



**V**isions are special insights. They are little windows suddenly opened or curtains drawn back. The more powerful they are, the longer they stay. When I was a teenager, I was privileged to travel to Europe with my family. I remember waking up the first morning and looking out of the hotel window. Every detail is still there nearly 30 years later. I can see the red tile roofs, the narrow cobblestone streets, and a man riding his bicycle with two long loaves of bread under his arm. I can hear the cuckoo bird and smell the wood-fired bakery next door. The effect was immediate. I loved it. Even though I have returned to Europe many times, that first picture remains strong.

I also remember taking a fine-arts class in college—it was a requirement.

I had never studied art before, but the professor in his curious way opened up a whole new world to me. I have been enriched and blessed by that vision ever since. I have spent days, perhaps months, of my life

in art galleries—exploring and enjoying.

Though unexpected, that vision was consciously accepted and nurtured.

Several years ago during the Olympics, a young man preparing for the high dive was interviewed on television. The most surprising comment was that he spent more time mentally reviewing the details of the dive than he did actually practicing it. Later, his coach confirmed that this mental phase was paramount to a successful dive. This was obviously something more than daydreaming or wishful thinking.

There are also biblical instances of visions strengthening or changing a person. Stephen's vision of Christ and of heaven was so strong that it enabled him to remain calm and steadfast even while being stoned to death. Perhaps the most famous "heavenly vision" was that of Saul, who, on the road to Damascus, refocused the whole direction of his life in a new vision of what God wanted him to do. John the Revelator saw the new heavens and the new earth so clearly that this world did not seem to have much attraction. And Jesus' vision of redemption led Him to this world and to the cross and the tomb.

Visions play an important part in shaping the everyday actions of individuals. When a vision is strong, individuals seem to know where they are going. On the other hand, there are people whose visions are incomplete. Because

# TEACHERVISION: THE KEY TO IMPROVED INSTRUCTION

## Visions Bring Insight and Inspiration

**B Y D . S . P E N N E R**

of their youth, the vision may not yet have developed, or with increasing age, it may somehow have failed to mature. The visions of others may be unfocused or distorted or may emphasize the wrong thing. Sometimes things go wrong and visions are broken or damaged, even shattered.

The concept of vision is linked in a very powerful way to teaching. This includes the teacher's envisioning of his or her ideal role, as well as creating visions within students. Since visions are such a powerful force, the teacher's vision will largely determine how he or she organizes the classroom learning environment.

A teacher's internal vision is a composite of hopes and dreams informed by the memory and example of models and mentors. It is reinforced by past successes and failures and modified by the local environment and by personal skills. Such a vision is like a powerful magnet, drawing people to it and away from competing distractions. While this is true even of an unarticulated vision, it is all the more so when the vision is conscious and well defined. The more clearly we visualize the details of the vision, the more likely it is to have an effect on us—and the more likely we are to fulfill the vision.

### **The Power of External Pressures**

Like everyone else, teachers respond to the external pressures that fill their lives. There are student demands and parental expectations. The principal has things for the teacher to do; the supervisor has a whole checklist. The board develops recommendations and passes resolutions. The state and federal govern-

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ment, as well as certain regulatory agencies, have their ideas about the way schools should be run. In church-related schools, the denomination sets standards and the local congregation has some specific codes. And the list goes on.

These external pressures are powerful. They seek to make teachers change or conform. But since the

pressures come from a variety of sources and are motivated by an assortment of reasons, they may conflict—causing the teacher to first do one thing and then another, with no sense of continuity or mission. Sometimes external pressures, brought about by students, parents, or the community, bring about radical change that leaves the teacher's vision scarred, shattered, or destroyed. But occasionally, external pressures help teachers see things in a new way, from a fresh perspective. New ideas become part of the teacher's internal vision—resulting in positive and long-lasting change.

But, despite all the external pressures, good and bad, most teachers press on with their work according to and in fulfillment of their internal visions. When the classroom door is closed and the class has begun, the teacher's vision is the guiding force.

### **Polishing the Vision**

Teachers can strengthen their visions and become better at their jobs in a variety of ways. Here is a short list of suggestions to facilitate the process.

