

## Teaching with Vision: How One Teacher Negotiates the Tension between High Ideals and Standardized Testing

By Karen Hammerness

These are challenging times for teachers. Mixed messages, conflicting demands, and increasing needs on all fronts surround them. Each day, teachers face increasing requirements and significant pressures on their daily practice from administrators and policymakers. It is hard to be, or remain, a teacher of quality committed to one's ideals.

In this article, based upon data from interviews and observations drawn from a larger study, I explore the experiences of one teacher as she attempts to be true to her own passions about what works for students in this era of accountability.<sup>1</sup> I focus upon the experiences of a high school science teacher, whom I call Kelly,<sup>2</sup> as she moves across the country from a large public high school in California to a small public alternative school in Massachusetts — a school she chose specifically because she felt it would be more consistent with her own vision of good teaching. However, while she moved to a school that seemed to her in many ways to be an

ideal context, her new school was in a very different "state," a state for which she was not fully prepared.

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Karen Hammerness is a post-doctoral fellow at the School of Education, Stanford University, Stanford, California.

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (or, MCAS) a new system of school accountability was in the process of being developed in response to the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993. The MCAS tests were to be piloted in Kelly's district

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for several years, and then would be required for students from the graduating class of 2003. How this new context affects her teaching, how she feels about her teaching, her students and her school, and what role her vision plays in that process is at the heart of this case.

Kelly's experience reveals the complex relationship between context and teachers' passions and commitments to good teaching. While research has demonstrated that the classroom practices of many teachers are shaped by school and departmental contexts (e.g., McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993), Kelly's experience demonstrates how the state and national context can play a significant role in teaching as well. In particular, her experience demonstrates what happens when a teacher's vision is at odds with the state context: while Kelly holds extremely high standards for herself and her students, standards rooted in her vision of good teaching, her conception is quite different from that embodied by the state standards. Such dramatic opposition poses challenges to her confidence about her teaching and to her vision for her students. It causes her to question her ability to fully enact what she envisions as good teaching.

Her story is not a simple story of one teacher's resistance to the pressures of accountability and standardization. Rather, this is the story of the ways in which this externally imposed context of accountability shakes her confidence, shifts her curriculum, and shapes her learning about her teaching, her students and her school. Yet it is also the story of how, due to the clarity of her vision and the compatible fit between her vision and her school context, she stays the course.

### Methodology

In order to understand the teaching experiences of teachers like Kelly, I argue that it is important to understand a teacher's vision of good teaching. In previous research, I have found that many teachers hold images of ideal classroom practices — which I call teachers' visions — that reflect their hopes and dreams for themselves, their students, their schools and even sometimes their communities — and that these images play a significant role in teachers' lives and work (Hammerness, 1999; 2001; 2003). Teachers' visions are substantial and concrete, vivid and powerful, and stable and consistent over time (though visions also do evolve). Through that work, I developed a set of questions that helped elicit teachers' visions, as well as interview questions and classroom observation protocols that enabled me to explore the nature of a teacher's vision and the relationships between vision and practice. To better understand Kelly's experiences, I draw upon data sources that include her written description of her vision (April, 1997), an initial interview (June, 1997), a set of classroom observations and a related interview (May, 1998), and four yearly follow-up interviews (August, 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003).

## Kelly: A Teacher with Vision

### Background

When I first met Kelly in 1997, she was teaching at Meadowbrook — a large, suburban public high school in an upper-middle class community in California — but she was preparing for an exciting move. While Kelly had been happy at Meadowbrook, she had not always felt that the school “fit” her own visions of teaching and learning. When she and her future husband decided to move across the country to Massachusetts, she sought a school that might provide a better context for her vision. She did much research on Massachusetts city schools, particularly those in the process of reform. Through her research, she learned about Hilltop High School, a newly established, small, urban alternative school in a low-income community in Massachusetts. Kelly told me that the night before her interview with Hilltop she had re-read a vision description that she had written in April of 1997 and that it served as a reminder of her goals, and had inspired her during her meetings with Hilltop faculty and students.

