Teachers' Visions:

The role of personal ideals in school reform

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Introduction

One of the most powerful foundations for educational reform is having a personal vision. As Fullan observes, "…personal purpose and vision are the starting agenda. It comes from within, it gives meaning to work, and it exists independent of the particular organization or group we happen to be in" (1993, p.13). In part, personal visions can serve as a starting point for reform because they represent a "reach"—a set of images of ideal classroom practice for which teachers strive (Hammerness, 1999). This kind of reach, or striving, is also central to good teaching. Sockett (1993) suggests that pursuing a vision is not only a means to generate commitment, but a fundamentally moral act, and that a "good" or ethical teacher is one who pursues a vision of a more ideal future (1993, p. 17). Greene (1995, p. 5) suggests that such visionary thinking may move educators to action; when "apathy and indifference…give way as images of what might be arise."

Personal vision is also a means of understanding the present and the past. As Brownowski has observed, "It is memory that gives us the power of foresight: we push into the future with images in which we fixed the past" (1966, p.80). In this sense, vision provides a means for teachers not only to develop activities and lessons that feel more consonant with their ideals, but they also serve as a means of reflection.

However, while vision may reflect one's hopes and dreams, it can have negative consequences as well. Little (1996) has shown that striving for an idealistic vision can sometimes lead to profound disappointment and disillusionment. She found that some of the most heightened emotional experiences in reform efforts occurred around the pursuit of particularly grand visions, and were likely to unsettle and even cut short teachers' careers. Similarly, teachers' participation in curricular reform efforts can lead them to develop overly grand visions resulting in deflated confidence, dampened motivation, and even reversion to more conventional teaching practices (Austin, 1997; Hammerness, 1997). In short, vision can make some teachers' ambitions soar, but it can also prompt self-doubt and despair.

These notions of vision as deeply individual, incorporating past and present, and neither wholly good nor bad, stand in marked contrast to many conventional discussions of vision in the worlds of education and business. In many change and reform efforts, personal visions are rarely the focus of attention, and organizational visions are considered a primary lever of improvement (Hargreaves, 1994). In many cases, teachers are expected or encouraged to "buy into" an

institutional vision rather than share or develop their own (Evans, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994; Louis & Miles, 1990). As Senge observes, "Such visions, at best, command compliance—not commitment" (1990, p.206). Furthermore, it is assumed that having a vision is good. Effective schools possess a vision, while those without a vision are seen as lacking in leadership and direction (Stoll & Fink, 1996). Often, organizational visions become abstract and disconnected from daily practice, representing meaningless platitudes, rather than concrete plans (Fullan, 1993; Senge, 1990). School visions developed without the contributions and personal interactions of teachers may "make the spirit sag, not the pulse quicken" (Evans, 1996).

This paper shows how personal vision contributes to teachers' professional growth and explores how vision may serve as a foundation for school improvement efforts. It argues that teachers' visions can be characterized by three dimensions—focus, range and distance. Understanding the relationships among these three dimensions can help us develop a deeper understanding of how teachers feel about their teaching, their students, and their school; of how much they challenge their students and themselves; and even of their commitment to the profession.

<div align="center">Methodology</div>

The research reported in this paper come from a two-year study of teachers' vision (Hammerness, 1999). Data was initially collected through a survey of eighty teachers regarding the content and character of their visions. The eighty teachers were graduates (selected to represent a range of teaching experience from novice to veteran) and current student-teachers from two teacher education programs. Two interviews (one in Year One and one in Year Two) were then conducted with sixteen of those teachers—selected to represent a range of teaching experience, subject matter, gender, and ethnicity—who described particularly powerful visions. Additional data comes from four teachers with whom I conducted reflective interviews and classroom observations. All interviews were transcribed, and a content analysis was conducted based upon the framework described later in this paper.

<div align="center">Looking at Vision</div>

The data showed that teachers do have visions which are substantial and concrete, vivid and powerful, and stable and consistent over time. Vision consists of images of what teachers hope <u>could be</u> or <u>might be</u> in their classrooms, their schools, their community, and in some cases

even society. For these teachers, vision can provide a sense of "reach" that inspires and motivates them, and invites them to reflect upon their work. Yet for some teachers, the reach seems too distant from current practice, their visions seeming impossible for them or their students to reach.

