

**A Vision Within a Classroom of Her Own:  
The Case of Ann**

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***Abstract***

*Researchers have suggested that effective teachers have a vision for their instruction. This article describes the professional journey of one teacher from her initial teacher preparation coursework through her first year of teaching. This research documented the role visioning played in enhancing this teacher's instruction across time.*

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The process of *visioning* requires teacher candidates and teachers to explicitly consider the educational values they hold and, accordingly, articulate their goals for their students (Duffy, 2002; Fairbanks et al., 2010). Arguably, teachers' visions impact the quality of instructional experiences their students receive. For example, Darling-Hammond, Banks, and their colleagues (2005) proposed that teachers with a vision are more likely to implement

effective instruction because “they are able to create a coherent curriculum that is also responsive to the needs of students” (p. 177). Conversely, “The teacher who lacks clear goals and a sense of purpose is likely to have difficulty making sensible, consistent decisions about what to teach, when and how” (pp. 171-172). The visioning process, then, has the potential to support teacher educators in guiding preservice and inservice teachers in developing a clear vision of education, a vision that will influence the daily instructional choices teachers make on behalf of all their students.

Researchers suggest that the visions teachers embrace contribute to the identity they develop as a teacher: “As teachers develop a vision for what teachers do, what good teaching is and what they hope to accomplish as a teacher, they begin to forge an identity that will guide them in their work” (Hammerness et al., 2005, p. 383). This identity is empowering. Turner (2006) reiterated this perspective: “Teachers who articulate their own instructional visions tap into a rich, internal source of professional power and integrity that can potentially enhance their teaching effectiveness” (p. 311). This sort of empowerment is what enables teachers to do what is best for their students in spite of limiting instructional directives that are commonplace in teaching (Duffy, 2002; Vaughn & Parsons, 2012). For example, Fairbanks and her colleagues (2010) stated that a vision “may be the source of the persistence, perseverance, and agency that fuel teachers’ efforts to resist restrictive policy mandates” (p. 164). Therefore, tapping into teachers’ visions of education may encourage novice educators to embrace critically reflective dispositions.

Accordingly, some teacher educators include vision statements in coursework as a tool for promoting critically reflective dispositions (Parsons et al., 2011; Squires & Bliss, 2004). For instance, Turner (2006) had preservice students write a paper describing their vision of culturally responsive instruction. She studied the content of the teachers’ vision papers and found that their visions illustrated a sense of purpose and included specific actions that the teachers intended to make in their teaching. However, the teachers in this study also acknowledged the difficulty in enacting one’s vision of culturally responsive instruction. Vaughn and her colleagues (Vaughn & Faircloth, 2011; Vaughn & Parsons, 2012) worked with inservice teachers in

graduate coursework. Teachers wrote vision statements as part of the courses, and the researchers interviewed teachers throughout the duration of the courses. They found that these teachers faced many obstacles to enacting their visions in their teaching contexts. However, these teachers frequently negotiated these obstacles so they could enact their visions.

The research highlighted above gives an indication of the complex nature of developing reflective practices as teachers grapple with adopting new ideas and adapting established pedagogical routines. In a similar vein, Parsons and his colleagues (2011) also had inservice teachers write vision statements in two different graduate courses. They conducted interviews with 12 teachers and analyzed these data along with their coursework. These researchers found that vision statements compelled teachers to be more reflective about their instruction and their teaching context. Across the studies, researchers concluded that tapping into teachers' visions promotes reflective dispositions and encourages teachers to consider their role as educators.

In sum, a vision can lead teachers to provide instruction that is responsive to the students they teach even in the context of restrictive mandates (Duffy, 2002; Fairbanks et al., 2010). Visioning as a course assignment can empower teachers to negotiate obstacles they face and bring about positive pedagogical changes within the contexts of their own classrooms (Vaughn & Faircloth, 2011; Vaughn & Parsons, 2012). Across the literature, visioning encouraged increased reflection about instructional practices, a disposition essential for creating effective classroom environments for all students (Parsons et al., 2011).

