"I THINK THEY CAN TEACH EACH OTHER MORE THAN I CAN": TEACHER LEARNING AND VISIONING IN SUPPORT OF STUDENT AGENCY

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This dissertation is dedicated to my children, Ella and Jack. May you always have teachers who recognize and foster your capacity to shape the world for good.

And to my husband Alan, who loves and supports me in my own quest to change the world.

And finally, to my parents, Colleen and Ralph, who always ensured that I recognized my own agency to bring positive change to the world.

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# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

The first sparks of this work flared into existence in my fifth-grade classroom, and, because of that, and because this is a work about student agency, I wish to first center a student's voice to highlight how I came to this work and why it matters to me. Below is an essay one of my fifth-grade students composed for a contest and passed along to me (Ms. Robinson is my maiden name):

*I'm not perfect. I'm not as good as other people. I'm not a fast reader or learner. I'm not that smart. I'm so different. These are all the thoughts I had my whole life until I met Miss Robinson and then started to change. Miss Robinson is my 5th grade Social Studies and ELA (English Language Arts) teacher.*

*On my first day, I noticed the couches and comfy chairs in her room and thought it looked safe and comfortable. She had super hero posters in the room. She said super heroes keep communities safe, help people, and make the world a better place. She said she believed we could be like super heroes, too.*

*When I heard this I thought, "Wow, maybe I can be those things."*

*During my first few days, Miss Robinson told us that "words can change the world." After I heard those powerful, beautiful, life- changing words, I wanted to do just that. But I didn't know how and wasn't sure I could do it anyway because I'm a slow reader. I told Miss Robinson my concern and she said it could actually be a good thing, because I could understand the story better. I never thought of it that way before and I felt proud and glad that I was different and special; I felt like I had a purpose.*

*Miss Robinson taught us how to figure out the meaning of hard words by using prefixes, suffixes, root words, and context clues. Being able to figure words out on my own without using a dictionary, made me feel independent and confident.*

*She also taught us how to write a persuasive essay and gave us opportunities to put our skills to use. Some students wrote to the governor or to our school's principal, but I wrote to my parents. I'm planning to persuade them to let me play Mine Craft for a longer period of time. I believe I have a good chance at succeeding.*

*Miss Robinson also holds group meetings everyday with the whole class. She allows everyone an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings. She teaches us to participate in discussions and listen respectfully. She always tells us when we can do better. She also shares personal life experiences that I can relate to. She says we are like a family and need to treat each other kindly and respectfully. I always know I can count on her.*

*Miss Robinson has taught me a lot, but the most important things she taught me are more personal. When I first started middle school, I doubted myself a lot. Now, I believe in myself. I'm smart. I'm special. I'm a great student. I have big ideas and I can change the world by sharing them with others, never giving up, and becoming the best me I can be.*

*~Marina (all names are pseudonyms)*

Marina's essay speaks more eloquently than I possibly could about the frustrations I faced as an educator trying to foster opportunities for students to use and develop their agency—that is, the contextualized and variable sum of their skills, intentions, and socially-mediated capacities to act as change agents purposefully impacting the world (Bandura, 2006; Clarke et al., 2016; Giddens, 1984). Inspired by my students' incredible potential to change the world, I was also frustrated in equal parts by, for many of them, their limited conception of their potential. My students were brilliant, kind, and powerful, but they did not always seem to realize it. Many of them pointed to previous educational experiences that had taught them that they were not good enough, were not smart enough, or were not powerful enough to create positive change in the world.

Instruction that centers and develops students' agency supports academic (Anderson et al., 2019; Kundu, 2020; Stenalt & Lassesen, 2021) and social-emotional success (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2015; Meston et al., 2022; Kumpulainen et al., 2014), yet educators increasingly teach in settings that restrict their opportunities to design such instruction (Santoro, 2017; Santoro, 2019; Vaughn et al., 2021). *Agency-supportive instruction*—in other words, instruction that provides opportunities for students to develop and exercise agency through making meaningful decisions about what and how to learn, using their learning to engage with the world, and impacting the learning of themselves and others (Clarke et al., 2016; Freire, 1973; Vaughn, 2021)—can support equity both within the classroom and within the larger society, where too often systems of oppression serve to prepare racially-, linguistically-, socioeconomically-, and ability- minoritized individuals to accept 'less' (Jordan, 2010): Less

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opportunity to access enriching and dynamic educational experiences, less opportunity to use passions, skills, and interests to serve educational and career goals, and less opportunity to be considered as valuable members of the classroom community able to impact the learning of others. In contrast to many studies that focus on equity as an outcome measurable on standardized assessments, I conceptualize equity as both broader and deeper—while pushing back on linguistic and cultural biases contained within standardized assessments may represent one avenue for increasing educational equity (Padilla & Borsato, 2008), practitioners and researchers dedicated to ensuring equity need look beyond a unidimensional assessment score, to explore the richness of students' opportunities for exploration and inquiry (Adair, 2014; Adair et al., 2018); the value given to their speech and silence (Segal et al., 2017); and the ways in which students are valued for the funds of knowledge they bring to the classroom (Gonzalez et al., 2006). When all students are given choice and voice in the classroom, they develop capacities that serve the goals they have selected for themselves and that can contribute to the wider society (Adair, 2014). Yet many students, particularly those from historically-minoritized populations, are rarely afforded access to these sorts of rich, agency-supportive pedagogical practices (Adair, 2014; Adair et al., 2018; Fuller, 2007; Williams et al., 2020). Social inequalities are reproduced when students who already possess significant advantages are afforded dynamic opportunities to enact agency, while others are deemed only capable of following directions and enacting scripted responses (Adair, 2014; Calarco et al., 2022; Golann, 2021). Given the discrepancy between the known benefits of agency-supportive instruction and its rarity in classrooms, there is a clear call to consider what changes to the educational system might create new opportunities for *all* students to engage in learning experiences that foster and leverage their agency.

However, despite the clear benefits of agency-supportive instruction, the *how* of enactment is significantly more difficult than the *why*. Agency is situative; its meanings are diverse to diverse individuals, and it is enacted differently by different individuals across different spaces. Students' enactment of agency in the classroom is often dependent on a complex array of individual and systemic factors, including, amongst others, students' sense of self-efficacy, their cultural norms, the dissonance or resonance between students' cultural and linguistic norms and those afforded dominance in society, educational policies, standardized curricula, and hegemonic ideologies that impact the ways in which students, knowledge, and learning are perceived and treated in the classroom. Many of these things are outside of teachers' control; currently, many American teachers have little power over the standards they are given,

the ways in which they are evaluated, or the hegemonic ideologies that may position their students in deficit ways outside the classroom. Yet, there are also things that many teachers can, to greater or lesser degrees depending on context, control: their pedagogical practices, their personal and academic relationships with students, and their visions of the classroom and student agency.

Clearly defined *visions* of student agency—that is, teachers' aspirational ideals of what student agency and agency-supportive instruction may look like in the classroom—may bolster teachers' capacity to enact agency-supportive instruction in the face of numerous constraints (Dauod & Parsons, 2012; Duffy, 2002; Hammerness, 2001; Vaughn & Kuby, 2019). These visions emerge at the intersection of lived experiences, passions, knowledge, values, and sociocultural ideologies (Duffy, 2002; Parsons et al. 2014). Teachers who spend time *visioning*— that is, articulating, reflecting on, and refining their visions--may more deeply invest in finding ways to enact ambitious pedagogies despite situational constraints (Duffy, 2002; Vaughn 2014; Vaughn & Parsons 2012). According to Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2005), teachers with a clear pedagogical vision "know 'where they are going' and how they and their students are going to get there" (177). Though there exist studies establishing the role of pedagogical visions in maintaining educators' commitments to ambitious teaching, as well as limited research into the perspectives on student agency that educators hold (Moses et al., 2020), to my knowledge, no study has yet examined the aspirational visions that teachers hold about the specific topic of student agency, despite the many benefits of enacting agency-supportive instruction.

Given this gap in the literature, this three-manuscript dissertation focuses on educators' conceptions and visions of student agency. This work focuses on the ways in which these conceptions and visions are defined, reimagined, refined, and foreclosed both in individual reflection and in dialogue with peers, students, and context. The first paper in this dissertation, a qualitative analysis of interview and focus group data with educators and their emergent bilingual students, describes disparate student and educator conceptions of academic discussion practices and the role these divergences may play in how students take up practices designed to position them as agents (Meston et al., 2021). Conceptions of agency represent one facet of the larger vision of student agency that educators hold, and thus it was this work that inspired papers two and three, which take a situative perspective on agency and educator learning, bringing together four educators working across different schools, grades, and subjects to dialogically delve into problems of practice pertaining to student agency during a year-long Critical Friends Group. The

second paper of this dissertation zooms in on this CFG, illuminating the visions of student agency and agency-supportive instruction that a single focal participant brought to her dialogic learning experience, in order to better understand the visions of agency that teachers may hold, as well as to consider the methodological affordances of analyzing visions within a dialogic professional learning space. And the third paper takes a larger lens to this CFG, focusing on the ways in which the participants used dialogic analysis of problems of practice to reframe, reimagine, or foreclose their visions of agency-supportive instruction (See Figure 1.1 for an overview of the three papers).

*Figure 1.1: Overview of the three papers within this dissertation*



**1** "They're the ones who hold the answers": Exploring educators' and students' purposes for academic conversation

Research question: In what ways do educator and student conceptions of academic discussion intersect or diverge in the middle-grades classroom?

Data sources: Educator interview and student focus group data

**2** "A constantly evolving process": Independent and dialogic visioning about student agency: A case study

Research questions: 1. What visions of student agency and agency-supportive instruction does one literacy teacher—independently and in conversation with colleagues—report as shaping her pedagogical actions?
2. What does analyzing engagement in dialogic professional learning experiences afford researchers studying teacher visions?

Data sources: Educator interviews and reflections, recordings of professional learning meetings, field notes

**3** "True teaching is making sure it works for the people in front of you": Teacher collaboration to re-envision instruction in support of student agency

Research question: How are teacher visions of agency-supportive instruction reframed, reimagined, or foreclosed through collaborative analysis of problems of practice?

Data sources: Educator interviews and reflections, recordings of professional learning meetings, field notes

As a practical contribution, this dissertation ultimately aims to provide recommendations for teachers and teacher educators seeking to ensure that dynamic, agency-supportive educational experiences are afforded to those too often denied them. Theoretically, this dissertation aims to

add to the literature on the role of teacher visioning as a practice complementary to dialogic analysis of problems of practice and supportive of student agency, as well as to consider the methodological affordances of analyzing visions as co-constructed and negotiated within dialogue. And, on a personal level, this work is for Marina, who was compassionate and kind and had brilliant insights into whatever we were reading, but who felt she had to silence her voice because she had been deemed "a slow reader." And this work is for Franklin, who had been labeled "a behavior problem"—no more than an object, and an undesirable one at that—instead of the passionate and talented writer and debater that he is. This work is for all the students whose agency I supported in some small way. And this work is for all the students whose agency I did not do enough to support, who I may have unintentionally silenced or marginalized, because, like seemingly all teachers in America's public education system, I was harried and tired, over-evaluated and under-resourced. I hope it may be of value to other educators who, in the face of so many obstacles, still seek to uplift students as change agents within their classrooms.

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# CHAPTER 2

## "THEY'RE THE ONES WHO HOLD THE ANSWERS": EXPLORING EDUCATORS' AND STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC CONVERSATION

"*When they came in, they seemed to think that I held the answers... Through academic conversations, I've kind of been able to show them that they're the ones who hold the answers.*" –Ms. Smith, grade 5 teacher

Ms. Smith (all names are pseudonyms) passionately believed in the power of academic conversation to support students' learning and agency development. Academic conversation was a cornerstone of her pedagogy, and her students were well-versed in what academic conversation looked like, how it supported knowledge co-construction, and how it deepened language and content learning. Yet, in Ms. Smith's classroom, and in the five other classrooms in our study, students and their teachers held divergent understandings of academic conversation as a means for promoting students' agency.

In this article, we, a team of literacy researchers and former middle-grade educators, examine the conceptions of academic conversation held by six middle-school teachers and 82 of their students. Prior research demonstrates that educators and their students may hold disparate conceptions of their roles in the classroom and of the value of certain learning activities, and that these divergences play a pivotal role in both student and educator investment in instructional activities (Maclellan & Soden, 2003; Song, Hannafin, & Hill, 2007). Through teacher interviews and student focus groups, we sought to answer the question: *In what ways do educator and student conceptions of academic conversation intersect or diverge in the middle-grades classroom?* This work illuminates potential areas of intersection that educators may leverage to strengthen student investment in classroom discussion, while also highlighting points of divergence in order to open space for authentic dialogue between educators and their students about which purposes are served by meaningful participation in academic conversation. In what follows, we first frame our study in the current literature. Then, using data collected in one middle school, we examine learners' and educators' understandings of the value and uses of academic conversation. Finally, we provide educators with suggestions for facilitating meta-discussion

surrounding academic conversation practices in their classrooms in order to promote both educator and student investment in the process of co-constructing meaning through talk.

## 2.1 Framing academic conversation

Zwiers and Crawford (2011) define *academic conversation* as "sustained and purposeful conversations about school topics" (p. 1). Drawing on the work of numerous others (e.g., Alexander, 2020; Matusov, von Duyke, & Kayumova, 2016; Wilkinson, Murphy, & Binici, 2015), we further emphasize the necessarily active role of students. To this end, we define academic conversation as "sustained and purposeful conversations about school topics *that actively engage learners in collectively constructing knowledge, deepening conceptual understanding, and developing students' sense of the self as an authorial agent."* Although talk in the classroom has gone by many names, we choose to utilize the term *academic conversation* for two reasons:

1. The term *conversation* implies reciprocity. In everyday understandings, conversation is multivocal, dialogic, and requires speaking and listening on the parts of both parties. We wish to emphasize this aspect of talk in the classroom—namely, that both students and teachers are responsible for bringing unique perspectives, for speaking, and for listening.

2. In contrast to prescriptive protocols, *academic conversation* is a general term encompassing various types and formats of talk that share the common purpose of knowledge co-construction in classrooms. Rather than specifying particular talk moves or group sizes, academic conversation has the flexibility to meet the needs of learners in various ways.

The premise of academic conversation draws on Vygotskian understandings of the culturally- and historically- constrained ways in which adults, peers and artifacts mediate learners' intellectual development, primarily through language (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotskian theory emphasizes the reciprocal role of scaffolding in learners' development; as Newman, Griffin, and Cole (1989) explain, "…cognitive change occurs within [a] mutually constructive process. While instructional interactions favor the role associated with the teacher, we cannot lose sight of the continually active role of the child" (p. 58). Through academic conversation, learners have the opportunity to learn reciprocally from and with others—both teachers and other students—using language as the medium for developing ideas.

Falling within the purview of dialogic practices, academic conversation entails the purposeful use of structured, reciprocal talk in the service of surfacing and cultivating students' thinking and learning (Alexander, 2020). Rather than talking *at* students, as in traditional educator-centric instruction, a dialogic stance necessitates talking *with* students (Alexander, 2020). These dialogic episodes are, ideally, characterized by engagement with open-ended questions and authentic problems; shared interpretive authority between students and teacher; and, embedment within classroom norms that promote inclusion and care (Lefstein and Snell, 2014). Well-structured academic conversation, in serving these aims, creates the conditions for students to develop as *authorial agents*, able to use cultural knowledge and practices as material to achieve their own purposes in the classroom and world (Matusov et al., 2016).

## 2.2 Tensions surrounding academic conversation

Because academic conversation has been linked with positive outcomes for student learning, the practice is gaining momentum (Resnick, Asterhan, Clarke, & Schantz, 2018). And, yet, as articulated by Lefstein and Snell (2014) and aligned with our own experiences as researchers and practitioners, academic conversation is often a site of tension. We submit that one source of tension underexamined in the literature results from implicit beliefs about what academic conversation *is*—the classroom talk *ontologies*—that students and teachers enact during academic conversation (Hall & Wicaksono, 2020).

Educators often experience these tensions individually as they attempt to reconcile the multiple (sometimes conflicting) conceptions they hold of the purposes for academic conversation. For example, an educator may use academic conversation to develop students' understanding of canonical concepts, which may potentially be at odds with efforts to make space for youths' multiple perspectives and understandings, or to cultivate learners' agency (Lefstein & Snell, 2014). Reconciling this tension is particularly challenging for today's educators, who teach in a climate of high-stakes accountability testing and may experience apprehension about lack of time and the perceived rigor of discussion-based lessons (Black, 2004; Fisher & Larkin, 2008). Indeed, there is likely great value in examining the multiple, sometimes conflicting, goals individual educators have for discussions in their classrooms.

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These tensions may also be experienced collectively among learners and teachers who bring divergent understandings of their roles in dialogic events (Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013). In particular, students from historically-minoritized populations (e.g., students classified as English Learners) have often been afforded far fewer opportunities to engage in extended academic conversation than their English home-language peers (Guan Eng Ho, 2005); as such, the role of "authorial agent" may feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable. While teachers might attempt to scaffold agentive participation in academic conversation (Santori & Belfatti, 2016), students, too, must recognize and act on these opportunities to benefit from them. Resolving tensions that surround academic conversation may enhance learner investment in these dialogic practices.

### 2.2.1 The role of reconciliation

While we emphasize that meaningful academic conversation can only happen in a space where diverse ideas are present and valued, we also suggest that shared values surrounding the purposes of academic conversation can mediate engagement in those practices. In this study, we draw on the concept of *reconciliation*. Song and colleagues (2007) define reconciliation as "the process of *examining* and *aligning* teaching and learning expectations and beliefs" (p. 34, emphasis added). Rather than view discourse practices in the classroom as a set of 'givens,' reconciliation processes aid teachers in viewing their beliefs about language uses as culturally and socially shaped (Gal & Irvine, 1995). It is our hope that, as teachers render these invisible beliefs visible, they will engage their students in doing the same, enabling the collaborative construction of a classroom environment that welcomes all learners to the (academic) conversation. During this process, educators and students strive to understand and value the diverse interpretations that others bring. By reconciling ideas about what it means to be a participant in academic conversation practices, students and teachers create an ecology that welcomes diverse ideas about those practices on the way to establishing a set of communal understandings about academic conversation's purposes and roles.

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## 2.3 Study design

This study was part of a multiyear researcher-practitioner partnership centered on teacher and student language usage in a linguistically-diverse school. The larger dataset included student assessments, student focus groups, teacher interviews, and classroom observations. Here, we focus on semi-structured interview and focus group data. Classroom observations served to corroborate our findings.

Our positionality as White, female researchers speaking with students from historically-minoritized populations likely shaped their willingness to speak candidly. Our research team is composed entirely of former teachers, which presumably impacted the questions we chose to ask and the ways we framed academic conversation. While our own experiences and backgrounds may lead to blind spots, we took measures to critically and systematically examine our assumptions: we turned to colleagues from across a variety of educational disciplines who focus on questions of equity in their own research for assistance in refining our protocols, engaged in selective member checking to ensure the credibility of our interpretations, and worked to achieve consensus throughout multiple iterations of coding.

