

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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