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Wilson, N. S. (2012). Uncovering teachers' beliefs through the development of a vision statement. *American Reading Forum Annual Yearbook* [Online], Vol. 32.

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## **Uncovering Teachers' Beliefs Through the Development of a Vision Statement**

Nance S. Wilson

Teachers are constantly making decisions. They make decisions regarding the classroom materials, organization, formative assessment, student feedback and more. Classroom decisions made by teachers are rooted in teachers' beliefs about literacy and how children learn (Mills & Clyde, 1991). However, it is difficult to capture teachers' beliefs because self-reporting is unreliable, "but self-report is better for reporting explicit cognitions rather than implicit ones, such as beliefs" (Gill & Hoffman, 2009). Therefore, finding alternative ways to capture teachers' beliefs is important.

Listening to teachers plan or develop curriculum is one way to gain an understanding of their beliefs (Gill & Hoffman, 2009). The purpose of this study is to investigate teacher talk during shared planning to provide insight into teachers' beliefs regarding the nature of literacy instruction. Four teachers gathered for six shared planning sessions aimed at developing a K-12 literacy vision. The elementary, intermediate, middle school, and high school teacher engaged in dialogue sharing instructional practices, rationales behind their decision-making, and how they defined key literacy elements such as comprehension and writing. Through these conversations the research gained an understanding of the teacher's conceptual beliefs regarding literacy.

### **Perspective/Theoretical Framework**

Despite the methodological limitations involved with measuring teachers' beliefs, the topic still remains an important area of study because beliefs are at the center of teachers' curricular and pedagogical decisions. Teachers' beliefs of literacy instruction are defined by Harste and Burke (1977) as principles that guide teachers' expectations regarding student behavior during reading lessons. Beliefs strongly influence teaching practices and classroom management (Gill, Ashton, & Algina, 2004; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004). Typically beliefs have been studied using surveys or questionnaires (Richardson, 1996); both types of assessments are problematic methods because they are not contextualized in teacher practice (Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2002; Speer, 2005). The studies about teachers' beliefs have examined a variety of areas including, but not limited to, general pedagogy (Snider & Roehl, 2007), reading instruction (Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd, 1991), and beliefs regarding

content area reading (Hall, 2005).

In a general study of teachers' beliefs about pedagogy, Snider and Roehl (2007) found that teachers believed in practices consistent with constructivism, small class sizes, and the value of learning styles. This large-scale survey research across a variety of socio-economic and geographic settings demonstrated unified beliefs regarding pedagogy in general. The teachers surveyed believed that student learning was linked to factors such as home environment and or learning problems rather than good teaching. Finally, the teachers' survey in this study saw teaching as more of an art than something effected by education and training.

Richardson et al., (1991) studied fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers' beliefs about reading instruction. They uncovered that teachers who believed in a bottom up philosophy of reading instruction were more likely to use a skills approach where those with a whole-language philosophy used authentic literature. This research demonstrated that teachers' beliefs about reading instruction affected classroom decisions regarding materials and instruction.

Hall's (2005) research into pre-service and in-service teachers' beliefs regarding content area reading found that teachers' beliefs regarding their lack of knowledge affected there decisions. Although both groups felt that teaching reading in the content could be worthwhile, they did not express confidence in their knowledge to do so. Pre-service teachers felt that since they did not have the knowledge to do so they should not have to teach reading; where in-service teachers felt that they should teach reading.

As these three studies illustrate, teachers have distinct beliefs regarding teaching and learning. They function to define the tasks and goals that teachers implement throughout the pedagogical decision making process (Nespor, 1987). These decisions affect the day-to-day teaching that occurs in the classroom. However, the traditional way of measuring teachers' beliefs through self-reporting is often viewed as inaccurate and superficial (Kagan, 1990).

Gill and Hoffman (2009) report that, "Measures of self-report have questionable construct validity because of bias, the interdependency of variables, and the uncertain representation by teachers concerning the distinction between knowledge and beliefs" (pp.1245-1246). Therefore, it is important to consider another lens for examining teacher beliefs about literacy instruction. Munby, Russell, and Martin (2001) suggest the method of practical argument for uncovering teacher beliefs. In this method teachers not only describe what they do, but why they do it, putting the focus on the justification for the causes of their behavior and decisions.

