



## "Matters of Consequence"<sup>1</sup>

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The bag lady crossing the parking lot is an elementary school teacher making her way to work. The Safeway logo stretches over a bulge of grade 4 journals in one bag. String and coat hangers, sweatsuit and runners poke from another. A portable learning center is firmly clamped under one arm but the curriculum guide for elementary art slips free into the mud.

The teacher moves awkwardly into the staffroom's cacophonous greeting. Deadlines shout from a bulletin board. Contest brochures litter the counter and a birthday card circulates for signatures. The dishwashing schedule accosts the unwary eye. Acknowledging that she is on team 5 and that yesterday was Monday, the 28th, the elementary teacher moves into the realization that the used coffee cups are her inheritance. She begins hastily filling the sink, apologizing to colleagues as she does so.

At the office the teacher is asked to complete an absence form covering last week's dental appointment. Now she stops at an accusing mailbox whose contents are wadded and protruding.

A quick perusal of these documents opens the gate to a trampling crowd of today's to do's. Please respond to the alternate supervision schedules proposed. Please fill out preference for swimming times on enclosed schedule. Please offer suggestions for speakers at institute. Please complete the quality of life survey. Please hand out the newsletter by.... Please be reminded that year plans for art and physical education are due Friday. Please use the attached computer printout to distribute hot lunches this week.... Student choices are indicated by date M1.B.D.(?)

The teacher turns to a colleague.

*"Do you understand this? M1.B.D.?"*

*"Weren't you at the recess meeting with the caterers yesterday? Week one, week two, meal one, meal two, dessert, and beverage. Make sure everyone gets what he ordered or someone will be without lunch."*

The hallways are Open Range. Colleagues and administrators roam at large and chance encounters can have far-reaching consequences. The teacher may be invited to make a staff meeting presentation on some aspect of Madelaine Hunter's material and thus secure for herself an all-time low status in her colleagues' affections. She could simply be served with a list of her students' overdue library books. Even colleagues can't be trusted in corridors. They call a greeting and slip in a reminder about the division planning ("*3:30. Today, your room*"). It can happen so fast. Worst of all contemplated encounters, the janitor may come upon the elementary teacher scuttling down the corridor close to the wall. Now he confronts her with the black heel marks on the tiles in 103, the sticky stuff by the bookcase, and the reason for the relocation of the waste basket. "*Last year that was the messiest room in the school.*" The elementary teacher is new to 103 but takes an indirect hit meant for the one on maternity leave.

The classroom is close now. Locked and empty, its imminent refuge puts heart into the bag lady as she turns the corner. But mere paces from the door, two giant steps and one baby step from her classroom, the teacher is paged to take a phone call in the office. She lets down her burdens and hurries back the way she came.

It turns out that Barbara's mother wants the elementary teacher to explain how it can be that Barbara's new boots have disappeared into thin air ... and further, why is it that students are permitted to roam the halls in lawless bands while other children are confined to the classroom, helpless to protect their winter footwear.

The bell sounds. Even Barbara's mother respects its insistence and lets the elementary teacher off with weak excuses and hopeful promises. The elementary teacher arrived early, but she is late. The children are clamoring at the locked door of room 103. The contents of her bags are scattered among student's books and lunchboxes.

The children surge into the classroom. All talking at once.

*"Mrs. Sullivan, last night our dog, she went outside ..."*

*"Mrs. Sullivan ..."*

*"to do her business ..."*

*"Mrs. Sullivan, do we have swimming ..."*

*"and after a while"*

*"... today?"*

*"Mrs. Sullivan, my tooth fell out."*

*"... and we couldn't find her,"*

*"Mrs. Sullivan, can I phone my mom to bring ..."*

*"and finally we found her ..."*

*"my bathing suit ..."*

*"Know where she was?"*

*"Mrs. Sullivan, you have to write me a note to ..."*

*"Mrs. Sullivan, when are our books going to come ..."*

*"use the phone"*

*"Mrs. Sullivan, I never got change from the hot lunch money ..."*

**"GOOD MORNING BOYS AND GIRLS, JUST A FEW ANNOUNCEMENTS THIS MORNING."**

*"Ssh! Grade Four," pointing to the P.A. speaker where the mild voice is being completely overridden by the classroom din.*