As teacher educators dedicated to preparing teachers who can effectively operate within the teaching context they will enter, we have our teacher candidates articulate a vision for their teaching in a preservice methods course. In spite of the rich literature base on teacher visioning and although studies with inservice teachers have shown promise for visioning as an instructional tool, few studies have followed teachers from preservice programs into their teaching careers to study how their visions develop or how their visions guide their instruction. Accordingly, this case study details one teacher's journey from a preservice literacy methods course through her first year teaching. The following research questions guided this study:

- What is this teacher's vision for her instruction?
- What experiences served as sources for her vision?
- Does her vision change over time? If so, how and what causes it to change?
- How does she enact her vision?
- What obstacles does she face in enacting her vision?

## Methods

The study reported here used case study methods (Stake, 2006) to document one teacher's progression through her preparation program and into her first year teaching using the lens of visioning. The longitudinal case study design allowed us to consider changes in vision, pedagogical practices, and contexts over a substantial period of time. Previous research on visioning has occurred over relatively short timelines typically defined by the traditional semester university schedule (Parsons et al., 2011; Vaughn & Parsons, 2012). The longevity of this project will enrich our understanding of key factors that contribute to teacher professional growth overtime. The particular case study detailed in this discussion serves as an illustrative example of the professional development process novice teachers may go through as they struggle to balance university based theoretical positions, school based practical positions, and personal visions for what education should mean for the students they serve.

Data collection began in 2009, when Ann (pseudonym) was enrolled in the first author's literacy methods course. Ann was a white female in her mid-20s pursuing her initial teaching certification through an elementary education master's degree program. She was selected using convenience sampling. A researcher, who was not the instructor of the course, invited all students in the class to participate and five of the nine students volunteered. Ann was selected for this report due to the insights her case provided for using visioning as a teacher education tool. This course occurred during the spring semester of her first full year in a two-year program. Data sources for this study included (a) a vision statement, (b) interviews, (c) observations, and (d) an email questionnaire.

In the methods course, teacher candidates wrote vision statements, which were guided by the following questions “Why do you want to be a teacher? What are you passionate about? What do you want to instill in your students?” (adapted from Duffy, 1998). In addition to writing this vision statement, Ann was interviewed about her vision during the course, at the end of the course, and in the following fall semester as she continued her coursework. In each of these semesters, she also completed 30 hours of fieldwork in which she observed instruction, co-taught, and occasionally independently taught lessons. The interview protocol sought to gain insight into the research questions. Therefore, questions inquired into her vision, opportunities to enact her vision, and obstacles to enacting her vision. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. During spring 2010, Ann completed student teaching. Her instruction was observed once during student teaching and a post-observation interview was also conducted. Ann completed an email questionnaire regarding her vision in the fall of her first year teaching. In the spring of her first year teaching, her instruction was observed once with a post-observation interview. Cumulatively, this case study captures two and a half years of professional growth for the participant.

For analysis, data were inserted into a chart (Appendix) that displayed Ann’s responses chronologically related to the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The two researchers separately analyzed the data filling in the chart and adding research memos (Maxwell, 2013) that included information germane to the research questions. The researchers then talked through their separate analyses. Peer examination of multiple data sources over an extended period of time and across multiple environments enhances the trustworthiness of the findings (Merriam, 2009).

## **Findings and Discussion**

We first meet Ann during the spring semester of her first full year in a two-year graduate education program. In Ann’s first interview, she expressed her vision as follows: “My vision is mostly I want kids to have fun reading and writing...I want them to read because they want to and not because they have to.” She

explained, “because I remember when I was growing up, I always hated reading by myself because in school it’s just like you have to read this, you have to read this, you have to read this.” Continuing, Ann identified “silent reading and giving kids options” as two strategies she planned to use to ensure her students learn to enjoy reading. Summarily she stated, “I want kids to want to read.”

Ann’s vision emerged from her past experiences as a student. Notably, she drew upon experiences she found demotivating in school and used her vision to create a different instructional model for her future students. Similar to previous studies (Parsons et al., 2011), this research found that providing Ann the opportunity to articulate her vision encouraged her to (a) reflect on what she ultimately wanted for her students, (b) explore why she believed her vision was important, and (c) consider pedagogical strategies that supported her vision of her teaching. Ann added, “I want to make sure that I do keep my vision in the back of my mind and I do want to try to implement it into my creating lesson plans.” This statement revealed how a teacher’s vision, even early in her teacher preparation program, has the potential to influence the day-to-day pedagogical decisions. This finding is in line with previous researchers’ suggestions (Darling-Hammond, Banks et al., 2005).

