Marshall Memo 514

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 9, 2013

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Mastery has been reduced to a high score on any old quiz."

Grant Wiggins (see item #1)

"Knowing that you're a novice who's a long way from true mastery is not inherently debilitating. On the contrary, having a worthy, far-off goal and tracking your progress in closing the gap are key to mastery in all walks of life."

Grant Wiggins (*ibid*.)

"I don't know many people who look forward to performance evaluations – on the giving or the receiving side."

Phyllis Korkki (see item #3)

"Asking for a 'teaching philosophy' (or a 'teaching statement') drops a grand piano of expectations out the window onto the applicant's head."

Leonard Cassuto (see item #4)

"[T]he opinions of those who eat the dinner should be considered if we want to know how it tastes."

Peter Seldin on students evaluating their instructors (quoted in item #2)

"I want my children to worry about homework, about violin lessons. I don't want them to worry about a stray bullet. I don't want them to develop fear. It's as if there are two Brooklyns running parallel, but completely different."

Nneka Sutherland, New York City kindergarten teacher, reflecting on a fatal shooting right outside her school, quoted in "New Job After Shots Are Fired: Keeping Students Feeling Safe" by Michael Powell in *The New York Times*, Dec. 3, 2013, http://nyti.ms/18OVegC

1. Grant Wiggins on How Students Should Demonstrate Mastery

(Originally titled "How Good Is Good Enough?")

"Mastery has been reduced to a high score on any old quiz," says curriculum guru Grant Wiggins in this lead article in *Educational Leadership*. "Thus, if you achieved 85 percent or 90 percent on any test of content, you would be deemed to have demonstrated mastery – no matter how picayune or low-level the test questions."

The problem is that some schools are breaking big-picture learning goals into "lists of bits" – such as vocabulary terms and isolated facts – says Wiggins. "The practice of reducing mastery to accurate recall of discrete facts and skills is tempting, common, and harmful… Although well-intentioned, this practice leads to needlessly fractured, boring, and ultimately ineffective learning that never prepares students to be fluent and skilled in authentic work."

Part one of the solution is planning curriculum backwards from complex, worthy, and valid tasks on which students must demonstrate high-level understanding, says Wiggins. We also need a clear definition of mastery, which is the ability to transfer skills or knowledge to a new, authentic setting. "Mastery requires dealing effectively with varied and sometimes novel challenges of purpose, audience, and context," he says – which is consistent with the Common Core State Standards.

What's missing in most schools' approach to mastery, Wiggins believes, is the "whole-part" approach that John Wooden used so effectively coaching UCLA basketball players. "I would show them the whole thing to begin with," said Wooden. "Then I'm going to break it down into the parts and work on the individual parts and then eventually bring them together." The key is that the assessment is on the whole complex process (for example, shooting free-throws in the middle of a game, with only 30 seconds to take two shots), not the individual parts (drilling free-throws in isolation). When other teams surprised Wooden's players with unexpected moves, UCLA teams were able to apply what they knew about the game and surprise their opponents (and their coach) with creative new plays.

The second challenge is knowing *how good is good enough*. For example, the Common Core ELA standards say students must be able to write analyses "clearly and accurately" – but *how* clearly and accurately? In most states, the bar needs to be raised – as it was in New York last year, resulting in lower student scores and howls of protest. Wiggins believes this kind of recalibration must happen across the board so the grades students get from their teachers and from state assessments align with Common Core and NAEP levels.

"I'm not saying we should hold kids to absurdly high standards or give them only endless bad news," he says. "I am saying that we must provide valid feedback early and often. Knowing that you're a novice who's a long way from true mastery is not inherently debilitating. On the contrary, having a worthy, far-off goal and tracking your progress in closing the gap are key to mastery in all walks of life… We owe each student the facts as to where he or she fits in terms of wider-world standards."

Where the rubber meets the road, says Wiggins, is the quality of the tests teachers give their students each week and the way those assessments are graded. "If local tests are less rigorous than state and national tests, and if teachers' scoring and grading of student work reflect only local norms and not wider-world standards, then the school is *not* standards-based." To ease the transition, he proposes that teachers might give letter grades for their assessments based on local standards and then, twice a year, give tests keyed to national norms and graded on national criteria.