Teachers' visions are not uniform. They varied across three important dimensions (Arnheim, 1969; Kosslyn, 1983; 1994; Messaris, 1994; Snyder, 1980): focus, range and distance (Hammerness, 1999). Focus refers to the center, or areas, of interest of the vision. What images, ideas, or aspects enjoy the bulk of concentration? When a teacher describes or envisions a vision, what areas are in focus? Focus also refers to the distinctness or clarity of the vision. One's vision may be sharply defined, with distinct images and interactions, or the vision may be blurry, with vague images and indistinct activity. Range refers to the scope or extent of the focus. The field of vision may be broad and panoramic or it may be more narrow and specific. For instance, some people may focus upon an area more narrow in scope such as an individual classroom or a particular group of students. Other people may describe a focus that has a broader range, perhaps spanning their community or their school, or maybe even stretching to include a school system, an ethnic community, or even the nation. Distance refers to how close or how far vision is relative to what one is currently doing. Vision may be perceived as quite close to current practices, or it may be extremely distant from daily experiences.

Finally, vision cannot be isolated from the contexts in which these teachers imagine and work. Indeed, whether teachers feel their contexts provide support is critically important to their ability to carry out their visions. These positive or negative views about the degree of support also indicate whether teachers feel their school context is moving towards their vision.

Vision as Guide and Measure

For most teachers in this study, vision served as a guide and a measure. Vision could serve as a guide for practice, directing curriculum, units, even daily lessons. It could also function as a sort of "measuring stick" indicating how far current practice sat from where one wanted to be. One teacher described this function as providing a "reference point to where you are." Yet in this role of measuring stick and guide, vision could prompt extremely different feelings in teachers. For those who felt that the distance between their vision and practice was reasonable and navigable, evaluating practice in the light of vision invited feelings of motivation and fulfillment. Such teachers felt inspired to reflect upon past practice and to evaluate their

strengths and weaknesses. In addition, those with a clear focus could use their visions to help them plan for the future. They could use vision as a kind of model for which to strive, directing their learning as they sought new means to approach their visions. One teacher, Carlos, for example, thought of his vision "everyday" and felt it played a central and quite significant role in his practice. He used it as a touchstone for reflection on past practice. He also referred to his vision to direct his decisions about what to teach, how to build his students' understandings, and even what role he plays in his school as a whole. Despite a considerable distance between his vision and his practice, Carlos felt inspired by his vision and felt fulfilled and satisfied in his work.

Yet for those who found that the distance seemed too far, the experience of comparing vision against practice could prompt feelings of discouragement and despair. In this case, reflecting on past practice and comparing it to a vision led teachers to feel discouraged and depressed. They sought reasons to explain their disappointing assessment, at times blaming themselves, the school, or perhaps worse, their students and the communities in which they taught. These teachers learned to discount their visions, to doubt themselves and to question their students' capacities. For instance, Andrea, a student-teacher of English, observed,

> I used to think about it [my vision] a lot…But I think…it's not realistic for me to sort of hold on to this as much as I used to….Whereas it was…in the front of my mind for a long time, now it's sort of tucked away in the back. It's still there but it doesn't dominate my thoughts as much as it used to.

Despite expressing a very ambitious and hopeful vision, after her first year of teaching Andrea had tempered her hopes, wondering if her vision could be achieved and, if not, whether she should leave her school or teaching altogether. The way teachers feel about their work depends upon a complex relationship among their vision, their current practice and their institutional context. Examining the focus, range and distance of teachers' visions provides a means of understanding the way teachers feel about their teaching, their students and their school; the changes they make or do not make in their classrooms; and even the decisions they make regarding their futures as teachers. While teachers' visions varied along each of the three dimensions and varied by context, a closer look revealed four consistent patterns or constellations that revolved around the distance from practice and the degree of clarity of the

visions. Each one of these constellations was associated with a particular variation on the role of vision in teachers' lives.

By looking at these constellations, we can begin to appreciate why someone like Carlos might look forward to sustaining his commitment to teaching over a number of years, be inspired to continue to reflect on his practice, and even spend long hours on the weekends and after school with students needing extra help; while a teacher like Andrea might become dispirited and deflated and struggle with whether she is a poor teacher or her students are poor learners.

Looking at the Constellations

"Close-Clear" Constellation[1]

Focus	Range	Distance	Context
Clear	Narrow	Close	Supportive or neutral

In the first constellation, visions are clearly and narrowly focused, fairly close to practice, and in a supportive or indifferent context. Three teachers from this study reflect this cluster of attributes. Patricia and Gary are both recent college graduates while Sandy is an experienced teacher of seven years and is also a graduate of the Raleigh Teacher Education program. Patricia and Sandy both teach science; and Gary teaches government and social studies.

All three teachers described visions that were sharply focused. For instance, Gary's vision of his economics classroom was clear, well-elaborated and articulated. He could explain in detail what he envisioned himself and his students doing and provided vivid examples. He also articulately described a focus upon decision-making and problem-solving, again with a number of supporting examples. Gary mentioned this focus frequently, describing it in detail in his vision statement as well as in both interviews. He also talked in depth about how decision-making was central to his discipline and why he himself believed it was important. Patricia's vision of small, communal education was similarly clearly articulated. She described images of what her curriculum would look like in this ideal classroom and what sorts of skills and habits her students would develop. In addition, she returned to her particular focus—the development of inquiry

skills—on numerous occasions. She was quite clear about why the methods of inquiry were important for her students to develop now as well as in later life. Sandy's vision, of a classroom of students conducting scientific research and exploring scientific concepts, was similarly clear.