*Articulate the vision.* Begin by writing out the vision, sharing it with a friend, or describing it on an audiotape. Remember: The more details it contains, the stronger the vision. And the stronger the vision, the more likely it will become a reality. Start every sentence with "I see . . ."—filling in the rest with details of what you envision for your classroom. You may feel shy about this, or the memory of your high school English teacher may be warning—"No personal pronouns. Don't be repetitive,"—but do it anyway. Unless you have done this be-

# Visions are exciting—they promise us the future.

fore, you may be surprised by what you find. For practice, try writing out a detailed lesson plan with specific details of what your dream would have students do throughout the lesson or class period.

*Seek external feedback.* To evaluate your vision, get as much feedback as you can. This will help you to make your dream realistic and practical. It is often hard to listen to the truth, so be prepared not to be too sensitive about yourself. Some sources of valuable feedback are:

1. *Tested measurements:* Books and articles about effective teaching, theoretical models, and other seasoned teachers and mentors. By comparison with others, your vision can grow and develop.

2. *Electronic media:* Video recorders are great, but even a tape recorder on the desk during a lesson will provide some good feedback. By doing this quietly when no one else is looking, you will have a chance to see if there is a match between your vision and your actions.

3. *Evaluations:* Don't wait for the principal or the supervisor—although these can be helpful. Find friends and peers to look in on your classroom and discuss what they see. Sharing your vision with others and then asking them to observe what is happening will be of double benefit. By explaining what you want to achieve in the classroom, you will visualize it better (ensuring a greater chance that it will take place), while the person observing will be looking for specifics and can reflect on what has actually taken place. A good team—teacher and observer—can help energize the vision.

*Get others on board.* Visions are exciting—they promise us the future. The most important thing that happens in a classroom is what goes on in the minds of the students. The role of the teacher in this fast-paced information age is that of “lead student,” and the vision of the classroom is a shared one—teachers and students together. Develop the vision together with your students. Furthermore, how about

sharing the vision with parents and involving them in the learning process?

*Modify and strengthen the vision.* A vision is not static but dynamic and ever changing. Polish your vision. Make some changes based on new ideas and valuable feedback. Visions are somewhat like dreams in the night—some parts dominate, while other parts are vague. As we polish, we find some areas that were vague are now rich in detail. As we make them more conscious, they become more powerful. Keep sharing your vision—that is the way it stays alive. Keep adding details. The more details, the more powerful the vision. (If you don't believe it, just look at a seed catalog in the spring. Before you know it, you'll be ordering all kinds of exotic seeds and digging up the garden!)

*Keep current.* Old visions are nothing more than stale souvenirs, so find ways to renew and enlarge your vision. Get “new glasses”—to refocus your efforts—by visiting a new place, even if it is only another classroom. Try shifting your way of thinking and doing by saying to yourself, “How would I teach if I had no books? If students had no workbooks or study guides? If there were no classroom? If this were the year 2025?” Try some ideas of your own. A vision of teaching is like any interest or hobby—if it is not kept “hot,” it fades and loses its appeal. Consequently, the vision becomes less powerful. What happens then? The vision is replaced by one of simply doing the minimum, of just getting by. Or you may end up copying what others are doing or trying to fulfill someone else's vision. This can lead to what is commonly

called burnout. Burnout is when a vision becomes faded or obscure, lost or destroyed.

## The Vision Renewed

Many powerful forces can shape the life of a teacher. These include external pressures and internal visions. While external pressures can effect change, the greatest improvements come from improving one's vision of the ideal teacher. Through study and practice, the vision becomes clearer, more focused and complete, as well as more Christlike. This suggests a new meaning for the phrase “restore the image of God in man”—refreshing the vision of God in teachers and students. Try spending a thoughtful hour a day on the life of Christ. Just as with athletes, the more we visualize our future activities, the more likely they are to occur. The meditation time will bring results. The more clearly we see Him, the more likely that we will become like Him.

This is the heart of education—enhancing the vision. For teachers must be concerned not only about their own visions, but also about the developing visions of students in their care. Fulfillment is found in working with individuals, whatever their vision, and helping them to complete, to polish, or to focus their visions. This is particularly true for the Christian teacher—who helps build dreams and inspire visions of eternity.

Polish the glass. Help those who do not see the vision clearly to clean away the dirt and grime of low or worldly ambitions. Repair the broken and shattered glass of emotionally scarred lives. Provide glasses for the shortsighted and surgery for the one with cataracts. For both the teacher and the student, the vision will be renewed. To borrow a phrase from Paul, now we see through a glass darkly—but when the vision is complete, it will be face-to-face. ✍

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