The following example illustrates how Ann’s vision did, indeed, influence her instructional decisions. The literacy methods course required preservice teachers to design and implement a guided reading lesson during the corresponding practicum experience. When asked if she had had the opportunity to enact her vision, Ann stated the following regarding the guided reading assignment:

I picked a book that – it’s a fun book. It doesn’t really have that much of a, like, the purpose is for pleasure. So I have a – we’re doing predicting and we’re using the pictures to make predictions. So I’m using a book that they are going to have fun reading but I’m also incorporating comprehension strategies.

Ann’s purposeful selection of a high-interest guided reading book corresponded with her vision: for students to enjoy reading.

In subsequent interviews, Ann continued to rely on her past experiences to articulate and guide her vision. She revealed, “I like reading now because I can read what I want to. I can, you know, go to the library and pick out a book and I’ve learned that that’s okay.” Continuing, Ann rationalized, “if you enjoy reading when you’re younger, it will help you to learn to read better, it will help you as an adult.” Again, Ann’s vision stemmed from her personal experiences and culminated in literacy goals emphasizing reading for enjoyment.

Interviews with Ann also revealed how field experiences (30 hours of observing and co-teaching each semester) encouraged her to reflect on classroom practices that supported and undermined her vision. In the following exchange, a rub between her mentoring teacher’s actions and Ann’s vision comes to light:

The whole school did “Drop Everything And Read” . . . I thought that was kind of cool because I hadn’t seen it in action. You know they made the announcement and everything and then . . . I luckily had a book with me. I read as well, though the teacher didn’t read—I did notice that . . . She was going to be gone the next day so she was doing, like, getting sub plans ready and stuff like that.

Ann’s subtle questioning revealed how her vision remained constant, even though she was not actively recalling it. Therefore, field experiences allowed her to recognize instruction that aligned (DEAR time) and that did not align (the teacher’s failure to model self-selected reading) with her vision.

Ann also faced obstacles to enacting her vision in her field experiences. For instance, in another interview, she lamented the lack of time she had to work directly with the students during her field experiences:

In high school, I did internships and I would go to the school library [in the] afternoons. And so, there, I was seeing the kids every day and I was, it’s a lot easier to get to know them and to motivate them and do stuff—you know, get them excited about school, when you see them every day . . . Unfortunately, [because of] my job, I go see [the students in my field experience] once a month pretty much. So it’s hard to really get to know the kids.

Ann expressed a desire to get students excited and motivated to read — her vision — as she had done in previous internship experiences. However, lack of time in her current role was an obstacle that impeded her ability to fulfill her vision. This interview illustrated, once again, the role past experiences played in shaping Ann’s thinking about her vision for her students.

Even though Ann relied on previous experiences to support her emerging literacy vision, she also recognized the potential value in additional educational opportunities. Contrasting field placements in two different classrooms, Ann revealed the desire for mentoring teachers to provide constructive feedback while still affording her the opportunity to develop her own lessons. She explained,

My teacher that I had in the fall was just like, “Do whatever you want; I don’t care” — had that attitude. So, it was hard for me to get by. I tried to be like, “Well, is this okay?” I really wanted her input on, like, I’m coming into her classroom and since I’m doing something for her kids I want to do it the way that I want to, but also the way that she would want me to do something with her class. And then, she just didn’t give me any tips or anything. The teacher I work with now I really like . . . I send her my guided reading lesson, so she knows what I’m doing and she gave me her input on it . . . I haven’t really had to negotiate or anything, but I like getting that feedback from the teacher.

Ann’s sentiments illustrated the value she placed on appropriate feedback in helping her reach the goals she established for her students. She appreciated the opportunity to develop lessons on her own, but also sought confirmation from mentoring teachers. Providing the opportunity for Ann to articulate her experiences, both positive and negative, within a visioning context, encouraged the adoption of critically reflective dispositions. As teacher educators, we understand her position as a novice teacher. We recognize the value of field experiences that both encourage and guide preservice teachers’ development (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005).

Nearing the end of her coursework, Ann's position as a preservice teacher is revealed as she grapples with aligning her vision with the demands of a future school district:

A big challenge [is] to learn how to teach them everything that they need to know, like, standards wise and curriculum wise. But, I also want to do it in the fashion that I want to do it in . . . I have all these ideas, but I don't know if I am going to be able to do all of them.