Before I interviewed Kelly for the first time, I asked her to write about her vision of the ideal classroom. In this written statement, Kelly described a classroom in which students and teacher explore scientific questions together in an atmosphere of “excitement, earnestness, and life.” Investigations are shaped by student interest rather than by the teacher’s choice or textbook topics. Students are learning to question and challenge information they’ve encountered and are learning to critically think through real-world problems: they “investigate and offer solutions to complex situations which often have no answer, while developing skills and reflecting on their learning.” Kelly sees her role as a supportive facilitator of student-centered inquiry, and also as what she calls “the human representative” of her subject matter. While Kelly recognizes that one could interpret this notion as “a very teacher-centered role,” she explained that one could also think about it quite differently. She sees her role as the facilitator of the kind of “two-way road” that she hopes students will enjoy in her classroom between their own interests and that of the discipline of science.

While Kelly’s vision focuses upon students becoming independent thinkers, able to approach problems with confidence and thoughtfulness, her vision has more than one focal point: it moves beyond her classroom. Kelly envisions a school in which colleagues also have those goals for students. Kelly feels that such consistent approaches would enable students to sustain their independent learning because they would encounter it in all their classes, not simply hers. She feels that a shared, school-wide approach might thus be more likely to contribute to attitudes and approaches to lifelong learning, and to help her enact her classroom vision; “I feel like the collegiality makes this structure [of my vision] possible, more effective, than if I were doing this by myself. In fact, I don’t think I could do this by myself.” Finally, Kelly imagines that her school would ideally be connected to the commu-

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nity in such a way that students' coursework could be based in part upon current problems or issues being addressed by that community.

Kelly felt convinced that Hilltop would be consistent with that vision. She was excited by the school's approach — a strong focus upon developing inquiry skills coupled with a project-based curriculum—and felt that it reflected her vision of students becoming independent thinkers. She was particularly impressed by the students' ability to take initiative and responsibility. As part of the hiring process, a panel of students had interviewed her, posed well-considered questions that indicated that they had read her resume carefully, and then provided feedback for her. She was encouraged by the apparent emphasis upon collegiality and teamwork at Hilltop. After meeting some teachers who shared advisory roles for small groups of students, she felt that the teachers seemed to share a sense of common vision and pedagogy. Taken together, all these aspects seemed indicators to her that this school would be the right place for her.

### Shaking her Confidence

When Kelly was just six months into her first year at Hilltop (1997-1998), it had become very clear that she was in a new "state." While she was pleased with the thoughtful, integrated inquiry-based curriculum she had developed with her Hilltop colleagues, she was uneasy about what was going on at the state level. Concerns about her students' potential performance on the MCAS tests weighed heavily on Kelly, even though she felt confident that her vision (and that of the school) really represented what was effective for students.

Kelly explained that at times she also wondered whether the vision she and her colleagues had developed was ultimately one that would benefit the students. She posed a string of concerns,

... what's going to happen? Is this good? Is this in the end good for the students? Or are we going to take them on this trip ... where we don't know where it's going to end?

Kelly then paused, saying, "You know what it is? ... this is very geeky, but in 'Star Trek' there's this concept of the wormhole, right?" She explained,

You jump in one end and you end up on the other side of the universe, right? There was this one episode one time that showed a wormhole where one end point was stable but the other end point wasn't. And so they couldn't sell the rights to go travel this wormhole because you wouldn't know where you would end up. And that's what I feel like. It's like we have just identified the wormhole... and we're about to jump into it and I have no idea. I hope that the end point is where the vision is going to be. I'm scared that we're going to take our students on this trip and we may end up in some place completely different.

Yet at the same time, she also described herself as feeling "very hopeful" that she and her Hilltop colleagues might actually be able to accomplish her — and their — vision. She mused:

It's like the first time I think we have staff . . . where everybody is not only open to it but we're actually going to try it. We're actually going to try and implement it. . . . I'm nervous because I don't know if it's going to work. I mean I should say if anything I'm very much, I'm very hopeful. I'm very excited because . . . I don't think I've ever been this close to . . . being part of making the vision come true. . . . And so I'm, you know, it's one of those things where — what do you call it? It's like, we're going to walk the walk essentially, and I'm scared.