In this study, it is believed that teachers' beliefs about literacy instruction could be uncovered through the observation of shared planning time in which the teachers are working to develop a shared K-12 literacy vision. Teachers' discourse during this period affords the opportunity of recording teachers' rationales for their curricular and pedagogical decisions as well as their comments regarding their peers shared experiences.

Vision statements are developed by stakeholders to show where one is going with his or her vision. The statement identifies beliefs regarding literacy practices, clarifies direction over

time, coordinates the actions of stakeholders, and motivates people to work toward a particular goal (Vogt & Shearer, 2011). In the development of a literacy vision the key questions to be answered are ‘what is literacy?’ and ‘how does a successful graduate meet this vision?’ The creation of a vision is highly dependent upon the teacher’s literacy beliefs. Teachers’ beliefs include their personal identity, choice of pedagogical methods, ideas about subject matter, students, and efficacy (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004).

### **Research Questions**

- (a) What are the common expressed beliefs about literacy instruction across teachers?
- (b) To what extent does the vision statement of the faculty align with comments in the collaborative sessions?

### **Methodology**

This study used qualitative case study methodology with the teachers as a group, making a single case (Yin, 2009). This was appropriate because the focus of the study was to develop an understanding of the teachers’ literacy beliefs as a whole. Case study methodology permits the researcher to study a group or individual as they engage in an activity to uncover what is common and pervasive (Yin, 2009). A qualitative approach was used because of its suitability in analyzing teacher dialogue, the need to incorporate a wide-angle lens (Spradley, 1980) and the socially constructed nature of teacher planning. This study examined teacher discourse to uncover common literacy beliefs between primary, intermediate, middle grades, and high school teachers as they developed a shared K-12 literacy vision.

### *Setting*

The study took place at a small southeastern suburban preparatory school located in a progressive city. The school has 630 students with no religious affiliation. The teacher-student ratio is 1:19. The school mission statement regarding instruction is “our goal is to ignite the full academic potential of every student. We use a “whole child” approach that promotes intellectual, emotional and social growth, while emphasizing problem solving, critical thinking and high-order reasoning.”

### *Participants*

The participants formed a convenient sample of teachers from a wide range of grade levels who were available to meet during a specific time. The group included a first grade and fifth grade teacher with 20 plus years of teaching experience in a variety of elementary grade levels. The two other participating teachers were a middle school Language Arts teacher with 15 years of experience in middle school and a high school English teacher with experience with middle school and advanced placement courses. All of the teachers had been members of the school community for at least 6 years and had experienced the same administrations and profession development opportunities regarding instruction during this time.

### *Research Design*

Although research was an outcome of this work, the design was established to assure that the teachers would be able to attain the school's goal of developing a K-12 Literacy vision. The design allowed for teachers to engage in self-reflection regarding their own literacy beliefs prior to meeting, to discuss areas of literacy instruction and how they implement them, and to reflect on the relationship of the vision statement to their classroom instruction. Therefore, each teacher completed a survey, met for six 45 minute periods and had time outside of the meetings to gather his or her thoughts and provide feedback to the group via email or the next meeting.

### *Uncovering prior beliefs and knowledge*

Teachers took the Literacy Orientation Survey (Lenski, Wham, & Griffey, 1998). They completed the survey prior to the first meeting. The purpose of the survey was to gather self-report data to correlate with the data collected in the shared planning sessions. The survey also assisted the teachers in thinking about their instruction and their beliefs about literacy instruction prior to the first meeting. This survey was appropriate because it has a constructivist view of literacy, the view expressed by the administration of the school and of which the teachers' had received multiple professional development opportunities over time.

### *Teacher Work Sessions*

The teacher work sessions took place during the course of the school day. The teachers used their planning period during this time and volunteered to participate in building a literacy vision. After each session, the researcher shared session field notes shared with the teachers for feedback and correction to assure that the teachers' statements were reflected accurately. In each meeting, the researcher used a tape recorder and field notes to record the team's discussions and reflections.

The sessions were planned with the final goal of creating a vision statement in mind. The first four sessions focused on a particular literacy topic to gather a range of teachers' beliefs regarding literacy instruction and to guide in the creation of the final vision statement. The focus of the first meeting was to have the teachers share a Language Arts lesson they recently did with their students; the researcher helped guide the discussion by asking the teachers about their learning goals for that lesson. The second meeting addressed a discussion about a unit teachers had taught; the researcher helped guide the discussion by asking the teachers about their learning goals for that unit. The third meeting focused on teaching comprehension. The fourth meeting focused on writing instruction. Each of these sessions were focused on sharing teaching practices and beliefs in order to set the stage for the final two sessions.