These three teachers all felt optimistic about attaining their visions; and all felt that their visions were relatively close to practice although most acknowledged there was at least some gap between their vision and their everyday practice. Sandy felt the closest to her vision, reflecting that the past academic year had been surprisingly similar to her vision. She observed, "This year was more like one hundred percent…This year…worked out pretty well and…so it's pretty close to that [vision]." While Gary felt that his vision was somewhat more distant, he maintained that he experienced moments when he was able to live his vision; "[In] my econ class there are times when I'll feel like I'll get close to where I would like the class to be. There are times when I can step back and watch the kids work." Patricia felt that her school context allowed her to feel as if she were approaching her vision. A small independent school located in an alternative community, it clearly reflected, and in many ways had shaped, her vision. When I first interviewed her, she was particularly optimistic about attaining her vision and remarked, "In terms of what I wrote [in my vision statement], a lot of that has been influenced by the fact that I already know that IS what I am going to do." Patricia had worked as a teacher's aide in this school before her student-teaching year, and explained that much of her vision had developed out of this experience. She now felt that, upon her return, she could "live out" her vision.

Teachers in this constellation maintained that their vision plays a significant and positive role in their lives. The clarity of focus enabled them to use their visions to constantly guide, measure and assess their classroom practice. As Sandy remarked, her vision guided the "whole structure of the classroom" from physical organization to curriculum. "I think about it in all my lesson plans. It's sort of how I operate. 'How would Sandy teach a lesson?' 'How would Sandy present this'?" The high degree of articulation in her vision enabled Sandy to constantly refine her own practice against her vision. Similarly, Gary explained that because he has a clear image of "where to go," he can purposefully develop appropriate curriculum;

> If I know where I want the kids to go, then it's easier for me to structure my class to get them there. I can think about…what topics I need to cover, how … I want to cover it, and what's the most effective way for me to help them learn and get to this point. So it [vision] just … helps clarify everything.

Gary gave a specific example of how his vision helps direct his work,

> So if I'm trying to decide what to do today, I [consider] what's the next step to get from here, from A to B, where are we at in that progress and what's the best way for them to get there. If you don't have that end point, it's really tough. You're just meandering around.

Patricia spoke of using her vision as an assessment of her current practice, and also in sustaining her commitment to teaching; "Its role is to first of all make me question what I'm doing. Is it really what I want to be doing? Is it [a] worthwhile use of my time? And then to keep me going." Indeed, teachers in this constellation seemed to find the experience of comparing practice to vision extremely motivating. Their pursuit of new means of approaching their visions led to new learning, in turn, fueling their motivation and initiating the cycle again. As Patricia explained, "I'm learning so much about how to get further that it helps keep me going." Gary described feeling charged by the opportunity to reflect upon his curriculum and felt that his vision motivated him to constantly "notice" new things and make changes in his practice. He said with excitement; "..next year I'll probably notice something else. 'Ohhh—I need to do this' or, 'I need to do that'…but still I think my underlying goal of getting kids to think more, to come up with their own solutions, I think that's going to be a constant." While Sandy explained that her vision prompted her to experiment with new ideas, such as teaching students to square dance to help them understand molecular motion, she admitted that a certain amount of anxiety accompanied such attempts. She commented, "There's definitely a lot of risk in the teaching that I do. [But] the first time … you come up with some bizarre idea [and you try it]. When I first did that, that was sort of like the breakthrough." Yet Sandy also described the exhilaration she felt when her classroom seemed to reflect her vision; "It's very fulfilling. Part of you wants to run around and scream [about] how excited you are and tell everybody and just brag and boast." These teachers seemed to benefit from a positive cycle of comparison, motivation, experimentation and learning, and fulfillment.

The clarity of their visions also helped to guide their selection of school contexts. For instance, Gary chose to teach at a public high school in eastern California, because he felt that they had a vision, and that it was reflective in part, of his own vision. "My new school, the one where I just got hired…they have a vision,… a school vision, which is one of the reasons I

accepted the job there," he explained. Patricia had elected to teach at her alternative community-based independent school, because she felt that her vision was shaped by her earlier experience at that school as a teacher's aide. She felt she could attain her vision at this type of school. Sandy was the only teacher in this cluster who did not use her vision to select her school, feeling that her context was indifferent to her vision. "I don't see any vision on their part, and their method of support is non-interference. And that's the best you can hope," she observed.