In a sidebar, Wiggins suggests several websites that have sample test items measuring wider-world mastery:

• Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessments: www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/testitems.html
• New Zealand Ministry of Education: http://assessment.tki.org/nz/Assessment-tools-resources/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum-Exemplars
• New Zealand Qualifications Authority: www.nzqa.govt.nz/qualifications-standards/qualifications/ncea
• Alberta, Canada Assessment and Qualifications Alliance: www.aqa.org.uk/exams-administration/exams-guidance/find-past-papers-and-mark-schemes

"How Good Is Good Enough? by Grant Wiggins in *Educational Leadership*, December 2013 (Vol. 71, #4, p. 10-16), http://bit.ly/1feRTGI; Wiggins is at gwiggins@authenticeducation.org.

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2. What Does the Research Say About Students Evaluating Their Teachers?

In this important article in *Review of Educational Research*, Pieter Spooren, Bert Brockx, and Dimitri Mortelmans (University of Antwerp) report on their meta-analysis of recent research on student evaluations of college instructors. In the higher-education world, student surveys are the most common measure of teaching quality – in some cases, the only measure. Students' opinions are easy to gather, and students can be seen as the most important stakeholders to ask – as Peter Seldin puts it, "the opinions of those who eat the dinner should be considered if we want to know how it tastes." (1993)

Student evaluation of teaching can potentially serve three purposes, say Spooren, Brockx, and Mortelmans:

- Feedback to improve the quality of teaching;
- Evaluative information on instructors for tenure and promotion decisions;
- Quality assurance and evidence of institutional accountability to outside stakeholders.

There's always been tension between the formative and summative aspects of student evaluations – improving teaching versus decisions on instructors' professional careers. The key

question in either case, but especially the latter, is the validity and reliability of students' opinions of their teachers. So are student surveys valid and reliable?

Answering that question is complicated, say Spooren, Brockx, and Mortelmans, because a number of factors affect the quality of student surveys:

• *How they are seen* – Evaluations have been called "happy forms," "personality contests," and measures of "customer satisfaction." If students don't have a sense that their feedback will be taken seriously, they may not be careful and thoughtful as they fill out the forms. There can also be a "halo effect," with students who give high ratings in one area giving high ratings in others.

• *Survey quality* – Some student questionnaires are poorly worded and haven't been tested for their psychometric properties.

• *Common conceptual framework* – If students and instructors don't have a shared understanding of what constitutes effective teaching, the impact of survey results can be suboptimal.

• *Anonymity* - When students are able to submit their opinions anonymously (which is almost universally the case), does that lead to depersonalizing the relationship between instructors and students? In anonymous surveys, students' opinions "disappear without a trace" into the aggregate data, say the authors, and there's rarely a space for "discussing, explaining, or negotiating the results with students."

• *Electronic versus paper questionnaires* – Response rates are much lower when students fill out surveys online (29% versus 70% in one study), but results are comparable and online surveys tend to generate longer and more thoughtful comments.

• *Interpretation and use* – Making meaning of survey results is more difficult than it looks, say the authors, and there's the risk of inappropriate use by administrators if guidelines and training aren't in place.

• *Faculty reactions* – Most instructors care about their students' opinions and are anxious when receiving them. Many faculty members are not aware of the positive research on student evaluations, and the less they know, the more they believe a number of persistent myths. Most faculty members don't find students' comments very helpful and/or ignore the feedback.

• *Gaming the system* – Some instructors focus on trying to improve their student-evaluation scores rather than using students' feedback to improve their teaching – for example, grading more leniently or giving less-rigorous assignments.

What were the findings of this meta-analysis? First, that the data from student surveys tend to be highly stable over time, indicating that students in different courses in different years are identifying important common themes about each teacher's work.