The final two sessions were focused on the creation of the vision. The fifth meeting was a brainstorming session regarding the goals of K-12 literacy instruction. The final meeting was the creation of the K-12 literacy vision. After the creation of their literacy vision the teachers each received a copy of the vision and asked to follow up with revisions and or comments in the form of emails.

### *Data Analysis*

Data was analyzed in a recursive (Stake, 1995) manner to uncover themes relating to literacy beliefs. Initially all the data was read and coded relating to general views about literacy, views about classroom instruction, and then views about development. After the first stage of analysis and organizing the data in a taxonomy supported by relevant examples from the transcripts, four categories consisting of beliefs about pedagogical techniques and curricular choices emerged. The data was then analyzed again to uncover the nature of the teachers' beliefs within these themes. The final pass at the data was aimed at clarifying the specific themes and developing the supports for each theme.

### **Results**

The analysis led to two broad categories of teacher beliefs considered important to literacy instruction and learning. The beliefs consisted of literacy as a meaning making process and teacher as facilitator of literacy instruction.

#### *Literacy as a meaning making process*

Literacy as a meaning making process was consistent as a theme throughout the sessions. The conversations regarding this theme highlighted important topics such as the reason for reading is comprehension and that in writing author's purpose is key.

The teachers defined comprehension as "going beyond the text." In the initial discussion regarding what is literacy and reading, the fifth grade teacher described comprehension as "so much more than being able to read a book." To which the first grade teacher responded, "Yeah, I mean it's not just word recognition." The teachers' understanding of comprehension changed from going beyond searching for a right answer to demonstrating an understanding of the text as a whole. The high school English teacher expressed frustration in helping her students see reading as a process of understanding when she shared,

*"can support it. But they're still thinking there's one right answer in the teacher's head, if I can predict what it is I'll get the grade."*

The fifth grade teacher also supported the above view in a follow-up comment,

*"They have very good word recognition, they do understand the words they're reading. They can say the word but they're not visualizing the mean behind the words."*

The conversation was further supported by the middle school teacher who shared,

*"Absolutely right but that's the first level of understanding--is the multiple choice; your child needs to take the information that they were given and make inferences and make comparisons and that would be, to*

*me, that would be more comprehension at my level; is that they can take the information they've been given, they can recall those words, they can recall those facts but can you take what you've read and make a comparison, can you make inferences, can you um support a fact from it?"*

The teachers' consistently defined literacy as requiring more than a retelling of what was "right there" in the text.

The teachers' also envisioned writing as a complex meaning-making event. In discussing different forms of writing instruction the teachers went beyond describing what they did; but described how they saw that the proper organization of writing led to students who understand the value of audience and the communication of ideas to add create meaning. In opening this conversation the first grade teacher described how she teaches her students that writing is about meaning making.

*A lot of the writing that I'm doing now is not as much individual writing but it's shared writing. . . I'm modeling and they're adding thoughts and ideas; um, this morning the idea was to make, you saw it on the board, the math story. It goes along with the reading, it has to make sense and have details.*

The fifth grade teacher followed this conversation by describing what she expected her students to achieve by the end of fifth grade so that they would demonstrate the ability to communicate through writing beyond the listing of basic facts.

*When students can write a good paragraph with details and support I want them to move on to write more so that each paragraph can flow into the next. The main idea, three supporting details, three supporting sentences, a closing sentence will all be a part of multiple paragraphs to provide more than just a simple retell but to provide like details.*

The high school teacher followed up this need for details and support in writing as a key element, when she shared that she wanted her students to be able

*to do a literary analysis research paper on their own with proper MLA formatting um, correct thesis statements, support, transition, away from a stereotypical five paragraph essay; I want them to be able to prove their point, if it's four paragraphs it's four paragraphs, if it's six paragraphs, its six...*

The overall consensus of these teachers throughout the meetings is that writing was more than simply putting ideas on paper, but a place for students to demonstrate deep knowledge and understanding about a topic.

As demonstrated in the excerpts above, the overall theme of literacy as a complex meaning making process was referred to throughout all of the meetings and supported by all of the teachers in a variety of ways. The support included complex definitions of what it means to comprehend and what it means to write; in both situations teachers described the process, as going beyond what is right there.

