerges. Briefly, theorists present a vision as a source that inspires teachers and guides their classroom instruction (Duffy, 2002; Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2011; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Hansen, 2001; Lampert, 2001; Shulman & Shulman, 2004).

Rattigan-Rohr (2005) pulled from the research literature to define a teacher's vision as a personal moral compass directing teachers to shape their practice and to act in ways they believe will positively benefit students. Possessing a vision, therefore, is an individual teacher's commitment to a morality that goes beyond traditional curricular goals and acknowledges that teaching children also includes a responsibility to develop larger understandings and attitudes. Duffy (2005) calls vision a "moral compass" because visions create a conscious awareness of how teachers wish to touch the future.

Similarly, theorists describe the call to teach as a mindset through which teachers create a vision of who they are and by which they make decisions to engage in constructivist or other forms of highly engaged teaching (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2011; Garrison, 1997; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Garrison (1997) argues that outstanding teachers not only answer the call to teach but that they "become this call...with persistence and care" (p. 74).

In addition to a moral purpose, researchers conclude that the exceptional teacher also develops a vision with a strong intellectual purpose; this teacher develops a vision that seeks to create conditions that will stir children's capabilities to achieve enhanced learning (Cuffaro, 1995; Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2011). Also, effective teachers are most often the ones who can be found working hard to ensure that their classroom practices are securely rooted in intellectual honesty and integrity (Ball, 1993; Lampert, 2001). As a matter of course, visionary teachers appear to be constantly seeking to find new and different ways to help their students learn and grow (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2011). They know that finding new strategies and methods requires both growing and the "letting go" of favorite and long-accustomed techniques (Hammerness et al., 2005). We understand then that teachers with visions work hard to ensure their students are able to acquire insights into themselves and their world.

Wood, Nelson, and Warfield (2001) lamented what they saw as the deficiency of an intellectual focus and the lack of movement toward a "well-articulated vision" by many teachers of mathematics

(p. 12). They noted their view of the benefits of an intellectual vision for the development of mathematics instruction. In such a vision, teachers would focus the teaching on understanding and reasoning, and on high standards of achievement. They also noted, however, that in classrooms where this kind of well-articulated intellectual vision is missing, low-level instruction continues to dominate.

A Vygotskian social constructivist perspective serves as a theory underlying how visions develop. Learning is more fully facilitated in the social context (Vygotsky, 1981). That is, pre-service teachers have had their entire career as students to observe teachers at work, a process Lortie (1975) labeled “apprenticeship of observation” (p. 61). Therefore, whatever understanding pre-service teachers construct about their developing visions has two components: (a) the thoughts or mindset they brought with them to the teacher education program, and (b) some possible adjustments and/or additions to those thoughts based upon what they learned in the social environment of the teacher education program.

A fundamental idea to this Vygotskian social constructivist perspective is the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, the ZPD is the space between what one actually knows and what one potentially could know, as determined through problem solving under the influence of a more knowledgeable person. Therefore, the development of pre-service teachers’ visions is likely influenced by contacts with various perspectives, presented to them within their ZPD, including information from readings, contact with teachers in field experiences, discussions about visions, interactions with peers, and other teacher education activities.

The expectation from this line of reasoning is that pre-service teachers link social and external interactions to their own internal developing visions for teaching (Forman & Cazden, 1985), which influences their thinking (Hughes, 1958). In the pre-service years, students wrote a vision statement upon beginning a new semester in the teacher education program. After readings, lectures, discussions, and field experiences, students continued to refine and refocus their vision statements. Consequently, pre-service teachers revised and refined their vision statements multiple times over two years.

### **Methodology**

This study took place in a mid-sized city in the southeastern United States. Five elementary school teachers were selected from a cohort of recent graduates for a follow-up study that accessed their junior and senior year online portfolios and examined their work as first-year teachers. These five were selected because they were first-year teachers in Title 1 elementary schools near the university and could easily be interviewed. Like their peers in their cohort, these five teachers were middle-class, white females. While they were at the same school for their junior and senior year internships and student teaching, three (Carla, Erica, and Emily [all names are pseudonyms]) were hired by that school upon graduation. Ruby and Janet were hired by similar schools (both Title 1) in the same school district just a few miles away from their field experience school. Thus, the five participants were in similar contexts during their first year of teaching.