Ann's analysis highlights an obstacle she anticipated having as a new teacher. In a position of uncertainty, she worried how her vision will align with her future context.

Throughout Ann's preparation experiences, visioning played an important role. In the data from Ann's time in her preservice work, visioning served as a foundation for lesson construction, provided a lens for recognizing coherent pedagogical practice, guided an appreciation for purposeful feedback, and encouraged the assimilation of new knowledge. Moreover, she was optimistic about how her vision would play out in the real-world teaching context. Describing the time in her field experiences, she shared, "It's hard to know, like, what books they read, what they've studied, and stuff like that. So once I get my own classroom it'll be a lot easier." However, the value of visioning as a reflective tool throughout a teacher preparation program remains unknown unless we ask how, or even if, teachers recognize their visions as first year teachers.

We first reconnected with Ann, now a third-grade teacher, through an email questionnaire in December of her first year teaching and then again for an observation and face-to-face interview the following April. The tentative preservice teacher disappeared, and Ann confidently confronted the daily realities of a first year teacher. Ann wrote, "My vision is to create students who want to be lifelong learners and who love to read." This statement was consistent with her preservice teaching vision. Yet, she went on to contextualize it within the lives of her students:

At the beginning of the year one of my students asked me what they were supposed to do if they didn't have books at home. This broke my heart! I have set up a classroom library where the students are free to "check out" books,

and I have really focused on setting it up and making it grow. I have really enjoyed organizing it in a way that is kid-friendly and feel that its inviting feel will help the students WANT to go and read a book.

Ann's vision remained a passionate source guiding her actions within the classroom. Confronting the realities of her own unique teaching situation and the individual needs of her students, Ann made available to her students the resources they needed to obtain the vision she holds dear.

Additional elements of the instructional environment Ann established also reflected her vision. Describing her literacy block, Ann wrote,

I also have a Language Arts Contract that the students work on during independent work time while I meet with guided reading groups. This contract has a variety of reading, writing, and word study activities that the students get to choose to do. I am hoping by allowing the students to have this freedom of choosing reading and writing activities that it will allow them to feel that they have a voice in the work they do rather than being given something and told to do it.

The literacy instruction Ann implemented in her classroom addressed her first visioning concern: Students are constantly told, "you have to read this, you have to read this, you have to read this." And two years later, she enacted her vision by "giving kids options," realizing the opportunity to change students' experiences with reading in a classroom of her own.

Not only did Ann continue to make pedagogical decisions based upon her vision, she also continued to filter new knowledge and opportunities based on the literacy vision she refined during her preservice work. Ann explained, "I've taken a writing workshop class just to, kind of, see...and it was pretty much very similar to the writing workshop that we talked about." She continued, "I mean I use everything that I've learned from that class because they [school administrators] are hands-off. But, because they are hands-off, we have to, you know, it's all on our own." Listening to Ann's contextualization of her first job placement, we realized the important role teacher education

programs play in providing a strong pedagogical literacy foundation for novice teachers to build on during their first years teaching. In Ann's experience, having a "hands-off" administration was not a negative component. In fact, it was a freeing and necessary element that allowed Ann to work through the routines and pedagogical philosophies that would ultimately support her vision. Vision dialogues provided a critical lens through which Ann could assimilate new literacy strategies and align the literacy practices she learned during her preservice preparation work with her personal literacy vision.

Despite Ann's ability to flexibly enact her vision within the confines of her own classroom she still encountered contextual impediments. Specifically, Ann found the school schedule to be an obstacle in fully enacting her vision. In her email response, she explained,

Our language arts block is never at the same time and some days it is broken up. It is really difficult to get the students working independently and pull a couple of guided reading groups on a daily basis. This has been the biggest struggle for me. I have this idea of how I want my language arts block to run but we never have a good solid hour and half to have a mini lesson, get the kids set up on independent work, and then be able to pull a guided reading group or two except for on Fridays.

While Ann worked around the scheduling parameters to meet the needs of her learners, she clung to a vision that afforded students extended blocks of time immersed in literacy experiences.