Second, there is a positive correlation between student survey results and other measures of teaching quality – for example, student learning outcomes, self-ratings, and alumni ratings. The most rigorous analysis would compare student evaluations with class test averages, common tests in multiple-section courses, pre- and post-tests, monitoring achievement in future classes, and using standardized assessments.

Third, instructors tend not to use students' feedback to reflect on and improve their teaching. This explains why, over time, student surveys have not led to improvements in teaching. Student survey results are much more likely to have a positive impact when instructors self-assess and look at the data with a colleague, administrator, or expert observer. (However, teachers with lower ratings tend to overestimate what students will say, and teachers with higher ratings tend to underestimate.)

Finally, the results of official student surveys correlate quite well with unofficial RateMyProfessor-type websites, but the authors say that "student evaluations from these websites should be interpreted with great caution." Why? Because of selection bias (students who use them tend to have very strong positive or negative opinions) and unscientific data, including opinions on teachers' "hotness" and "sexiness." The authors also caution against using any student survey data as a sole criterion for evaluating instructors.

"On the Validity of Student Evaluation of Teaching: The State of the Art" by Pieter Spooren, Bert Brockx, and Dimitri Mortelmans in *Review of Educational Research*, December 2013 (Vol. 83, #4, p. 598-642), http://rer.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/08/12/0034654313496870.abstract

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3. Problems with Annual Evaluations

"I don't know many people who look forward to performance evaluations – on the giving or the receiving side," says Phyllis Korkki in this column in the business section of *The New York Times*. Here are several reasons behind the dread:

• Evaluating a star performer in a previous managerial job, Korkki felt obligated to note at least one area for improvement. "I saw him bristle as I mentioned his flaw," she says, "and I wondered if that one criticism overshadowed all the praise."

• Managers are often told there should be no surprises when poor performers get their end-of-year reviews. But it's understandable for bosses to procrastinate and shy away from bringing up bad news. As a result, problems tend to simmer below the surface till they explode at evaluation time.

• For many workers, performance evaluation is "this weird form you fill out every year that has nothing to do with everyday life," says Stanford professor Robert Sutton. "If performance evaluations were a drug, they would not receive F.D.A. approval [because] they have so many side effects, and so often they fail."

• Ranking employees can have negative effects, says Korkki. The most extreme application of this approach was Jack Welch's "rank and yank" policy when he was CEO at General Electric: the top 20 percent of employees received bonuses, the middle 70 percent were coached on ways they could improve, and the bottom 10 percent were fired. Opponents of this approach say it penalizes managers who are successful at getting all employees to perform well – they still have to fire the bottom 10 percent and many deserving high-performers aren't rewarded. Ranking also undermines collaboration – in fact, it can even lead employees to sabotage one another to score higher in the ranking. At Microsoft, employees complained for

years about how performance ranking discouraged teamwork, and the company recently discontinued the policy.

• On the other hand, a super-egalitarian approach to evaluation can also have negative effects. "Few things are as demotivating to a workforce as seeing poor performance tolerated and exceptional performance ignored," says Jon Picoult, head of a Connecticut consulting company.

A better approach, says Sutton, is to provide continuous feedback and save formal evaluations for those who are not performing well – and those being eyed for promotion. Managers at Adobe have adopted this approach, conducting a series of medium-stakes check-in conversations during the year in which subordinates get feedback on their work.

"Invasion of the Annual Reviews" by Phyllis Korkki in *The New York Times*, Nov. 24, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/jobs/invasion-of-the-annual-reviews.html?_r=0

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4. Asking Job Applicants About Their Philosophy of Teaching

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Leonard Cassuto (Fordham University) says that asking applicants for college teaching positions to submit a philosophy of teaching is a waste of everyone's time. "Most of the teaching philosophies I've read have ranged from forgettable to terrible," says Cassuto. For hiring committees, they are "some of the most tiresome reading that academe has to offer (and that's saying something)… Who ever heard of someone with fewer than five years of experience at a job having a 'philosophy' of how to perform it?... Who ever heard of young people having a well-thought-out philosophy of anything?"