The five teachers had written vision statements at the start of each semester during their junior year and again in the senior year. For this study, only the final vision statement per semester was collected. Consequently, the data consisted of the five graduates’ final vision statements from each semester of the junior and senior years and their lesson plans and reflections from the literacy methods courses (Reading Methods, Language Arts Methods, and Children’s Literature) completed during their junior

and senior years. The prompt for the vision statement was: Why are you here (in teaching)? What do you hope your students will become (30 years into the future)?

Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2003) was used to code vision statements. This allowed for large blocks of textual information to be arranged into mutually exclusive categories. Coding of students' vision statements proceeded in three levels. The first level of coding decided whether a statement was a vision. The second level of coding placed identified vision statements in a priori categories—intellectual and moral, based on the research literature. The third level of coding identified general themes that emerged from students' statements within each of the two a priori categories. To establish reliability in this study, three researchers served as critical peers to read the coded data from students' vision statements. They were in complete agreement with my coding.

In the next stage of coding, I read the lesson plans and reflections, using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2003) to code them as having a focus of moral, intellectual, or both. Moral visions focused on dispositions toward life and the students she hoped to shape, such as creating productive, caring citizens who will ultimately make positive changes in the world. Intellectual visions focused on students becoming lifelong learners with a passion for seeking knowledge. Sometimes the visions did not lend themselves clearly to one specific category and instead led to the placement of a combined category.

Then, lesson plans and reflections were read again to search for evidence of their vision statement. One of the critical peers who assisted with the vision statement coding also read two of the lesson plans and reflections to verify the coding process.

Further, each of the five participants was interviewed (see Appendix A for interview questions) in late November during their first year of teaching. I interviewed four of the participants after school in their classrooms. Due to scheduling conflicts, I had to interview one participant (Janet) by telephone. Since they started school in early August, they were approximately halfway through the school year. All five interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The telephone interview occurred on speakerphone to record the conversation. Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2003) was used to code interview data. I searched for evidence of their vision statements in the examples they provided and in their responses to each of the interview questions (see Appendix A). Finally, I read and reread the participants' explanations for common themes (Maxwell, 2005). Two of the critical peers who assisted with the vision statement coding also read the interview transcripts and were in complete agreement with my codes.

### **Findings**

The guiding questions for this study were: 1) What is the focus of pre-service teachers' visions? 2) How are pre-service teachers' visions evident in their reflections on the teaching of literacy and in their first years of teaching?

Results of the content analysis revealed that the visions became more morally focused as pre-service teachers progressed through their junior and senior years. Some visions started as both moral and intellectual, but each semester they became more moral. For example, Carla's vision in the junior year blended the moral and intellectual:

Teaching to me is the opportunity to offer unconditional support, encouragement, and love to each child who walks through my classroom door. I truly feel that every child, no matter their



background or situation, can benefit from a good teacher who cares about them... If there were one thing I want my students to become, it would be lovers of knowledge. I want them to think learning and being smart are good things. I want them to continue learning all throughout their lives. I want them to actively seek out knowledge every day.

By the time Carla reached her senior year of student teaching, her vision had shifted to a moral focus:

My classroom will be a positive atmosphere that praises strengths and strides. We will not focus on or point out weaknesses. This positive atmosphere is one that will rely on mutual respect between students and between the students and me. This affirms the diversity we have in our class.

By the last semester of the student teaching program, all five participants held morally focused visions. However, lessons and reflections across literacy methods courses had an intellectual focus. Thus, the vision statement did not appear in the classroom practice of these five participants.