**"... SO PLEASE SEND THOSE NUMBERS TO THE OFFICE BEFORE RECESS. O CANADA WILL BE SUNG IN FRENCH TODAY."**

*"Did anyone hear what numbers I am to send down?"*

*"I think it's how many kids have paid for the fun run."*

*"No, it's UNICEF boxes."*

*"Mrs. Sullivan ..."*

*"Never mind, ssh. Now sing please."*

### **Memo to the Principal**

Dear Glen:

Thank you for extending the deadline for year plans in art and physical education. I spent the weekend with the new curriculum guide for art and I think its remarkable. A splendid articulation of all the concepts and skills, of the philosophy ... it makes me wish I could *take* an art course ... several courses. Design, pattern, composition, color, texture, perspective. I begin to sense the paucity of my knowledge of this fascinating subject. Imagine the reading, the study, the thought and preparation required of anyone but an artist to plan and carry out the course as it is outlined. To develop in the children as the course intends, an artistic orientation to the world. A fine and worthy ambition.

And one by which I am overwhelmed. I teach art 75 minutes a week.

I've only glanced at the physical education curriculum so far. Next weekend I'll grapple with the objectives for creative dance and the philosophy of fitness. That curriculum was conceived by a person whose physical poise is text and lesson. I'm round shouldered and I have fallen arches. My suggestion of a leaf in wind had the kids convulsed with laughter last year. Oh, I played ball as a kid. I swam and skated. And I'd like to do some of those things with my kids. I'd feel honest ... centered ... playing games with them. I'd be glad of opportunities to know them and be known through some physical dialogue that would allow me to participate in my own voice—but then, I guess that wouldn't meet anyone's objectives. I teach physical education for 30 minutes a week. I wonder, do the curriculum writers know about people like me, people outside of *their* orientation, when they chart the course?

The Department of Education has created an admirable vision of what art should be, of what physical education could be, of what language arts must aspire to. And given that as a teacher I could also be a learner in a realistic sense, much of this ... some of this ... would surely be possible. But the county also has an agenda for me. I am to learn the terms and concepts of the new teacher effectiveness literature. To plan according to these models. And the school has some concerns requiring my attention, grade level meetings, extracurricular programs, report card revision committee, supervision, fund-raising. And then there's the actual teaching. Like a deadly hydra the job keeps sprouting heads until it is hard to believe that people continue to function under such oppression. Each single task seems reasonable, worthy, even necessary. It is the combining and compounding that begins to crush the dedicated teacher who has, after all, her own agenda.

I know you must insist on these things, Glen. I know there are central office priorities, and government mandates. I believe that to survive as a school administrator today you serve many masters. And since educational issues are public province and everyone, having gone to school, is an authority on schooling, the demands are countless and conflicting. School boards may translate community concerns into policy that comes "from the top down." Accountability means *being seen to be doing the job*. This means visible planning to behavioral objectives at every level, high scores on standardized tests, leadership in training staff in the technology of teaching. It means the school having good press and a high profile in the community. It means win-

dow-dressing. And that means asking teachers to devote time, a great deal of time, to activities with only the most oblique relation to student learning.

Make a display for the cabinet in the foyer—not when that would naturally culminate an activity in my teaching but between the 14th and 28th of November, when it's my turn. Organize a booth for the Flea Market and Fun Fair (unless you want to be the only uninvolved class in the school). Make every student responsible to complete an elaborate project for the science fair—report, pictures, and backdrop—even if the learning value for individual students is highly questionable. How would it be interpreted if West Central didn't participate? Or if West Central were to use the science fair to support its own educational goals rather than dancing to the beat of the district drummer.

