On Being a Hedgehog

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...it was very provoking to find that the hedgehog had unrolled itself,
and was in the act of crawling away.

—Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

The inservice begins as they almost always do—with a transparency on the overhead projector. "Can anyone tell me what well-known expression this represents?" the speaker chirps.

We see an irregularly-shaped round object with what appear to be four chicken feet protruding from its edges. Nothing coherent emerges from the muttering among the audience members, so she announces, "It's 'killing two birds with one stone.'"

She pauses for the expected murmurs of appreciation, then continues, "Today we're here to show you how curriculum mapping can do just that for you in your classrooms. Now what do you think those two birds are?"

While we mutter again for a few seconds, she switches off the overhead and replaces her transparency with a new one. "No guesses? Okay, here they are ..."

She switches on the projector, and we see the stone is now labeled "curriculum mapping" and has been moved to the edge of the picture, revealing two flattened birds with Xs for eyes. On the breast of one of the hapless creatures is written "accountability" and on the other "student learning."

I look around to see if anyone else is as stunned as I am by this most unfortunate of metaphors, but I see only the dull, glazed eyes of a roomful of public school teachers for whom curriculum mapping is just the latest in a career-long list of sure cures for what ails education in our state. So I don't raise my hand and say, "Excuse me. We're here to learn how to kill student learning? Are you sure that's what the state department wants us to do?"

Instead I fold my arms, grieve in silence for the death of student learning, and wish once again that I were more like one of my heroes from literature, Lewis Carroll's Alice. Alice knows what to do in the face of nonsense. Instead of cowering under the threat of impending beheading, Alice stills the swirling insanity of the Queen of Hearts' croquet game with a single word.

"Nonsense," said Alice, very loudly and decidedly, and the Queen was silent.

But I'm no Alice. You know me. There's at least one of me in every school. I chair my department, teach the honors classes, and have the principal's unbounded trust. I
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sponsor the yearbook, the newspaper, and the Junior Beta club. I go to workshops that aren't required, show up to cheer on the football, volleyball, and quiz bowl teams, and still get my grades turned in on time. The word committee is inexorably linked with my name—textbook adoption, school improvement plan, accreditation self-study—each has its own file on my desk. I write grants and answer emails from former students. I bring homemade offerings on Secretary's Day and keep my room clean enough to please the custodians.

I'm the quintessential "good girl" who grew up to be the "good teacher"... until that second dead bird, accountability, landed in my classroom. I was warned about it, it scared me, but I didn't even know what it looked like, and none of the information I got about it makes any sense. The word used to mean something, but now it might as well be "jabberwocky."

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jabjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch..."

"It seems very pretty," she said when she had finished it, "but it's rather hard to understand!" (You see she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are! However, somebody killed something: that's clear at any rate."

—Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There

The first year of the state's accountability program—composed mainly of the imposition of high stakes tests at grades four, eight, and ten and accompanied by vague threats of dire consequences if scores on those tests weren't high enough—was not so bad. There were lots of meetings, lots of copies of standards documents, lots of reminders of the all-important dates in March when the tests would be given. My students took the tests, they passed the tests, and life went on pretty much as usual.

But that summer, the test results were published in the newspapers. In my local paper, scores from each school in the district were compared in graphs and charts and narrative. No one was happy. Schools at the bottom, obviously, felt belittled. Schools in the middle, like middle children in a family, felt overlooked and ignored. Even schools at the top felt nervous; they had nowhere to go but down.

Year two of the plan began with noticeably more tension in the air at my school and throughout the district.

Beginning-of-school faculty meetings are always an onslaught of new rules, regulations, requirements, and procedures. I had been teaching for fourteen years by then, and I was still waiting for a beginning-of-school faculty meeting agenda to include a list, or even a single item, of nonteaching baggage that we no longer have to carry.

That year's list of new to-dos was remarkable for its length and complexity even excluding the information about the state test. In addition to mandates for career awareness, bus safety, and character education, the district chipped in its demands for drug resistance and violence prevention education and a collection of policies, forms, and letters to inaugurate a new get-tough attendance plan.

Shoulders were already sagging and teachers' eyes were telegraphing despair when our assistant principal rose to add his bricks to our load. He gave us folders filled with charts and checklists, and for the next hour and a half, he paced and talked, punching the air with the finger of one hand while waving forms at us with the other. Documentation was his word of the day; and when he wasn't using it, he spoke in acronyms.