### 2.3.1 Participants and school context

The study took place in an urban middle school in the Southeastern United States, in a state with an official English-only language policy. According to the district's website, during the 2018-2019 school year, the school enrolled 795 students, of whom 55% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 42% are designated English Learners (ELs). The school's population is comprised of 62% Hispanic students, 16% Black students, 11% White students, and 11% Asian students.

Participants included six middle-school (5th-8th grade) educators and 82 of their students. Educators opted into the study to gain insight into meaningful ways to engage their students in language practices. Five of the teachers taught both a content area subject and a language support class for ELs, while the sixth served primarily in a support role for content-area educators teaching ELs and also taught a language support class (see Table 2.1).

Drawn from two fifth-grade, two sixth-grade, one seventh-grade, and one eighth-grade class, the students in this sample all participated in the school's English support program (see Table 2.2 for a breakdown of student participant home-languages by grade).

We sought to give credence to the unique and multiple realities of the participants, by asking educators and students to reflect on and share their experiences, beliefs, and concerns about academic conversation during one-on-one semi-structured interviews (for educators) and focus groups (for students) in the spring of 2019. Students were a convenience sample based on acquisition of parent or guardian consent. Student focus groups consisted of four to six individuals from the same grade working with one interviewer to respond to questions designed to elicit beliefs, knowledge, and understandings regarding academic conversation.

*Table 2.1: Educator participants*

| Pseudonym | Years taught | Grade level taught | Mainstream subject(s) taught | Gender | Self-reported race |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ms. Woodall | 5 | 5 | Science and Social Studies | F | White |
| Ms. Smith | 2 | 5 | English Language Arts | F | White |
| Ms. English | 3 | 6 | ELL support | F | White |
| Ms. Hammer | 3 | 6 | English Language Arts | F | Pacific Islander |
| Ms. Eldridge | 16 | 7 | Science | F | Asian |
| Ms. Byron | 2.5 | 8 | English Language Arts and sheltered math | F | White-Hispanic |

*Table 2.2: Student participant home languages and gender*

| Grade | Number of students | Gender breakdown (F/M) | Home languages other than English (# of speakers) | | | | | |
| | | | Arabic | Karen | Nepali | Spanish | Other | Two or more |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | 24 | 10/14 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 19 | 0 | 1 |
| 6 | 24 | 11/13 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 15 | 1 | 1 |
| 7 | 17 | 6/11 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 14 | 1 | 0 |
| 8 | 17 | 4/13 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 13 | 2 | 0 |

## 2.4  Data analysis

We coded interview and focus group transcripts using inductive thematic analysis, to "[present] the stories and experiences voiced by study participants as accurately and comprehensively as possible" (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p. 15–16). Initial coding isolated incidents where teachers or students articulated the purposes of academic conversation. Next, the first author open-coded those incidents to develop categories. From there, the research team examined codes, collapsing similar codes to develop the final codebook (see Table 2.3). After individually double-coding 20% of the relevant transcripts, two members of the research team worked toward consensus. The primary investigator then returned to all transcripts to recode and seek disconfirming cases using the collapsed and refined categories, periodically consulting with the team.  Two codes were eliminated due to fewer than five instances of each code occurring across samples. Frequency counts were obtained in terms of instances of each code. After final coding of teacher and student transcripts, codes were compared between students and their teachers to analyze instances where alignment of conceptions had occurred, or where reconciliation might serve to integrate student and teacher ideas.

*Table 2.3: Final Codes and Examples*

| Code ("academic conversation as a…") | Sample teacher quotes | Sample student quotes |
|---|---|---|
| time when students are practicing certain social norms | "A lot of it too is how to actually conduct a proper academic conversation." | "You always gotta be so fancy." |
| support for content learning (skills or knowledge) | "I really try to think of it as a scaffold for our learning. So, it's a learning activity in itself, but it's also always scaffolding either a whole class discussion leader, or a writing activity, or the next question about the text." | "Sometimes you read a book…so, like compare and contrast." |
| activity designed to help students deepen or elaborate on ideas and understandings | "They're building on that and coming up with their own ideas." | "Like a serious conversation, really going into deep what is the question about and what we're talking about." |
| tool for developing students' English | "More than anything, I think it increases their vocabulary and helps them practice even the correct way to format a sentence." | "It's, you can get like a lot of fancy words by doing this because sometimes you can like focus and just try your best and like say good words." |
| conversation about specific topics | N/A[1] | "Talking about certain things…important things." |
| conversation that is no different than any other conversation | N/A | "Cause you might to talk to your friend and be like, you can talk about how their day is." |
| opportunity to listen to/interact with peers' ideas and opinions | "To …make it look successful would be having the kids actually talking and listening to one another." | "When you interact with other people." |
| discussion where most participants speak | "With whole group though, you always have the ones that are so reluctant they will never speak up, you know…I feel that they are more successful with small group." | "I guess a lot of people are talking." |

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[1] N/A indicates no instances of this code were found in this sample

| Code ("academic conversation as a…") | Sample teacher quotes | Sample student quotes |
|---|---|---|
| means of positioning students as agentic learners | "When they came in, they seemed to think that I held the answers, and I think they now... Through academic conversations, I've kind of been able to show them that they're the ones who hold the answers, not me." | N/A |
| means of assessing students | "It also gives me a chance to assess them in a more natural environment where they are getting to use speaking instead of writing." | N/A |
| not certain of the definition or purpose of academic conversation | N/A | "I don't really know." |

## 2.5  Findings: Language ontologies from educator and student perspectives

As the transcript excerpts at the start of this article illustrate, even teachers passionate about academic conversation faced difficulties in working with students to co-construct and negotiate a shared set of ontologies surrounding academic conversation. Across the data set, we encountered important convergences and divergences in student and educator conceptions regarding the purposes of academic conversation (see Figure 2.1).

*Figure 2.1: Instances of each coded event*
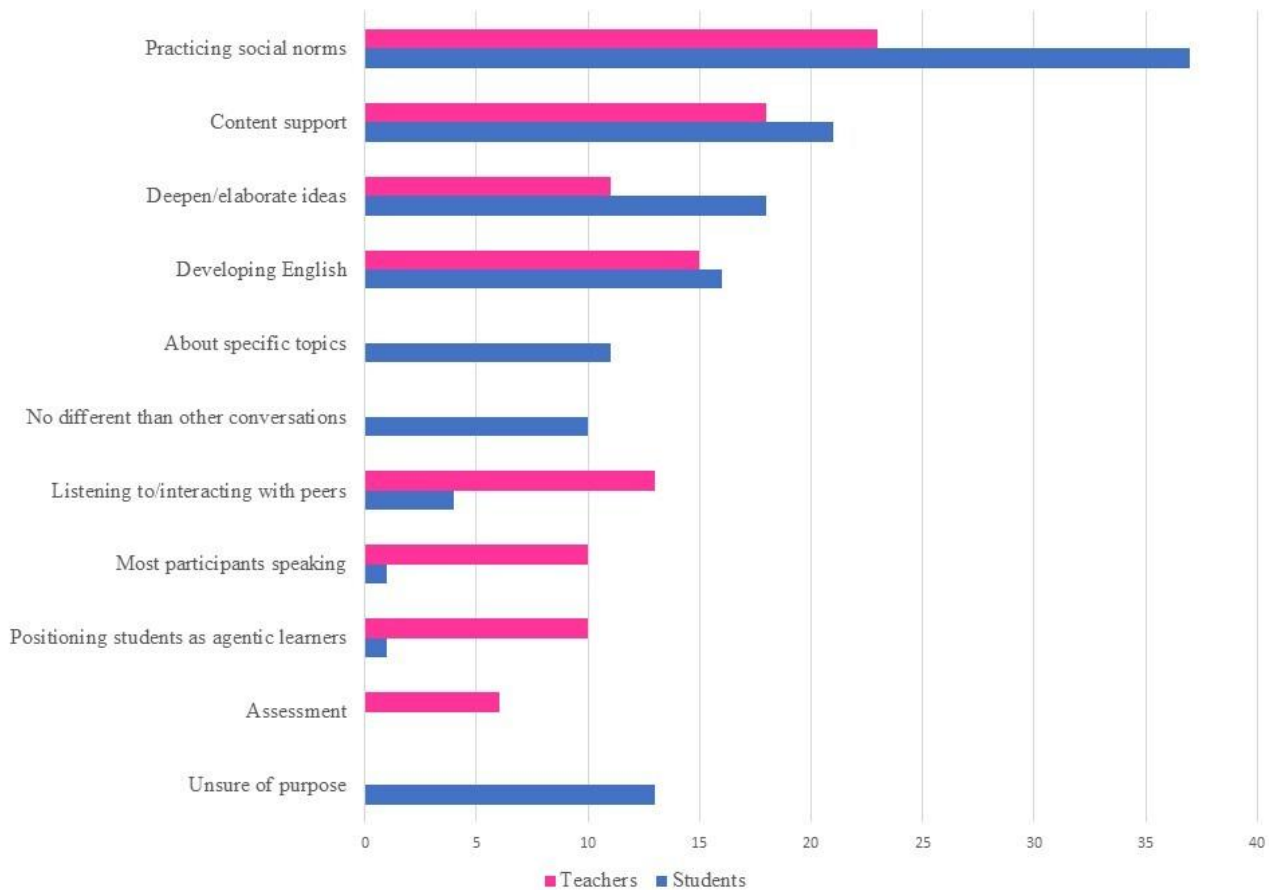


Students and teachers agreed that academic conversation provided opportunities for learning and practicing certain discussion norms, scaffolding and deepening content understanding, and developing learners' language skills. These convergences represent important points of connection for teachers seeking to engage students in rich academic conversation. However, several teachers expressed concerns about students' limited engagement in academic conversation, suggesting that these points of convergence may not promote sufficient student investment in the practice.

In contrast, positioning students as authorial agents with interpretative authority was a key point of divergence, identified by all six teachers in 10 separate instances, but by only one of 82 students in a single instance. Perhaps student disengagement in academic conversation was shaped by their divergent understandings of their teachers' intentions for positioning them as powerful agents. Students who understood academic conversation as primarily resulting in individual content learning might have questioned why they should be asked to engage in forms of learning that are, in some ways, less efficient than direct instruction at transmitting content (Dean & Kuhn, 2007). Without understanding that academic conversation promoted their ability to learn *from* and *with* others and offered the opportunity to engage in creative interpretation and transcendence of mere facts, students may have felt that academic conversation was not worth the additional time or effort.

To examine this conflict in more depth, we discuss two cases that epitomized this conceptual divergence. The two cases were selected to represent two ends of a continuum. The first educator (Ms. Hammer) was an English teacher with strong commitments to academic conversation developed during her master's courses and over the course of three years of teaching dedicated to centering student voice and critical thought. The second teacher (Ms. Eldridge) was a science teacher who proclaimed herself a 'beginner' at employing academic conversation for student learning. She was not yet conceptualizing academic conversation practices in the complex ways we have defined above but was seeking to improve her skills to begin engaging students as more active participants in her classroom. We feel it important to showcase both these teachers and their students to represent the range of ways in which academic conversation is conceptualized, even within the same school environment.

### *2.5.1   Ms. Hammer and her students: Critical thinking around open-ended questions*

A concern for teachers was reconciling their idealized conception of academic conversation with concerns about student engagement and accountability. Several of the teachers we interviewed described a stark contrast between the ways they expected academic conversation to

look in their classrooms (e.g., engaged students using critical thinking and analysis in the process of actively teaching and learning from each other) and the ways those conversations played out in reality (which often included minimal student participation and recitation of surface-level answers). Ms. Hammer, an educator with three years of experience teaching sixth-grade English, highlighted this struggle during our conversation:

> You see a few kids not participating, and you see a couple kids giving the right answer, and you could do it a good eight times, and your classroom is still not engaging in the way that you want it to be. And so, it's easy just to say, okay, never mind. I can't be at all tables, ensuring that they have those conversations and holding them accountable to it.

Navigating this tension was frustrating for Ms. Hammer. She expressed ontologies surrounding the use of academic conversation as an instructional tool and showed a thoughtful attention to the importance of growing students' self-sufficiency as learners and thinkers:

> I think successful conversation looks like students taking initiative to discuss first just the comprehension of the text, but then to eventually be able to ask and respond to higher order questions that they come up with and that they generate themselves. And, learning off of each other where there are questions where there's no particular correct answer.

Ms. Hammer's description of successful academic conversation shows a deep grounding in theory, a focus on critical literacy that asks students to move beyond low-level comprehension, and an understanding of students' ability to serve as agentic learners when they are "learning off each other where there are questions where there's no particular correct answer." According to Matusov et al. (2016), "The authorial notion of agency resolves the dichotomy of the given vs. the innovative because the given serves as the material for transcendence" (p. 435). Ms. Hammer describes a view of students' comprehension of a shared text as an important resource to be leveraged in transcending the interpretative bounds of curriculum-mandated knowledge.

Yet, as her reflections on engagement and accountability show, she was frustrated that the reality in her classroom did not match her ideal. In our observations of Ms. Hammer's classroom, she demonstrated her commitment to academic conversation by inviting students numerous times to collaboratively engage in higher-order thinking surrounding texts in small groups; however, many students seemed to wait for whole-class discussions to engage in the conversation, if they engaged at all.

Our discussions with Ms. Hammer's students revealed that they also possessed thoughtful conceptions of the purpose of academic conversation, regarding it as a means of supporting content, language, and metacognitive skills, as in the transcript excerpt below. We include this excerpt because it was representative of many responses surrounding students' perceptions of academic conversation's purposes.

| 1 | Researcher: | Okay. What are the things that you learn from academic conversation? |
| 2 | Elena: | How to say it better. |
| 3 | Luis: | Like how to stay on topic. |
| 4 | Researcher: | Okay. How to stay on topic, how to do better. What could you be doing better at? |
| 5 | Luis: | Focusing on the- |
| 6 | Elena: | Reading better. |

Elena, a native Spanish speaker, originally focused on the role of academic conversation in developing communicative language skills. Such a focus may represent her communicative goals for learning in English class or may be an artifact of the implicit messages she receives as an EL in an English-only state. She later added that academic conversation can support reading skills, though she did not elaborate on how. The brevity of these student responses was, in general, a pattern we witnessed across focus groups. Metalinguistic reflection is a challenging task, and the difficulty students had in using language to talk about classroom discussion may be the result of having had few prior opportunities to engage in metalinguistic talk. Elena's perception of academic conversation as supporting language and content skills represents a valid conception (Murphy, Wilkinson, & Soter, 2011), but it does not align with Ms. Hammer's. Nor does Luis's, as he primarily focused on self-regulation skills that are commonly valued by the dominant culture of schools—specifically, staying on task and focusing.

While both Elena and Luis expressed aims that could conceivably be achieved by engaging in academic conversation, Ms. Hammer, as the architect of classroom instructional practices, was designing academic conversation with differing goals in mind. Working towards differing ends may impact the perceived value of academic conversation for both students and teachers (Song et al., 2007). This may result in decreased engagement from both parties, as Elena attempts to find

the language and content skills she is supposed to be learning from academic conversation, while Ms. Hammer seeks evidence of students' critical thinking and agency.

Reconciliation practices might serve to structure academic conversation in a way where both parties feel that their goals are being met, and thus support greater engagement from both students and teachers (Song et al., 2007). Ms. Hammer's and her students' goals are not incompatible, but unless they make these goals visible, there is little opportunity for both to work in ways that support these aims. Student engagement may diminish when they perceive that teachers do not support what they believe to be meaningful learning (Song et al., 2007).

### 2.5.2    *Ms. Eldridge and her students: Language scaffolding for peer-to-peer learning*

Like Ms. Hammer, Ms. Eldridge, a seventh-grade science teacher, struggled to consistently and meaningfully leverage academic conversation to promote student learning. Until recently, Ms. Eldridge had relied almost entirely on whole-class lecture. As a 16-year veteran teacher and self-professed 'beginner' at using academic conversation, Ms. Eldridge's conceptualizations differed from Ms. Hammer's, instead emphasizing language development:

> Academic conversation to me, I just really encourage the students to use the vocabulary that we're learning. In the beginning of the year, when I would ask for volunteers, they tell me their answer and it would just be a one answer, a word or a couple words. Now, I'm really encouraging them, "Okay, why don't we use a sentence.".

Ms. Eldridge's focus on English development reflects her valuing of teaching technical vocabulary and particular syntactic structures in disciplinary texts to accelerate disciplinary learning. These values were also reflected in her instruction (Figure 2.2). While these conceptions do not align with the complex ways in which we have conceptualized academic conversation—as supporting students' active development of interpretative or authorial agency--Ms. Eldridge's new focus on incorporating students as active learners in her classroom makes her an important case to study. Indeed, she may represent many teachers who wish to actively engage learners but are still unsure what meaningful academic conversation looks like.
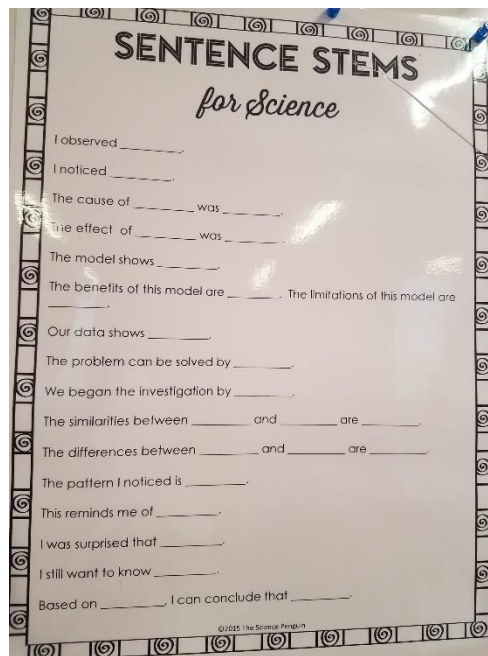
*Figure 2.2: Disciplinary language poster in Ms. Eldridge's classroom*

Ms. Eldridge, though still developing her understandings about academic conversation, did have moments when she also conceptualized this practice as a means for enabling students to learn from each other as active agents, though not with the level of interpretative authority afforded to Ms. Hammer's students:

> They also need to have that kind of structured discussion with other students too. Because I think that when they do that, and like the learning goes on between the two…I think it's almost more powerful than me teaching them.

By contrast, Ms. Eldridge's students expressed a range of conceptions of academic conversation. For example, the transcript excerpt below represents the only instance in which a student discussed the possibility of agency development in the context of academic conversation.

| 1 | Researcher: | What do you learn from academic conversation? |
| 2 | Juliana: | You see it in another way. |
| 3 | Researcher: | You see it in another way? Can you tell me more? |
| 4 | Juliana: | For example, let's say I thought something and when I |

talked to [Maria] …she talks about something else and we both share different ideas, so we learn more.