*Teacher as facilitator of instruction*

The second theme that was prevalent throughout the teachers' discussions was the role of the teacher. Each of the teachers saw themselves as facilitators of learning. They described their role as providing the appropriate instructional context within which students will grow and learn.

In the area of reading, the teachers believed that by providing a range of learning opportunities from literature circles, to learning centers, to dramatization, and analysis techniques students would come to meet the learning goals. They described these activities across grade levels and in a variety of contexts. For instance, the first grade teacher used guided reading and learning centers throughout her literacy instruction and took the time to explain how this works to the other teachers. The fifth grade teacher used a combination of whole class and guided reading to support students reading development supporting each instructional setting with probing questions to develop students thinking. The middle school teacher described how she taught the students literature circle roles and how she guided them in becoming independent with these roles. The high school teacher described how she had students read with a literacy analysis idea or a probing question in mind so that they could discuss the literature from a variety of perspectives.

A core belief of these teachers was that writing to communicate was at the heart of literacy. They saw a need to immerse students in writing but frequently lamented that there was never enough time. The teachers shared the belief that it was their role to facilitate the writing process and help students to write for a particular audience. The teachers talked about providing time for writers' workshop and journal writing. In addition, they talked about the need to grade for a purpose rather than to grade everything. The high school teacher described this as "*focusing you critique to assure that students get what you want them to do better.*"

*The final vision statement*

The final vision statement reflected the teachers' beliefs regarding literacy instruction (See Figure 1). The statement highlighted teachers' position that literacy is complex; teachers described comprehension as going beyond the concrete or 'right there' to something that needs to be applied. Furthermore, their vision statements (a) reflected the need for writing with support and (b) recognized the role of the audience.

Regarding the facilitation of instruction, the vision statement is less explicit. However, it does highlight the need for the writing process and for the study and analysis of multiple genres two items that require the teacher to facilitate learning.

FIGURE 1:  
Literacy Vision Statement

*The vision of language arts teacher leaders is for high school graduates to be careful, thoughtful, reflective, critical readers and writers.*

*To accomplish this vision each graduate will be:*

- *A reader who comprehends beyond the written or spoken word*
  - *A reader who applies what they read*
  - *A reader who can engage in analysis across a variety of genres and texts*
  - *A writer who is proficient in all stages of the writing process*
  - *A writer who selects and uses appropriate support*
  - *A writer who follows the conventions of language*
  - *A writer who recognizes the role of audience*
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### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' beliefs regarding literacy instruction through the formation of a school-wide vision statement. Teacher's beliefs were uncovered through the conversations and the teachers' statements supported explanations of these beliefs. The use of teacher dialogue during a meeting was an effective approach for uncovering teacher beliefs. The discourse provided the opportunity to uncover the teachers' rationales for their curricular and pedagogical decisions.

The shared experience had additional benefits. The teachers were able to learn from each other. The teachers were brought together explicitly for this process and were initially concerned about the lost planning time. However, the benefits of the process were most clearly expressed by the first grade teacher in a conversation prior to the start of the third meeting.

*I'll be honest with you.... my first response was oh dear God, here I have to go to another meeting. But now I have enjoyed listening to how everything is relevant at each level; it just is your perspective of the level and I think you know I'm not familiar with high school kids or middle school kids so for me to look at it in those terms it's been interesting; I've enjoyed it.*

### **Educational Significance**

This study supported the hypothesis that teachers' creation of a common vision statement provides a lens for understanding teachers' beliefs about literacy learning. Furthermore, teachers'



planning time provided a forum for teachers to display the rationales underlying their decision-making, rationales that are usually hidden from view, especially from the view of a researcher. Teachers normally hidden planning process was thus rendered visible, and hence open to investigation. Through the investigation it was uncovered that teachers beliefs about literacy instruction can be uncovered during through dialogue about instruction and planning. This finding aligns with the research by Gill and Hoffman (2009) and encourages questions regarding future work on teacher beliefs.

This study was limited by the lack of corresponding classroom observations to verify the teachers' belief statements with teacher action. Gill and Hoffman (2009) found that some teachers stated beliefs in meetings did not always related as clearly to teaching actions as others. This research would be strengthened by follow up with classroom observation. In addition, the nature of this research in developing a vision statement would allow for observation as teachers explain and train other teachers in understanding the vision statement. This would provide further understandings of teachers' beliefs regarding the key points of the vision statement.

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