If our SPS (school performance score) was too low, the DAT (district assistance team) would descend on us, but we weren't to worry. He'd written our PGP's (professional growth plans) for us, and the SPI's (student performance indicators) they detailed were just what we needed for CYA (no translation given) purposes.

Even if he had used whole words instead of initials, there wasn't much sense to be made in what he said that day. Someone needed to stand up and shout, "Nonsense!" But no one did. We slumped lower in our seats, propped our heads on our hands, and took it all in.

By the time he was done, we had two new forms to be filled in for each of our students and a list of four items that were to be included and highlighted in our lesson plans for each day.

Students arrived the next day, and the school year started with all the usual chaos, paperwork, and sore feet. By the end of the second week, schedule changes and intercom announcements had diminished, and it was time to begin making lesson plans and keeping up with the newly required documentation. As directed, I charted my students' scores on the previous year's standardized test, a multiple-choice, norm-referenced test. My orders were to address their three weakest areas each week, highlighting this effort in my lesson plans. The results of my charting were confusing at best. My students' three weakest areas were vocabulary, outlining, and the Dewey Decimal System—one of
which would be assessed on the constructed response, criterion-referenced test they would take that year. This would be the first of many conflicts between my good-teacher tendency toward obedience and my common sense and professional judgment. I decided to quietly ignore this particular directive in the hope that, with so many other requirements, the absence of this one would go unnoticed. It did, and my subversion had begun.

I chose to focus my efforts on the only part of the new documentation requirements that made any sense to me—addressing the content standards in each day’s lesson plans. Colleagues from my local site of the National Writing Project had participated in the writing of our state’s standards for language arts; they weren’t nonsense. They looked like what I wanted students to do in my classroom—use the writing process, respond to a wide variety of literature, analyze and evaluate sources for research. My usual beginning-of-a-new-year fervor had been nearly flattened under the fallout from the first faculty meeting, but I managed to find it at the bottom of the pile of new paperwork, plump it up, and make my annual new-school-year’s resolution: I will actually write daily lesson plans instead of doodling on Post-its or in the margins of whatever young-adult or professional book has inspired a new teaching idea.

It had quickly become obvious to many on the faculty that the three-inch square in the standard issue lesson plan books could not begin to accommodate all the new directives, so a committee had been formed (I served on it, of course) to design a new lesson plan format. We settled on a two-page model with one page devoted to the list of state standards and benchmarks in a checklist format. The page of benchmarks would face a page for writing daily plans in a binder. The lesson plan page contained boxes for each day labeled with the usual Madeline Hunter (goddess of lesson plans) components of a lesson cycle—focus, instruction, guided practice, independent practice, closure—because the official teacher evaluation form for our district is still keyed to that model.

Madeline Hunter’s magic words, as it turns out, hadn’t, for a long time and on most days, really fit the activities in my classroom. Nor did they really describe what went on in the science teachers’ hands-on, experiment-based classes, or the math teachers’ classes where they used manipulatives and emphasized problem-solving over calculations. But that didn’t worry us. Our administrators had been well-trained in the Madeline Hunter model . . . so well-trained that they could spot us using elements of her lesson cycle when we ourselves didn’t know we were doing it. I had more than one glowingly positive evaluation report in my personnel folder that gave me high scores for my closure even though the observer had left long before the end of the lesson. I even had an observation report with me named as the “evaluete” that had been done on a day when a guest speaker from the central office had been doing a mandatory career awareness presentation to my class for the whole period. I don’t know which parts of her talk had earned me such high ratings for guided and independent practice in that day’s lesson because it had all looked to me like her talking while the kids sat passively in their seats.

After a few revisions and numerous reductions in the sizes of margins and font, our new lesson plan forms were approved. They included all the layers of fossilized mandates from bygone eras plus the new signposts in the landscape of accountability. They were made available to all teachers on paper or computer disk along with extra copies of the list of things that had to be highlighted. A new binder, fresh highlighters, and stronger reading glasses completed my tool kit, and I was ready to maintain my resolve to write suitably accountable lesson plans.

Each week, I wracked my brain and scoured my files and professional library for reading and writing activities to address the benchmarks. Two or three of the activities each day never seemed like enough with that intimidating list of tiny type looming over the blank spaces of my lesson plan page. I started pushing myself and my students to do more and more in each class period. By Wednesday of each week, my plans were already obliterated by arrows, scratch-outs, and notes as I moved activities we hadn’t gotten to down the page, turned class activities into homework assignments, and tried to compress two activities into one in fruitless attempts to fit it all in. Still the unchecked benchmarks taunted me.