Juliana, a speaker of Spanish, Portuguese, and English, discussed the power of academic conversation for broadening perspectives by introducing conflicting viewpoints or complementary information, essential components of authorial agency. Her explanation that Maria "talks about something else and we both share different ideas, so we learn more," illuminates the reciprocal nature of academic conversation and the ways in which students are empowered as agents to teach, learn, and perhaps transcend common interpretations in that context. Her understanding of these practices could serve as a valuable resource for Ms. Eldridge in planning and implementing academic conversation in her classroom; reconciliation work in Ms. Eldridge's classroom might reveal that her students are capable of greater critical thought and agentic learning than she currently realizes.

Our other focus group with students from her classroom included Stella, Leana, and Carlos, all native speakers of Spanish. The transcript excerpt below is typical of those we encountered across grade levels and classrooms, as it reveals a mixture of ideas regarding the role of academic conversation.

| 1 | Researcher: | What is an academic conversation? |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | Stella: | Like a serious conversation, really going deep into what is the question about and what we're talking about. |
| 3 | Researcher: | What else? What do you guys think? |
| 4 | Leana: | An important conversation about something specific. |
| 5 | Carlos: | I don't know. |

Stella offered a well-developed conception of academic conversation, explaining that it allows students to go "deep into what is the question about and what we're talking about." Her explanation reflects a conception we encountered in 18 instances across our student data set; namely, that academic conversation allows students to deepen and elaborate on their ideas. Leana seemed to agree with Stella and built on her thinking by elaborating that academic conversation is important and about something specific. This understanding further reflects the idea of extending and advancing students' learning, as specific topics allow for deeper investigation than broad ones. Carlos, by contrast, seemed unfamiliar with the concept or terminology of academic conversation.

The range of ideas surrounding academic conversation's role in learning speaks to the challenges inherent in reconciliation. Each student described above had a unique conception of academic conversation and its purpose, in many cases distinct from those espoused by Ms. Eldridge. However, engagement in reconciliation about the purposes of academic conversation could allow Ms. Eldridge the chance to learn from students' complex ideas and help those who are uncertain, like Carlos, to participate in academic conversation more fully.

## 2.6 Discussion

We believe that educators' classroom talk ontologies shape the design of classroom instruction, and that students' ontologies play a determining role in how that instruction is taken up and enacted. Previous research has demonstrated the impact of educator goal transparency and student-teacher goal alignment on student engagement (Anderson, Hunt, Powell, & Dollar, 2013; Song et al., 2007), though never, to our knowledge, in the context of a specific focus on classroom talk. Students' and teachers' reflections, along with observational data collected as part of our larger research endeavors, suggest that misalignment between student and educator conceptions about the purpose of academic conversation may shape engagement in those conversations. In particular, while students often mentioned academic conversation as a means of supporting social skills, content learning, idea elaboration, and language development, they rarely saw it as a means of positioning them as authorial agents within the classroom. In contrast, all six teachers emphasized this as a key purpose of academic conversation. Academic conversation requires greater effort on students' part than direct instruction; if students do not understand the agentive purposes for academic conversation, they may not believe the effort is worth the reward.

Our findings suggest that greater attention to reconciling student and teacher talk ontologies is needed (Song et al., 2007). One means of addressing ontological misalignment is through *meta-discussion*; that is, open conversation wherein the community collectively negotiates the definition, purpose, and explicit value of academic conversation. Meta-discussions provide opportunities for students to learn from teachers what they might be doing and why during academic conversations. However, talking about talk also provides opportunities for teachers to learn from students, thus allowing for reconciliation surrounding the purposes of classroom

discussion. Students who understand why they are encouraged to engage in certain discourse practices, the personal value that such practices can afford, and, particularly, their own interpretative agency within the context of such practices, may show increased investment and thus improved learning outcomes from discussion participation. Furthermore, by allowing learners to share the talk ontologies that guide their participation, educators can gain valuable knowledge about the discourse practices that are meaningful to their students.

Our study of teachers' and learners' conceptions of academic conversation does have limitations. Six of our 82 students seemed unfamiliar with the term *academic conversation,* mentioning their lack of comprehension in 13 instances. To address this limitation, we focused our analysis on those 76 students who did claim to have some understanding of academic conversation. In addition, our data does not allow us to address how specific structures and norms of academic conversation may inhibit or promote student authorial agency. Finally, our relatively modest sample makes it challenging to parse apart whether differences in teachers' perceptions of academic conversation can be attributed to differences in disciplinary norms or developmental expectations. Future studies with larger samples of educators in different content areas and grade levels might pursue this question**.** Despite these limitations, our findings highlight the importance of reconciling divergent teacher and student understandings about the purposes of academic conversation.

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# CHAPTER 3

## "A CONSTANTLY EVOLVING PROCESS": INDEPENDENT AND DIALOGIC VISIONING ABOUT STUDENT AGENCY: A CASE STUDY

Literacy educators today face extensive constraints limiting their capacity to teach in ways they deem creative, purposeful, and ethical (Santoro, 2017; Santoro, 2019; Vaughn et al., 2021). Mandated curricula provide rigid scripts to follow, regardless of their relevance to the students in teachers' classrooms (Golann, 2021; Pignatelli, 2005); deficit ideologies about linguistically-, racially-, culturally-, and ability- minoritized students have resulted in public policies limiting teachers' capacity to draw on these students' funds of knowledge in shaping responsive instruction (Fredricks & Warriner, 2016); and student scores on standardized assessments have become the primary measure of success in many districts (Warring, 2015). Literacy teachers may feel these pressures more than most; in many places, particular emphasis is placed on students attaining 'grade-level' reading scores (Thompson, 2016; Wu, 2016). This focus on grade-level reading as measured by assessment scores means that reading tends to be more commonly subjected to scripted curricula than other content areas, often resulting in decreased opportunities for innovative educator practices (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2017; Demko, 2010; Vaughn et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is a personal risk inherent in turning over control of discourse and of interpretation to students and facing the uncertainties of a classroom guided by student interests, resources, and passions (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001), such that even educators with a strong commitment to supporting student agency may abandon their goals in the face of uncertain outcomes and minimal support. These factors together paint a grim picture of U.S. literacy classrooms as spaces where both teachers and students are often positioned as passive and powerless.

However, these rigid constraints have not eliminated teachers' drive to support students' deep conceptual learning, collaboration, and *agency* (Kang, 2016; Santoro, 2019), which I define as the contextualized and variable sum of students' skills, intentions, and socially mediated capacities to act as change agents purposefully impacting the world (Bandura, 2006; Clarke et al., 2016; Giddens, 1984). Educator adoption of agency-supportive instructional practices-—in other words, instruction that provides opportunities for students to develop and exercise agency through

opportunities to make meaningful decisions about what and how to learn, to use their learning to engage with the world, and to impact the learning of themselves and others (Clarke et al., 2016; Freire, 1973; Vaughn, 2021)-- can have a powerful impact on equity within and beyond the classroom. For example, agency-supportive instruction can counteract the silencing of minoritized learners' voices in schools (Barton & Tan, 2010; Snell & Lefstein, 2018) and support students' development of strong practice-linked identities, both of which facilitate a sense of ownership over classroom learning (Collett, 2018). Educators who find ways to support student agency despite personal, institutional, and systemic barriers provide students rich access to current and future identities as scholars and change agents working for equity and social justice (Meston & Phillips Galloway, 2022).

Though there likely exists no one factor that determines an educator's drive to work within and around constraints to support student agency, one commonality found amongst many of these maverick educators is a strong *vision* of agency-supportive instruction (Duffy, 2002; Hammerness, 2001; Vaughn & Kuby, 2019). These visions comprise "a conscious sense of self, of one's work, and one's mission … a personal stance on teaching that rises from deep within the inner teacher and fuels independent thinking" (Duffy, 2002, p. 334). Clearly articulated visions drive teacher agency to creatively resist constraints or leverage affordances to implement agency-supportive instruction (Duffy, 2002; Hammerness, 2001; Vaughn & Kuby, 2019). Teachers who engage in *visioning,* or the act of articulating and refining their visions, shape reflexive opportunities to critically examine the views they hold about teaching, students, and what constitutes meaningful learning (Hammerness, 2006; Vaughn et al., 2021).

Though current work on teacher visioning illuminates educators' agency to teach literacy in ways that accord with their ethical codes, to my knowledge, no work has yet examined the specific visions that in-service teachers hold about student agency in literacy classrooms, nor the affordances of analyzing visions as reflected through engagement in dialogic professional learning experiences—that is, professional learning experiences designed around structured discourse protocols intended to support the construction of new understandings (Nehring et al. 2010). To that end, this case study follows Willow[2], a high school literacy educator, in order to explore the vision of student agency she articulates as driving her instruction. I focus on Willow's case because it offers insight into how visioning may support educators navigating the constraints of

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[2] Educator-selected pseudonym

standardized testing, mandated curriculum, and student resistance to agency-supportive instruction as teachers may define it. This investigation is focused by the questions:

1. *What visions of student agency and agency-supportive instruction does one literacy teacher—independently and in conversation with colleagues—report as shaping her pedagogical actions?*

2. *What does analyzing engagement in dialogic professional learning experiences afford researchers studying teacher visions?*

In what follows, I first discuss the theory of visioning framing this work, then review the design of the study and of the professional learning experience in which Willow participated, and finally detail results and implications for research and practice.

## 3.0. Theoretical Framing

Research indicates that instruction that provides students opportunities to exercise agency plays a significant role in contributing to students' academic success (Adair, 2014; Kundu, 2017; Mercer, 2011) and social-emotional well-being (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2015; Bown, 2009; Kumpulainen et al., 2014). I refer in this work to such instruction as *agency-supportive instruction,* to recognize its possibilities for supporting student agency. Agency-supportive instruction may play a role in supporting students' engagement with learning, as students who feel that their agency is suppressed in classrooms tend to become alienated from school as a whole (Rajala, 2016). By contrast, students afforded access to agency-supportive instruction not only have opportunities to become active producers of meaning and knowledge but can also appropriate cultural tools and understandings to fight for equity and support democratic ideals, by, for example, critically examining and pushing back against systems of oppressions within disciplinary learning (Barton & Tan, 2010; Freire, 1973; Rajala et al., 2016; Vaughn, 2021). For example, in Barton and Tan's (2010) critical ethnographic investigation of low-income youth participating in an extracurricular program on green energy technologies, program facilitators co-planned and negotiated content with students, created openings for students to bring their passions and interests into the learning process, and shaped opportunities for students to use their skills and knowledge to make an environmental and social impact on the world beyond the program. Students took up

and indeed expanded these opportunities, asserting themselves by positioning themselves as scientific experts while resisting scientific norms that have been used to privilege Standard American English.

Despite these powerful benefits of agency-supportive instruction, teachers often perceive themselves to be significantly constrained by U.S. education systems that suppress student agency (Meston et al., 2020; Donnor & Shockley, 2010; Vaughn, 2020). Commonly-identified barriers to agency-supportive instruction include: systems that accord high evaluation scores for adherence to formal curricula that often create little room for student voice and critical thought (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2017); the valuing of students and teachers for their standardized assessment scores, rather than for their capacity to consider multiple perspectives and come up with creative solutions (Segal et al., 2017); and teacher education programs that rarely discuss students' agency in any concrete and formalized way (Vaughn, 2021). Because of these constraints on teacher autonomy, educators presented with opportunities to create space for student agency may bypass these opportunities in favor of preserving more passive or institutionally-sanctioned learning activities (Rowe, 1998; Vaughn, 2014). Implementing agency-supportive instruction may represent a significant professional risk, and, in a system set up to position students as passive learners, designing agency-supportive instruction may feel like fighting the currents of uncharted waters.

Clearly articulated visions may offer a map for educators attempting to navigate these stormy seas. Visioning is based in Vygotskian social constructivist theories of learning, which posit that learning is necessarily embedded and constructed in social contexts (Horn & Garner, 2022; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Scales, 2013; Scales, 2021; Vygotsky, 1981). Viewed through this perspective, visions are dynamic across time and context, and are situated in and shaped by educators' lived experiences, ideologies, passions, and local and cultural contexts (Scales, 2013; Scales, 2021; Vaughn & Saul, 2010). This situated perspective on visions and visioning makes possible the evolution and refinement of educators' visions, through the dialogic interplay of current visions, contexts, and a wide variety of experiences, such as professional learning experiences. Visions support educator agency by providing teachers with a clear goal towards which to work, which may impact their recognition of affordances and ways of reframing or resisting constraints in their context (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Parsons et al., 2014).

However, visioning exercises often ask participants to vision about their classrooms and education as a whole (e.g., Daoud & Parsons, 2021; Scales, 2013; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2010), rather than about specific elements of classroom life. These holistic visions are valuable as a means of supporting educator agency (Duffy, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Parsons et al., 2011; Parsons & La Croix, 2013; Parsons et al., 2017; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2010; Vaughn & Parsons, 2012), but it is possible that teachers with a vision intended to encompass all of their pedagogy may overlook elements of classroom life that are integral to students' academic and social-emotional success—elements such as supporting student agency. For example, a teacher creating a holistic vision may describe a classroom where students are reading every day, instruction supports student agency, and students love learning. In this holistic vision, agency is mentioned, but there is no clear articulation of what student agency is or how instruction might support students' opportunities to develop agency. In contrast, visioning specifically centered on student agency asks educators to do both more and less—to sharpen their lens and direct it only at student agency, thereby creating the conditions to support a deeper interaction with this topic. Because clearly-articulated visions of classrooms and teaching support teacher agency to enact ambitious literacy instruction (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Parsons et al., 2011; Parsons & La Croix, 2013; Parsons et al., 2017; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2010; Vaughn & Parsons, 2012), I posit that having a clear vision of student agency may support educators in enacting agency-supportive literacy instruction.

Because educator visions are situated within context and experience, this exploratory case study examines the visions of student agency and agency-supportive instruction held by one high school English teacher participating in a professional learning group centering dialogic analysis of problems of practice. The aim of this work is to generate emergent data regarding what visions of student agency and agency-supportive instruction literacy teachers might hold and how researchers might better understand these visions by analyzing engagement in professional learning groups.

### 3.1. Design

This exploratory case study was designed to explore one educator's specific visioning around student agency and agency-supportive instruction and to analyze how that vision was

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described in interviews and in professional learning experiences. Therefore, this work is focused by the research questions:

*1. What visions of student agency and agency-supportive instruction does one literacy teacher—independently and in conversation with colleagues—report as shaping her pedagogical actions?*

*2. What does analyzing engagement in dialogic professional learning experiences afford researchers studying teacher visions?*

### 3.1.1 Context and Participant

This exploratory case study took place over the course of 2021 and 2022 within the context of a larger researcher-practitioner partnership focused on visioning about student agency within professional learning contexts. A case study design was chosen for this investigation, in order to generate detailed emergent data regarding the practices of literacy educators visioning about student agency. Willow, the focal participant selected for this work, was first recruited through her work with a voluntary CFG centering teacher leadership and ambitious, equitable, and culturally-responsive instruction. Recruiting through this PLC allowed for purposive sampling of educators dedicated to engaging in professional learning to improve their capacity to design and implement agency-supportive instruction.

Willow, a $10^{th}$- and $11^{th}$- grade English educator teaching in a school serving a linguistically-, culturally-, and racially- diverse student body, was selected as the focus of this exploratory case study for several reasons, ranging from the logistical to the conceptual (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009). Logistically, given the high rate of teacher relocation in the district within which this study was conducted, Willow's consistent role within her school offered affordances in terms of seeing how educators conceptualize agency in response to specific students across time. Conceptually, Willow's seven years of experience as an educator made her one of the most experienced teachers in this study, and it became clear over the course of the year that her vision of student agency was particularly richly informed by her experiences. Because of the ways in which she deeply questioned and rigorously theorized her vision of student agency in response to the students in her classroom, Willow represents a particularly strong case to begin generating

emergent data about visioning student agency from a situative perspective. And finally, Willow represents an interesting case because, in contrast to the other participants, she described the diversity of content matter subjects represented within the CFG as a constraint rather than an affordance for her learning. Many educators can connect with the feeling of professional learning experiences failing to offer the learning they were seeking. However, despite Willow's perception of this subject matter diversity as a constraint, her vision of agency-supportive instruction did change over the course of the CFG. In summary, because of logistical reasons, as well as her richly theorized conceptions of student agency and her perceptions of the learning experiences in the CFG as significantly constrained, Willow represents a case that can inform both educators looking to refine their own visions of student agency and agency-supportive instruction and teacher educators looking to design professional learning experiences that create opportunities for meaningful vision refinement.

### *3.1.1.2. Design of the professional learning experience*

Because this study examines the affordances of analyzing engagement in professional learning experiences to inform understanding of educators' visions, an explanation of the structure of these experiences will shape understanding of how these visions were elicited and questioned.

An extensive body of research indicates that deep dialogic engagement with problems of practice can catalyze processes leading to conceptual change (e.g., Curry, 2008; Horn, 2020; Horn & Garner, 2022; Lefstein et al., 2020). An example of one method of structuring this deep dialogic engagement, Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) represent dialogic professional learning experiences in which teachers meet together over an extended period of time (often two years or more) to delve deeply into problems of practice, typically drawing on one of the protocols provided by the National School Reform Faculty (to see sample protocols, readers can visit https://nsrfharmony.org/protocols/). Over the course of the 2021-2022 academic year, Willow collaborated with three other educators and myself in a monthly CFG centered on questions regarding student agency and dialogue. For this CFG, we used a modified Tuning Protocol provided by the PLC from which participants had been selected. This protocol included components such as a ten-minute presentation of the problem, wherein participants explained a

disconnect between their visions and the reality of their classrooms; clarifying questions to support deeper understanding of focal educators' contexts; probing questions to support focal educators in reimagining, reframing, or better understanding affordances, constraints, and visions; feedback to clarify points of strength and potential areas for improvement; and reflection time, to allow the focal educator time to consolidate ideas and refine their vision as a result of the dialogic process. This protocol was slightly modified to include video clips showing the focal educators' instruction, with the intention of anchoring discussions of problems of practice in rich representations of the context (Horn & Garner, 2022; Steeg, 2016; van Es & Sherin, 2010). Altogether, the group met eight times over the course of the 2021-2022 school year, although only six of these meetings were analyzed for this paper, due to technological or time constraints (see Table 3.1).

*Table 3.1: Overview of CFG meetings (meetings highlighted in gray were not analyzed for this work)*

| Month | Presenter | Facilitator | Problem of practice described by presenting educator | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| August | Rose | Willow | What is impacting students' entrance into mathematical discussions of tasks unprepared to discuss their ideas? | |
| September | Willow | Olivia | How to aid students in translating understanding of texts into analysis of texts during collaborative tasks? | Classroom video would not play during meeting |
| October | Bee | Rose | How to support students in creating a plan to solve division word problems? | |
| December | Bee | Olivia | How to support students in creating a plan to solve division word problems? | Recording unavailable for analysis |

| January | Willow | Rose | How to engage students who are reluctant in collaboration and discussion? | |
|---------|--------|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| February | Rose | Olivia | How to help students translate knowledge gained from academic discussions into writing? | Protocol not able to be implemented with fidelity |
| April | Olivia | Willow | How to make group presentations interactive learning experiences for both presenters and audience members? | |
| May | Olivia | Rose | How to get students to give more authentic feedback to their peers? | |

### 3.1.1.3. Data Sources

Analysis drew on two primary sources of data: (1) three semi-structured interviews conducted with Willow between 2021 and 2022 and (2) video recordings and related artifacts from six CFG meetings conducted during the 2021-2022 school year. In addition, two informal observations of Willow's classroom were used as a method of triangulation, in order to corroborate statements made during interviews and CFG meetings.

