The Many Hats of a Teacher

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Preface
One of my favorite Dr. Seuss books is The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins. In the story, the little boy Bartholomew tries repeatedly to remove his hat while in the presence of royalty. Unfortunately for our hero, each time he reaches up and removes one hat another appears to replace it.

This delightful tale got me thinking about the many hats, or professions, that people wear in their day-to-day activities. I began to jot down some of the “hats” that are inherent in the occupation of middle school teacher and was amazed to find the list becoming awkwardly lengthy and cumbersome, requiring more than just the front and back of my original napkin at the restaurant.
Figure 1: The Many Hats of a Teacher

Egad! Surely a middle school teacher isn’t responsible for all of these hats at any given moment, I had tried to rationalize. But upon attempting a rather unsuccessful paring down of the list it became obvious that the profession
was indeed on the order of Master Cubbin’s predicament.

This list was constructed with the middle school teaching experience in mind, but it certainly encompasses all levels of teaching, from pre-k through university levels. As you will find, some hats will be worn more often in elementary schools than in high schools, and vice versa. This is not to say that this list is comprehensive by any means. If anything, it is merely the tip of the iceberg, or perhaps more appropriately, the tip of the feathered cap. If you find the need to add the individual “hats” of astronaut, rodeo clown, lion tamer, or many, many other professions, feel free to write in the margins...

Figure 2: The author with a few of the hats he literally wears in his classroom

-A-

Accountant
Two dollars to buy a lock for the locker
+ Four dollars to pay for the field trip to the zoo
+ Fifty cents to pay for the popcorn on Friday afternoons
x Twenty five kids in your advisory/homeroom
= One monetary headache if not recorded, triple receipted and recounted ad infinitum.

Whoever said that one would never use math much like the rapid-fire multiplication drills we had in elementary school was incorrect. You know the drills – where the faster you could recite the product-answer the faster you were rewarded with an even more difficult set of problems. As Middle School Teachers (hereafter referred to as “teachers,” or “Emperors”), the fact that we survive when the popcorn announcement is made and we suddenly have twenty-five students with one dollar bills, five dollar bills, fifty dollar bills (where would they get a fifty from anyway?) swarming our desk, asking for change and demanding receipts to show the popcorn-lady, is an amazing feat in itself.

**Actor**

If all the world is supposedly a stage, and the general populace are the players, what are the teachers? Are we the directors, perhaps, or maybe the stagehands, or the key grip (and what is a key grip)?

What if it could be said that we are the greatest of all actors, performing the roles of our lives, hoping beyond hope that those of our student-filled academy would deign to award us with an Oscar? Imagine putting on a show for five individual classes of Oklahoma History students. Each class must cover the same material; that could be, for instance, five recitations of the Trail of Tears. In each class, the teacher must say almost the exact same lines, or else unknowingly forfeit one class’s potential A+ on the end of the unit exam because the teacher inadvertently dropped the line about Andrew Jackson’s refusal to acknowledge the Supreme Court.

Poitier, Hopkins, Schwarzenegger, and the other ... greats ... had to know their lines as well.

And what was their yearly-gross-to-date on their check?
Advocate
Although a teacher can certainly be an advocate for a lot of political entities (e.g., Greenpeace, the Republican Party, PETA, etc.), it falls on the teacher to be an advocate for a group of people that rarely have a voice in matters: the students.

Indeed, if a teacher isn’t willing to go to bat for his students on the issue of why-do-we-have-pizza-on-every-Friday, what are the students learning about leadership, guidance, and direction? Yes, that is silly, but pizza on the last day of the week is quite a big deal.

Perhaps it falls on the teacher to be the child’s advocate when there is not such a good home life. Does the child want to stay after school so he can finish his work, or is it because he doesn’t want to be alone in his neighborhood until the parents get home at six o’clock? Being an adult who supports the students may be one of the bigger hats that teachers wear.