The clarity of these teachers' visions enabled them to use their visions as a guide and a prompt for productive analysis of practice. As Senge (1990) has observed, the juxtaposition between vision and current reality can lead to a sense of "creative tension" that may inspire and motivate people to learn new ways to navigate the gap. A good degree of support from the school sites helped reinforce teachers' efforts in this respect. Hence, vision leads to fruitful analysis of practice, leading to learning and increased feelings of excitement and agency as teachers continue to advance their visions.

"Close-Cloudy" Constellation

Focus	Range	Distance	Context
Fuzzy	*Narrow*	*Close*	*Supportive*

In the second constellation, visions have a fuzzy and narrow focus, are quite close to practice, and are in supportive contexts. In these cases, vision seems to play a minimal role in teachers' lives. Four teachers in this study reflect this constellation: Daria, Nel, Paul and David, who teach mathematics, history, science, and English respectively. All but Paul are experienced teachers at the high school level. Daria and Nel were the most veteran teachers in this study, with eighteen and fifteen years of experience, respectively.

Teachers in this constellation did not describe their visions with the same clarity as teachers in the previous one. In contrast to teachers in other constellations who had clearer visions, teachers in the "Close-Cloudy" constellation did not offer multiple examples or elaborations of their visions. In addition, while teachers in other constellations returned repeatedly to certain aspects of their visions, describing them as particularly significant or

central, teachers in this constellation did not indicate a particular center of attention. For instance, over the course of his interview, David emphasized a number of areas in connection with his vision. He talked at various times about the importance of peer editing; connecting his subject matter to other disciplines in the school; helping all students succeed in his classroom and trying to adapt his curriculum to varying ability levels. While other teachers in this study kept returning to one particular focus, usually also explaining why it was important to them, David did not constantly return to any one of these areas. He did not emphasize any one of these aspects of his vision as being more important than another area, nor did he explain why they were important to his vision. Daria, Paul, and Nel similarly did not emphasize any one aspect of their vision as being particularly important to them.

These teachers also said that their practice was already extremely close to their visions. Nel described her practice as "almost identical" to her vision, adding, "most of it, I feel, is going on in my practice right now." David observed, "I don't have a problem with finding my vision or attaining my vision for the most part with my students." Paul emphasized, with a note penned at the bottom of his vision statement, "I feel very fortunate that I'm in a position where I am actually able to live much of this vision <u>right now.</u>" Daria remarked, "I think my classroom…is pretty close to the ideal."

Yet when asked about the role vision played in their lives, these teachers offered vague examples, talked about other teachers, or described vision as something that worked mostly in their "unconscious." Daria spoke the least about the role of vision. When asked about its role in her life, she instead talked about the role she felt it played in general for teachers, and about its role in motivating other teachers at her school. While Paul remarked that he thought about his vision "probably several times a week" he did not provide examples of how it shaped his curriculum, or helped him reflect upon his practice. When asked to illustrate the role vision played for him, he explained that he was currently thinking about how best to maximize his time at the end of the year with his students but he did not describe how his vision related to those efforts.

In addition, these teachers were quite vague about the steps they were taking to approach their visions. David, for instance, had trouble comparing his vision to his current classroom. When asked what he was working on in his current classroom in order to get closer to his vision, he seemed to struggle with his response;

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> I think I need to be more consciously aware of ways in which I make more connections to students' lives. I think I have a pretty good atmosphere set up in my classroom though it's something at the beginning of the year you need to make sure that you set up and I think in one classroom this year it didn't work too well. I don't know. I don't know what to say.

Nel and David both described their visions as tacit or inchoate influences upon their practice. Nel explained that vision played what she called an "intuitive" role and that it was "instinctual" rather than overtly active in her thinking. She explained that she tended to fight for what she believed in, and suggested that her vision was part of how she defined what she believed in, but did not describe vision as playing a particular role in those efforts. Of all the teachers in this constellation, David talked the most about the role of his vision. He commented that it was not an entirely "conscious thing";

> I don't think it's a conscious thing but…it basically comes down to what's working and how is it working, or what's not working and how can I change it so that it does work? So when things work for me, I'm hitting the ideas and the vision I want to achieve. So that recognition is where I see my vision and recognizing what I'm doing well and what I'm not doing well.

Indeed, David explained that he did not actively think of his vision in planning, "I don't [think to myself], 'Okay, well, this is what I need, this is the vision and this is where I want to go.' But instead, it's 'Okay, these are the things I'm using and… what's working?'"

All four of these teachers taught in what they describe as particularly supportive contexts. Nel and Paul both taught in independent schools, noting in their interviews that their schools reflected their visions for the most part. Paul explained that the parochial school where he works had a clearly articulated vision[2] quite consistent with his own vision's emphasis upon personal as well as intellectual growth. David taught in a suburban school in one of the highest-income neighborhoods in his region. He explained that the students in the school make it particularly easy to get close to his vision. Daria also taught in public school, but felt her context was not unsupportive of her vision, and that her vision was extremely close to her practice.