Rather than draw on traditional written vision statements, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with Willow over the course of a year, with the goal of delving deeply into her vision of student agency and agency-supportive instruction. This method of ascertaining participant visions allowed me to act responsively by asking in real time for more detail about vague or particularly interesting aspects of educators' visions. Interviews had a past-present-future structure, enabling Willow to reflect on her experiences as a dynamic learner and supporter of student agency over time (Horn et al., 2008; Horn et al., 2013). For example, the first interview, taking place in summer of 2021, prompted Willow to reflect on her prior teaching experiences and challenges supporting student agency (past), her current conceptions of what it means to support

student agency (present), and her goals for supporting student agency in the upcoming year (future). Each subsequent interview was influenced by the answers provided in the previous interviews—in other words, what was the present in one interview became fodder for reflecting on the past in subsequent ones (Horn et al., 2008; Horn et al., 2013). To respect Willow's time, all interviews were restricted to one hour or less.

Rather than assuming a normative vision of what student agency looks like in classrooms, these interviews provided Willow the opportunity to articulate her contextualized visions of student agency and agency-supportive instruction, as well as to describe her perceptions of the barriers and affordances impacting the realization of this vision. Re-exploring the same questions over time and having Willow reflect on changes within her vision and identified affordances and constraints provided opportunities to connect the narratives told about student agency during the CFG to specific learnings or reimaginings.

### 3.1.2.3. Analysis

Initial analysis of interviews began with in vivo coding, in order to represent Willow's voice and lived reality as closely as possible (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This in vivo coding process revealed that Willow held particular visions regarding student agency as well as what meaningful agency-supportive instruction entailed. In addition, because visions are situated in and shaped by context, this coding process also focused on identifying the affordances and constraints that Willow identified as impacting the realization of her visions.

In addition, Willow's speech acts during the six analyzed CFG meetings were coded. Speech acts, a theoretical category derived from the work of Austin (1962) and Searle (1976, 2005) are defined not merely by the words that speakers use, but by the pragmatic and contextual meaning behind those words. Speech acts represent, "acts that refer to the action performed by produced utterances" (Hidayat , 2016, p. 1). In other words, coding for speech acts in this case entails coding for the illocutionary force, or the intended purpose of the speaker. Coding speech acts offers particular affordances for the examination of engagement within a CFG from a situative perspective—oftentimes, speakers' statements do not stand as meaningful on their own, but only

gain meaning when viewed as responses in dialogue with other speakers, the immediate context, and larger contexts (Bakhtin, 1981; Cutting, 2002).

Although Searle (1976) grouped speech acts into only five macro-classes (declaratives, representatives, commissives, directives, and expressives), this work centers a speech act typology derived from an initial inductive analysis of three CFG meetings. This inductive analysis identified seven types of speech act that performed particular functions within the CFG:

1. Problems of practice: Declaration of the problem stymying enactment of vision of agency-supportive instruction, request for assistance

2. Proposed affordances: Declaration or question implying resources/people/contextual factors which may be helpful in achievement of vision of agency-supportive instruction

3. Proposed constraints: Declaration or question implying resources/people/contextual factors which may be detrimental to achievement of vision of agency-supportive instruction

4. Goals of instruction: Declaration or question aimed at clarifying goals for instructional practices in relation to larger vision of agency-supportive instruction

5. Reframes of vision/affordance/constraint: Declaration or question in which participants bring new perspectives to bear on the meaning of agency-supportive instruction, or the various affordances and constraints impacting its enactment

6. Reimagining of vision: Declaration or question in which participants concretely defined new ways in which their vision might be enacted within the classroom

7. Foreclosures of teacher capacity to enact vision: Declaration or question in which participants precluded enactment of vision of agency-supportive instruction

Following the identification of these seven speech acts, all CFGs were open coded using a coding system that identified the particular speech act undertaken and the ideas expressed during the speech act. For example, during the January CFG, Willow reframed her conception of agency-supportive instruction in the context of collaboration. She stated:

> I think probably the biggest thing is-- because I didn't want to do too structured of an
> activity, because I didn't even think to mention it until Bee asked, but we had done a very

similar question before. But because there was such a lack of, I don't want to say understanding, but there was trouble that they had in analysis, so *I just really like the idea of thinking about the collaboration in different components. There's the thinking component, but then there's also the interaction component, and the reading component, and the writing component. So, if I'm not going to structure, or provide more scaffolds for the reading component, or the writing component, maybe there needs to be scaffolds on something else. So, kind of thinking everything as like separate tasks that they need to do, and separate skills. And so, if I'm going to leave one really open, make sure that I'm scaffolding the rest of them.*

The italicized section above was coded as "W_Refr: Collaboration as comprising different components," wherein the W indicates that Willow is speaker, "Refr" indicates that she is reframing her understanding of agency-supportive instruction, and "Collaboration as comprising different components" indicates that her reframe centered on the idea that conceptualizing collaboration as comprising different components that can be scaffolded could support students' agency. This stood in contrast to her previous conception of collaboration as a single task. This section was double-coded not just as a reframe, but also as a reimagining of agency-supportive instruction, as she described specifically how that reframing might translate into practice (i.e., leaving only one component of collaboration open-ended and scaffolding the rest).

Altogether, 315 open codes from both the CFGs and interviews were analyzed during the axial coding phase and collapsed into 12 categories across four pre-determined dimensions: Willow's vision of student agency, her vision of agency-supportive instruction, constraints impeding the realization of her visions, and affordances supporting the realization of her visions (see Table 3.2 for final categories and sample excerpts). Although it is outside the scope of this paper to deeply dive into each of the constraints and affordances Willow identified as impacting her realization of her vision, an awareness of these constraints and affordances better situates this work in her perceived context, and thus perceived affordances and constraints were also identified alongside visions within the analysis.

Final categories were then compared to statements Willow made about her visions of student agency and agency-supportive instruction, affordances, and constraints during the CFG meetings, in order to analyze the similarities and differences in how these were discussed in interview and professional learning contexts.

| Dimension | Category | Sample coded excerpt |
|---|---|---|
| A vision of student agency | Agency is bravery in engaging with literacy content | It means not being afraid to try something new. It means not being afraid to ask for help. It means not doubting yourself. It means not doubting other people. So, I think big-picture-wise, it would look like, students are more confident—even when they're wrong they're just more confident. (Willow_6-16-22_Interview 3) |
| | Agency is creative engagement with challenging content in support of growth | I'm a big fan of larger projects, because I think it puts more agency on the kids. I don't need to talk at them for 90 minutes. So, you know, something that they're doing with an essay, or we'll do like debates, or they'll do a more creative piece, but I like giving them larger things to work on. (Willow_6-26-21_Interview 1) |
| A vision of agency-supportive instruction | Agency-supportive instruction is a scaffolded process | [Supporting student agency] is a constantly evolving process that I definitely haven't mastered (Willow_6-26-21_Interview 1)<br><br>But because there was such a lack of, I don't want to say understanding, but there was trouble that they had in analysis, so I just really like the idea of thinking about the collaboration in different components. There's the thinking component, but then there's also the interaction component, and the reading component, and the writing component. So, if I'm not going to structure, or provide more scaffolds for the reading component, or the writing component, maybe there needs to be scaffolds on something else. So, kind of thinking of everything |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | as separate tasks that they need to do…And so, if I'm going to leave one really open, make sure that I'm scaffolding the rest of them. (Willow, September 2021 CFG meeting) |
| | Agency-supportive instruction is based in recognizing students' individuality | I wrote down the idea of just trying to figure out where the kids' specific strengths were as readers and writers. So instead of—I feel like I've spent a lot of time trying to help kids be more independent in their reading, but I forget that they're also so different in their strengths and not just what they want to read and what they want to write about. So, taking that into consideration when I come up with activities where they're collaborating would be helpful. (Willow, January 2022 CFG meeting) |
| | Agency-supportive instruction is based in multimodal, low-stakes collaboration in support of deepening thinking | So, I want to use collaboration to help students build this understanding and build this background knowledge and kind off of what they already know and what they're reading. (Willow, September 2021 CFG meeting)<br><br>Really, just giving kids way more avenues to communicate was the most successful thing that I did to adjust to what they were, what they were doing, how they were growing. (Willow_6-16-22_Interview 3) |
| Constraints impeding realization of vision | Covid-19 pandemic | They are so completely unwilling to have conversations, and this is not something that I saw before the pandemic. (Willow, January 2022 CFG meeting) |
| | Systemic and institutional factors | I noticed when I got [to Maple High] that nobody even did independent reading. That wasn't a |

| | | thing….It felt frowned upon even, so I didn't do it for a year. So, I think that there's maybe something against the freedom of it that might be scary. (Willow, January 2022 CFG meeting) |
|---|---|---|
| | Student fear | But they are so afraid. They are so afraid to do anything that doesn't have a yes or no, A, B, or C, D answer. (Willow_2-25-22_Interview 2) |
| | Educator fear | I was afraid. I was afraid that everything that was not exactly reading off the paper was off-task, and off-task means out of control, which means I've lost them.  (Willow_6-26-21_Interview 1) |
| Affordances supporting realization of vision | Classroom community | I think the biggest thing [in preparing students to be agentive] is just culture at the beginning of, 'Everybody's learning, everybody's helpful, so you can ask somebody and it's okay.'  (Willow_6-26-21_Interview 1) |
| | Literacy subject matter | I don't have actual standards that they have to memorize. It's all more of like a process of analyzing and reading and writing, and I think that that is something that nobody can teach you how to do—you have to teach you how to do that, and so I can offer tips or insights along the way, but the only way to do that is literally to practice. (Willow_6-26-21_Interview 1) |
| | Student interests and resources | They brought insatiable curiosity…They really, really wanted to expand their worldview. (Willow_6-16-22_Interview 3) |
| | Thinking and reflecting with respected colleagues | I don't think that I would have thought of [giving students more avenues to communicate during collaborative discussion] honestly, truly, without |

| | | this group and that specific conversation. I really think that-- not that I ever would have been in the mindset of like, oh, these kids just aren't doing it. But I really would have been stuck in the mindset of, why can't I get these kids to talk? instead of the mindset of, well they are, just not the way I was expecting.  (Willow_6-16-22_Interview 3) |
| --- | --- | --- |

To increase the trustworthiness of these findings, I worked in consultation with a research assistant to create a dynamic vision profile of Willow that explored her vision across time and the multiple contexts that shaped and refined that vision. I further engaged in member checking with Willow, in order to best represent her unique reality and vision of student agency and triangulated my data by having overlapping data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### 3.1.2.4. Positionality & Reflexivities

My analysis, interpretations, and, indeed, the questions I chose to ask and topics I chose to study in this work are intimately informed by my positionality as a former educator of middle school students. Middle school learners straddle a place where they are coming into a deeper awareness of themselves as learners, individuals, and members of a larger community. Yet even as these students strive to find places to enact agency in support of this newfound awareness, middle schools can represent places where student agency is fiercely repressed in order to create orderly and well-controlled environments (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). The tensions inherent in trying to do the challenging work of supporting student agency in the middle grades played a role in my sleep (or lack thereof) on many nights during my years as an educator. I recognize this positionality as both a strength and a limitation of this work: while I am deeply passionate about this subject, I acknowledge that this passion may at times interfere with my abilities to best represent the unique and multiplicitous realities of participants. However, I have striven, through member checking and

consultation with colleagues, to ensure that I am representing Willow's reality as closely as possible.

## 3.2.    Results

Willow's vision of student agency and of agency-supportive instruction within her literacy class was complex, multifaceted, and revealed differently in individual and dialogic contexts. Below, I first discuss Willow's visions of agency and agency-supportive instruction, and then explore the similarities and differences between how those visions were expressed during interviews and dialogic professional learning experiences.

### 3.2.1.    Willow's visions of agency and agency-supportive instruction

Altogether, Willow articulated an expansive vision of student agency that centered students' bravery in engaging with high-level literacy content matter. She shaped her classroom around a vision of agency-supportive instruction as a process that emphasized students' individuality and drew on multimodal opportunities for collaboration in support of thinking and learning. These ideas were deeply intertwined with each other in her visions. Below, I explain each of these elements of her vision in more detail.

#### 3.2.1.1. Student agency is bravery in engaging with literacy content

Willow's vision particularly centered student agency as entailing bravery in engaging with literacy content. She explained:

> I would know that they had like reached a point of like, self-sufficiency and confidence, when I'm not their first, like, 'Help me, I need saving.' So, when they are able to like, kind of like sit in a mess for a little while and, like, not be freaked out or not give up, and figure it out or ask somebody else or even know to ask me. (Willow_6-26-21_Interview 1)

She provided an example illustrating how challenges to bravery in certain contexts may impact students' engagement with content, and thus their growth:

> They are so afraid. They are so afraid to do anything that doesn't have a yes or no, A, B, or C, D answer. And I think it's because they have possibly been without guidance in the learning process. Maybe they felt like very alone. And so, the kids that I interact with-- today, for example, we were doing poetry annotation. And I had three children sitting behind my desk with me. And they would write something down and then they would read it out loud to me and be like, 'Right?' And I'm like, 'Yeah, okay. It's your thought, so I don't know what to tell you.' But they're just so afraid sit in the mess, I guess. (Willow_2-25-22_Interview 2)

Indeed, student fear was frequently used as a counterpoint to a vision of students as willing to turn to peers for help, to acknowledge those areas where they are struggling, and to push through challenges. She identified a larger educational system that punishes failure to conform to rigid expectations as shaping this student fear. Continuing her explanation of the centrality of bravery to agency, she explained,

> It is hard to not know something and to be OK with that. And I think that that is something that the public education system beats out of us at a young age. We are taught on standardized tests and things that there is a correct answer and there is an incorrect answer. And education has become less about exploration. And so, I think that kids need to be encouraged to be brave and take risks, because [not knowing something] is risky. (Willow_2-25-22_Interview 2)

For Willow, student resistance to what she envisioned as agency-supportive instruction was conceptualized not as originating within students, but as a byproduct of a restrictive educational system. Her response to that, addressed in the following two sections, was to center her classroom around growth rather than achievement and to scaffold students' engagement with those pedagogical activities that they may have perceived as risky.

*3.2.2.*   *Student agency is engagement with challenging literacy content in support of growth*

Another facet of Willow's vision of student agency in the literacy classroom centered engagement with challenging literacy content in support of growth as integral to agency. Engagement with challenging literacy content, in this instance, refers to instances where students were synthesizing, analyzing, evaluating, or reflecting. However, rather than subscribe to normative views of what it meant to be engaged with content, she described agentive engagement in support of growth as an individualized experience, explaining, "as long as you're on the journey, that is success" (Willow_6-16-22_Interview 3). Visits to her classroom showed her enacting this aspect of her vision by designing instruction around choice reading, creative writing assignments, and collaborative experiences designed to build students' background knowledge through and for literacy. One example of her commitment to high-level engagement in support of growth as a non-normative process was represented in her reformulation of her writing grading system. Despite the constraints of her school and district's grading policies, which required that performance be graded, Willow created a system whereby students received not just a performance grade on writing, but a revision grade focused on the ways in which they had deeply engaged with practices designed to improve their writing. She explained this work as aligned with her vision of student agency as a process centering growth and engagement with challenging content:

> I just finished my eighth year of teaching and this is only something that I finally was able to come up with this year after many, many years of trying things that failed…When we started doing writing, I would have students submit a rough draft just for formative feedback, and they would peer edit, and they would self-edit, and I would give them feedback, and then they would revise. And they would get a grade for how well they were able to use the prompt and stuff using the state rubric. But the larger grade, the weightier grade, was I would put their rough draft and their final draft side by side, and it was a revision grade. It was a 'Did you get better?' grade. And did you take the comments that I had and use them? And in those students' moments of seeing it's not-- I could get a D according to the state, but I could get an A, because look at how far I came on this revision grade. And that points out that just because you're not perfect, it doesn't mean you failed. (Willow_6-16-22_Interview 3)

Willow's vision of student agency as based in 'the journey,' was evident in the ways she designed instruction to support students' growth in accessing challenging content, as well as in her commitment to supporting students' reflexive awareness of their own journey.

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### *3.2.1.2. Agency-supportive instruction as a scaffolded process*

In Willow's vision of student agency and agency-supportive instruction, teachers support students in "a constantly evolving process" of becoming more agentive in particular circumstances; educators can then leverage students' developed agency to create expansive opportunities for agency in other circumstances. In her conception of agency-supportive instruction, agency was a skill to be practiced and expanded, and thus was supported across a variety of contexts. . For example, when reflecting in an interview on learnings from her most recent CFG meeting, Willow explained,

> And I think I've been thinking, obviously, obviously kids need to talk. And not only is it a standard, but it's a skill you need in life. But maybe the way to start, since there is so much fear there, is by being able to-- I don't want to say hide, but being able to be behind a Post-It note or a computer screen or whatever, until you feel like you have the skills and then you can step out and you can put your face out there when you do it, almost like it's the scaffolded steps of being able to have the conversation. (Willow_2-25-22_Interview 2)

In this excerpt, Willow described developing student agency as a multistep process drawing on students' strengths to move them towards new forms of agency. In addition, she discussed her own process of becoming more adept at supporting student agency, as she reflected on the impact of her biases in designing agency-supportive instruction and how she had honed her understanding of what supporting student agency might look like. A foundational element of this vision of agency-supportive instruction was that, for Willow, all students possess an intrinsic capacity for developing agency, because developing agency was conceptualized as a process that could be scaffolded and refined to meet the needs of individual students and groups. Indeed, both student agency and teachers' attempts to support student agency were envisioned as ever-evolving processes. In particular, Willow conceptualized teachers' attempts to support agency as situated at the intersection of their skills, ideologies and biases, and contexts. She recognized that her own ideologies and biases played a significant role in her challenges supporting student agency, and

that reframing her conceptions brought her more closely in line with what students needed to continue growing as developing agents.