During interviews, participants shared that the dissonance between their visions and the lessons and reflections was due to guidelines set by the methods instructors and the state standards for English/Language Arts, both of which were intellectually focused. Janet's response summed up the general views about this dissonance: "There was no choice in what we had to teach for the methods classes, because there were set guidelines. It was usually one or two lessons with concrete objectives." Hence, while the pre-service teachers held moral visions, moral aspects of their vision statements did not appear in the lesson plans and reflections that were assigned in their coursework, because they had to meet requirements. Requirements across their literacy coursework focused on building elementary students' reading and writing skills through use of specific strategies.

Further, participants offered that their visions looked to the future instead of the present (Ruby), were shaped by the school context (Emily, Janet, and Erica), and appeared spontaneously in lessons while teaching instead of being explicitly inserted in lesson plans or reflections (Carla).

When interviewed during their first year of teaching, participants were asked if their vision still had a moral emphasis. Emily's response summed up the general feelings of all five regarding the pressures of teaching and the problem of enacting one's vision:

I'm struggling with keeping my vision in mind while planning, due to pressures like report cards, guided reading, prescribed amounts of time, and prescribed objectives. I work it in when there's a problem, so there's moral input but not conscious planning.

Thus, the pressures of covering the curriculum while implementing various literacy programs (e.g., reading, phonics, word study, and writing) in their classrooms and following school and district mandates made it difficult for the participants to enact their visions. Indeed, the five first-year teachers were more concerned with compliance so they could keep their jobs in this tough economy than perhaps going against the grain to enact their visions. Since the state-mandated test scores influence the way society perceives how well public schools are performing, and since the focus of the test is on intellectual gains, the principals in these Title 1 schools have made teachers aware of the need to

increase test scores. These first-year teachers were learning how to navigate the year-round test-prep contexts to boost test scores, and they did not question what was expected of them.

Other issues also interfered with enacting the vision in the first year of teaching. In Ruby's fourth grade class, 10 of her 26 students received special services and/or modifications due to learning and behavioral needs. Unfortunately, the lack of support from her administration and support staff added to her daily teaching challenges, and Ruby frequently found herself in a survival mode where her focus was on making it through each day. When asked about whether her vision appeared in her teaching, Ruby stated:

I don't know. I believe it and want to do it. I want my students to rise above the things they've been subjected to at home, to be confident and feel good about themselves.

Overall, the five participants maintained that they still had a moral vision and that it appeared in their teaching in impromptu ways during their first year of teaching. Each participant shared examples of their visions in their teaching, such as holding class meetings for discussing class issues (Ruby), role-playing appropriate behavior when faced with criticism (Emily), having an "I can" attitude as a classroom rule (Janet), sharing how their choices today influence their futures (Carla), and praising English language learners every time they raise their hand in class to participate (Erica). While the participants provided examples of their visions in action, none of the teachers tied the examples to the teaching of literacy or any other specific academic area. I believe this is due to the visions having a moral focus.

When asked if they thought their vision would make a difference in their future teaching, all five participants said it would. Carla and Erica mentioned that experience would allow their visions to appear more and be embedded in their teaching. Emily stated that when she is more comfortable with the academics, planning, and schedule, it will appear in her teaching. Ruby and Janet said their visions were still changing and growing with experience. These first-year teachers have not abandoned their visions. In fact, Janet has her vision statement posted beside her desk in her classroom. Thus, despite the difficulties posed by reality, the teachers strive to enact their visions.

### **Discussion**

It seems that in spite of some significant classroom struggles, the first-year teachers continue to hold fast to the vision of who they want to be as teachers and to the practices they believe best serve students. Nevertheless, these new teachers express frustration because their current practices do not mesh with their visions of themselves or with their ideal view of their literacy instruction.