Architect
Being an architect can mean drawing up the plans to a complicated sports arena complete with five large meeting halls, with 42 stalls each in the 8 restrooms placed strategically around the center.

But have you sketched out a plan that involved 120 students, 30 Bunsen burners, 60 Petri dishes and several liters of hydrochloric acid, recently? Do you know where everything goes and where everyone should be standing at any given moment? No?

Planning, planning, planning, oh, and planning.

Attorney
“No, you can’t sue Darryl because he looked at you cross-eyed.”

“Yes, as a teacher I can look in your locker without probable cause because you have no reasonable expectation of privacy.”
“No, gang colors are not allowed because they are disruptive to the learning process.”

“Yes, you can have a Bible study group at lunch if you want.”

“No, I can't make you say the Pledge of Allegiance, but I will ask you to stand while everyone else does.”

“Yes, I have to have your parent’s real signature on the field trip medical release form.”

Is there anything more to say about this particular “hat” that teachers wear?

Author
It was a dark and stormy afternoon ...

She had been left in the classroom alone with twenty little children, all chanting the most horrifying words that a single teacher faced with a group of children who are not able to go outside because of the weather could ever hear – “Free time ... free time ... free time.”

A wolf howled in the distance.

Okay, so maybe teachers don’t write stories on a day-to-day basis, but sometimes they are placed in a situation in which they must come up with an original idea that will be sure to entertain the masses for the final ten minutes in class which shouldn’t have been empty, but the guest speaker couldn’t make it due to an unfortunate case of “What do you mean this Tuesday?”

As a teacher who is put into a situation in which an original story must be told or chaos will grab hold of the classroom and shake it to pieces, here are a few suggestions: snot is really popular as a subject; there can not be enough references to the latest music group; and, most importantly, it must be grounded in a hint of reality (e.g., “I saw this on PBS (or MTV)”).
Bailiff
The Bailiff has a most wonderful job in the courtroom: he calls the court to order when the Judge comes through the door; he gets to swear in the individual witnesses when they approach the stand; and occasionally they get to place stickers on pieces of evidence, indicating which bloody knife belongs to which prosecutorial witness. Oh, and most importantly, the bailiff must be able to produce a menacing scowl at any moment.

A teacher naturally falls into each of these roles: calling the class to order is a natural process in the classroom (although rarely shouting “Oyez, Oyez, the Great and Powerful Oz is now presiding”); calling on each student to answer the question to one of last night’s homework problems (and there is a lot of “swearing” at this point, although it doesn’t emanate from the teacher); getting to place happy face stickers on 100% papers; and identifying those students’ papers that have come equipped with all of the true/false blanks filled in but yet lack the easiest answer of them all at the very top corner of the paper – “name:______________.”

The proper scowl at the proper time doesn’t hurt, either.

Bard
There once was a teacher who told stories through song
And trying to rhyme them made them absolutely too long.
But the students didn’t seem to mind
They were in fact almost too kind
Because when he was singing they weren’t doing their assignments wrong.

Beggar
Although “beggar/panhandler” may eventually become synonymous with “middle school teacher” if salaries do not climb, it is a much different type of begging to which is being referred.
An example: “Johnny, please, please, please see to it that your mom gets this note. I am going to staple it to your eyebrow so please do not remove it. It is very important.”

Or, “Suzie, please, please, please quit talking about how big Karen’s mommy is. It is not appropriate behavior for you to do so, and besides, she is just big-boned.”

And finally, “Travis, please, please, please come down from there. Basketball goals were not meant to be climbed upon ... yes, I know that you can touch the net, but try to impress me by getting down without breaking anything.”

**Binder**
A binder is a person whose job is to put the backing on a book in such a way that the individual pages, say, the whole chapter of learning to divide by fractions, does not fall out.

Note to self: remind students not to throw their backpacks in their lockers helter-skelter without telling them how much it will cost them to repair the spines of our new social studies books.

Duct tape is a most amazing piece of technology. It not only fixes the spines of de-bounded math books, but science, social studies, and reading books as well.

