# 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?