Indeed, it seemed that the conditions were so right for meeting her vision that a very real, but particularly unsettling possibility had emerged. What if Kelly and her colleagues taught in a way that is consistent with the vision, but the students did not achieve in a way that Kelly envisioned, or worse, in a way that they needed in order to be successful in life? For while the stakes for Kelly were high, with the potential for failure as a teacher, she recognized — and feared — that the stakes for her students were even higher. Failure for her would be depressing and dispiriting, but for her students it could alter or even suppress opportunities for lifetime success. Thus, while Kelly and her colleagues pursued their vision, they did so in constant awareness of the statewide context, the requirements of which were very likely contradictory to the kinds of efforts they were making in their school but which at the same time had very serious consequences for her students.

Some recent research on teachers' responses to state and district level policies have focused upon how they make 'sense' of these policies, examining how teachers interpret, manage, and negotiate the meanings of different reform initiatives (e.g., Coburn, 2001; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002) Yet it seems that for Kelly, the state policies do not prompt as benign a response as "sense-making." The state policies intrude upon practice, and lead her to unsettling concerns, fears and doubts. The dramatic opposition between her vision and that of the state leads her to questions about her vision, the abilities of her students, as well as her own ability to teach.

#### Shifting Curriculum

By May of that academic year (1997-1998), when I spoke with Kelly again, her concerns about testing had mounted. The Hilltop students were right in the midst of taking pilot MCAS tests along with some other students in the city. Though she identified many "flaws" in the tests, Kelly appreciated that a poor performance could have a dramatic impact on her students' futures. She explained that such tests were forcing her to re-think the means to her vision and, in particular, to concentrate more upon the content of science rather than the process:

In terms of my concerns, I've been actually very concerned about substance. And it's leading me to sort of rethink a little bit . . . Not so much that I question the sort of relevance and perspective [of my vision] and even thematic units, but I sense even more so I guess the urgency that . . . in order for these students to go on to college and compete on an equal playing ground as can possibly be, we have to . . . look at content at lot more closely than I ever have before.

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Kelly worried that recent critiques of reforming schools might apply to her own students; "Much of the criticism I've heard of reform[ing] schools like Hilltop is that when they get to college [people say that] 'These students are very good in thinking, they're very good in group work, but they are missing the content' and so that handicaps them."

Research has found that teachers have quite dramatically changed their practice in light of statewide testing. These studies reveal that teachers tend to give more attention to the content of the tests in their daily lessons (McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 1999) and that teachers are also de-emphasizing content not on the test (Jones et al., 1999; Koretz, Barron, Mitchell, & Steecher, 1996). Abrams, Padilla and Madaus (2003), who surveyed over four thousand teachers from what they termed "high stakes" and "low stakes" states, found that a substantial number of teachers in both testing programs reported that their statewide testing program had led them to teach in ways that run counter to their own beliefs about good educational practices.

Yet Kelly chose not to dramatically alter her curriculum in light of the tests. She remained faithful to her vision of powerful educational experiences for her students by seeking an appropriate balance between state-required content and process in her curriculum that would still allow her to remain faithful to her vision;

My vision is not altered . . . I don't think I'm going to spend more time lecturing and memorizing and giving tests or anything like that. I don't envision it like that. I still envision . . . finding ways to do labs, to do projects to help build that into their understanding. So I think my vision is . . . not altered, it's just perhaps I need to be more precise in structuring my class.

Kelly revised her curriculum to enable her students to learn more of the content of the tests, but she felt strongly that she would not "alter" her vision. In the face of this pressure-cooker of personal, collegial, school, state and even nationwide stakes, Kelly and her colleagues displayed remarkable courage and faith. They pursued their vision, hopeful that they were doing the right thing. They tried to reasonably adjust their efforts to account for their concerns.

### Shaping Her Learning

Despite her persistence, Kelly's fears and doubts foreshadowed what could happen if she discovered her vision was not successful, and that her students did not seem to be learning better; understanding concepts more deeply, or becoming independent thinkers. This fear prefigured an even worse potential outcome of Kelly's "wormhole": Kelly might see that her dreams were unrealistic and that neither she nor her students were capable of attaining them. In fact, other teachers in this study did learn to doubt their students, their own teaching and even the possibilities for the schools and the communities in which they taught (Hammerness, 2003).