Towards the end of that sixth year using the same book, I know that teachers can get pretty creative in keeping their texts whole ... including but not limited to putting on their hats of “beggar,” “emergency management specialist,” “parole officer,” etc.

**Bus Driver**
You in the back, sit down!

In a small town school, it is almost a requirement to get a bus driver's license because there are just not enough people to take your sixth grade students to
the zoo while the seventh grade students are going to the park, and the eighth grade students are going to the county jail (and some are even coming back).

Here is the rule about going in reverse in a school bus:

Don’t.

Always park so that you NEVER have to back up a school bus. Is it a coincidence that all schools have those circular driveways in the front to drop off and pick up students? No. There is a reason for that: bus drivers do NOT back up.

The best thing about wearing the bus driver “hat” on your own field trips is that you always know where the bus driver parked the bus. This is a most important thing when you have a group of thirty students all clamoring to go home and the only vestige of human civilization is a Dairy Queen three-quarters of a mile down the road from the baseball field.

- C -

**Career Counselor**

When you grow up, you can be anything you want to be, but if you DO happen to become a geriatrics expert majoring in psychoses experienced by professionals who have given their life to the cause for thirty years and have diddley to show for it, well, hey, all the better.

How many times have you heard it said that, “You don’t want to grow up to be the Wal-Mart greeter, do you?”

Are you kidding? That job must rock! You get to meet people all day long and entertain kids with balloons - now that is the life.

Now how many times have you heard it said, “You are a Middle School Teacher? Why in the world would you ever want to do that?”
So, should we as teachers really be the ones giving advice about others’ careers?

**Carpenter**
The lights flash on and off, then turn dim.

The curtain comes up.

The spotlight comes on.

“Ladies and Gentleman, please refrain from taking flash pictures during tonight’s show. Also, we ask that you please turn off any electronic devices. Now, we would like to welcome you to tonight’s performance of Oklahoma!”

Of course Aunt Eller’s house didn’t just appear by magic when the choral director decided on this year’s musical. Somebody had to build it.

Warning! Warning! Warning! Getting involved with the creation of a musical’s set can be hazardous to your health, home life, and other hobbies you may enjoy for the next two months.

**Cheerleader**
Give me a “J” ... give me an “E” ... give me a “T” ... give me an “S” ... what’s that spell?

Now as teachers, we not only have the ability, but perhaps also the responsibility to help the audience out with the tougher cheerleader cryptograms. In fact, it falls upon us to root, root, root for the home team, no matter how much the scoring differential is between our team and the state champions from the past five years; we cheer.

And not only at sports games do teachers don the mantle of cheerleader. In a much more subdued atmosphere, teachers cheerlead when their student gets his hard earned “B+” on the semester test. Teachers cheerlead when the
young girl on crutches has to walk from the end of the hall all the way to the cafeteria. Teachers cheerlead the “Bluebirds Group” to come up with a solution to the difficult question posed on the blackboard.

The students really love it when they are all chanting in the gym their graduation year’s numbers and you jump in and chant your graduation year... eighty-nine, eighty-nine, eighty, eighty, eighty-nine. (Yes, I realize that some of you may have graduation years that are perhaps a little earlier or later than mine, but the 6th graders can’t differentiate between your graduating year and mine.)

**Chef**

During the unit where a little bit of Russian history is introduced, break out the caviar and crackers. Only the really brave ones at the middle school will try it. Speaking of brave, the bravest man in the world is the guy who first looked at a raw oyster and said to himself, ‘I wonder how that will taste.’

Putting on the chef “hat”, both figuratively and literally, is an excellent way to engage the more tactile students. Besides, why should the Consumer Science teacher get all the fun? Be wary of cooking in the classroom, however, because the wonderful smell of grilled anything is no longer a wonderful smell after the third day that the odor has refused to leave.