For teachers in this constellation, vision did not seem to play an explicit role. It did not guide their planning, nor motivate them to reflect upon their practice, invite them to analyze their curriculum, or prompt them to learn new approaches or methods of teaching. Perhaps teaching in

what Stoll and Fink (1996) call a "cruising school" that is already fairly successful by many standards may provide a sense of accomplishment and may not prompt the kind of examination or exploration that occurs in the schools of some of their counterparts. Or, perhaps the distance and role of their visions have changed since they first entered teaching—perhaps they initially felt farther away and now after teaching so many years, they feel that they have made considerable progress on their visions. Thus, vision plays a less important role in the lives of these teachers.

<u>"Distant-Clear" Constellation</u>

<u>Focus</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>Distance</u>	<u>Context</u>
Clear	*Narrow*	*Distant*	*Not supportive or neutral*

In the third constellation, visions have a clear and narrow focus, are quite distant from practice, and are in a context that is at best indifferent, or at worst, inimical.
Six teachers fall into this constellation; Andrea, Nina, Sarah, Susan, Jim and Lily. Andrea, Susan and Lily are relatively new to the profession. Sarah, Jim and Nina all had some previous teaching experience. Sarah taught English for five years in Spain; and Nina taught science for two years in another state. Jim had been teaching for four years after graduating from his teacher education program. The teachers represent four disciplines; Andrea, Sarah and Susan all teach English; Jim teaches English and history; Nina teaches science; and Lily teaches mathematics. Most of these teachers felt their contexts were particularly unsupportive, while several of them termed them as simply indifferent.

Teachers in this cluster felt that the gap between their vision and their practice was overwhelmingly vast. A distant vision undermined their motivation and depressed and discouraged them. Rather than inviting the sense of "creative tension" that energized teachers like Patricia or Gary, vision simply surfaced tensions. Lily, for instance, described a "huge

disconnect" between her vision and her current teaching. She explained that when she compared her teaching to her vision, she felt the contrast "was so depressing that I decided it was much better just to … work all the time and not think about it." She added,

> Because if I stop and think about it, I'm satisfied with pieces of my teaching but there's so much more that I should and could be doing…I guess that my vision reflects what I think my teaching should be and how kids learn. And I'm not there which means I'm not doing everything I can to help the kids learn.

While these teachers said vision played a minimal role in their lives, they still talked extensively about their visions. In fact, these visions seemed to play a negative role, leading them to question and doubt their hopes and expectations. Even worse, these teachers seemed to be learning to distrust what they imagined and to consider their dreams to be impossible illusions. During a follow-up interview, for example, Lily referred to her vision disparagingly as "dreamland" and "an uneducated ideal." Only nine months into teaching high school, Sarah explained that in her current circumstances at her school she felt as if her hopes had been so badly dashed that she described her vision as "trashed." She observed, "Your ideas get so far away from what you are dealing with every day that you end up distrusting what you visualize." Susan said simply, "[O]n an emotional level it's really difficult to keep going."

Lily said she had come to learn not to expect as much as she had hoped; "I think I'm still moving towards it [my vision] but I don't set it as a requirement.…. I also learned to lower my expectations in the first month of my teaching." It is important to emphasize that she says that this shift occurred in the "first month" of teaching. Lily had barely begun to teach before her ideals began to crumble and she was already expecting less of herself and her students.

Jim said he had developed what he called a "sub-vision." He explained that if he could not attain his vision of his English-as-a-second-language students graduating, he worked towards what he thought was the acceptable next best thing to his vision:

> You have to think about [what happens] if they don't graduate? What are they going to learn? Are they better people? Are they more educated people? More prepared for this world than if they haven't come to school? So that's kind of a 'sub-vision' if the first one can't be reached. I'm trying to think about how can I best prepare them for working or even go back to Mexico or whatever.

Sarah explained that the vast gap between her vision and her reality prompted her to "hate" her teacher education classes. Vision served not as an inspiration, but as a glaring reminder of how impossible "possibilities" were for her;

> When I think of possibilities, it's when I go to Mayfield State. I hate it, sometimes. I go to this Wednesday methods class. [People say things like] "this is a good poetry technique", "We do this…", or, "In my class I did a whole unit on poetry, combined with…."….I would get out of there and I would feel so depressed. I would feel a combination of envy and such disappointment…in myself. It's very hard to figure out what's you and what's your environment.

In fact, only nine months into teaching high school, Sarah no longer believed her vision was possible;

> I like to overcome obstacles, but this one I cannot overcome. I give up. I mean I will maintain the line, the status quo, but whatever illusions… teachers have of helping or changing or affecting students' lives, give it up. There's no way, it's physically impossible to do it.