While Kelly at times questioned her vision, she never doubted her students'

potential. At times, she worried that she was projecting her own wishes and desires upon them. Echoing concerns raised by Delpit (1988), Kelly wondered whether her vision reflected the educational experiences she herself would have loved to experience, but perhaps not those which were appropriate for her students. She remarked:

This is the kind of classroom I would enjoy right now... [But] maybe my manifestation is different than what these students... maybe it's too limiting for these students. Maybe I should be thinking of more things, more ways that they would — or I should say different scenarios in which they would become actualized learners.

What Kelly does learn is that while she can have doubts, concerns, and questions, her dreams remain possible. She also learns to maintain faith in the vision that she holds with her colleagues. She learns how to reflect upon her personal ideals in light of state standards and tests, and she learns that she can make reasonable adjustments to her curriculum and still remain comfortable that she is not altering her vision. She learns that her students can achieve in ways that may not be measured by standardized tests. However, if Kelly had not the strength of purpose, clarity of focus, collegial support, and complementary school context that made her persistence possible, she might have questioned the abilities of her colleagues, herself, and her students (as some others in this study did). She might have come to learn that what she dreamed was not possible — for herself, her students or her school.

#### Staying the Course

By Kelly's third and fourth years at Hilltop, she had begun to enjoy more success, though not without continuing questions and doubts. When I interviewed her after her third year, in the summer of 2000, she noted, "This year, I felt closer than ever. I really feel optimistic." Kelly felt that she had developed some curriculum that really reflected her vision's emphasis upon independent thinking. She noted that she had "come a lot closer to the vision," and had developed a project in which students investigated the quality of water in their city. The project was intended to help her students understand the relevance of science to their community, to hone their inquiry skills, to practice independent investigation, and to develop more experience in "quantitative science." At the end of their investigation, students presented the findings to an audience of parents, teachers, and other community members. Kelly said she felt convinced about the quality and nature of their learning, and was extremely pleased with the passion and engagement they had displayed.

#### Pressing for More

But Kelly was not entirely satisfied with the work she and her students had done; she continued to push her own expectations (and those she held of her students). While she felt thrilled in some ways with their progress, she still believed that some of the students' work was not quite of the quality she envisioned. She felt she might do a better job helping them develop their presentation skills in order to

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share scientific data with an audience. Kelly explained that when her students had trouble meeting her expectations, she “tended to look at my teaching” rather than feel that her vision was not appropriate for them. She continues to examine her practice in light of those ideals, constantly identifying ways in which she and her students can improve their work.

Yet the high standards she held for her students still represented significant conflict with those endorsed by the state standards. Having scrutinized the test, for example, she noted that it focused upon “random concepts” that ran in complete contradiction to the ways in which she was trying to help her students appreciate the field of science.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Kelly was engaging her students in what seemed to be a quite sophisticated rendering of a scientific experience — identifying a problem that was authentic in their community concerning the nature of their water, gathering data, developing hypotheses, evaluating the data, testing hypotheses, representing the data through graphs and other visuals, and finally sharing the data with a real audience and answering unanticipated questions from real people. Yet the MCAS test did not assess any of that scientific understanding. Adding to the pressure was the unfortunate but not surprising fact that over the past three years, her students had done quite poorly in comparison to state averages, on the pilot exams. Kelly also felt that the stakes were even higher because her ninth graders (the class of 2004) now had to pass the test to advance to the tenth grade. Kelly felt increasing tension between the accomplishment of her students and what the state was expecting. She also noted that while she and her colleagues were trying to maintain their focus and their commitment working within this climate of accountability was extremely stressful.

Kelly reflected that she was able to acknowledge the importance of the tests but still stay the course. She maintained confidence that, as she said, “we are doing the best we can.” She remained certain that her students were developing powerful scientific understandings in her courses, and she was able to conclude that while she would try to address some of the content knowledge assessed by the tests, “I’m not going to teach to [the tests].” She said with some assurance, “I know what we are teaching them is strong.” She also acknowledged that it is “very important” to work on her students’ skills and emphasized, “I recognize — am aware — that at least for this population I teach, I have to make sure that they have the skills down.” However, Kelly remains discomfited, hoping she is making the right choices; faithful, but never entirely sure.