I see you dialogue with the kids, Glen. I read papers you've written and we share reflective conversation. I know you as a genuine educator. I believe that you care very deeply about those for whom you have made yourself responsible—and in your case that includes staff and students. You are a man of ideals and these you pursue with generous personal commitment. Still, I wonder, how will you hold the line on so many fronts as your integrity apprises you of the costs? You see too clearly to ignore the contradictions.

Bill Dickson, a Calgary superintendent, recently reminded me of the pact Theodore Roszak makes with his student. I believe he speaks for many of us and touches on the essence of the pedagogical commitment you and I share. In part, Roszak (1979) tells the student:

You come to me as the person no one else can be, a unique event in the universe. Somewhere in you there is a special destiny waiting to be discovered. I will watch carefully for the moment of its awakening, because that is the crown and the summit of my calling.

I will always bear in mind as I teach you the inherited culture that it is a storehouse of uniquely created meanings, each the unexpected achievement of an inspired personality. I will regard you as one who may also have come into our lives to speak an original word. Perhaps it will sound strange to all who hear, and to me as well. But I will value that strangeness in you above all else and will allow no inhibiting authority to hold back its growth, because the life of our planet makes its way forward (if it does at all) by resourceful invention and bright surprise.

I will remember in the midst of all our studies that the one most important lesson that can pass between us is yours to teach, mine to learn. And that is the lesson of your essential identity. (pp. 82-83)

These lines help me align myself for a true reading. They help me to recall my vocation and they compel me to confront the hydra.

As teachers we are finite resources. Finite in time, in energy, and in ability. But each student before the pedagogical eye/I is an infinite challenge in terms of his "essential identity."

How will you protect us from the forces which threaten to shatter the possibility of our communion?

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*"Nos foyers est nos droits ..."*

*"Mrs. Sullivan ..."*

*"Good morning grade 4."*

*"Good morning, Mrs. Sullivan."*

*Knock, knock. "Absence Alert form?" "Oh, who's away?"*

*"Andrew—but he's probably late."*

*"He's always late."*

*"Pat."*

*"Mrs. Sullivan, you don't put him down, only if you don't know where they are ... Pat went to BC."*

*"I know. Ssh.... Only Andrew, I guess. Sorry to make you wait."*

*Knock, knock. "The CTBS testing starts today. You have everything?"*

*"Are there answer sheets? I don't know where Shelly keeps them Mr. Johnson. Sean. In your desk please. Take out pencils and erasers."*

*"I don't got a HB pencil ... Mrs. Sullivan."*

*"They might be here with the files. Hmm. That's strange."*

*"I came in last week and we filled in their names and grades so we'd be all set. Here's the stop watch ... press it to start and press it here to reset."*

*"Mrs. Sullivan, Billy never filled out one of them sheets last week ..."*

*"They must be here somewhere ... Here. This looks like it might be what we want."*

*"OK. Have Billy fill in the bottom code here ... name and grade before you begin. Here are some extra pencils. All Set? Good. The times are indicated here in the instructions."*

Once the children have settled down to do the vocabulary section the teacher reckons she has 17 minutes. But some are finished in 8. Others have barely begun. She thinks to fill in the names and choices on the book order form. At H—Hallett, a student comes to her desk.

*"Mrs. Sullivan, can I get a book?"*

And as a second approaches.

