

Gilden's Hat Collection: An Analogy on the Infinite Job of an Educator



PROLOGUE

The first five years of my teaching career have been a quest of collections. I've collected lots of memories, experiences, lessons, questions, connections, and hats—both physical and metaphorical. The most recent physical hat I added to my collection is a gorgeous African-made straw hat purchased from an eccentric woman and self-described “bitch from New York.” I was canvassing for universal healthcare for California and got too close to her stand so she yelled at me and I bought the hat to get in her good graces. She still didn't sign my petition, but I love that hat. Here, however, I'd like to talk about hats of a metaphorical type.

THE HAT STAND

My inquiry practice has allowed me to step back and take stock of where I've

been and what I can do in the future. As I step into leadership roles and opportunities, every idea I have is rooted in engaging teachers in inquiry as a way of reflecting on their practice or trying something new. This hat stand is forged from the finest metals of inquiry and reflection with the best welders and metallurgists I know: my critical friends and fellow teacher comrades. Without the reflection supported by the Knowles Fellowship, my hats wouldn't have been hats: they would've been a jumble of overwhelming life. I am grateful to have been able to find names for my hats so they take form and have a hook to rest on while not on my head. This stand has room for more hats, and to manage the expansion of my current hat collection. Without further ado, I present my hat collection:

My Teaching Hat

Description: This is a red top hat with a tattered brim and some scuff marks. It hangs on the top of the rack, not necessarily because it's used most, but because it's taken on and off frequently.

Use: *My Teaching Hat* is worn for three events. Event 1: I am in front of students for five to six hours a day when school is in session. I engage them in learning and doing math and also involve myself in learning about them and building relationships. Event 2: I am planning to be in front of students. Over time, I have developed an arsenal of tricks to keep my students entertained. The *Teaching Hat* looks like a magician's hat because teachers create magic and entertainment. The time I spend planning is variable, but has decreased over time, and at different times of the year or seasons of life. Event 3: I am grading schoolwork. This is my most despised event, but I have been using my *Leadership Hat* to help me make this more meaningful by converting my classroom to fully standards-based grading and helping my colleagues explore that for their classrooms as well. *My Teaching Hat* can be uncomfortable to wear after six hours a day or for more than 36 hours per week, but I have no choice but to wear it for Event 1 which is already about 30 hours. It's hard to wear the hat for more hours in a day, or for more than five days in the week. When I spend extra time wearing *my Teaching Hat*, it definitely pays off. When I keep the time I wear the Teaching Hat strictly

to my contractual 36-40 hours per week, I can tell the difference in my life-balance but also it leaves me feeling inadequate. I strive to be able to serve students well in a 40-hour week.

My Family Hat

Description: This is a lightweight purple beanie. It's stylish, it's warm, it's casual, it always belongs. It sits eye-level on the hat stand, usually on the second or third hook from the top.

Use: This is my favorite and most cherished hat! This is the hat I use to prioritize my friends and family. I wear this hat when I'm spending time with my husband and pets, when I'm spending time with my family and hanging out with friends, and when I'm connecting with other humans whom I choose to have in my life. I run cold, so a beanie provides that special warmth that makes me feel comfortable, but sometimes wearing a beanie can be too much when it's hot outside! I felt like this during my first year of teaching when there was a lot of hardship in my family. *My Family Hat* was worn snugly under my Teaching Hat and impacted my ability to focus fully on both my teaching and my emotions related to my family. *My Family Hat* also had to be paired with *my Grief Scarf* when I lost my aunt, my cousin, and my childhood dog during my first year of teaching. I also wore *my Family Hat* a lot during my fifth year of teaching when I planned my wedding and got married. Now, I have started expanding my family, and welcomed my first child in August 2024. As my family grows and changes, I find myself revisiting these reflections for validation and inspiration.

My Leadership Hat

Description: This is a very fratty looking, large trucker hat with the Greek letters ΔΣ on it. It has two large, translucent Nalgene bottles affixed to it with straws coming out and dangling for access by the wearer's mouth. People are very drawn to this hat. The Nalgene bottles usually have different colored liquids in them. It sits next to the *Family Hat*, on the other side of the stand.

Use: Because there are only two Nalgene bottles, I am only able to carry up to two leadership-related liquids at one time. The first of the two liquids I've been

drinking in the last year is a deep cherry and rosehip red, 50% sweetness, which represents my leadership in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) East Bay Chapter's Education Workers Circle. **From my inquiry, I knew I wanted to pick up my Leadership Hat more.**

We are a group of socialist-minded educators organizing for better workplace conditions and using our unions to advocate for a better workplace for all workers. And the second, a similarly red liquid but more bitter and viscous, represents leadership in my own union and as a very active member of my professional spaces. My most recent projects include advocating for more money and resources for our math program in my high school and across the district, educating more of the math department and the ninth grade teachers on standards-based grading, and providing more transparency in our union leadership. I like this hat. It is fun. Sometimes I wear this hat when I really should be wearing my Teacher Hat. However, *my Leadership Hat* feeds me liquids and *my Teacher Hat* can be pretty scratchy. From my inquiry, I knew I wanted to pick up *my Leadership Hat* more.

My Adulthood Hat

Description: This is a bright green bucket hat with pink polka dots. It's one of those hats that you always want to wear because it's so fun, but you also never want to wear it because it clashes with anything else you'd wear. It sits near, usually below, the *Leadership Hat*.