Subsequently, during Ann's spring interview, she revealed how she advocated for changes in the daily structure, "Our schedule is hard because we don't have uninterrupted language arts block . . . But that will be changing next year cause we have all been voicing our opinions." Ann used her vision to influence contextual changes she recognized as necessary for supporting the development of students' dispositions toward literacy. Her administrators clearly worked hard to create a collaborative and responsive environment for the teachers.

Reflecting on her first year, Ann also acknowledged social emotional learning attitudes impeded many of her students. For instance, during Ann's spring interview she described the students she worked with on a daily basis, "Kids drag their feet

with their hoods on every morning, not wanting to be here. So, it's making them passionate about school and to want to learn." Continuing, we hear evidence of Ann's professional growth as she reflected on her vision development in relation to her current teaching position:

I think when I did my paper I wanted them to be lifelong learners. I guess, with this particular group of kids, I'm not looking so much to the future; I'm looking to right now to having, I mean, to really getting them to want to learn this year, in hopes that that will carry over.

Ann used her vision to carefully consider the learning environment she created for her students. She recognized the negative disposition toward literacy that many of her learners' possessed, and she actively worked to shift students' perceptions:

I try and do fun activities. Like today you saw the concrete poems. I knew that would – at the end of the day on Thursday, they're tired. We haven't had a break all day. So, it's kind of a fun thing for them to learn. So, I try and incorporate stuff that they need to know with fun activities. Sometimes we'll go outside and we'll do activities or I'll do hands-on activities in here. So just making it that it's not always work, work, work, that you can work and have fun at the same time.

In Ann's description we see her vision in action. She created "fun activities" to engage the students in the learning process. Ann's literacy lessons, including guided reading groups, interactive writing, read alouds, word study, and language arts contracts, are not just fun without a purpose. The context drives the pedagogical decisions Ann makes on a regular basis. Furthermore, her vision not only empowers her to act but also informs our understanding of the true intentionality behind her actions.

Finally, Ann's concluding statement provides teacher educators and administrators a last glimpse into the personal value visions may hold for novice teachers, as they strive to make a positive difference in the literacy lives of their students; Ann reflects, "I am hoping that my vision is rubbing off on my students because of this enthusiasm they have for reading."

## Implications

Understanding a novice teacher's vision is one way for administrators, school leaders, and teacher educators to help new teachers navigate the transition from university experiences to the realities of daily life in the classroom. This study followed one teacher through her preservice preparation program and into her first year teaching, documenting the development of her vision. Across the two years of this study, Ann's vision did not change much. Ann clung to a desire for her students to enjoy literacy activities. As a novice teacher she relied on her vision to guide her in identifying practices that aligned with the literacy goals she embraced. She faced some obstacles as she attempted to enact her vision. In her preservice experiences, Ann found the field experiences to be obstacles. First, she was there so seldom that she felt that she could not get to know the students and the curriculum well enough to help them develop a love of reading. Then, she found the varying supportiveness of her cooperating teachers to be an obstacle. She was seeking feedback as a novice teacher and her cooperating teacher did not provide much support. Once in her own classroom, the school's schedule proved to be an obstacle to enacting her vision. Although obstacles did emerge in this study, they were not the restrictive curricula and instructional mandates other researchers have reported (Duffy, 2002; Vaughn & Parsons, 2012). In fact, Ann specifically states that the administration in her first position was "hands off."

It is encouraging that Ann, as a first year teacher, negotiated obstacles she faced. The school's schedule did not allow her to implement the literacy instruction of her vision, so she negotiated this obstacle by initiating conversations to get the schedule adjusted. Plans to change the schedule resulted from these conversations. It appears that Ann found a teaching context that was supportive of her vision.

As researchers have previously suggested (Duffy, 2002; Parsons et al., 2011; Squires & Bliss, 2004), it appears that visioning as a teacher preparation exercise is valuable. It is important to note that through this research, many other aspects teacher preparation program emerged. For example, Ann appeared to have strong pedagogical literacy knowledge. Also,

although her perspective of the quality of her field experiences varied, they certainly influenced Ann as a developing teacher. Therefore, visioning certainly shows promise as a component of methods courses, but only when paired with the other aspects of effective teacher preparation (see Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

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## Appendix

Ann	Coursework / Field Observations			Student Teaching	Year 1	
	3.16.09 interview	5.23.09 interview	9.29.09 interview		3.4.10 observation and interview	12.13.10 questionnaire
Vision						
Enact						
Obstacles						
Negotiate						