It is entirely possible that the frustrations these new teachers have expressed might be developmental in nature (Levin, 2003). That is, they may not be at the point in their practice where they are able to draw upon their visions as a source of proactive strength, and they might not yet be able to rely upon their vision as they attempt to meet the expectations of school, district, and state mandates. Given the complexity of classroom instruction, teachers need to demonstrate resiliency and creativity; otherwise, obstacles caused by the uncertainties of classroom teaching can undermine the implementation and sustainability of one's vision. Despite the fact that this cohort had been exposed to the research on teachers' visions, engaged in conversations of their own teacher visions throughout their teacher education program, and had written vision statements each semester (4 semesters in 2

years), perhaps their development still followed the same path as other first year teachers. While Grossman and her colleagues (2000) found that the program effects from teacher education appeared as early as the second year of teaching, I firmly believed that this group of first-year teachers would enact their teacher visions because of the repeated exposure and engagement with their own vision statements during each semester of their last two years at the university. Thus, a limitation of this study is including first-year teachers.

As Shulman and Shulman (2004) point out, teachers often come to realize that they will need to create their vision for school and the classroom with the knowledge that their professionalism “is largely shaped by the continual interaction between their beliefs, attitudes and emotions, on the one hand, and the social, cultural and instructional environment in which they function, on the other” (p. 5). This point is echoed by other theorists (Fairbanks, et al., 2010; Hammerness, 2008; Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003; van den Berg, 2002). In time, these new teachers might come to more readily embrace their visions, classroom struggles notwithstanding, and at the same time be a part of teacher communities in which shared visions can benefit everyone (Shulman & Shulman, 2004).

Finally, given the right opportunities and directions, these new teachers will grow to form visions that will highlight what they know is right for all of their students and what they believe their classroom practice should be (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2011; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2011). If Duffy (2002, 2005) is correct in his reasoning that teachers with visions have a propensity to trust their professional judgments, then I look forward to the continued examination of these teachers’ practices.

### **Conclusion**

It seems clear that the new teachers in this study still embraced the importance of a vision for teaching as they developed it in their pre-service teacher education program. The focus of those visions continued to be either moral or intellectual. However, two other possibilities must be considered. First, these new teachers, in their efforts to adjust to the first year, might simply be holding onto a familiar way of thinking, rather than seriously using their vision as a standard against which to measure their practice. Second, these new teachers could be respectfully telling me not what they truly feel but rather what they believe I want to hear.

While the five participants remained acutely aware of their visions, they nonetheless put that vision “on hold” when faced with certain classroom realities. That is, they focused instead on difficult classroom matters such as mandates, behavior issues, and wide-ranging ability groups.

Continued research will explore whether these new teachers will, over time, be able to sustain their visions in subsequent years. It is not known at this point if these five teachers will abandon their visions or if they will work diligently to enact them. Additionally, given the dissonance between visions, lesson plans, and reflections, future research is needed to explore whether visioning in the pre-service teacher education program requires explicit instruction. It could be that university faculty need to not only help students build their vision but also how to maintain and sustain their vision as they encounter contextual issues and classroom difficulties. For instance, Turner (2007) suggests that teacher visioning in literacy methods courses could provide a context for incorporating culturally responsive teaching in elementary classrooms. Perhaps by following Turner’s lead, literacy educators could help pre-service teachers go beyond simply being aware of cultural diversity and instead empower these

novice teachers to use their visions as a way of reflecting on their young students' literacy learning for a larger societal purpose. In this way, teacher educators could demonstrate how moral visions fit in the teaching of reading and writing.

Finally, teacher development research should fit naturally with visioning research. Future research could combine both areas to discover how visions develop through the pre-service and in-service years. As teacher educators, we have much to explore in terms of how visions continue to develop over time in the in-service years. Questions along these lines include: How do the visions change over time? How do contextual and other factors influence vision development?

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## Appendix A

### Vision Study Interview Questions for First-year Teachers

1. Your vision statements had a moral emphasis, yet the critical performances had an intellectual emphasis.
  - a. Why do you think that happened?
  - b. How did you apply a moral emphasis?
2. Is your vision still moral, or has it changed?
3. Please provide examples of how your vision shows up today in your teaching.
4. Do you think your vision makes a difference in your teaching? If so, how?
5. Do you think your vision will make a difference in your future teaching? If so, how?
6. Do you have other thoughts that you would like to share about your vision?