Teachers in this constellation highlighted the unsupportive nature of their contexts. These teachers' descriptions of their school share a striking resemblance to what Rosenholtz (1989) has described as "stuck" schools. Echoing Rosenholtz's description of the "maintenance mentality" of stuck schools, Sarah felt that her school's vision was simply to "hold the line." She felt unsettled by the tension between children and teachers, and staff and teachers, suffocated by what she saw as the controlling atmosphere of the school, and burdened by the administrative requirements placed upon new teachers. Andrea felt entirely isolated from her colleagues, noting that she might feel more confident and powerful as a teacher, had she colleagues with whom she could explore the means to approach what she imagined. Susan, who had been assigned to teach in what had previously been the wrestling room, with few supplies, a dank odor, and a leaky roof, felt that she was forced to attend so frequently to the physical aspects of her classroom that she was prevented from reflecting upon her pedagogical goals. Like Andrea, she also dreamed of having stronger collegial support and an intellectual climate for reflecting upon her teaching.

The apparent impossibility of their visions led these teachers to ask themselves difficult questions. Is it my teaching—is it me? Is it my students? Is it my school? Is it this community? In attempting to answer these questions, teachers in this constellation may have come to reinforce their stereotypical images of students (even images that some may consider racist), of

certain schools, or even particular communities. Indeed, teachers who entered the profession without stereotypical images of youth may even learn to expect less from their students. Teachers in this constellation were the most at risk for leaving the profession. Andrea and Susan told me they were already considering leaving teaching, yet they were both only first-year teachers. Furthermore, these teachers were at risk not only of leaving with dashed hopes, but also with lowered expectations for students, schools and themselves.

<u>"Far-Clear" Constellation</u>

Focus	Range	Distance	Context
Clear	*Broad*	*Far*	*Supportive*

In the fourth constellation, visions have a clear and broad focus, are far from practice, and are in a supportive context. Jake, Carlos and Kelly all have visions that reflect this constellation. These teachers range in levels of experience; Jake had taught history for seven years; Kelly had taught science for four, and Carlos was a student-teacher of history. All three were in contexts that they felt support their visions.

For all of these teachers, vision seemed quite far from practice. Jake explained, "I'm certainly not here yet." Kelly observed that her vision of students developing independent thinking skills was still quite distant, "We're still very far away from students owning their own education." Carlos remarked that his goal for the Latino youth population becoming more academically successful may take years.

Despite the considerable distance, vision remained a significant measure and guide. As Jake explained, "I realize that this may never be achieved, but I try to think constantly about what it would look like and measure it, use that as a measuring stick consistently and say, 'OK, this is where I need…'" Specifically, Jake commented that his vision directed his planning,

> …there's no question that this is in the front of my mind all the time. When you have to sit down and think, "OK, what's this next unit going to be like? What are we going to do this year? How are we going to coordinate with the English department? They're reading Night. We're doing World War II. How are we going to facilitate their learning?" That sort of stuff. [I'm] always thinking about this.

Jake said that his vision also helped him evaluate his current practice; it enabled him to identify what he could do differently in his classroom and direct changes he needed to make in his practice or curriculum. Jake commented that his vision prompted reflection at different levels in his thinking, from long-term curriculum planning to daily classroom events. "I guess you think about it on different levels," he explained. For instance, on a daily basis, he compares what happens in his current classroom to what he envisions happening.

> You think about it every day when you go into the classroom and you kind of go, "Whew, what was that? What am I doing here?' Or, "That went very well, why don't I do that more often?" So I think for me, it's just a constant check.

Both Jake and Kelly referred to the importance of elaborating steps towards their visions as part of enabling them to recognize and enjoy a sense that they were making progress towards it. Kelly, for instance, talked about having developed particular plans that she and her colleagues would enact to get closer to their vision. Kelly and her colleagues envision that students in their school would become "independent thinkers"—able to ask good questions that are of deep personal interest, research appropriately, reflect and critique what they are doing, and come up with thoughtful, possible responses. She and her colleagues devised a plan to support the development of such independent thinking in students that involved focusing on different "levels" of thinking for students. They had identified what they called a "inquiry level" for younger students, in which students would learn how to approach problems, pose good questions and reflect on their work (essentially, learn metacognitive skills). Then they had identified a "self-initiating" level at which students would be able to identify areas of interest to them and pursue them somewhat independently.

> So one idea,…speaking in more concrete terms, is that we would have three levels. Something which we could call like an 'inquiry level' designed for students to… become more familiar with the habits of lifelong learning which are a series of questions and habits that we have identified as important for an independent critical thinker.