As I pushed students to do more and more, they seemed to respond by doing less and less. No matter how often I pointed to the poster-sized blow-up of the benchmarks page on the wall, marked with Post-it flags to show all the ones we’d tackled and all the ones we’d yet to achieve, their apathy inundated me. “You’ll need this for the test,” I’d say again and again each day, but not so much as a flicker of an eyelid indicated that they cared.

I was more tense and exhausted than I’d been since my first year of teaching. I spent hours every Sunday writing plans and checking off benchmarks. I twisted my best practices into barely recognizable shapes to appease Madeline Hunter, and updated the
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assistant principal’s new forms. Each week, he came to my class for a “walk-through” during which he’d sit at my desk and paw through my paperwork while I watched him from the corner of my eye, wondering what he was or was not finding in my binders and folders. He’d scratch away for several minutes on a form on his clipboard and leave without a word, never allowing me to see what he’d written.

After several weeks, someone complained to the principal about not being shown the written reports of the walk-throughs. In the teachers’ lounge, we were calling them “walked-ons.” The new term needed no explanation for those of us who’d experienced it and instantly caught on, then became a verb. The next time the assistant principal walked on me, he left a paper on my desk. All the boxes for lesson planning, highlighting, form-filling, and test-score plotting were checked. I had passed. But in the blanks for class observed, he’d written “language arts,” when he’d actually walked in on an elective computer class. For topic of lesson, he’d filled in “writing process,” but I’d been demonstrating adding animation effects to PowerPoint presentations.

Suddenly I wasn’t anxious or tired or scared; I was angry, but not at him, at myself. I knew the state standards and the tests. I knew how to teach reading and writing. Why had I allowed forms and checklists, stanines and percentiles, and an administrator who didn’t know or didn’t care what kind of class he was interrupting to convince me that I was inadequate? It was nonsense, but I had lost my head and accepted it.

“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.

“Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”

“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.

“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”

That Friday, I packed my briefcase for the weekend. I brought home my lesson plan binder and a copy of Bud, Not Buddy, a young adult novel by Christopher Paul Curtis that I’d bought back in July. I’d planned to use it as a read-aloud, but it had gotten squeezed out of my lesson plans by the flow of benchmarks. On Sunday, I sat down at the computer to prepare lesson plans as usual, but this time I didn’t write; I copied and pasted. I pulled up files of previous plans and selected reading and writing activities from them. It didn’t matter if they were plans I’d already used or plans that had proven to be impossible to complete in the time allowed; I made my selections solely on the basis of benchmarks. I was required to highlight in my plans any activities that addressed a benchmark. I’d just discovered the highlighter tool in Microsoft Word, and this was my chance to use it. When I printed that page it was wet with Canary yellow. I put the page in my binder, checked off all my favorite benchmarks on the facing page, and sat down to read Bud, Not Buddy.

I was reading it aloud to my class the next week during my walk-through. This time, I didn’t bother to watch the assistant principal. I watched my students instead. All that week, as I’d ignored every word on my page of perfect lesson plans, we’d been laughing together over Bud, Not Buddy. We had written and shared lists of “rules and things for having a good life” inspired by the character’s lists in the novel. I had reread passages containing similes and metaphors, and students were keeping lists of their favorites in their notebooks. They were adding to their collections passages they’d found in their independent reading and experimenting with simile and metaphor in their own writing. That week, the students I had been tempted to characterize with the worst teachers-lounge labels—“brain dead,” “lazy,” “getting worse every year”—were smiling, listening, begging for more.

“Aw, just one more chapter,” Aaron was pleading as the assistant principal completed his walked-on report and left.

“Sure,” I said. “Why not? Simile and metaphor are covered in the benchmarks, after all.”

Neither the novel nor reading aloud was mentioned in my lesson plan, but I got all my check marks again.

The next Sunday, I called up the same lesson plan file, changed the date, replaced the yellow highlighting with lime green, printed, and sat down to read Christopher Paul Curtis’s other novel, The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963. I made notes on Post-its about a possible author study project. I felt happy for the first time that year.

A woman accompanied the assistant principal on his next walk-through. He had invited her, the new dean of the college of education at the local university, to see how well his teachers were performing under his new documentation regime. He showed her my lesson plan, orange that week. She nodded and smiled. The assistant principal smiled. I smiled—a big Cheshire Cat smile. “I am hiding in plain view,” I thought, “I’ve become invisible except for my smile.”
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I'm no Alice. I'm no Cheshire Cat. I am a hedgehog. I have neither won nor lost the accountability game; I have simply walked out of it.