### 3.2.1.3. Agency-supportive instruction is based in students' individuality

Willows' response to the constraints of what she perceived as a dehumanizing educational system was to envision agency-supportive instruction as based in students' individuality, often discussing how agency-supportive instruction is shaped by recognizing students' strengths and challenges and teaching in response to those, rather than by drawing on decontextualized 'best' practices that may privilege certain ways of knowing, doing, or being. In discussing how she would support the agency of students who felt disempowered to engage deeply with literacy content during class discussions, she explained,

> So, my first step would be trying to figure out why they weren't engaging. So, if it was maybe due to a disability or [the task being] something that they felt like they weren't as competent in, I think that would be addressed one way. As an example, I had a kid three years ago who was severely autistic and would not talk in large groups, but she was so smart, and so what I would do for her, and what I would do for maybe a person who had major confidence issues or was worried that they weren't good enough, is I would tell them up front that there was going to be a group discussion. I would tell them the question and I would say, 'You get to say the first thing,' so they could spend their time during silent reading if they wanted to plan what they wanted to say. And that gave them more think time so they would feel more confident in their answer. (Willow_6-26-21_Interview 1)

Here, we see Willow's assumption that the role of educators is to know students deeply and to use that knowledge to create instruction that aligns a flexible vision of agency-supportive instruction with an understanding of students as individuals.

### 3.2.1.4. Agency-supportive instruction is based in multimodal, low-stakes collaboration in support of deepening thinking

The final element of Willow's vision of agency-supportive instruction was a focus on multimodal, low-stakes collaboration in support of deepening learning and thinking. She envisioned collaboration as a natural extension of the deep engagement with content that was so integral to her vision of student agency, explaining that,

> I always look for kids explaining things to each other… Somebody like 'I don't understand how you found that,' and then they start explaining it. That's how I know when it went well, if somebody is explaining the process of what we just did… I think when that's the goal, that it raises what everybody else is able to do. Even if they don't make it to necessarily the point where they're explaining something. they know that my expectation is not that just that they're copying. (Willow_6-26-21_Interview 1)

Throughout the year, Willow struggled to refine her vision of what meaningful collaboration looked like, especially as she perceived her efforts to engage students in collaborative work as failing to achieve her intended goals for students' agency and learning. It was through her engagement with the CFG that she refined her vision of collaboration to include a multimodal element, in service of meeting students where they were:

> How can we bring the magic of the Zoom screen into the classroom? So, doing some kind of thinking about how do kids interact with each other over the phone or over the computer? And then how can you bring that into a room with a parking lot or something like that? And that might be a way that there's an in-between of the communication, there's like that middle ground as a really good scaffold (Willow, January 2022 CFG meeting)

Students' discomfort communicating orally led Willow to reshape her conception of agency-supportive collaboration as emphasizing a variety of ways to engage with and learn from peers.

### 3.2.2. *Affordances of analyzing visioning embedded in dialogic professional learning*

Analyzing Willow's engagement in her CFG meetings provided a more detailed view of her visions, particularly with regard to her vision of agency-supportive instruction and the constraints she identified as impeding that instruction. Overall, while interviews about her visions of agency and agency-supportive instruction tended to result in high-level overviews of those visions—the *what* and the *why* of agency and agency-supportive instruction--delving deeply into

her own and others' problems of practice created naturalistic opportunities to share details—in particular, the *how* of those visions.

For example, although Willow frequently discussed high-level engagement with content as key to student agency in the literacy classroom, details of how she conceptualized supporting this engagement became clear when she reflected on how a challenging lesson compared to her vision of agency-supportive instruction. When asked during a CFG what she envisioned an ideal discussion looking and sounding like, Willow explained:

> So, I think that in an ideal world, maybe it would have been good to start the conversation with the analysis question, and then look at the main ideas as building blocks to that. So, like, let's find the main idea, and that might have been a good way to have the conversation go so that they kind of knew, even though everything was presented to them, they kind of were able to look at it backwards like I do when I plan it. (September 2021 CFG meeting)

Details such as Willow's conception of agency-supportive instruction entailing opportunities for students to backwards plan support the finding that she conceptualizes student agency in literacy as entailing deep and creative engagement with content, but also goes beyond this finding, by providing an example of how she might structure this work. Other scaffolds she described throughout the CFG meetings as supporting her vision of agency-supportive instruction included shared group norms for discussion, designated opportunities for students to interact with relevant, diverse texts, and a repeated annotation structure to provide access to texts, amongst others. Together, these assertions in context painted a more vivid and intricate picture of what sort of deep and creative engagement with content Willow valued.

In the CFG meetings, Willow also discussed a wide range of resources and barriers impacting the realization of her vision. For example, she articulated school culture as a barrier to her vision of agency-supportive instruction, a constraint that she had never discussed in interviews before:

> I think that one thing that's not happening is-- it's not that collaboration isn't happening, but I don't think it's very big at my school to talk about reading. I don't think that that's very big. So maybe there will be group projects, especially in the elective courses where kids are working in their pathway. But I have not seen a lot of teachers branch away from annotate, write an essay, answer these questions… I noticed when I got there that day that nobody even did independent reading…It felt frowned upon even, so I didn't do it for a

year. So, I think that there's maybe something against the freedom of it that might be scary.

(January 2022 CFG meeting)

Only in the context of having to deeply analyze students' experiences in response to her attempts at implementing agency-supportive instruction was she prompted to explicitly reflect on this culture as a potential barrier to her vision. Across six CFG meetings, Willow shared numerous details about her goals, context, and perceptions that deepened my understanding of the visions of agency and agency-supportive instruction she had shared in interviews.

## 3.3. Discussion

The present study explores the visions of student agency and agency-supportive instruction held by one literacy educator participating in a professional learning group, drawing on interviews, meeting recordings, and written reflections to create a dynamic vision profile of the focal educator. Analysis indicated that Willow held conceptions of student agency as comprising: persistence, bravery, and resourcefulness in support of growth; engagement in multimodal, low-stakes collaboration in support of deepening thinking; and deep, creative interaction with content. She conceptualized agency-supportive instruction as an emergent and iterative process based in recognizing and leveraging students' individuality.

This work adds several contributions to the research base on teacher visioning. First of all, no work has yet explored what specific visions of student agency literacy educators might hold, and how these visions might impact the conceptualization, design, and implementation of agency-supportive instruction. This work adds several contributions to the research base on teacher visioning. First of all, no work has yet explored what specific visions of student agency literacy educators might hold, and how these visions might impact the conceptualization, design, and implementation of agency-supportive instruction. A broad and deep pool of research has demonstrated the power of teacher visions and visioning experiences as catalysts for ambitious instruction (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Parsons et al., 2014); given the known benefits of agency-supportive instruction and the inequitable access to agency-supportive instruction in the United States, a focus on how teachers may envision and enact these visions of agency-supportive instruction is called for. Though this paper only begins to delve into this important subject, it offers

an entry point for those wondering what thoughtful visions of agency-supportive instruction might comprise and how those might be shaped within dialogic professional learning experiences.

Secondly, although the purpose of this study is not to generalize the particularities of Willow's vision of student agency to other literacy educators, it does contribute to the field an analysis of visions as speech acts embedded within in-service professional learning experiences that can provide rich opportunities for deepening understandings of those visions. Previous studies of visioning have primarily focused on the visioning process as occurring in response to written or interview prompts (e.g., Parsons et al., 2017; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2010). By contrast, this work offers a situated conception of visioning that enabled a focus on visioning as a dynamic social practice. This new conception offers utility for the analysis of teacher visions, as future research may center on exploring how visions are shaped and negotiated in communities of practice.

Below, I discuss specific implications for teacher learning and research.

### 3.3.1. Implications for teacher learning

Willow's vision of student agency and agency-supportive instruction played a role in her capacity to recognize and act upon constraints and affordances impacting the realization of that vision. Because a clearly articulated vision may support teacher agency (Duffy, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Parsons et al., 2011; Parsons & La Croix, 2013; Parsons et al., 2017; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2010; Vaughn & Parsons, 2012), teacher educators and instructional coaches seeking to support educators working within restrictive environments to enact agency-supportive instruction may be able to draw lessons from this work. This study suggests that creating opportunities for professional learning participants to articulate their visions of student agency and to connect those visions to visions of agency-supportive instruction may offer space for teachers to resist constraints, leverage affordances, and expand their visions. However, it is also important to recognize that, while vision-based professional learning may support educators as designers and implementers of agency-supportive instruction, it is unreasonable to expect this work to fall entirely on teachers. Teachers work within systems often at odds with their visions of student agency and agency-supportive instruction, and there are limits to what teachers can achieve within those systems.

### 3.3.2. Implications for research

Because this work represents a small case study of a single educator, future research might benefit from exploring the visions of agency and agency-supportive instruction of a larger group of educators. Such work might reveal asset-based aspects of visions that school leaders, teacher educators, and instructional coaches might leverage in shaping school and classroom cultures, or deficit-focused elements of visions that could be addressed through thoughtfully-designed professional learning experiences.

In addition, analyzing Willow's vision of student agency within the context of a dialogic professional learning group provided important insights into details of her vision that might have gone unremarked in high-level written or oral visioning experiences. Future research might benefit from a focus on analysis of teacher visioning embedded within in-service professional development alongside analysis of written or spoken exercises more explicitly focused on teachers' visions. Currently, teacher visioning research often focuses on pre-service teacher learning (e.g., Deng & Hayden, 2021; Vaughn & Kuby, 2019) or on in-service educators responding to written or oral prompts about their visions (e.g., Parsons & La Croix, 2013; Vaughn, 2015; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2010; Vaughn & Saul, 2013). Examining discussions of visions embedded in dialogic professional learning contexts may create opportunities to examine the interplay of multiple visions and contextualized barriers and affordances in authentic dialogue.

### 3.3.3. Limitations

Although this work offers important contributions to the research base on teacher visioning and student agency in the literacy classroom, there are limitations to this work that should be acknowledged. First, this represents an exploratory case study examining a single educator working within a specific context; therefore, the findings of this investigation are not meant as

generalizable experiences, but rather as insight into what visioning about student agency might afford educators and how these visions may be observed in professional learning contexts.

Secondly, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, my opportunities to be in Willow's classroom observing the role of her vision in shaping instruction was limited. Therefore, my discussions of how her vision shaped instruction rely both on the informal observations I was able to conduct as well as the descriptions of classroom instruction that Willow provided.

## 3.4. Conclusion

This exploratory case study focused on the vision of student agency and agency-supportive instruction articulated by one literacy educator. Engaging teachers in visioning about student agency represents one potential method that teacher educators and instructional coaches may draw upon to support educators in enacting agency-supportive instruction in constrained contexts. Furthermore, this analysis demonstrated that teachers' visions can be analyzed within the context of dialogic professional learning experiences to deepen researchers' understanding of participants' visions.

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# CHAPTER 4


# "TRUE TEACHING IS MAKING SURE IT WORKS FOR THE PEOPLE IN FRONT OF YOU": TEACHER COLLABORATION TO RE-ENVISION INSTRUCTION IN SUPPORT OF STUDENT AGENCY


*Student agency* represents the dynamic and contextualized sum of students' abilities, intentions, and socially-mediated capacities to purposefully impact the world (Bandura, 2006; Clarke et al., 2016; Giddens, 1984). Teachers who create opportunities for students to exercise and develop agency have the potential to play a significant role in contributing to students' academic success (Adair, 2014; Kundu, 2017; Mercer, 2011) and social-emotional well-being (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2015; Jagers et al., 2019; Meston et al., 2022). Access to instruction that fosters and leverages students' agency may create opportunities for youth to develop critical stances (Kibler et al., 2021); to play a role in shaping pedagogical experiences that are responsive to their needs (Vaughn, 2021) to recognize their capacity to act as change agents (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015); and to access a wide variety of possible futures (Daniel, 2019; Phillips Galloway & Meston, 2022).

Yet, educational accountability reforms have obscured opportunities for teachers to enact agency-supportive instruction, or pedagogical practice centering student opportunities to exercise agency in support of developing capabilities in culturally meaningful ways (Adair, 2014; Rowe, 1998; Vaughn, 2014). Instead of centering student agency in the design of classroom instruction, teachers have increasingly been called upon to emphasize test preparation, to prioritize control of student bodies, and to adhere to the rigid guidelines of scripted curricula designed for students other than the ones in front of them (Adair, 2014; Golann, 2021). Furthermore, there is a level of uncertainty inherent to the enactment of agency-supportive instruction; teachers seeking to raise up student voice and choice must relinquish some interpretative and/or tangible control (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2017; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001). This uncertainty can be disconcerting, especially for educators facing evaluation systems that reward teachers who ensure compliance and quiet from their students. However, despite these challenges and constraints, many educators

still seek to engage students as agents—to raise up minoritized voices (Barton & Tan, 2010), to provide rich access to opportunities to use learning to shape a better world (Meston & Phillips Galloway, forthcoming; Santoro, 2017), and to support students' development of practice-linked identities (Collett, 2018). However, even for educators committed to this work, its complexity can be overwhelming.

While all teaching is complex, teaching in agency-supportive ways is significantly more complex than relying upon "banking" pedagogies that position students as passive vessels to be filled with knowledge (Alexander, 2020; Freire, 1973; Vaughn, 2014). Agency-supportive instruction involves in-depth knowledge of pedagogy, content, and students needed to leverage emergent interactions in support of student learning and agency (Carter-Stone et al., 2021). Educators hoping to engage in such complex and ambitious teaching practices require support to develop the skills and dispositions conducive to this work.

Unfortunately, the dominant model of professional learning—that of outside facilitators running short-term workshops on "best practices" divorced from context and students (Cochran-Smith, 2001; Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Horn, 2020; Lefstein et al., 2020)—may not adequately support educators' capacity to do this complex, dynamic, and situative work. Such a focus on decontextualized pedagogical actions falls short in preparing educators to serve as informed decision-makers within the daily reality of teaching, where students bring diverse funds of knowledge, interests, and motivations to classrooms situated within a complex system of policies, school procedures, and societal expectations. In other words, many educators may have difficulty translating their learning of 'idealized' practices from in-service professional development to real classrooms, particularly in instances where educators seek to enact ambitious, agency-supportive instruction (Horn, 2008). Furthermore, in many cases, 'best' practices may not be best for all students; these practices are too often shaped to center certain ways of interacting, knowing, and being, while marginalizing those who may not fit these molds (Philip et al., 2019).

An alternative to this top-down model of professional learning consists of dialogic analysis of problems of practice in support of refining teachers' *visions*—their aspirational ideals for pedagogy and classroom (Duffy, 2002)--and practice of agency-supportive instruction. Teachers with well-articulated visions of classroom practice are more likely to enact ambitious instruction

in the face of restrictive policies and contexts (Duffy, 2002; Hammerness, 2001), and thus, visioning about student agency may support educator agency to design and enact agency-enriched classroom experiences. However, visions are not constructed by individuals disconnected from local and historical contexts; rather, visions are socially embedded—they are co-constructed, shaped, asked and answered, and constantly in dialogue with context and colleagues and one's own praxis. To that end, this qualitative investigation follows four educators working in different grades and subjects at schools across a large, urban school district as they participated in a Critical Friends professional learning group over the course of year. The aim of this work is to explore the ways in which these educators reframed, reimagined, or foreclosed their visions of agency-supportive instruction. This investigation is focused by the question: *What conditions make possible reframing and reimagining of teachers' visions of agency-supportive instruction during dialogic analysis of problems of practice?*

In what follows, I first discuss the theories of agency and visioning framing this work, then review the design of the study and of the Critical Friends Groups (CFG) as a professional learning structure allowing for dialogism, and finally detail results and implications for research and practice.

## 4.0. Theoretical framework

### 4.0.1. Teacher visioning

Teachers bring to the classroom visions of what ideal teaching looks like, carrying within them "a personal stance on teaching that rises from deep within the inner teacher and fuels independent thinking" (Duffy, 2002, p. 334). These visions are dynamic, shifting over time as educators incorporate within them their professional learning, their lived experiences as teachers and students, their cultural and linguistic identities, and their passions, interests, and moral values (Duffy, 2002; Hammerness, 2001; Vaughn & Kuby, 2019; Vaughn et al., 2021).

Visions can play a vital role in maintaining educators' focus on student agency in the face of endless waves of accountability reforms alongside professional learning experiences emphasizing ostensible "best" practices (Vaughn, 2015; Vaughn, 2021). Educators are situated in specific contexts serving specific students, and the current focus on one-size-fits-all education may obscure the rich funds of knowledge and voices of students who do not fit this mold (Philip et al., 2019). Duffy (2002) explains,

> Promoting a particular way of teaching is dangerous. It leads teachers to believe that there is only one right way to teach literacy, and that good teaching demands compliance with the tenets of a particular ideology or method or program. They do not learn to do what we know the best teachers do–combine and adapt many methods and materials to fit the situation in which they find themselves. (p. 332)

Rather than divorcing content from context, educators with a clear and well-articulated vision of pedagogy consider what agency-supportive instruction looks like for the students in front of them (Vaughn, 2015; Vaughn, 2021). And as educators engage in *visioning*, or articulating and refining their vision of aspirational teaching, they create opportunities to continually reflect on and refine their practice in line with their commitments (Vaughn, 2021).

CFGs represent a particular type of dialogic professional learning group. By *dialogic professional learning groups,* I refer to professional learning communities wherein participants engage in often-structured discourse designed to encourage questioning, proposing alternatives and hypotheses, sharing lived experiences, and negotiating meaning around pedagogical principles, teacher-student interactions, and other factors impacting the classroom (Caughlin et al., 2013; Horn et al., 2017; Hunt, 2018; Nehring et al., 2010). This work is important for supporting educator conceptual change, as dialogic professional learning creates opportunities for educators to situate formal concepts and shared knowledge within their own contexts (Horn et al., 2017; Nehring et al. 2010): Research has demonstrated that engagement in Critical Friends and other dialogic professional learning groups can impact the extent to which teachers' visions feature elements of ambitious and equitable teaching practices (Rigelman & Ruben, 2012). However, less attention has been paid to the mechanisms supporting this vision refinement. Therefore, this paper delves into the *how* of dialogic inquiry, exploring the ways in which educators within a Critical

Friends Group reframe, reimagine, or, in some cases, foreclose their visions of agency-supportive instruction.

### 4.0.2. Situative perspective

### 4.0.2.1. Student agency from a situative perspective

A situative perspective on agency (e.g., Greeno, 2006; Horn, 2020) centers a conceptualization of agency not as a property of individuals, but rather as an action that occurs in negotiation with others, the environment, and cultural tools, artifacts, and norms. Key to a situative framework is understanding that agency is situated in specific times, places, cultures, and societies; this perspective enables a focus on student agency not as a normative trait or possession that students do or don't possess, but rather as something that students do, and do differently, at various times across diverse contexts.