*"Can I draw?"*

*"Ssh. Sit quietly in your places and don't disturb those who are still working."*

At this point Andrew arrives at the classroom door looking tired and disheveled. He pokes a note at the elementary teacher and goes to his place. *"Make a note,"* she tells herself, *"for Al Johnson, that Andrew missed the vocabulary section."*

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### **Memo to the Guidance Counsellor**

Dear Al:

I administer these standardized tests with a growing sense of unease. In front of me are most of the reasons. There's Blair. He works so painfully slowly. He reads quite well but will only finish half the test. The results will reinforce the self-doubt he harbors with regard to his abilities. And there's another reason. Billy, in the front row right under my nose where he can be watched and "encouraged." He's playing now with his ruler and pencil. He's tied his shoelace to the leg of the desk (which is sure to bring on a fire drill) and he's gazing off into—what place? Now *that* I would rather know than the answer to any question on any test I have ever given. Billy is the best reader in the class. He knows all about Ben Franklin and Leonardo da Vinci. He has a mature vocabulary and a quick grasp of what he reads. Billy will, with constant prodding, finish about two thirds of this test. His score will put him at about a grade 4 reading level, whatever that means. Trish gives me further reason to dislike these tests. She is already finished. Asking her to check her work will be to encourage and participate in her dishonesty. She'll duck her head and feign compliance. Trish's dislike of

such tests (and indeed for most aspects of school work) elicits an unvaried response. It's a headlong rush at the thing, the response of a person who believes that she has little control over the outcome and who predicts failure.

*"I didn't get very many right, eh Mrs. Sullivan?" "I'm not one of the kids who gets out of handwriting today. I know it." "I done this wrong, didn't I?"*

Trish writes a test the way she might take bitter medicine but with less belief that it will do any good. Her compulsive behavior ensures that her expectations will be fulfilled by the test results. These children are only some of the reasons for my mistrust of these instruments.

I remember how I felt last year when we received the package accompanying the test results. We had a meeting where the scores were interpreted for us. We saw the numerical comparisons within the school. Within the county. We knew how our grade 4s compared on a nation-wide scale. We knew which school's clientele rated highest and which school had the poorest showing. Oh, shame.

Each part of the test had a separate score. Everything categorically measured. We were even provided with an item analysis that allowed us to zero in on the questions most weakly dealt with by our children. The comma in the complimentary closing of the friendly letter, is it? Aha. New objectives form in the mind. Choral speech will have to be eliminated. Here is a pressing matter which will in some form materialize on a future agenda over possible falling standards ... and possible causes of possible falling standards.

I've lived long and broadly enough to know the capricious nature of punctuation conventions in the friendly letter and even in the more austere forms. I have some appreciation, as well, of the significance in a lifetime of such matters. The matters raised, on the other hand, by Blair's performance, by Billy's score, and by Trish's response to the test are what the Little Prince would call "matters of consequence."

Bill Dickson (1986) told Calgary teachers in a recent address:

I believe that we must *sanctify* the whole individual in our teaching and learning in the context of our realities: a curriculum that reduces, compartmentalizes and classifies everything to be learned; and in the context of school and student organization which does likewise with labels, classes, grades, levels, school periods, school days and school years.

Let us not forget the integrative, convergent, synergetic processes to help the student put the pieces together, to build wholes and learn holistically.

Moffett (1981) says one of the most important things we can do is “teach a person *that* [not what] he knows” (p. 9).

All of this is only part of my frustration. When I’m asked to graph the student scores on separate forms and send them home to parents for further misinterpretation and reverberation I feel angry. To be spending time I don’t have, giving energy to the service of something I believe to be a negative thrust in education—something which works *against* motivations and success in lifelong learning—that makes me indignant.

Moffett (1981) is pessimistic about our escape from this service. He says:

You are impressed into the service of accountability, and standardized testing is no more easily dropped than cigarette manufacturing, however injurious to your health. It is packaged into materials and nested down in the souls of administrators. It evaluates curriculums and therefore dictates curriculums. Teachers teach toward the tests and it’s amazing how fast their good intentions dissolve about teaching anything else. (p. 8)

My final frustration with the tests is that even given the credibility of grade-level scores in reading, what am I to do about the fact that Trish reads at a grade 2 level and Billy at a grade 8? The class set of novels is at a *grade 4* level. The class loads being what they are (and increasing) make interactive teaching/learning extremely difficult. The physical environment itself works against us. For group work children sit on the floor or lie in the corridors because classrooms are designed to accommodate students working in isolation and regimentation.