Indeed, the clarity of Kelly's focus included not only what students were doing and what she was doing in her ideal classroom, but also a pathway that she and her colleagues could take in order to get closer to her (and their) vision. Kelly and her peers in this constellation explicitly used their visions as guides for planning curriculum as well as a means of assessing past and future practice. The considerable articulation of their visions enabled them to constantly test and

refine their practice against a clear, elaborated template as well as to map out future directions and avenues towards their visions.

Furthermore, all three of these teachers selected their schools purposefully, as contexts in which they felt they might be better able to attain their visions. Kelly, for instance, consulted her vision statement before interviewing with her current school, a school which she described in follow-up interviews as "the right place," observing, "I'm in the right school for this [vision]." Similarly, Jake's description of his school revealed a sense that it was in the process of developing a school vision; "I think there are a few teachers who have very similar, not necessarily the exact same vision, but a sense that we [are thinking] let's just change the whole thing!" Jake chose to teach at his school because it was beginning to explore some curricular reforms modeled after the Coalition of Essential Schools and he believed they might have the potential to pursue significant change. Throughout his several years at Parkside, Jake and some fellow teachers initiated a process of exhibitions for senior-level students, in which the students developed, and then exhibited a year-long independent study research project. Indeed, these teachers' contexts (particularly for Kelly and Jake) call to mind Stoll and Fink's (1996) characterizations of "moving" schools:

> Moving schools are not only effective in 'value added' terms, but people within them are also actively working together to respond to their changing context and to keep developing. They know where they are going, they have systems, and they have the 'will and the skill' to get there (p.86).

While Carlos' school clearly did not offer the reforming environment of Jake's and Kelly's schools, Carlos perceived his school as offering a unique opportunity to work closely with Latino students. Thus, in that light, he viewed Sandhill as "supportive" of his vision. Carlos explained that he had always wanted to work in a community like his own, "my goal has always been…to work in a similar community to Sandhill…with the Latino community." In fact, Carlos insisted that he conduct his practicum at his former high school, despite the concerns of faculty in his teacher education program about such an arrangement.

Thus, even though the reach is substantial, these three teachers were deeply driven by their visions. They felt capable and powerful. Vision invited them to reflect and analyze past curriculum, shaped plans for the future, and encouraged them to continue to refine and revise their work. Vision and context together contributed to these feelings; for vision helped them identify schools that seemed to offer a fruitful context for their vision. The supportive (or

"moving") context also helped these teachers experience feelings of progress towards their visions. The juxtaposition between vision and practice that so discomforted teachers in the "Distant-Clear" constellation served to excite and charge these teachers.

Implications

The initial results of this investigation illustrate some of the ways that vision can make a difference in teachers' lives. While one teacher in this study remarked that "Nobody ever asked me [about my vision]," this research suggests that attending to the visions of individual teachers may represent a powerful foundation for improvement efforts. Inviting teachers to make their visions explicit, and assisting teachers to examine and challenge those visions may help to surface deeply-held beliefs about teaching and learning. Elmore (1996) has suggested that without addressing such beliefs—which he has dubbed the "core of educational practice"—reform efforts are doomed to failure. He emphasizes that reforms that wish to succeed must find ways to surface, acknowledge (and if necessary, change) this core. Similarly, a number of teacher educators and scholars have pointed out that uncovering teachers' lay knowledge and beliefs can have a profound impact upon how and what teachers learn (as well as unlearn) in their professional development programs (Clandinin, 1999; Lester & Onore, 1990). Building upon research on the relationship between teachers' beliefs about teaching and their professional practice, these scholars argue that teacher development programs must elicit teachers' lay knowledge in order to confront contradictions, challenge assumptions, and deepen knowledge in turn laying the ground for more complex personal and theory-based professional knowledge (Lortie, 1975; Clandinin, 1986; Grossman, 1990; Britzman, 1991). By asking teachers to share their visions, reformers and teacher educators could develop a powerful new means to begin surfacing some of the assumptions and beliefs that drive teachers' work.

At the same time as examining the core of teaching and learning, helping teachers develop an understanding of what it takes to achieve their goals may assist them in facing inevitable setbacks and protecting them from disillusionment and discouragement. In his work on the life and career cycles of teachers, Huberman (1993) found that nearly half of experienced teachers who felt that they had become more wary with respect to reform cited disappointments in innovations as an important contributing factor to their conservatism. To help stave off the unrealistic expectations that may contribute to disappointments and a more cautionary stance to

reform, it may be helpful for teachers in the process of reform to maintain an episodic vision, or a vision of building towards change in moments rather than of consistently ideal practice (at least not immediately). Such an understanding may also be particularly critical for new teachers participating in reforms, who are especially vulnerable to disappointment and discouragement and even to leaving the profession early if they are unable to find ways to insulate themselves and their visions from deflation (Moffett, 1999). In addition, this quality of vision may be equally important for reformers to appreciate. They may need to avoid conveying a sense that ideal practice must be immediate, consistent, and daily. Without an appreciation for the episodic character of vision, reformers could unintentionally exploit the passions and idealism of teachers.