Those who defend asking for such statements say it's a useful exercise for applicants, even if they haven't developed a full-blown philosophy. Cassuto disagrees: It's what writing teachers call a "bad prompt," and bad prompts "produce bad writing from good writers." That's because candidates for teaching positions don't really know what's being asked. "Asking for a 'teaching philosophy' (or a 'teaching statement') drops a grand piano of expectations out the window onto the applicant's head," he says. "It throws them into unfamiliar terrain that doesn't allow them to show their skills. They try to embrace the task, but they can't get their arms around it so their attempts look mechanical, even clumsy."

A better question for teaching candidates would be grounded in the particulars we want to see them perform on the job. How about asking for an annotated course syllabus for the course they will teach? The annotations would explain the sequence of assignments, the reason for assigning particular readings, and the general rationale for the plan. This would allow them "to talk about their teaching in a way that they – and we – can understand and learn something from. And let's allow them to delay becoming philosophers until they have at least a grey hair or two."

"What's Your Teaching Philosophy? It's Time to Overhaul a Foolish Job-Application Requirement" by Leonard Cassuto in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dec. 6, 2013 (Vol.

LX, #14, p. A30), http://chronicle.com/article/Whats-Your-Teaching/143315?cid=megamenu; Cassuto can be reached at lcassuto@erols.com.

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5. The Impact of Retention in First Grade on Parents' Expectations

In this *American Educational Research Journal* article, Jan Hughes, Oi-Man Kwok, and Myung Hee Im (Texas A&M University) report on their comparison of 118 ethnically diverse, at-risk first graders who were retained, compared to similar first graders who were not retained. In their repeat year in first grade, retained students felt more cognitively competent, and teachers had similarly positive perceptions.

However, parents of retained students had lower expectations of their children, and these lower expectations continued into the following year. The researchers speculate that this difference in perceptions was because retained students and their teachers were looking at cognitive competence compared to first graders who were a year younger than the retained students, whereas parents were outside the classrooms and responding to the stigma of retention.

"The negative effect of retention on parent educational expectations at Year 2 in turn has a negative effect on reading and math achievement as well as on children's perceived cognitive competences," say Hughes, Kwok, and Hee. "In the case of cognitive competence and behavioral engagement, this decrease in parent expectations reduces the magnitude of the positive direct effect of retention on these outcomes… Because parental influences on children are not limited to a given year but persist across years and because parent expectations are strongly stable across years…, the downward adjustment in expectations in response to grade retention may have enduring negative effects on children's perceived competence, behavioral engagement, and achievement."

"Effect of Retention in First Grade on Parents' Educational Expectations and Children's Academic Outcomes" by Jan Hughes, Oi-Man Kwok, and Myung Hee Im in *American Educational Research Journal*, December 2013 (Vol. 50, #6, p. 1336-1359), http://aer.sagepub.com/content/50/6/1336.abstract; Hughes is at jhughes@tamu.edu.

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6. The Impact of Retention on Other Students' Attendance

In this troubling *American Educational Research Journal* article, Michael Gottfried (Loyola Marymount University) reports on a study of the impact of retained students on their classmates' absences. Analyzing a longitudinal database of elementary students in a large urban district, Gottfried found that classmates of retained students had higher rates of unexcused absences than students whose classes had fewer or no retained students. He believes this means that retained students have a spillover effect on the level of disengagement among their classmates. "The results suggested a pervasive negative effect of a greater percentage of retained classmates," says Gottfried. He advocates for further research on the mix of students in classrooms and other factors to support what he calls "protective classroom environments."

"Retained Students and Classmates' Absences in Urban Schools" by Michael Gottfried in *American Educational Research Journal*, December 2013 (Vol. 50, #6, p. 1392-1423), http://aer.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/08/01/0002831213498810.abstract; the author can be reached at mgottfri@lmu.edu.

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7. Infusing Career Orientation in the Middle-School Curriculum

In this *American Educational Research Journal* article, Michael Woolley (University of Maryland) and Roderick Rose, Dennis Orthner, Patrick Akos, and Hinckley Jones-Sanpei (University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill) report on their study of CareerStart, a program aimed at helping middle-school teachers make course content more career-relevant for their students. The program was implemented in seven of 14 middle schools in a diverse district of 3,295 students and followed over three years. Lessons in core curriculum areas are available online for grades 6-8 at this website: http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/careerstart-grade6 (for grades 7 and 8, substitute those numbers for the last number in this URL).