I know that you share my dismay over tests and scales, over labels and pigeonholes, and all the fraudulent figures that make us dishonest accountants. And I wonder, Al, is there a way to shift the record-keeping from what we think can be counted to what we know really counts?

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Unsuspecting, the teacher now opens the note from Andrew which reveals that he got only one 8x10 photograph and a class picture while his sister in grade 2 received the complete package of school photos. Mother had checked off the same package request for both children and sent \$14.00 for each.

The teacher defers solution seeking on this one and continues with the testing.

Halfway through the third section. "Bzzzzzt"

*"That's the recess bell! Can we go if we're done?"*

*"Ssh!"*

Shake head and frown. Fidget, glare. Glare ...

*"... Time's up grade 4."*

*"We missed recess."*

*"You can still have your break, but you'll have to stay in the classroom since others are back in class."*

*"Can I go to the bathroom?"*

*"Mrs. Sullivan can I get something out of my lunch?"*

*"Mrs. Sullivan, I need a drink."*

*"Mrs. Sullivan, I hate them tests."*

*"Are we finished?"*

*"Grade 4, keep it down."*

Knock, knock. *"Can we have your count for the fun run?"*

*"Oh, I don't.... Grade 4 SSHHH. Can I have your attention please? GRADE 4. How many ... how many of you have signed up for the run? four? five?"*

*"No, Mrs. Sullivan, I never signed up. I just wanna know if ..."*

*"Sherry. Just a minute PLEASE! Do we have only four people signed up? Four, I guess."*

*"OK."*

*"Do you know where I hand in the book order forms?"*

*"You mean Armadillo?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"He came at 10 after 9 this morning. He picks them up first thing in the morning."*

*"It says October 20th on the form ..."* (It would be nice to know things.)

*"They can back order. Next month. It will show both lists of selections."*

*"I guess I'll have to write all the parents notes and return the money."*

*"Yeah, I think that would be best ..."*

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### **Memo to a Parent**

Dear Mrs. Ames:

There must be some mistake here. I got into this whole circus so I could share poems and stories with kids. I'm a teacher. I wanted to write with them and turn them on to rhymes and images and ideas. I'm not against kids having hot lunch! How can anyone who lives in this climate be against hot lunch!

You wonder why I don't take orders for the book club this year (Miss Martin did in grade 3 and the children so looked forward ...). You want me to collect lunch money and be the guardian of the winter footwear.

When I got into this business I somehow imagined I'd be talking with kids and listening to kids, not writing swimming receipts, tallying book club monies and collecting rummage. I didn't imagine myself saying in so sharp a tone. *"Not now, Brian. Sit down, Trish. Quiet all of you. Just a minute, Blair. Kelly! How can a person add with all this leaping about and hollering going on!?"*

You'd like me to keep Barbie in at recess and at noons. (School policy says we must supervise children kept in at these times.) Barbie's complained of earaches and it's indefinite. I mean it comes and goes. Better to be safe than sorry. You suggest that perhaps I could use the time to help her with reading. She's weak in any event and her dad's promised her a bike if she gets a better mark next report. You haven't time, what with a couple of preschoolers and a part-time job. You'd like me, if it's no trouble, to see that the Davis girl in grade 3 gets Barbie's hot lunch any time Barbie is absent. (They're cousins, you tell me.) Last week when I was away (you remind me) the cousin didn't get Barbie's lunch as you had instructed. You've no idea who ate it or if it was thrown out by the substitute. It costs enough and they don't give refunds for absences. And speaking of money, you'd like to know what justification I see in their charging an entry fee for the flea market. First you volunteer your help and send muffins for the baking table and then they stick their hand out as you come through the door if that's not the limit.

I'm not against school photos. Who can object to a child having a picture of himself with his classmates of '87 and old Mrs.

(What-was-that-old-crab's name?). I want children to ski, to learn to play chess, to be in an operetta, compete in the Journal games and the speech festival ... I just didn't know so much of it would depend on us.