## Implications and Conclusions

What does this story tell us about helping teachers hold on to their passions? Kelly’s experience demonstrates the complexity of a teacher’s experience as she attempts to negotiate the apparent conflict between standardized testing and her own vision. Her confidence is shaken, and her learning and her curriculum are in



some ways re-shaped and shifted. But ultimately, she does not succumb — she stays the course. Her experience illuminates at least three potential opportunities for teacher preparation in supporting teachers as they navigate the rocky terrain between vision and reality: Teacher educators can support new teachers in dealing with the gap between their ideals and their daily work; in developing clear and focused visions; and finally, in identifying supportive contexts that complement their visions of powerful teaching.

#### Facing Gaps and Conflicts

First, asking student-teachers to articulate their visions may provide the grounds for careful exploration of the potential gap between vision and reality that so often “shocks” new teachers (Veenman, 1984). Teacher educators can help prospective teachers by comparing state curriculum standards and tests to their ideals, as well as to any curriculum plans they have developed. Such conversations may not only shed light upon any unexamined discrepancies, conflicts, or mismatches, but could also help them strategize how to deal with them. Teacher educators can help their students to consider ways to both adhere to their teaching visions and prepare students to succeed on the tests, and thinking about what that would look like, what the consequences are for the teacher and the students. Ultimately, when teachers like Kelly do choose to ‘teach against the grain’ (Cochran-Smith, 1991), they might be able to feel even better supported in their choices, as well as recognize that they have fully explored and come to terms with the consequences.

#### Developing a Focused and Clear Vision

Kelly’s experience also reveals that the clarity of her vision is particularly important in enabling her to stay the course. Kelly’s vision encompasses not only what she hopes students will engage with and also how they will accomplish it: she has a clear sense of the pedagogical approaches, roles, and materials that embody her ideals. She knows what role she needs to play as a teacher and what role her students must play. She has a strong grasp of the content that she feels is critical to learn in her field. And ultimately, because she can imagine her aims and goals with some elaborateness and richness, she is able to appropriately measure her students’ progress — and in turn, can tune her curriculum and practice appropriately.

Not all student teachers or novice teachers may enter teaching with such clear visions, but teacher educators can help their students develop clear visions. They could support student teachers in fully articulating, honing, and elaborating their visions so that they are vivid and concrete, and in more readily identifying school contexts that may complement their ideals.

#### Seeking Complementary Contexts

Finally, Kelly’s experience demonstrates the importance of teaching in a

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school that fits with one's vision. While the clarity of her vision is certainly important in helping her stay the course, the fact that her colleagues share her vision — and that the school does as well — provides a buffer from the pressure and demands of testing.

Yet while Kelly sought a school that would provide a good match between school and personal vision, not all novice teachers do so. Nor do they necessarily know how to evaluate a school or how to recognize "signs" of a good match or a possible mismatch. Teacher educators can support new teachers in actively seeking contexts in which to teach for their novice years that provide a good fit with their visions.

Kelly's struggles, successes, and steady work to maintain her ideals reveals not only the complexity of one teacher's experiences in this era of accountability, but it also illuminates some of the ways that vision might be developed, nurtured and sustained in novice teachers. With a deeper appreciation of how teachers like Kelly hold to their passions and commitments in the face of significant pressure, we can perhaps better assure ourselves that other new teachers will be able to maintain their visions even in the most trying conditions.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This case is drawn in part from a chapter in a book about teachers' vision, *Seeing through teachers' eyes: The role of vision in teachers' lives and work* (working title), forthcoming from Teachers College Press.

<sup>2</sup> In order to maintain her anonymity, "Kelly" is a pseudonym, as are the names of her schools.

<sup>3</sup> The MCAS science test for 1998 required students to be familiar with "Inquiry" along with three "Domains of Science" (which are listed as "Physical Sciences"; "Life Sciences"; "Earth and Space Sciences"); Technology, and "Science, Technology and Human Affairs." (Source: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/1998/release/1.pdf>). Specific test items can be found and downloaded from this website address.

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