Within this definition, both intention and social resources are necessary to act agentively (Clarke et al., 2016). For example, a student may perceive themselves to have valuable knowledge to offer to their peers during academic discussion (intention) but be prevented from doing so by a teacher who is concerned that this information will take much time away from discussing the text she has been told to teach (social resources). Conversely, a teacher may make space for students' funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2006) within academic discussion, creating opportunities for students to learn from and with each other (social resources), but if students perceive their funds of knowledge to be less valuable than the teacher's, they may feel they have nothing of value to share (intention). A situative perspective enables a focus on individuals within contexts, on both individual intention and social resources. Given agency's multifaceted and contextual nature, a situative framework offers value by affording a focus on educator visions of agency within localized contexts, as shaped by both individual and structural factors (Bang, 2015; Greeno, 2006; Horn, 2020; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

### 4.0.2.2. Teacher learning and visioning from a situative perspective

Teacher learning occurs not in isolation, but in interaction with context, cultural artifacts, and colleagues (Horn, 2005; Wenger, 1998). Within dialogic professional learning experiences, educators' "pre-existing personal understandings gained in other situations [mediate] interpretations of new situations" (Edwards, 2005, p. 171), suggesting the importance of focusing on participants' *negotiated experiences*, or the ways in which they engage in, narrate, and create meaning around activities (Wenger, 1998). Specifically, I illuminate the ways in which teachers within a professional learning group negotiate visions of agency and agency-supportive instruction (Edwards, 2005), aiming to develop their "capacity for interpreting and approaching problems, for contesting interpretations, for reading the environment, for drawing on the resources there, for being a resource for others, for focusing on the core objects of the professions whether it is children's learning or social inclusion" (Edwards, 2005, p. 179). Agency, as a construct with differing meanings across various contexts, is constantly negotiated in classrooms, within professional learning communities, and even within individuals as they refine or reimagine their visions of agency over time—what an educator perceives as meaningful agentive action may differ significantly from what student A perceives as agentive practice, which may in turn be at odds with what student B determines to represent meaningful agency (e.g., Meston et al., 2021). Agency can be discussed, contested, and navigated in classrooms and professional learning communities in various overt and implicit ways, and a situative framework creates space to consider the diverse meanings assigned to agency by individual actors working within specific contexts—in this case, to examine how visions of student agency might be dialogically co-constructed and refined in conversation with context and professional learning.

## 4.1 Design

### 4.2.1. Design of the professional learning experience

Many have argued in favor of collaborative learning experiences as a means of supporting educator agency; however, collaboration is, in and of itself, no guarantee of professional learning (Little, 1990). Therefore, preparing educators to foster student agency in the classroom first entails the deliberate design of high-quality collaborative learning experiences that foster opportunities for participants to critically examine, contest, and negotiate their perspectives on agency-supportive instruction—to distinguish learning experiences that foster these opportunities for meaning making, I hereafter refer to them as "dialogic" (Hunt, 2018). In framing and designing the dialogic learning experience I propose here, I draw on the work of numerous scholars who have advocated for exploring problems of practice as an exemplary means of structuring professional learning experiences and increasing educator agency (e.g., Horn & Garner, 2022; Lefstein et al., 2020; Little & Horn, 2007; Vedder-Weiss et al., 2018). According to Vedder-Weiss and colleagues (2018), such exemplary professional learning experiences are characterized by dialogic opportunities designed to make connections between teaching and learning by deeply examining problems of practice anchored in rich representations, with a focus on positioning teachers as agentic in dealing with these problems. Below, I explore each of these elements in more depth as they pertain to the design and implementation of this Critical Friends Group.

### 4.2.1.1. Connecting teaching, learning, subject-matter—and agency

Too frequently, teaching is viewed as equivalent to learning. However, what is taught by educators is often quite different from what is learned by students (Cohen, 2011). Exemplary professional learning experiences make explicit the connection between what teachers are teaching and what students are learning. By framing problems of practice that focus on this connection, educators are afforded opportunities to consider the ways in which their teaching supports or inhibits the learning they hope to see in their students (Horn & Little, 2010). Or, as Cohen (2011), explains:

> What teachers and students do together can be more or less than their individual resources might permit, depending on the interaction. Teaching consists not in what teachers know, but in what they know how to do with students and what students know how to do themselves, with one another, with some content, and with their teachers in their environment. (p. 51)

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Effective professional learning makes explicit and offers multiple perspectives on what teachers are doing with students and how they are supporting students' development of knowing what to do with themselves, with one another, and with content.

Because student agency situated in classroom spaces is often intricately intertwined with subject matter, explorations of agency benefit from consideration of how students are positioned as developing agency to access, interact with, and create the subject matter taught in the classroom. Therefore, making explicit the connection between subject matter and student agency potentially represents a vital element of educator learning that supports student agency (Manukhina & Wyse, 2019). To this end, the stated mission of the Critical Friends Group discussed in this paper was to explore the ways in which educator practices support the agency of all students in the context of the subject-matter learning of the classroom.

### 4.2.1.2. Dialogically exploring problems of practice

Educators may also develop their capacities as facilitators of agency-supportive instruction through engagement in structured dialogic learning experiences, such as those represented by Critical Friends Groups (Curry, 2008; Franzak, 2002; Levine, 2019). Research indicates that relying on protocols to guide dialogic learning experiences, rather than on rigid or loose structures, results in significantly more turns of talk focused on instruction (Levine & Marcus, 2010). The semi-structured nature of these experiences may support educators in avoiding common problems that tend to plague professional learning experiences (Lefstein et al., 2020), such as failing to have an adequate leadership structure (Horn & Little, 2010), relying on "tips and tricks," rather than delving deeply into problems of practice (Horn et al., 2017), or framing problems in ways designed to save individual and collective face, rather than to support professional learning (Vedder-Weiss et al., 2018). In order to focus learning on presenters' problems of practice and to avoid these common pitfalls, the professional learning experiences described in this manuscript drew on a modified version of the National School Reform Faculty's "Tuning Protocol" (readers can see sample protocols at https://nsrfharmony.org/protocols/), which create structured opportunities for participants to reconsider constraints, affordances, and goals; to take varying perspectives on problems of practice; and to engage in reflective practice. Each meeting included time for the focal educator to present her problem of practice; for participants to ask questions about the classroom,

instruction, and provided artifacts; for participants to ask reflective and hypothetical questions of, as well as to provide feedback to, the focal educator; and for the focal educator to reflect on the learning that had occurred during the meeting.

### 4.2.1.3. Anchoring in rich representations of practice

Although the use of video-based representations of practice as an anchor for professional learning experiences has grown over the past decade, this development has largely failed to touch CFG communities (for an exception, see Czaplicki, 2011). Video recordings of classroom instruction present opportunities for educators to observe themselves, as well as to receive alternative interpretations of classroom interactions from their colleagues. In a written or spoken explanation of problems of practice, collaborators are dependent on the presenter's interpretation of the problem and context; however, video affords collaborators the chance to see and decide for themselves what may be occurring within the interactions depicted and to negotiate understandings of the events depicted (Horn & Garner, 2022; Steeg, 2016; van Es & Sherin, 2010). Although this CFG began in a traditional fashion, with educators describing their problems of practice orally and in writing, preliminary analysis and a review of the literature led to the inclusion of video clips of classroom instruction as part of the presentation of the problem element of the CFG protocol. These video clips, alongside lesson plans, student artifacts, and descriptions provided by the presenting teacher, served to create rich, multifaceted representations of practice that allowed for diverse interpretations of the problematized classroom interactions (Little, 2003).

### 4.2.1.4. Examining problems in depth

Supporting educators' capacity to enact agency-supportive instruction may take many forms. Because teaching is marked by numerous uncertainties, and agency-supportive teaching even more so, given its focus on drawing out students' funds of knowledge and using students' unique perspectives to guide learning and inquiry, educators gain agency through the development of pedagogical judgment (Horn, 2020; Horn & Garner, 2022). Exploring problems of practice in depth, considering multiple perspectives and solutions surrounding these problems, and coming to a more profound understanding of these problems all serve as elements supporting the development of pedagogical judgment. In her work, Horn illustrates the power of video-based formative feedback in supporting educators' pedagogical judgment and their resulting agency to

meet student needs in less-than-ideal conditions. Lefstein et al. (2020) also discuss the role of pedagogically productive talk in developing educator judgment and agency, framing pedagogically productive talk as: focused on problems of practice; based in pedagogical reasoning; anchored in rich representations of practice; multivoiced; based in generative orientations; and balanced between support and critique. Common to both Horn's and Lefstein and colleagues' conclusions in particular are the importance of focusing on the development of pedagogical judgment through deeply exploring problems of practice anchored in rich representations. To anchor the learning of the CFG, each meeting focused on a single presenter offering a single problem of practice for analysis for the entirety of the hour-long meeting. Throughout the meeting, the group focused on the problem through different lenses, including the lens of investigator, as participants asked clarifying questions to better understand the classroom context; imaginative partner, as participants asked probing questions designed to support the presenters' reframing and reimagining of potential affordances and barriers; and analyst, as participants sifted through the presenter's commitments, constraints, affordances, and goals for students to provide meaningful feedback.

### *4.2.1.5. Positioning teachers as capable of solving problems*

Professional learning that supports educators' capacities to enact their visions positions both presenting and collaborating participants as capable of solving problems of practice (Horn & Little, 2010). Rather than normalizing problems as inherent to contexts or positioning presenters as just needing advice, tips, or tricks, high-quality professional learning experiences that foster educator agency use dialogic discussion to frame problems in ways that allow for presenting teachers to consider the problems from new perspectives and to draw on the resources of their colleagues in arriving at potential solutions (Horn & Little, 2010). Within the context of this study, collaborators asked the presenter probing questions designed to facilitate their consideration of problems of practice from alternative perspectives, but in the end, presenters themselves were called upon to reflect on these questions and their own answers in arriving at their own solutions. One way in which the group opened further space for this work for all participants was by collaboratively agreeing to replace the five-minute debrief of the CFG process at the end of each meeting, which participants had described as not helpful to their learning, with a five-minute time for individual reflective writing time at the end of each session, to allow all participants an

opportunity to synthesize their thinking and apply the ideas shared to their own contexts (see Figure 4.1 for an overview of CFG process).

*Figure 4.1: Overview of the CFG visioning cycle*
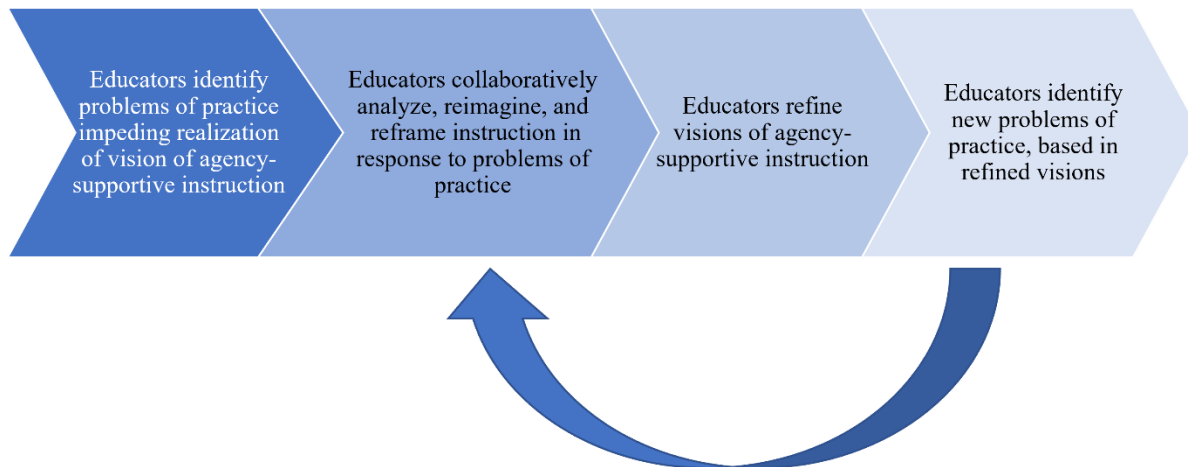


Tracing Teacher Conceptual Change Horn and Garner (2022) delve deeply into the study of conceptual change as a meaningful measure of effectiveness of professional development, explaining that, "Conceptual change moves beyond simplistic forms of learning, like skill acquisition or additive changes to practice, and instead emphasizes the transformation of fundamental understandings (diSessa, 2005)" (p. 11). Vital to studying learning from a situative perspective is an understanding that learning cannot be decontextualized from the ideologies, experiences, and conceptions that educators already possess. Therefore, meaningful professional learning consists not of 'giving' teachers new ideas, but rather of creating spaces for them to develop more sophisticated concepts as scientific ideas are brought into contact with educators' lived experiences (Little & Horn, 2007; Vygotsky, 1986). In other words, teacher learning centered in pedagogical principles but divorced from teachers' real contexts will not create meaningful conceptual change, nor will teacher learning experiences focused entirely on classroom experiences without insight from formal pedagogical principles. Therefore, the professional learning experience described in this investigation sought to create opportunities for educators to share, dispute, reframe, and reimagine teaching in support of student agency as conceptualized through their lived experiences, formal educational knowledge, and personal visions.

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### 4.2.2. Design of the study

Rather than explore professional learning from the context of effectiveness, which necessarily imposes normative judgments at odds with a situated view of learning, this study takes a non-normative perspective on teacher learning and focuses instead on the ways in which teachers' visions of agency-supportive instruction are mediated, negotiated, and reconceptualized through dialogic exploration of problems of practice.

#### 4.2.2.1. Participants and context

This work took place in a large, urban school district in the Southeastern United States from June 2021 through June 2022. The 2021-2022 academic year was the first full year of in-person learning for the district since 2019, and thus represented a unique opportunity for educators to reframe or reimagine what meaningful face-to-face learning experiences might look like.

This work is the result of a partnership with four focal educators serving within a diverse range of schools, grades, and subjects across the district (see Table 4.1 for details regarding educator roles and experience). These four teachers were first recruited through work with a voluntary teacher-led professional learning community centering notions of ambitious, equitable, and agency-supportive teaching. The choice to partner with this professional learning community for recruitment hinged upon a desire to purposively select for this work educators with a commitment to continued professional growth in support of student agency.

*Table 4.1: Focal educators*

| Pseudonym | Years of experience | Grades and subjects taught | Types of school taught in |
|---|---|---|---|
| Olivia | 2 | 5th grade math | Charter, International Baccalaureate |
| Bee | 8 | 5th and 6th grade math support for exceptional education students | Military base (1 year), private school (3 years), charter school (4 years, including current) |
| Willow | 7 | 10th grade literacy (gen ed and inclusion), 10th and 11th grade sheltered EL literacy | Public |
| Rose | 3 | 2nd grade self-contained | Magnet |

## *4.2.2.2. Data sources*

This analysis drew from two primary data sources: semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant, and six video recordings of CFG meetings, alongside related field notes.

## *4.2.2.3. Semi-structured interviews*

Each participant took part in three semi-structured interviews: one conducted prior to the 2021-2022 academic year, one conducted mid-year after a CFG in which the participant was the focal educator, and one conducted following the end of the entire CFG series. The exception to this was Bee, who was not able to engage in the mid-year interview. Because of the situated nature of agency and the diverse ways in which educators conceive of student agency, conducting semi-

structured interviews allowed me to be responsive to educators' unique conceptions, challenges, and classroom situations, by, for example, asking educators to expand on the terms they chose to employ in discussing agency.

Interviews employed a past-present-future structure (Horn et al., 2008; Horn et al., 2013), providing a temporal dimension to the study of teachers' conceptions of student agency. For example, discussions of present teaching practices in one interview became fodder for reflecting on the past in the next, as educators considered how those practices had engaged students in developing agency and where challenges had arisen. Such a discussion might then lead into how these past experiences had led to a revised conception of student agency and agency-supportive instruction in the present.

### 4.2.2.4. Critical Friends Group meetings

The CFG met eight times throughout the 2021-2022 academic year, with each educator having the opportunity to present twice. Meetings only occurred in months where at least three participants and myself were able to attend. Only six of these meetings were included in this analysis, as the December meeting did not record correctly, and an interruption to the February meeting meant that the protocol was not able to be completed with fidelity (see Table 4.2 for details). The CFGs were conducted via Zoom, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and concerns about educator and researcher safety.

*Table 4.2: Overview of CFG meetings (rows highlighted in gray were not able to be analyzed)*

| Month | Presenter | Facilitator | Problem of practice described by presenting educator | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| August | Rose | Willow | How might the launch portions of my lessons be impacting students' agency to engage in mathematical discussions of tasks? | |
| September | Willow | Olivia | How to aid students in translating understanding of texts into analysis of texts during collaborative tasks? | Classroom video would not play during meeting |
| October | Bee | Rose | How to support students in creating a plan to solve division word problems? | |
| December | Bee | Olivia | How to support students in creating a plan to solve division word problems? | Recording unavailable for analysis |
| January | Willow | Rose | How to engage students who are reluctant in collaboration and discussion? | |
| February | Rose | Olivia | How to help students translate knowledge gained from academic discussions into writing? | Protocol not able to be implemented with fidelity |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| April | Olivia | Willow | How to make group presentations interactive learning experiences for both presenters and audience members? | |
| May | Olivia | Rose | How to get students to give more authentic feedback to their peers? | |

For each analyzed meeting, the video recording was transcribed through a transcription service.

### 4.2.2.5. Analysis

In order to adhere as closely as possible to teachers' verbalized visions of agency-supportive instruction, first cycle interview analysis began with in vivo coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Following first cycle analysis of each interview, in vivo codes were analyzed for common themes, as well as for disconfirming cases. These themes were then analyzed within and across each participants' interviews, to explore both commonalities across time and instances of conceptual change within teachers' visions, resulting in the creation of teacher vision profiles. In order to increase trustworthiness, a research assistant independently double coded four teacher interviews to create vision profiles. Meetings were held to resolve minor discrepancies, via a process of re-examining transcripts and discussing interpretations in order to arrive at consensus.

Although in vivo coding offers affordances in the analysis of teacher interviews, it has less utility for examining the interplay of ideas during professional learning. Therefore, coding within each CFG meeting centered on the speech acts identified within those meetings. Speech acts represent a theoretical category based in pragmatic linguistic theories and are defined by the actions performed by a speaker's words (Austin, 1962; Cutting, 2002; Ruytenbeek, 2021; Searle, 1976, 2005). For example, a speaker who states, "You bumped into me," may be expressing a

declarative (making clear that the act of bumping occurred) or an indirect directive (requesting or demanding an apology). Speech acts are analyzed within three concentric contexts:

1. The situational context, which refers to the immediate shared context—in this case, the Zoom CFG meeting;

2. The background knowledge context, which refers to the knowledge and ideologies shared about the world and each other—in this case, this largely centered on knowledge and ideologies around pedagogy, students, and educational systems; and,

3. The co-textual context, which refers to shared knowledge of what other discussants have been saying—in this case, the ideas expressed across this and previous meetings (Cutting, 2002).

By coding speech acts, I hoped to engage with speakers' intended purposes for their words, situated within their own unique understandings, experiences, and visions, as well as within the larger dialogue occurring within and across the CFG meetings (Hildayat, 2016).