**Coach**

Yes, there are certainly hats we wear as coaches on the sports field, but there are other coaches as well. Teachers put on their coach hats when they attempt to teach Johnny how to sand wood. The hats are put on when Suzie needs to open her locker but just can’t get the hang of “clockwise, counterclockwise, clockwise.” The hats are put on when Darryl believes that the best thing to do with his otherwise uncooperative shoelaces is to turn them into a weapon of mass destruction.

Although it is sexist, one of the perks of the job, according to some guy teachers, is that even if you are a guy teacher who doesn’t happen to know the difference between man-to-man and zone defense because - well, there
shouldn’t be a guy who doesn’t know that - you still get to be called “coach” by the majority of the student body.

You just don’t get the stipend.

**Computer Expert**
We just converted from NT to 2000 because the server wasn’t responding to the XML metatags produced from our Flash MX; probably because we were only running on a 2.4 gigabyte fiber-optic with our 1040 RAM. Sometimes you just need more power, you know what I mean?

If you don’t know, that is okay, but be prepared to learn. As educators, the computer is sitting there on our desk just staring at us, begging us to turn it on and use it to its fullest capacity ... that is, more than being the attendance machine. As human beings who are fallible and easily fall into a set routine, that attendance machine can be intimidating. Fortunately middle school teachers are NOT human beings and therefore fall outside the laws of fallibility. The attendance machine is much more – it can also keep grades!

But fear not, true believers, for the computer age is upon us, and it will gradually become integrated into every classroom until there are no more textbooks, no more papers in the grade basket, and the only legitimate excuse will be having a city-wide blackout the night before the research paper is due.

Don’t worry.

Teachers will never be replaced.

Computers can’t wear hats.

**Concierge**
The hotel concierge is just full of wonderfully useful information. Examples abound:
“Excuse me, could you tell me which restaurant serves the best oysters on the half-shell?”

“Where is the nearest Outlet Mall?”

“How much would it cost to take a taxi over to the theatre?”

Now consider the following questions to a Reading teacher wearing the concierge hat:

“Hey, what are they serving in the sandwich line today?”

“Where is the nearest water fountain that has super-cold water?”

“How much do you think it will cost to take this huge dent out of my friend's trumpet and can YOU do it before seventh hour?” (Remember, this is the Reading teacher we are asking.)

- D -

**Data Entry Processor**

Let’s do the math.

If an 8th grade Algebra teacher has five classes throughout the day, each having 25 students, and each meeting all five days of the week, and the school year is 36 weeks long, and this particular algebra teacher has a penchant for giving a three question quiz at the beginning of the hour for each class to determine how well the students learned the previous day’s lesson, how many papers does this teacher grade in the year?

5 times 25 times 5 times 36 is equal to ... 22,500 papers.

Now obviously giving a quiz every day is almost impossible, so let’s reduce that by .. half. That still leaves us with approximately 11,000 quizzes to grade in the year. Should we throw in the chapter tests given once a fortnight, and
the regular homework assignments given on an almost daily basis? Now the number climbs back up to 20,000.

As teachers, we can stand in unanimous support of the recent Supreme Court ruling that indicated students doing each other’s daily paper grading was not a violation of FERPA. Yay!

However, where do these 20,000 grades go? At some point, they either go into the hard copy grade book, or else they are ten-keyed into the computer.... 20,000 entries ... one teacher ... one year ...

**Dental Assistant**

No, this “hat” is not responsible for recommending what 4 out of 5 dentists think is the best toothpaste, although teachers have been known to give a few words of advice on oral hygiene.

Nor is it responsible for bringing out information about the students eating habits, i.e., candy bars and cokes everyday for lunch. However, teachers have also been known to impart a few words of wisdom in this general area.

Indeed, this hat is not unique to middle school teachers; it is shared with elementary teachers who arguably get to wear it more often and with more gaiety.

The situation: “Um, Mr. Cyan, I have a problem.” The student looks up in trepidation as his outstretched hand holds what appears to be a rather nasty science experiment gone horribly wrong, or else a tooth that has recently jumped ship.