I'm not against children having these wonderful opportunities but I am concerned about honoring what I believe is my real responsibility to your daughter.

I wonder what will be your reaction when you discover one day that Barbie's had so little chance to talk that she's inarticulate. Or that she's had so little occasion to think, to plan, or to choose that she lacks the confidence to take charge of her learning. Of her life. What if she's read little and been read to less, so that she's functionally illiterate? What if Barbie can't fill in an application or write a letter?

Will she see, in retrospect, the school photos, hot lunches, the ski club, and the fluoride treatments as compensation and justification for the situation, or will I be held responsible? In your mind. In her mind. I, who wanted so to read and talk with her ...

PS. I received your note insisting that Barbara take the fluoride treatment in spite of the fact that it nauseates her. I will remind her of your wishes in this regard.

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"OK. Grade four. You've had more than a full recess. Put the puzzles away quickly please. And get ready to continue with the testing. Jill, NOW. Not next week sometime."

It is at this point that Victor waves his hand and advances spurting blood from his nose. The teacher urges him on by and prepares to begin the next part of the test, making a mental note to let Mr. Johnson know that Victor missed the first part of the reading section.

Knock. Knock. A parent volunteer hands the teacher a tray of paper cups with the fluoride solution. A collective groan goes up from the class. They pass it around making the most of this diversion from the tedium. Barbara, having been duly "reminded," obediently "rinses" along with the rest.

The testing continues.

Finally. Finally.

The lunch bell rings only minutes before the end of the reading section. The teacher keeps the children "on task" or quiet until the time is up and the booklets and answer sheets are collected. She insists that students remain seated in their places while

lunch is being eaten. They know the routine but some resist or forget and need prompting. Today they're uncommonly antsy.

"Kelly R. In your places, please ... Erin, sit down while you eat. Barb ..." she warns. The girl rising from her place falters under the strained quality of the teacher's voice "BARBARA." She recognizes this as a command. With evident reluctance she turns back to her desk and vomits on the heat register ... and a little bit on the trustee's son. (Well, they're out there. They have to be in someone's class.)

This is not the bitter cold day when a girl pulls the fire alarm on purpose at lunch time and the janitor triggers it accidentally while resetting it in the afternoon. This is not that day, but this is also a cold day. Fourteen children have notes entitling them to stay in at noon hour for a variety of medical (and not-so-medical) reasons. The elementary teacher is not sorry to be on outside supervision. Here in the open space of the playground there's still heavy action. Two children sustain legitimate injuries. Another 12 will relate tales of outrageous acts committed by their classmates or "*the grade 6 in the green toque.*" Six children want to hold the elementary teacher's hands but four will settle for hanging on her sleeves, purse strap, and scarf. When the bell goes to end supervision the day is half over.

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### Memo to a Student

Dear Annie:

Your broad freckled face invites my tenderness. Your wide eyes and slow smile show the trust and frankness with which you greet the world. You are a sturdy child, a farm girl such as one would be typified. You are the girl I imagined when I read *Heidi* as a child myself. You want to be a cowgirl, and if there is such a thing in your grown up world, you'll be a fine one.

When I look at you I feel a sense of guilt and of failure. I sift through the weeks and months we have spent together in grade 4 hoping to discover some sliver of wonder, some flash of color, some moment of surprise we may have shared. Just a swift spark, a warm stone, a small tune.... If on some far distant day in your cowgirl future, you come across in your treasure, just such a token of our togetherness, Annie, and never even remember me, at all, at all. Oh, I will be redeemed. But there's precious little chance of that.

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**Memo to the Curriculum Writers, the Central Office Staff, the Trustees, the School Administrators, Colleagues, Parents, and Students**

After all is said and done I too have a child. She is waiting now for her bedtime story.

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**Note**

1. Saint-Exupéry, A. de (1971). *The little prince* (K. Woods, Trans.). San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

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