In March of that second year of accountability, the walked-ons stopped because what we were doing in our classrooms no longer mattered. The tests were over. When the scores came out that summer, the results were pretty much the same as they'd been the year before; all of my students had passed again. This was bad news. The state's accountability formula requires scores to go up each year or your school will be labeled a "school in decline" regardless of what your test scores are. The superintendent of my district had come from Texas, land of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, forerunner in the school accountability race; he knew what to do. Two new departments were created in the district's central office. One of these was the Office of Staff Development. Previously, instructional supervisors in each of the curricular areas had been in charge of planning and presenting inservices for teachers within their areas. The language arts supervisor, for example, routinely surveyed teachers to find out what they wanted to learn more about. She enlisted the services of National Writing Project teacher-consultants and other highly successful classroom teachers to conduct workshops on topics such as thematic units, portfolio assessment, reader-response strategies, and methods for teaching grammar in context. Teachers were allowed to choose the sessions they would attend. The evaluations of these workshops indicated that teachers appreciated the time to share ideas with other teachers and the practical, immediately applicable strategies they gained from these sessions. The Office of Staff Development, however, operated under a different paradigm. Their job was to find a one-size-fits-all model of professional development, and their mission was simply this—raise test scores. The program they chose for year three of accountability was curriculum mapping. Each teacher was given blank charts and directed to fill in the content he or she would teach during each month of the coming school year. Later, we were told, the individual teacher maps were to be merged in some way within each school, creating departmental maps. Then each department of each school would send their maps in to the central office, and these would somehow be combined to produce district-wide maps for each subject that were to be posted outside the door of every classroom. The end result would be a generic scope and sequence, general enough to be applied across the district. Summer inservice days that had previously been provided for ongoing education in one's curricular area were now set aside for teachers to wade through teacher's manuals, standards documents, and test-item analyses to create their individual curriculum maps which would not actually be used for anything. Most teachers found this to be a grueling and frustrating task, but not me. I had learned a valuable lesson the previous year—in Accountabilityland, appearance matters more than reality. So I created a great-looking table with shaded headings, bulleted lists, and bolded benchmarks. I smiled as I turned it in to my school curriculum mapping facilitator. She smiled and placed it in a folder and put the folder in a file box. I haven't seen it since, and I'm sure no one else has either.

The second new department, headed by a Ph.D. in statistics, was the Department of Research and Evaluation. From this office emerged thick books of color-coded pages containing each school's test scores sorted into every conceivable configuration. They added aggregate to our vocabularies and to the pile of paperwork required of teachers. They created a test to practice for The Test and another test to pretest for The Test, and then prepared more thick reports of the pretest scores. The head of this department was the featured speaker at our first faculty meeting of year three of accountability. She told us, as she switched on her overhead projector, that she was there to help us win the accountability game.

"Let's take a look at your numbers," she said pointing to the bell curve of stanine scores our kids had produced the year before. "You've got these few scores up here in stanines seven, eight, and nine. That's great, but they don't really have much more room to grow, do they? Then we've got these few scores here in stanines one, two, and three. They sure have room to grow, but let's face it," she said, leaning in conspiratorially, "they're never going to move your numbers to a significant degree. These are the scores to focus on." She tapped the middle of the bell curve. "Stanines four, five, and six. This is your maximum impact group."

I pictured parents tucking their little stanine scores into bed that night; I wondered if they knew whether their little stanines were in the maximum impact
group or not. Given our propensity for acronyms, would we soon be referring to these children as MIGs?

"I'm not telling you not to meet the needs of these other groups, of course, but this group here," she said, tapping on the top of the bell curve again, "this is where you're going to get your biggest gains."

Throughout her talk, I'd been digesting her analogy. If accountability is a game, who are the winners and losers? The politicians who threw out the first ball and the general public cheering them on from the sidelines would have us believe that students would be the winners. The quality of their education would improve because schools would finally be "held accountable" for what students did or did not know. But we hadn't been discussing students at all, only scores. They were "our numbers" and we needed to "move the numbers" to win the game. The accountability game was starting to look like a distorted imitation of school reform to me. The way we were playing it was becoming as meaningful as batting hedgehogs through croquet hoops using flamingoes as mallets.

Our principal must have sensed our discomfort after the statistics-laden pep talk ended. "I know you want to teach the whole child and all that," he said after Dr. Research and Evaluation had left. "You can still do that—after March 15." I saw some teachers counting on their fingers; I knew they were calculating just how many days we would have to teach students instead of test items, but I didn't want to know.