The result: CareerStart brought about significant gains in students' math performance but had no effect on reading performance. The researchers attributed the gains in math (versus reading) to the more direct curriculum links to math and science careers.

"Advancing Academic Achievement Through Career Relevance in the Middle Grades: A Longitudinal Evaluation of CareerStart" by Michael Woolley, Roderick Rose, Dennis Orthner, Patrick Akos, and Hinckley Jones-Sanpei in *American Educational Research Journal*, Dec. 2013 (Vol. 50, #6, p. 1309-1335), http://aer.sagepub.com/content/50/6/1309.abstract; Woolley can be reached at mwoolley@ssw.umaryland.edu.

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8. What Constitutes Rigor in High-School AP Courses?

In this *American Educational Research Journal* article, Walter Parker, Jane Lo, Angeline Jude Yeo, Sheila Valencia, Diem Nguyen, Robert Abbott, Susan Nolen, John Bransford, and Nancy Vye (University of Washington) report on their comparison of traditional Advanced Placement U.S. Government and Politics courses and more project-based courses on the same content in 12 classrooms in four high schools. Their conclusion: the traditional AP course "emphasizes fast, superficial learning at the expense of meaningful learning, which is problematic because meaningful learning appears to increase the likelihood of adaptive transfer… We believe that gearing advanced high-school courses on government and politics toward depth of understanding, engagement, and adaptive expertise rather than bare-bones test prep actually matters. It matters not only for student learning but also for democratic institutions such as independent judiciary, checks and balances, and equality under the law. These institutions require agents – citizens – for their maintenance and invigoration. The AP platform places severe limits on this aim by packing too much curriculum into a single course and then capping it with a high-stakes, breadth-oriented exam."

"Beyond Breadth-Speed-Test: Toward Deeper Knowing and Engagement in an Advanced Placement Course" by Walter Parker, Jane Lo, Angeline Jude Yeo, Sheila Valencia, Diem Nguyen, Robert Abbott, Susan Nolen, John Bransford, and Nancy Vye in *American Educational Research Journal*, December 2013 (Vol. 50, #6, p. 1424-1459), http://aer.sagepub.com/content/50/6/1424.abstract; Parker can be reached at denver@uw.edu.

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9. Should Objectives Be Posted in Classrooms?

In this blog post, Grant Wiggins comments on administrators requiring teachers to post daily objectives on the wall, sometimes in the name of UbD-type backwards design of curriculum units. Some schools take it a step further: when students are asked what standard they're working on, they chorus, "We're working on ELA Standard B.2.a.i."

"This gets it all backwards," says Wiggins. "The posting is the means; the end is understanding of the meaning of the work and a way to stay on track… The aim is to ensure that students understand goals and how current activities support those goals. Ideally, then, students have perspective and see the value of the work; they understand the *why* of the current work in order to find it more meaningful and to facilitate purposeful learning, and they have a touchstone for gauging progress (and thus use of time)."

The best test of posting goals on the wall is whether students can answer questions like, *Why are we doing this? Why does it matter? and How does it connect to previous work?* If students respond, "I dunno" or "Ask the teacher," it's not a good sign – and it doesn't validate the efficacy of the sign on the wall. [Far better to have provocative, well-crafted unit Essential Questions on the wall and frequently refer to them as the unit unfolds.]

"Mandating the Daily Posting of Objectives, and Other Dumb Ideas" by Grant Wiggins http://grantwiggins.wordpress.com/2013/12/05/mandating-the-daily-posting-of-objectives-and-other-dumb-ideas/, Dec. 5, 2013

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 43 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 64 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year).

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief/Public Education NewsBlast
Better Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
ED Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update/Curriculum Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle School Journal
NASSP Journal
NJEA Review
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Wharton Leadership Digest