Although speech acts have typically been defined according to five macro-types (declaratives, representatives, commissives, directives, and expressives) (Searle, 1976), numerous sub-types have been identified, ranging from "apologizing" (Bayat, 2013) to "expressing gratitude" (Pishghadam & Zarei, 2011). Because of the situated nature of visioning-based professional development, I endeavored to create categories of speech act derived from an initial subset of the data. Inductive analysis of three CFG meetings identified seven types of speech act that performed functions contributing to or indicative of conceptual change within the CFG:

1. Problems of practice: Declaration of the problem stymying enactment of vision of agency-supportive instruction, request for assistance

2. Proposed affordances: Declaration or question implying resources/people/contextual factors which may be helpful in achievement of vision of agency-supportive instruction

3. Proposed constraints: Declaration or question implying resources/people/contextual factors which may be detrimental to achievement of vision of agency-supportive instruction

4. Goals of instruction: Declaration or question aimed at clarifying goals for instructional practices in relation to larger vision of agency-supportive instruction

5. Reframes of vision/affordance/constraint: Declaration or question in which participants bring new perspectives to bear on the meaning of agency-supportive instruction, or the various affordances and constraints impacting its enactment

6. Reimaginings of vision: Declaration or question in which participants concretely defined new ways in which their vision might be enacted within the classroom

7. Foreclosures of teacher capacity to enact vision: Declaration or question in which participants precluded enactment of vision of agency-supportive instruction

In particular, reframings and reimaginings were conceptualized as instances of conceptual change, wherein educators negotiated amongst their lived experiences and shared formal knowledge to create new meanings around agency-supportive instruction. The most important difference between reframings and reimaginings was the level of concreteness applied to the speech act—reframings were operationalized as abstract, comprising instances where elements of the vision, or of the affordances and constraints impacting it, were redefined. Reimaginings, conversely, were operationalized as concrete, comprising instances in which teachers concretely outlined how a vision might be enacted in a new way in their classroom. For example, in the May 2022 meeting, Olivia reimagined providing students rotating roles in their group presentations—this was a concrete reimagining of how she might enact her vision of agency-supportive instruction as offering opportunities for students to teach each other. However, this concrete reimagining was undergirded by an abstract reframing—that is, a new perspective that it supports students' agency to have rotating group roles during presentations, because this gives them opportunities to develop mastery over different elements of content. In some instances, a sentence would include both a concrete reimagining and the reframing of perspective that led to that reimagining woven together; in these instances, the sentence would be coded as both speech acts.

These seven types of speech act were then used in a form of inductive-deductive coding; while each speech act was deductively coded with one of these seven speech act types, each was also coded inductively with the illocutionary force behind each speech act.

After each meeting was coded in this way, these codes were placed into concept maps detailing themes and relations between ideas (see Figure 4.2 for an example). Working under the

assumption that individuals working in dialogic spaces often bring to their communities ideas and perspectives that accord with their values and visions (Lave & Wenger, 1991), I analyzed participants' engagement across these meetings. Though tracing conceptual change is a complex and imperfect science, I attempted, through this temporal and relational analysis of engagement, to determine how participants' visions were expressed, expanded, refined, and otherwise changed during the CFGs. After coding individual interviews and CFG meetings, I engaged in a structured memoing process detailing changes I noticed across participants' visions, people and events contributing to those changes, and my own impressions of the data, including within them excerpts that struck me as particularly noteworthy. Finally, to ensure that my interpretations and understandings accorded with those of the participants, I shared with each participating educator the portion of this investigation centered on her own interpretative work and asked for her commentary, though I only received a response from Bee (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### 4.2.3. Positionality

My positionality as a White, female, former middle grades educator played a significant role in this study. In particular, the ways in which my culture and experiences have shaped how I think about agency impacted my own participation in the CFGs, and thus their overall direction. I served as a participant within each CFG, although never as a facilitator (the member who led us through the protocol) nor as a presenting educator (the educator seeking feedback on a problem of practice). However, as a full participant within the CFG who was involved in all opportunities to question, provide feedback, and present alternative viewpoints, the questions I chose to ask, the ideas I chose to highlight, and the ideas I chose to disregard all shaped the CFG meetings in ways that cannot be disentangled.

Figure 4.2: Partial CFG relationship map
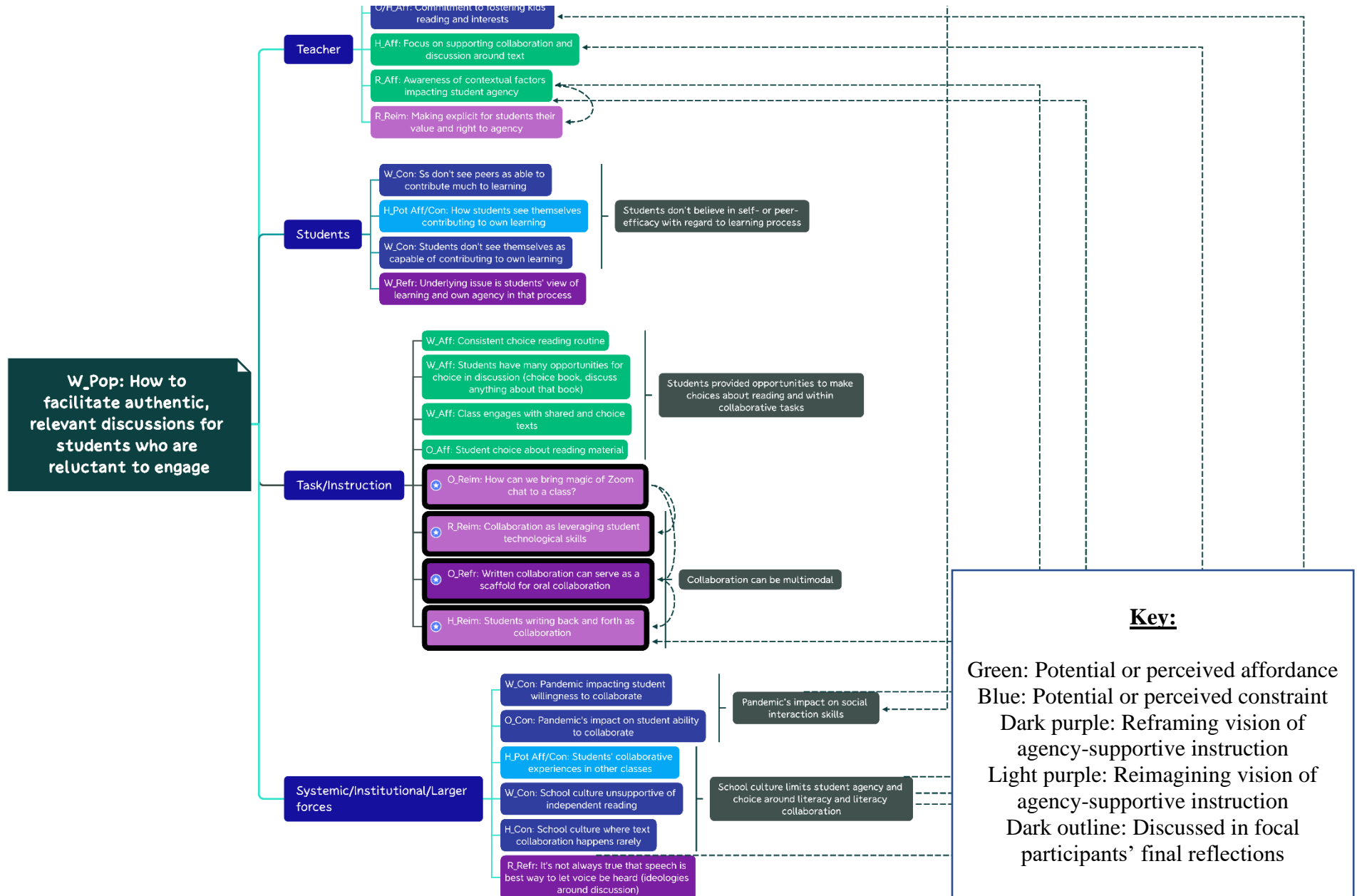
## 4.3.  Results

Across the corpus of CFG data, there were numerous instances in which educators reframed or reimagined their visions of agency-supportive instruction. Below, I provide three vignettes to illustrate three conditions which were particularly fruitful in leading to teacher reframings and reimaginings of visions of agency-supportive instruction. These three conditions are:

1. Identification of unnoticed affordances to reframe agency-supportive instruction

2. Reframings opening imaginative space for reimaginings

3. Reimaginings as a foundation for reframings in the face of constraints

Though this is by no means an exhaustive exploration of which conditions may lead to reframing or reimagining of teacher visions, the three conditions explored here played a significant role in the changes that teachers self-reported as impacting their practice. I choose to present these results as vignettes to emphasize the necessarily interactive nature of the work done during dialogic professional learning experiences and how it was the sum of these extended interactions that resulted in such significant change.

### 4.3.1.  *Identification of unnoticed affordances to reframe agency-supportive instruction: Collaborative discussion as exceeding the bounds of speech*

According to Willow, the most impactful moment of the year-long CFG series occurred during the January meeting, when she reframed her conception of agency-supportive instruction. One particularly integral element of Willows' vision of agency-supportive instruction in her

literacy class entailed students collaboratively discussing content to support learning and to aid students in refining their thinking processes. Below, I trace how she reframed this conception of agency-supportive instruction to meet the needs of her specific students, culminating in a conception of agency-supportive instruction as entailing multi-modal, rather than primarily oral, collaboration.

Within her first interview, Willow shared her dedication to using discussion as a means of supporting students' developing agency, explaining that, "Basically anything that's not summative, I want the kids working together, because I think they can teach each other more than I can, for the most part" (Willow_6-26-21_Interview 1).

While Willow carried this conception of agency-supportive instruction based in discussion across the year, her vision of what this instruction might entail shifted as she engaged with students and the CFG. Challenges such as getting students to engage with each other led her to decrease the number of formal activities designed for discussion in her class, as she explained in the January 2022 CFG where she was the focal educator:

> WILLOW: I can only speak for the high school level, but I am seeing a huge issue with kids being very reluctant to collaborate and discuss, even on a very informal level. So, my official problem of practice that I wrote down is, students are reluctant to engage in collaborative activities and discussions… I've just met failure after failure this year, so I have not done it as much as I wanted to.

Throughout the meeting, Willow suggested that a year spent in isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic as a constraint that was potentially impacting students' social comfort, and thus their willingness to share and discuss ideas. Her vision of student agency in the literacy classroom as supported by discussion came into conflict with the ways her students were engaging (and not engaging) with each other during those discussions. In response to students' reticence, she shifted her vision of how students might develop agency in her class, instead focusing her instructional time on writing, choice reading, and authentic individual engagement with texts. However, later

in the CFG meeting, Willow reflected on what made collaboration such an integral part of her vision of student agency.

HEATHER: What are your goals for collaboration?

WILLOW: I feel like right now, they see me very much as the knowledge keeper. And I don't want that. I want instead for them to realize that they're building understanding. (January 2022 CFG)

This reflection represented an important visioning experience, as Willow articulated the reasoning behind her vision of students developing agency through discussion. Articulating visions and the reasoning behind them support educators' dedication to pursuing worthy, if challenging, goals (Hammerness, 2001).

Over the course of the meeting, Willow's vision shifted as her colleagues pointed out affordances that could support her work in helping students to "realize that they're building understanding". A pivotal moment in this process occurred when Olivia flipped Willow's concerns about the pandemic as a constraint, identifying her experiences facilitating collaboration during that time as an affordance that could support her enactment of her vision:

OLIVIA: And I know you mentioned the pandemic and spending an entire year in virtual learning. And so how did virtual learning impede students' ability to collaborate? And did you have any strategies from last year that you used to get students to work with each other?

WILLOW: Yeah. I really recently started thinking about, how did I get them to collaborate last year? And it was so much through a screen. And so, I've tried that a little bit this year. In the last lesson I taught, I was trying to get them to sort of build this board of figurative language examples so they could see each other as examples. And instead of doing it in a group, in a discussion, I put it on the computer. And when it was through a screen and they didn't have to talk through each other, they were way more willing to participate in that. So

that's interesting. And I mean, that's the collaboration piece, but it's definitely not the speaking piece that I want them to get better at. (January 2022 CFG)

At this point during the dialogue, Olivia's reframing of the pandemic experience as an affordance rather than a constraint offered a different potential vision, of collaborative discussion as a multimodal experience drawing on the teaching skills that Willow had developed over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, while Willow acknowledged the merit of engaging students in multimodal collaboration, she also reiterated her concern about developing students' oral discussion abilities as integral to student agency.

Later in the meeting, Olivia again returned to this point, highlighting the affordance of students' willingness of communicate through virtual methods. Rose elaborated on this discussion of unnoticed affordances, emphasizing her own struggles to recognize student strengths that may be less overt than speech and asking Willow to reflect on students' strengths as readers and writers:

OLIVIA: I also think it's interesting that you pointed out that students have been virtual for a year and so they will communicate over screens or through a chat box, but they won't actually say it out of their mouths. And so how can we bring some of the magic of Zoom chat call to a classroom? And I don't know what you all's laptop policy is or whatever, but maybe having a tablet or a-- what do you call it? Those parking lot posters that they put on a wall in the classroom or even doing Flipgrid, where they're actually having to make a video and talk. And so maybe it's a scaffold for students who still don't feel comfortable talking in group or talking in front of their peers. They can still participate, and you can still use that to keep the classroom going and keep the discussions going.

ROSE: I think what Olivia said was really compelling, about meeting them where they are, using what they find. I think it's hard. I struggle with this all the time. Talking is the most important thing you can possibly do to advocate for yourself, but that's not always true and how can you let your voice be heard in different ways? And they are really technologically savvy, and that is a way to have your voice or who you are be brought to light, and letting them have that be a form of freedom…That made me think a lot about how much I try to

emphasize talking because that's what I can see and hear, you know? But there's other ways for them. That made me think, there's other ways for them to express themselves. And where do they already do it, you know? Where are they already expressing themselves as readers and writers and all that good stuff? (January 2022 CFG)

Finally, Willow had the opportunity to reflect on and synthesize what had been discussed up to that point, and to articulate changes to her vision that occurred as a result of this dialogic engagement, emphasizing in particular the revelatory nature of Olivia's reframe of the pandemic experience as an affordance rather a constraint, and extending her thinking by reframing the meaning of agency-supportive instruction, as involving multimodal collaboration based in students' strengths. She concluded by reimagining what such a reframe might concretely look like in her classroom:

> WILLOW: And I wrote down what Olivia said word for word. How can we bring the magic of the Zoom screen into the classroom? So, doing some kind of thinking about how do kids interact with each other over the phone or over the computer?
>
> And then how can you bring that into a room with a parking lot or something like that? And that might be a way that there's an in-between of the communication, there's like that middle ground as a really good scaffold. So, I liked that idea too… I also really like the idea of using collaborative writing as a way to build capacity for collaboration because I guess, I also forget, like Rose, that you don't just have to talk to collaborate. There are so many other ways to do it, and I forget that all the time, as evidenced by these lessons. So, I think that there are a lot more opportunities that I could put in for kids to collaborate in different ways that meet all of their different strengths.  (January 2022 CFG)

Willow brought her learning back to her classroom, designing agency-supportive instruction that drew on students' strengths as writers and collaborators as part of a process of supporting their agency to engage in oral collaboration. For example, rather than have students discuss their papers as part of a peer revision process, she had students write back and forth as a scaffold for later discussion. Supported by the identification of unnoticed affordances that Olivia and Rose shared

during the CFG, Willow engaged in an iterative visioning process that refined her conceptions of student agency in collaboration and what it means to support students' collaborative agency within her realized context, moving from a vision of student agency as deeply based in oral collaborative discussion to a vision of agency-supportive collaboration as multimodal and based in student resources and interests.

### 4.3.2. *Reframings opening imaginative space for reimaginings: Limiting choice in support of student agency*

In many instances, reimaginings of instruction were preceded by reframings–either of what student agency is or of what it means to enact agency-supportive instruction. The below vignette illustrates how a reframing of what agency-supportive instruction entails led to a reimagining of that instruction.

During the August CFG session, Rose sought her collaborators' reframings and reimaginings around the question, "How might the launch portions of my lessons be impacting students' capacity to engage in mathematical discussions of tasks?" In her initial interview, Rose had described a complex vision of agency-supportive instruction that comprised designing compelling, accessible content that allowed students opportunities to impact each other's thinking; providing clear structures and expectations and enforcing those expectations equitably; and creating opportunities for students to serve as experts, by shaping opportunities for them to share funds of knowledge that are historically undervalued in American public schools. However, during this session, another component of this vision emerged—for Rose, supporting student agency entailed granting significant amounts of autonomy. All whole-class discussion was centered on student-created work, students engaged in free-style discussion to build understanding in whatever ways seemed most appropriate to them, and, though Rose modeled a three-read structure for students to support their understanding of tasks, students were not required to use this structure

during their independent work times. All this autonomy, while valuable and potentially rewarding in certain scenarios, meant that students were lost. This connection became apparent to Rose when Willow questioned the structure of her lessons:

> WILLOW: When you do a problem where they're kind of given that problem on their own, are they given explicit time to do that three-read task before they start? Like, is it a step? Like everybody take five minutes and do this first, or is it just kind of attack the problem? (August 2021 CFG)

This questioning caused Rose to reflect on the impact of this unstructured autonomy, eventually concluding that it was not sufficient to enable her students to act as agents impacting each other's learning, but also questioning if too much structure might decrease academic rigor. In a particularly pivotal moment, Rose responded to Willow's question, reflecting:

> ROSE: It's kind of attack the problem. But I think chunking is really such an important thing that I am struggling to do in a way that is appropriate for everyone. Like I don't want chunking-- like part of the work of math is you have to chunk it. You have to be able to identify and break down the important information.
>
> And I don't-- it's hard-- the productive struggle balance, it's really hard for me right now, because I do not have a lot of confidence or feel like they have-- When I let them do productive struggle, well, it's not even productive struggle. It's just struggle, and they--I don't want them to feel defeated, but also at the same time, I don't want to lower expectations. Like, I want to give them the support they need to attack the problem, but that has been chunking it, which also feels a little bit like I'm doing a lot of the work, the cognitive work of understanding the problem for them. (August 2021 CFG)

In this moment, Rose reframed her understanding of her agency-supportive instruction—too much autonomy wasn't supporting agency but was actually hindering it. Instead of being a time to develop identities as mathematicians who persist and generate ideas in support of impacting each other's thinking, independent and collaborative work times were proving to be daunting and discouraging.

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This reframing led to several important reimaginings of instruction. Willow reimagined the order of activities, suggesting that students might gain confidence from working in pairs (rather than independently) first. Olivia reimagined a new scaffold as students sharing their planned strategies before beginning independent work; and I reimagined scaffolds as students evaluating solutions generated by students in other classes or by Rose on related problems. Rose engaged with each of these reimaginings when considering her next steps:

> ROSE: Basically, like to categorize a lot of your feedback, one of it is like increasing structure. And increasing structure on the launch will really benefit them. With those consistent guiding questions, I have them up there, but I do not ask them every launch– I, just sometimes, I'm like, well, how it's happening in this problem, you know? I don't hold myself to those guiding questions. And the importance of doing that will build their familiarity and a sense of consistency, which will give them confidence to be engaged in the task launch and feel like they understand what's happening.