Use: This hat was designed to seem really fun and you want to gravitate to it, but, WATCH OUT, because it is so draining to wear. It really squishes my head. The thing is, if I don't wear this hat, my life becomes way too chaotic and messy. It's a balance. I wear this hat when I'm doing things like chores, financial planning, or cooking. Sometimes at events where I would normally wear another hat, I end up wearing *my Adulthood Hat* instead. For example, sometimes I walk my dog in *my Adulthood Hat* instead of *my Family Hat* or *my Self-Care Buff*. Sometimes I really want to be wearing anything but *my Adulthood Hat*, but I end up having to wear it anyway. It really just depends on the shape of my head and how much room there

is at that moment. Sometimes I wonder how much of child-rearing will be spent wearing *the Family Hat*, and how much I'll end up wearing *the Adulthood Hat*. What will be my balance?

My Anxiety and Depression Bandanas

Description: The Depression Bandana is dark blue and the Anxiety Bandana is orange. The Depression Bandana has a few tatters and lighter blue patches from many cleanings. The Anxiety Bandana isn't used as often so you can still see the fold marks in it. These bandanas wrap around the pole of the hat stand.

Use: These things have a mind of their own. *My Anxiety Bandana* just—poof!—appeared one day early in my first year teaching and it would not get off for almost two years. Now it usually stays folded neatly away on the stand except for around grading periods. Symptoms of the *Anxiety Bandana* are upset stomach, racing heart, and pressure of the lives of 100+ children on my shoulders. If I ever threw away *my Teaching Hat*, I'm pretty sure *my Anxiety Bandana* would jump into the trash with it.

My Depression Bandana is more prominent and started to make its appearances once *my Anxiety Bandana* began to get folded up more often. It doesn't like sunlight. It tends to creep its way onto me when the weather gets cold, but then often it breaks those patterns too. More research needs to be done to figure out when *the Depression Bandana* is most active. Symptoms include deep and unexplained sadness, tears, irritability, and lack of any motivation.

My Grief Scarf

Description: This is a flowing dark gray scarf that is meant to be worn as a shawl or a head covering. The threads get on everything! It wraps around the bottom hooks of the hat stand.

Use: This scarf doesn't get used often, but it was used many times in my first year of teaching. I lost my aunt, Rebecca, to a long battle with breast cancer. I spent a lot of weekends during that first year visiting my family and watching my aunt deteriorate quickly. My cousin, Jeff, took his life after a lot of suffering with his mental health. My childhood dog, Hannah, who we had since I was in fifth grade,

was put down after a long and happy life. I still find threads of this scarf on me. This scarf was worn a lot again in my fifth year of teaching when I lost a student and his brother to gun violence. I had taught him the previous year in two different classes and got to know him well and the third, youngest brother, was my student during the worst year of his life. This little brother is one of the threads of my grief scarf.

My Self-Care Buff

Description: This is a green and purple tie-dyed buff. Because buffs are small and thin, they can be worn under another hat, or on another part of my body. It is located near the hook of the *Adulthood Hat*.

Use: Sometimes it's hard to justify wearing only my small buff when I have all these other hats to choose from that are bigger and flashier. **I am realizing I need to also take care of my body and my spirit as well.** I've made some realizations recently about what self-care is and what it isn't. I used to wear this buff to sit and escape through watching love-based reality TV shows like "The Bachelor", playing "Breath of the Wild", or reading. However, I am realizing I need to also take care of my body and my spirit as well. I've added some new hobbies and habits like going to a climbing gym and journaling more regularly.

EPILOGUE (FOR NOW)

There is always something more I could be doing. Despite, or rather because of, all the great stuff I was doing in my classroom, I felt called to put on my *Leadership Hat* more often. I had a handle on my *Teaching Hat* after 4 years, and finally felt ready to spread my wings more. What I learned through my extended stints with my *Leadership Hat* is that we wear many hats as teacher leaders to tend to different areas of our practice. Sometimes, letting go of a hat does mean to abandon, burn out, or fail, but other times it's because the weather or style isn't right for that hat.

Teaching is a long game. Change is an even longer one. Often I have to wait

months to implement new ideas in my classroom. Change outside the classroom takes even longer. A lot of my *Leadership Hat* projects have a huge scope! It took time, planning, and intentionality to begin tackling these issues. **Teaching is a long game. Change is an even longer one.** Ultimately, change can start from just having conversations and deciding to pick up a different hat. I know that I will be able to pick up my other hats when the time is right. I hope this is just one of many years of learning to strike a balance between all my hats and being comfortable with which ones gravitate toward my head. I am at least putting on a hat, and that is a great thing.

Postscript

If anyone feels inspired to make an artistic rendering of my hat collection, please contact me!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank a few key members of the Knowles Teacher Initiative, a fantastic organization that develops early career high school science and math teachers. I could talk a lot about the hardships and balances and lessons learned in the early years of the Fellowship, but overall, I was improving in my practice and each year felt better than the last, even during the pandemic! However, by the first quarter of the fifth year, for the first time in my career I did not feel like I was getting better. It felt like my year was worse than all the years before it. I was starting to burn out quickly. In the Fellowship, we learn through inquiry cycles, and my group during my fifth and final year of the Fellowship, Enya Granados, Sam Greenidge and Joyce Lin, helped me develop the hat analogy to better understand myself and my story. I'd also like to thank my colleagues, Masha Albrecht, Leah Alcala, and Ashley Daly, for being my role models of balanced and thoughtful educators.

Emily Gilden is a math teacher at Berkeley High School in Berkeley, California and Knowles Senior Fellow. She teaches ninth grade Math 1 and is a union

representative. You can reach Emily at emily.gilden@knowlesteachers.org.