Now in elementary school it is a joyous occasion, celebrated by the class which candidly admonishes the proud owner of the detached tooth not to stay up all night for fear that the Tooth Fairy will not make her rounds in a timely matter.

However, in middle school, a lost tooth can take on a whole new set of issues: what to do with the tooth that was knocked out when Jimmy got into a fight
with Billy, and more importantly, what to do about Jimmy. The answers range far and wide, but a bag of ice for the tooth, a bag of ice for Jimmy’s face, a bag of ice for Billy’s hand, and a phone call to mom pretty much handles it.

**Desktop Publisher**
The great thing about using the computer’s myriad of Microsoft’s Office-esque software is that no matter how many hours one sits in front of the computer, no matter how many pull-down windows one selects, no matter how many hotkeys are available, the students always have a better grasp of working on the machine. This certainly goes for desktop publishing.

A PowerPoint presentation, built painstakingly over the last two weeks that quickly summarizes the decline and fall of the Roman Empire can easily be reverse engineered by the students; they adeptly tear it apart and put it back together in ways that are unfathomable.

Much better, but unfathomable.

Yearbooks, Newspapers, and Letterheads, oh my!

**Detective**
It was still a dark and stormy afternoon. The winds were howling and the lights were flickering, but Ms. Green didn’t care. Her 27 middle school students could handle the difficult weather raging just outside their door.

And then the lights went out.

A scream.

A scuffle.

A loose tooth clacked against the floor.
The lights came back on and Ms. Green was surprised to see each and every one of her students sitting in his or her desk, hands folded on top, each student with a smile on his or her face.

Something was wrong, horribly, inextricably wrong.

She glanced around the room looking for clues, when she finally found what she was looking for - someone had stolen the casing to the pencil sharpener.

“All right,” she began. “Will the criminal fess up or are we going to have to do it the hard way.”

Silence.

The tooth just lay there.

Indeed, although teaching middle school may not be as dramatic as this (in fact, it is much MORE dramatic), the detective hat (a fedora?) is one that every teacher must don from time to time. Money lifted from another’s jacket, graffiti in the girls’ bathroom, or a broken oboe reed all have one very important thing in common.

No one did it.

That is incorrect, for there are two things in common.

No one saw who did it either...

All the more reason for Colombo to hang up his hat. But since a teacher can not do that, Ms. Green has to ask herself one simple question: “What would Nancy Drew, Jupiter Jones, the Hardy Boys, and Encyclopedia Brown do in this situation?”

**Doctor**

The hat of the doctor also comes with matching scarves, for there are many aspects of this profession in which middle school teachers are expected to be
proficient: neurosurgery; eye, nose, and throat infections; broken bones; intestinal problems; bladder issues; anesthesiology; general practice; and exotic diseases.

The scarf that is most worn is red, indicating emergency medicine. This ranges from scraped knees from the playground to bruises from killer dodgeball to broken arms in softball practice. A teacher is there to make the diagnosis and gives treatment on the spot.

Treatments also have a wide range. Perhaps the most effective is telling the student to, “walk it off,” like our football coach said back in the day. But boo-boos can be kissed (again, not generally at the middle school level, but highly effective at the elementary schools), broken arms can be splinted (as long as they can throw accurately with their other arm, keep ‘em in the game, right?), and the bloody nose can be tilted back.

However, teachers everywhere are always stumped when it comes down to the most exotic of all ailments that strike students – the tummy ache. It is a very strange disease as it is time-stamped – it mysteriously appears right before a test in social studies and then disappears equally as fast during the party in the science room.

It baffles teachers to this day, giving us starts and fits, indigestion and headaches, back pain and a low throbbing in the left arm.

Maybe teachers should just walk it off.

Read more of The Many Hats of a Teacher: E - G H - L M - Q R - Z
Return to The Many Hats of a Teacher: A - D

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