I got through that year by testing the limits of my invisibility. I printed the perfect lesson plan only occasionally; all that highlighting took so much printer ink. The walk-ons continued but with less zeal than before. Sometimes I didn't get all my check marks. Sometimes I got Post-it note reminders to update my SPIs, which I couldn't and wouldn't do because I had never started any SPIs and all the blank forms were still in a folder on my desk. Two years of having all my students pass the tests must have protected me from the threatened consequences of my disobedience. I identified my maximum impact students on the forms provided, but then I tried to forget who they were. I tried to get to know more about them than their stanine scores. I tried to make sure they'd be comfortable with the demands of the test without letting it dictate all of our daily activities. It was a hard year for all of us. All of my students passed the test for the third time, the last time.

The morning the scores were released, the administration called an impromptu faculty meeting to announce the happy news. The scores looked good; the numbers had moved. The good news was announced to the kids. They had heard of little else but test scores all year, and they were visibly relieved when they learned the results. Or maybe they were just elated that they had earned the free admission to the end-of-the-year dance that they'd been promised if they passed. The principal bounded into one of my classes later that day, congratulated students on their hard work, and beamed at me. "Now your wonderful language arts teacher can do all those creative things she likes to do," he told them. I tried to take that as the compliment he meant it to be, but I could not find the energy or the inclination to be overjoyed by, or even to care about, the results of the test. It still felt like the Queen of Hearts' croquet game to me.

In the final weeks of that school year, I had been approached by a friend and mentor of mine to apply for a job at a private school on whose board she served. The school was located on a beautiful campus just a few miles from my home and enjoyed a reputation in the community for maintaining the highest academic standards. The open position was for a class called Reading/Writing Workshop. I listened wistfully while my friend laid out all the reasons I would be the perfect teacher for the job and the job would be the perfect one for me. But when she was done, I sighed and told her it was simply out of the question. I had sixteen years in the public system by then. I couldn't walk away from the retirement system when my twenty-year eligibility was within sight. I had applied that year for National Board Certification. If successful, I would get a sizable annual stipend from the state, but only if I was teaching in a public school. Besides, I couldn't bail out on public education. I was a good teacher; they needed me.

Thus I found myself staring with dull glazed eyes at the two dead birds on the speaker's transparency. We were moving into phase two of curriculum mapping, she said. The proposed merging and re-merging of all the various maps from across the district had not occurred, so I wasn't at all sure what phase two involved. Strangely, other than announcing the date by which some curriculum map or other had to be posted outside my classroom door, the speaker didn't discuss curriculum mapping any further. Instead she turned the proceedings over to her colleague who repeated the message I'd heard the year before about the identification and targeting of our maximum impact groups.

My mind, understandably, began to wander. I thought about the private school, and I thought about four more years of the accountability game, four more years of

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trying to make sense of the nonsensical. The workshop presenters were passing out sample test-score reports, preparing to show us all the ways the numbers could be analyzed and examined to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of our maximum impact groups. I pictured the illustration of the croquet game in my childhood copy of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. Alice is holding her flamingo, its neck twisted into a C so it can stare angrily at her. In the background, the Cheshire Cat is fading away, the playing card soldiers are desperately trying to paint white roses red, the Queen of Hearts is shouting tyrannically, and one creature alone is doing a sensible thing. The hedgehog, with no intention of allowing itself to be whacked through a hoop in a game with no rules, has unrolled its prickly self and is leaving the field of play.

I’m no Alice. I’m no Cheshire Cat. I am a hedgehog. I have neither won nor lost the accountability game; I have simply walked out of it. I teach 64 students now instead of 120 or more. I use my sixteen years of experience, my reading of professional literature, and my professional judgment to decide the content of my curriculum, and I have no idea what I will be teaching in February. My students took some sort of standardized test last year, but I have no idea what their scores were. Instead, I know that Clara and Katherine will only read books about horses; Maci can count to twelve in Japanese; Dean—who hates to read—finished Frindle in one day. My desk is still full of files and papers, but none of them came from my administrators. They are weekly letters my students and I write to each other about our reading. Mac’s collection of poetry about the major battles of World War II, and Lizzie’s list of books I must add to the classroom library. My school does not make me a captive audience to any overhead projector but will pay my way if I choose to attend a professional conference. Like all the other teachers at my new school, I have a one-year contract. If I do not perform the duties that my students, their parents, and the administration expect, I’m out of a job. At last I understand what accountable means.

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