Furthermore, as the constellations illustrated, teachers who had considerably elaborated the activities and actions they needed to undertake described strong feelings of agency with regards to their ability to gradually approach their visions. If reformers and teachers work together to identify and clarify the practices that will help advance towards the visions, they may then be able to develop the appropriate institutional supports that Elmore (1996) deems necessary in order to effect change. In fact, Cohen has remarked that the ability to generate such steps is characteristic of an excellent teacher;

> One distinguishing feature of more exemplary teachers is that they not only hope but also devise the strategies, make or adapt the curriculum, consider classroom tactics, learn from students' work and their own, and in other ways create the intellectual and social infrastructure that enables their students to capitalize both on the visions that inspire their practice and on the hope that sustains it and that enables them to learn from their work (1998, p.445).

Such pathways may provide reinforcement for teachers' pursuits towards their visions, sustaining their motivations to continue to pursue their visions, and, in turn, preventing them from becoming discouraged by the distance between vision and everyday practice.

Exploring teachers' visions may also make it possible to better appreciate whether someone's opposition to a reform represents resistance to the ideas themselves or something of a learned response after having found that their own vision was not attainable. A teacher who might simply have been considered a staunch reform opponent might become understood as someone who, like the teachers in the "Distant-Clear" constellation, had compromised their hopes and learned to lower their expectations. Acknowledging and surfacing teachers' personal

visions might assist reformers to move beyond thinking about teachers simply as "advocates" and "skeptics" to a deeper understanding of teachers' response to reforms.

Finally, this study suggests some interesting directions to pursue with regard to the relationship between context and vision. For instance, a number of teachers in this study who felt motivated by their visions had also selected contexts that offered some consistency with their visions. A supportive context appears not only to provide resources and a nurturing environment for one's vision, but in many cases, more supportive contexts seem to be developing in concert with teachers' visions. Some teachers, like Kelly, Jake, Patricia and Gary, had found schools that were developing visions that were consistent with (and in Kelly's case, built upon) their personal visions. Such a synergistic environment created strong buttresses for these teachers' attempts to make progress towards their visions. On the other hand, this study also suggests that a "sinking" context can be as destructive in relationship to one's vision as a "moving" school can be constructive. For teachers like Sarah or Andrea, and their colleagues in the third constellation, a disjuncture between vision and context can be deeply destructive. This relationship between vision and context suggests a particularly important finding for teacher educators. With an appreciation of the critical interplay between vision and context, teacher educators may be able to help student-teachers identify field placements that may provide an appropriate "reach" for their visions. Such an understanding might also allow more student-teachers to be able to navigate the professional work field and find schools that matched their visions in the ways that Jake, Carlos, Patricia, Gary and Kelly did. Or, teacher educators may at least be able to help teachers avoid the potentially debilitating mismatches that led teachers like Andrea and Susan to consider leaving the profession. This is not to suggest that it is inappropriate or unhealthy to teach in contexts that prompt interrogations of visions and even challenge them. Such experiences may be particularly powerful for student-teachers, given that they are provided ample opportunity for reflection and thoughtfully supported in their efforts and inquiries. Nonetheless, it is also clear that substantial conflicts can result in drastic consequences not only for a teacher's dreams and for her career as a teacher, but also for her learning and that of her students.

Conclusion

Fullan (1999) argues that in order to generate the kind of "fusion" necessary to effect change, organizations must build upon personal, moral, spiritual and intellectual purposes. Such

power, he suggests, can only come when the hopes and dreams of individuals *and* communities are engaged. Developing a common vision that yields from and builds upon the experiences and passions of teachers' individual visions could result in a deeply motivating and personally meaningful sense of shared purpose, one that provides a powerful force for reform. By drawing upon the power and potential of personal ideals, work with teachers' visions may lead to the kinds of community, collaboration and commitment that organizational visions are meant to engender.

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[1] Choosing appropriate names for these constellations was a challenge. I selected these names—
"Close-Clear"; "Close-Cloudy"; "Distant-Clear" and "Far-Clear"—because they captured some
of the particularly relevant distinctions of these constellations—the distance and the clarity of the
focus of the visions. While these titles do not call to mind all of the features of the clusters,
names like "far-sighted" or "near-sighted" would have been pejorative and labeled the teachers
unfairly.

[2] In fact, Paul's school prints their Vision Statement on the front page of their monthly
newsletter, which reads,

> Students of St. Anne High School will possess the knowledge, skills, and Christian values
> they need to achieve fulfilling personal lives and careers. They will be prepared to
> exercise leadership roles in their adult lives and foster democratic principles and
> Christian values of social justice in a diverse and technologically changing society.