Above, Rose began her reflection by highlighting the key reframe of this session: That student agency is supported not by a complete lack of structure, but by structures carefully designed to position students as capable decision-makers, learners, and thinkers. She reimagined what increased structure might look and considered how increased structure might benefit students' capacities to access content. With this increased access to content, she hoped she would be able to do more to enable students to impact their own and others' learning trajectories via dialogue and collaboration:

> ROSE: And I really like the idea of restating the problem, and they can also connect with like that peer-to-peer interaction early on because then they can uncover and get rid of some of each other's misconceptions. Like if Leo had talked to a partner that he was thinking of additive comparison, how much more powerful would it have been to let his teammate be the owner of that clarification, rather than me being like, are we doing multiplication? You know, having a peer would be like, well, we're not supposed to add, we're supposed to do times, you know. And I think that would have been a really good chance to increase student voice in the launch.

And having a chance to talk through it with a partner will also support some of those who feel overwhelmed by how much the task is asking them to do, and I do have lots of kids feeling overwhelmed and struggling, especially during that independent phase, whereas if they've talked to a partner and just listened to what a partner is thinking the task is asking them to do, I'm wondering how that will help with their feeling of like the daunting, overwhelming nature of the task.

Rose's reflections on "the daunting, overwhelming nature of the task" speak to the role that she perceived emotional vulnerability was playing into her students' reluctance to engage in co-creating meaning during class discussions. She again linked this back to a need for more structure, emphasizing that clear and structured access to both academic content and classroom protocols would support students as they sought to bring their unique understandings to classroom discussions:

ROSE: I think that doing the partner-independent-partner-independent structure would be really beneficial. And I think one of the reasons I've struggled doing that is because they don't have good, structured conversation norms right now. We're doing some structured things, with like looking and leaning close, but just the amount of dialogue is not enough, and they need structure to do it. And so, I think using a Kagan strategy is really, really important. And getting them really familiar, like picking one, because sometimes I get overwhelmed by the Kagan strategies. I'm like, there's so many. Which one do I do? But picking one and getting really good at it-- you not having to practice it again and again and again-- will really benefit them.

And then Olivia you also talked about-- or no. Heather and Olivia both talked about looking at examples of efficient methods. I get really caught up in how important it is to only use their examples. But, to show and to model and to have them, not even like I'm modeling, but to show examples and non-examples and let them have the dialogue about them will help I think build that confidence. For ones who are overwhelmed or struggling, they can see these are different ways that people have attacked it and like, let me evaluate this rather

than me having to attack it myself. And then think through, and that will help solidify their understanding.  (August 2021 CFG)

Rose concluded the session by reflecting that student agency is more than just freedom--it is something that needs to be structured and supported. Students were losing confidence in their identities as mathematicians able to agentively engage with content, because too many entry points and not enough scaffolds and structures supported their engagement. By reframing agency-supportive instruction as providing the scaffolds and structures necessary to support this mathematical engagement and identity adoption, Rose and her collaborators were able to generate numerous reimaginings of instruction that enabled her to provide needed structures that students could work within to meaningfully generate math content and gain ownership over mathematical content and language.

### 4.3.3.   *Reimaginings as a foundation for reframings in the face of constraints: Context and student behavioral challenges constraining possibilities*

Although reframings often served as the foundation of reimaginings, in certain instances, this relationship was reversed. This pattern seemed particularly salient when the focal educator seemed particularly cognizant of constraints impeding the enactment of her vision. In this vignette, I focus on the case of Bee, who was the only educator who engaged in instances of self-foreclosures across the six CFG meetings analyzed. In contrast to reframings and reimaginings, which represented moments when teachers enlarged their visions of the possible, foreclosures in this work represented those instances in which educators diminished opportunities to enact agency-supportive instruction.

During the October 2021 CFG, Bee acted as the focal educator and sought to address the problem of practice "How to support students in creating a plan to solve division word problems?"

Across the interactions within this meeting, several instances of self-foreclosure occurred. This final vignette illustrates the ways in which Bee's teaching context and vision of agency-supportive instruction created ripe conditions for these moments of self-foreclosure, as her vision came into conflict with the constraints of her context. Furthermore, this vignette serves to highlight the ways in which Bee's care for her students created opportunities for her CFG collaborators to offer reimaginings of her practice that eventually resulted in a significant reframing of her vision of agency-supportive instruction.

Bee's problem of practice stemmed from the vision of student agency she had shared in interviews, a vision that centered students feeling and being academically competent to participate in the general education classroom. According to Bee, her vision was shaped by her desire to support students' confidence, as she had observed that many students seemed to feel a stigma attached to being in special education, and by her context, a pull-out special education math class in an academically-focused charter school. Bee envisioned agency-supportive instruction as meeting students' academic and social-emotional needs as individuals, through building community with parents, engaging in an ethic of care (Noddings, 2012), and getting to know students' unique learning styles. Bee demonstrated deep caring for her students and their academic and social-emotional well-being, but because the heart of her vision of agency-supportive instruction entailed preparing students to achieve a normative academic standard, there existed little room within that vision for responsiveness to students who exert agency in different ways.

Throughout the session, Bee engaged in several instances of self-foreclosure. Though she emphasized her attempts to support students' agency through the provision of resources and modeling, she eventually concluded that the wide range of abilities in her class made enacting her vision of agency-supportive instruction nigh-impossible.

> Heather: I've heard you mention a couple of times this idea that you have to 'spoon feed' the students. So, it seems like a big concern of yours. What do you feel would have to change in order for that to not happen?

BEE: First, in the video, I don't know if you saw the two students that were sitting closer to me…Their IQ is where they need to be in a different classroom. It's much-- it's too low for what we're doing.  (October 2021 CFG meeting)

In this interaction, Bee highlighted the fragility of her vision of agency-supportive instruction: The weight of two students deemed disruptive was enough to collapse the possibility of enacting that vision.

In response to Bee's focus on her constraints, Rose attempted to offer a reimagining, asking Bee to concretely consider how she might differently support different students; however, due to the interruptions of those same students, Bee remained concerned about engaging her students in partner work—a key component of her vision of agency-supportive instruction.

ROSE: So just to question-- just to build on your response to that question of what would have to change-- so for those two who maybe the supports in the class aren't enough, how is that different from what might have to change for the others in the class who-- you see them picking it up. What's different about that? How do you see them picking it up? What's the process for them like?

BEE: They were able to answer questions. Like I could just say, what are we doing in this problem? My two that are about to move out, usually they'll just-- 60. 25. I know. And they'll stop the class and just give me numbers or just say random stuff. Where today, I noticed that some of the others in there, they're starting to put things together and they're able to answer the question. We're going to a soccer game, and the rows have 32 seats in each row. They're starting to put things like that together. So, without those students that are requiring so much support, when they're removed, I can see where we can do more partner practice. They can build off of each other, versus when I try to do that with the group I have now, those that are struggling the most, they're doing so many off-task things that I have to keep them separated in order for the class to keep moving, if I'm making sense. I just feel like there's going to be more progress because those are so needed. When those students write one thing on the paper, I almost have to stop class because they want

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me to come over and look at what they've written on the paper. Just things that-- it slows our class down. So, I can't give the other group that information or try to allow them to do independent things because of just the needs of those others. (October 2021 CFG)

Bee's expression that she had achieved her vision of agency-supportive instruction to an extent was tempered by the distance of two students from the academic and behavioral standards expected within her class and her school. As mentioned in her first interview, Bee's charter school context was "a little bit more rigid" than traditional American public schools with regard to student and educator expectations. A situative perspective on teacher visioning lends itself to considering how this teaching context may have played into the vision of agency-supportive instruction Bee shared– she was observed weekly by her instructional coaches and given a weekly report card on her teaching practices. The external pressures of Bee's context represented a potential barrier constraining her vision of agency-supportive instruction, and who fit within that vision.

However, Bee was deeply committed to enacting an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2012) in support of meeting students' academic needs and supporting the growth of their confidence–both integral elements of her vision of student agency underlying her vision of agency-supportive instruction. Noddings (2012) defines an ethic of care as one which:

"emphasises the difference between assumed needs and expressed needs. From this perspective, it is important not to confuse what the cared-for wants with that which we think he should want. We must listen, not just 'tell', assuming that we know what the other needs. (p. 773)

Bee's dedication to meeting students' expressed needs was made clear in the multitude of ways she sought to learn about students as individuals, including: meetings with students and parents before the start of the school year to better understand students' interests and goals and to start building a supportive community; attempting to teach through a multitude of modalities to meet students' individualized learning styles; and helping students to learn about themselves as learners. Though her ethic of care was tempered by her need to meet state standards, she sought as often as possible to discover and meet students' expressed needs within the context of her constraints.

It was this deep care for her students that compelled Bee to seek solutions outside the constraints imposed by her school context. Within the CFG, Rose and Willow continued to offer reimaginings of how Bee might work within the constraints of her context and still move closer to her vision of agency-supportive instruction. Rose suggested that, rather than having students memorize a set of steps, students might instead be given problems with multiple solution paths, so that class discussion could center on identifying the most efficient path.

> ROSE: All math has multiple solutions paths. And when you have to follow these really narrow steps, sometimes you're not able to access them as easily. And so I'm wondering about-- how maybe not necessarily having the exact same problems, but making problems that have multiple solution paths and then narrowing in on one that they need to focus on in class-- you know what I mean? Like maybe it is the long division solution path, but noticing and comparing the different solution paths. I'm just wondering about what that would look like and if the curriculum allows that to happen at all. I don't know if it's a curriculum thing.

Rose's reimagining of what Bee's math class could like—students creating and evaluating their own solution paths instead of following a set of rigidly defined steps—offered new opportunities for students to take ownership over their math and adopt mathematician identities.

Willow followed up with a reimagining of reformatting the word problems to include manipulatives or only numbers and symbols, rather than words.

> Willow: One of the things I wondered, and I don't even know how possible this is, but I'm just wondering, because they're working with these word problems and that's something that they're struggling with, I'm wondering if another format might help them understand the work better, and then go into the word problem. So, I'm thinking maybe manipulatives or something where they could physically see the numbers in front of their eyes. And then do the same thing with the word problem so that they could maybe see how it translates, like Monopoly money with the vet, or something like that. Or even something that I've done with my English kids that struggle with sentences is having them write their own,

almost like a Mad Libs, because then they understand what goes in where. So you write most of it, and then they're just filling in bits and pieces. And I wonder just if they did that and then solved for the answer or solved for each other the answers, if that would help them understand the pieces of the word problem a little bit better, so that they could tackle it on their own.

Like Rose, Willow framed her reimaginings of Bee's instruction as linked to helping students achieve ownership over their mathematical practice, using language like "solved for each other," to hint at the creation of a math discourse community supportive of students' agency to meaningfully impact each other's learning, and "so that they could tackle it on their own," to suggest that these reimaginings of classroom practice could facilitate students' mathematical access.

It's important to note that both Rose and Willow shared their reimaginings as things that they hoped could be possible within the constraints of Bee's context, while also acknowledging the potentially limiting role of those constraints on the feasibility of those reimaginings. Rose acknowledged that her reimagined learning experience may not be possible in Bee's context, concluding her explanation of her reimagining of instruction with, "I'm just wondering about what that would look like and if the curriculum allows that to happen at all. I don't know if it's a curriculum thing." Willow expressed similar acknowledgement of Bee's constraints, beginning her explanation of her reimagining with the disclaimer, "I don't even know how possible this is."

Despite her restrictive context and self-foreclosures, these offered reimaginings played a role in revisions that Bee made to her practice. Within a restrictive context, reframings may have been too abstract to transform into a vision of agency-supportive that might fit within numerous constraints; instead, it was the concreteness of Willow's and Rose's reimaginings of Bee's practice that opened a possibility space where she could see what her vision might look like. When she took these reimaginings back to her classroom, the impact on her students' engagement and learning also led to larger shifts in her vision of agency-supportive. In her final interview, Bee reflected on the impact of the CFG's reimagining work, as well as students' responses to when she implemented that reimagined instruction. She particularly emphasized how the combination of the

two caused her to re-evaluate how her teaching practices were hindering students' attempts at agency and to reframe what agency-supportive instruction might mean:

> BEE: I think because of the type of school system I'm in, I was too rigid and too teacher led. And when I kind of adjusted that a little bit as much as I could and still be in compliance with the type of school that I'm in and gave the students just a little bit more of an opportunity to just go out on their own, and just be creative and do-- just kind of use their minds more versus this real rigid I'm taking-- being aware of the time and I'm not giving them very much of an opportunity to express themselves.
>
> But when I slowed it down and didn't give them as much teacher-led instructional time but more of a peer-- where they could just converse with their peer partners, and I just saw a bigger difference. Things that I was struggling to maybe get them to understand, I saw how quickly their peers, especially when they were paired correctly, was able to just push that extra little bit. And I saw a lot of light bulbs. (Bee_6-1-22_Interview 3)

This example highlights an important takeaway: that although Bee's self-foreclosures limited her capacity to support students' agency in the ways she had envisioned, her ethic of care opened her to accepting and trying things she might have otherwise found risky within the constraints of her rigid context. Her colleagues' reimaginings in dialogue with her vision opened opportunities to for Bee to concretely see how, even with the restrictions of her context, she might enact a new vision of agency-supportive instruction. Armed with these concrete reimaginings of instruction and her own care ethic, she concluded the academic year by pushing back on the constraints of her context and teaching in a new way that she perceived as better supporting students' agency.

## 4.4.  Discussion

This work has several limitations. One potential limitation of this work rests in my own role as a participant during many of the CFG meetings. Though all four focal educators individually requested that I join the group as a participant when questioned during pre-interviews, my own involvement necessarily changed the direction that negotiations of meaning took. Future iterations of this work might explore how these negotiations of student agency change without the active presence of a researcher.

An additional limitation (and simultaneous strength) of this research rests in the way that participants were selected. Each was offered the chance to participate because of their involvement in a voluntary professional learning community defined by its commitment to supporting teachers in developing ambitious and equitable pedagogy. Therefore, the educators featured in this work are representative of a select group of teachers invested in continuing to develop their practice outside of required professional learning experiences—in other words, the ways in which they learn and negotiate meanings surrounding student agency may not be representative of the teaching community at large.

Returning to the research question, *What conditions make possible reframing and reimagining of teachers' visions of agency-supportive instruction during dialogic analysis of problems of practice?* I propose four key takeaways from this study that may have an impact on conceptions of teacher professional learning.

The first takeaway, which draws from across these vignettes and the larger study overall, is that visions, despite how they are commonly portrayed in the literature, are not individual, but socially situated and shaped, and thus, they can be co-constructed, and negotiated within dialogic analysis of problems of practice. Visions are often defined by Duffy's seminal (2002) work, where he explains that visions represent "a conscious sense of self, of one's work, and one's mission … a personal stance on teaching that rises from deep within the inner teacher and fuels independent thinking" (p. 334) (for an exception to this individual conception of visions, see Scales, 2013).

And this conception of visions as individual possessions has played an enormous and valuable role in researchers' and teacher educators' understandings of the ways that teacher visioning can support educator agency to enact ambitious, agency-supportive instruction in the face of significant constraints. But, beyond this conception of visions as individual possessions, this study demonstrates that visioning is a dynamic social practice situated in context and experience, and thus that visions are able to be negotiated and co-constructed. This offers new opportunities for educators and teacher educators to work together to co-construct and negotiate visions of pedagogy that center equitable access to rich, dynamic, and agency-supportive instruction.

The second takeaway, drawing from Willow's vignette, is that collaborators engaging in dialogic analysis of problems of practice can draw on rich representations of practice to identify previously-unnoticed affordances and that this recognition of affordances can open new opportunities to reframe what agency-supportive instruction means for individual students. General visions of student agency and agency-supportive instruction may center certain ways of being, doing, and interacting while marginalizing others. Therefore, contextualizing visions of agency-supportive instruction by emphasizing the affordances of teachers' unique students may support equitable access to agency-enriched learning experiences, by offering the chance for responsiveness to students' needs as developed and developing agents (Horn & Garner, 2022). Rose reflected on the situated nature of student agency and its entanglement with equity in her second interview, explaining, "Building student agency in Southeast Forest District might look different than building student agency in North Forest District, because the history of the educational opportunities in those areas are different, and you're building agency with a community who's been disenfranchised through public education. So, it's like, how are you going to build agency with a population that's been disenfranchised [INAUDIBLE]? How are we going to expect them to trust that you're going to foster agency in their child when that school 60 years ago was-- you know? Student agency should be developed for the community and by the community...true teaching is making sure it works for the people in front of you." Dialogic analysis of problems of practice drawn from teachers' classrooms created the space to recognize the resources that students and teachers bring to the classroom, and thus to reframe what agency-supportive instruction meant for the particular students Willow was teaching.

The second takeaway, drawing from Rose's vignette, is that reimaginings of instruction may be more impactful and generative when undergirded by a reframing of the meaning of instructional practices. This is at odds with the traditional model of professional learning, wherein outside experts provide short-term workshops focused on sharing new instructional practices divorced from an exploration of the larger meaning of those practices within a specific context (Cochran-Smith, 2001; Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Horn, 2020; Lefstein et al., 2020). By contrast, the work of extended dialogic analysis of problems of practice offered a meaningful space to do the work of reframing meanings within her context–through her collaborators' probing questions, Rose was able to reframe her vision of agency-supportive instruction as entailing autonomy within clear and bounded structures. This reframing served as the foundation that made possible the numerous reimaginings that Rose brought back to her classroom.

And finally, the third and perhaps most important takeaway draws from Bee's vignette. Although foreclosures represented a small part of the data set, their significance should not be ignored. For many teachers working within a restrictive system of scripted curricula, punitive evaluation systems, and high-stakes standardized assessments, foreclosing their capacity to enact visions of agency-supportive instruction may seem like the only logical choice. However, Bee's extended engagement analyzing problems of practice with a group of educators dedicated to agency-supportive instruction resulted in the discovery of places within her restricted context where she could work within constraints to create new opportunities for students to develop as academically-competent and confident agents. In particular, the work of reimagining instruction— of concretely considering how her vision of agency-supportive instruction might play out within such a restrictive context—allowed Bee to realize the possibility of making genuine changes while still conforming to her school's changes. The enactment of these reimaginings led to a larger reframing for Bee of what agency-supportive instruction is. Therefore, educators within highly constrained contexts, as so many educators currently are in the United States, may find that opportunities to reimagine agency-supportive instruction within their context may be most impactful in changing perceptions and practices.

This work, which centered the experiences of four educators working within a Critical Friends Group, demonstrated that structured professional learning experiences centering teachers' problems of practice as subjects for deep inquiry offer diverse opportunities for reframing and reimagining agency-supportive instruction. This work is particularly important for its focus on the situated and socially-negotiated nature of visioning. It is the hope that this small exploratory study may serve as a catalyst for future research exploring how this work may be done at larger scales, and the impact of this re-visioning work on classroom practice and pedagogy.

## 4.5.   References

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