Marshall Memo 1049

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 19, 2024

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"I'm not afraid of storms, for I'm learning how to sail my ship."
Louisa May Alcott

"It took becoming a student again and being in that vulnerable space to fully realize the learning difficulties that our own students can face and the many aspects of their lives we can't know."
Michael Huntington (see item #2)

"Leading questions can ruin a feedback conversation fast."
Justin Baeder (see item #1)

"Clear is kind."
Brené Brown (quoted in *ibid*.)

"Routine, low-stakes writing should be part of every student's literacy diet."
Paige Tutt (see item #6)

"For all of us, language learning is a gym for the brain."
Mark Vanhoenacker (see item #7)

"Always be ready for nobody to have done the reading."
Matthew Kay (see item #4)

1. Helpful Dialogues with Teachers After Short Classroom Visits

"Leading questions can ruin a feedback conversation fast," says Justin Baeder in this *Principal Center* article – for example, *So, how could you get students to listen better when you're giving instructions?* With a leading question, the criticism is indirect (*Hey, why didn't you do X?*), but the teacher knows what's going on – a judgment is still there and the conversation gets off on the wrong foot. It's implied that:

- The teacher didn't think of doing what the supervisor has in mind.
- The teacher *should* have thought of it.
- The teacher needs to justify *why*.

It's easy to see why teachers often hear leading questions as an insult to their intelligence.

"As instructional leaders," says Baeder, "we can't sidestep uncomfortable conversations and still help teachers improve." With mediocre or ineffective teaching practices, he believes Brené Brown's maxim is apt: *Clear is kind,* and conversely, *Unclear is unkind*.

With the example above, the conversation might start with a description of the problem as the supervisor sees it: *I noticed that when you began giving directions, many of your students were talking, and you didn't stop to make sure you had everyone's attention before continuing*. The next step is to check in with the teacher, using an open-ended question on their thought process at that moment in the lesson. Depending on what the teacher says, the supervisor might offer specific suggestions or arrange for a visit from the school's instructional coach.

Here's another example of indirect feedback: *Hey, did you think about reviewing the vocabulary you pre-taught before starting on the shared reading?* A better approach: *So I noticed that you were doing a shared reading with some pretty difficult vocabulary today, and I know you've done some pre-teaching of that vocabulary. Talk to me about what you've done up to this point, and how that…* In the ensuing conversation, the supervisor might learn that the teacher *did* review the vocabulary, that they didn't (but for a good reason), or some other scenario.

"Changing teacher practice takes many conversations over time," says Baeder, "and that means getting into classrooms every day. He recommends visits that are brief (5-15 minutes), substantive (versus mere compliance), open-ended (not narrow data collection), centered on what actually happens in each classroom, linked to a shared set of expectations, and always followed by a face-to-face conversation with each teacher.

"In any feedback conversation," Baeder continues, "we may need to shift flexibly between one or more of three roles:"

- Coach – Using reflective feedback to try to change teachers' thinking.
- Leader – Asking about teaching conditions to get insights into how to improve the context of teaching and learning.
- Boss – Giving directive feedback to improve on mediocre or ineffective practices.

Baeder suggests these possible questions to kick off feedback conversations, each focusing on something specific that was observed:

- Context – *I noticed that you… Could you talk to me about how that fits within this lesson or unit?*
- Perception – *Here's what I saw students doing… What were you thinking was happening at that point?*
- Interpretation – *At one point in the lesson, it seemed like… What was your take?*
- Decision – *Tell me about when you… What went into that choice?*
- Comparison – *I noticed that students… How did that compare with what you had expected to happen when you planned the lesson?*
- Antecedent – *I noticed that… Could you tell me about what led up to that, perhaps in an earlier session?*
- Adjustment – *I saw that… What did you think of that, and what do you plan to do tomorrow?*
- Intuition – *I noticed that… How did you feel about how that went?*
- Alignment – *I noticed that… What links do you see to our instructional framework?*
- Impact – *What effect did you think it had when you…?*

"How to Avoid Leading Questions in Feedback Conversations" by Justin Baeder in *The Principal Center*, August 7, 2024; Baeder can be reached at justin@principalcenter.com.

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2. A High-School Teacher Walks in Students' Shoes

In this article in *Independent School*, Colorado math teacher Michael Huntington describes engaging in an unconventional PD experience last year: he enrolled as a student in an AP Physics C class at his school and somehow fit it into his regular teaching schedule. He'd never taken the course when he was in high school, was curious about how students used mathematics in a challenging science class, and wanted to learn more about physics. "As I put myself in the position of a learner," says Huntington, "I saw anew the struggle students face in learning new material, and it was much different from my own student days."

The first challenge was not multitasking when he was supposed to be paying attention. "It took all my willpower to not check e-mail during class," he says, "and eventually, I stopped taking my laptop altogether." But for the first few weeks things went well; he kept up with the homework, asked good questions, and aced the first test.

But then the material got more challenging and Huntington found it hard to study at home with young children around. He couldn't take advantage of after-school physics help time, fell behind, and stopped trying as hard. "I didn't ask questions when I was stuck," he

says, “and I didn’t go back to material I knew I didn’t understand. I have seen my own students do this exact same thing, and here I was doing it, too.”

On the next test, he did so poorly he didn’t want to turn it in to the teacher. He was embarrassed that he, a PhD in mathematics, was struggling, that he needed to ask so many questions, that he needed to study so much. Huntington realized he was ashamed to reveal his misunderstandings and weaknesses – that he hadn’t yet placed himself “in the mindset of a learner.”

Finally he had a frank talk with the physics teacher, who “simply listened with empathy – no reminders about growth mindset, no pep talk, and no judgments.” Being heard and understood, and establishing a relationship with the teacher, was all it took to pull out of the doom loop. Huntington recommitted to the class, put in the necessary study time, asked questions in class, and looked over previous tests to see what he hadn’t mastered.

Meanwhile, in one of his own math classes, he noticed that a struggling student was avoiding coming for after-school help and wondered if this student was going through the same process. He spoke to the student, sharing his own experience in AP Physics, and the student started showing up for extra help and improved. “As teachers,” says Huntington, “ how often have we thought that a student who needed help and didn’t come in was just lazy? Or if a student wasn’t asking questions or engaged in class, we assumed they were not interested and were not willing to do the work… It took becoming a student again and being in that vulnerable space to fully realize the learning difficulties that our own students can face and the many aspects of their lives we can’t know.”

“Trading Places” by Michael Huntington in *Independent School*, Spring 2024 (Vol. 83, #3, pp. 51-53); Huntington can be reached at michael.huntington@coloradoacademy.org.

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3. Committing Students’ Names to Memory At the Beginning of the Year

In this *Edutopia* article, Rae Merrigan, who has taught in several countries, says her goal each year is to learn all students’ names within the first week. She’s especially attuned to this task because lots of people get her name wrong, pronouncing it Ree or with two syllables. When people do this, it makes her feel “unnoticed and unvalued,” and she imagines the same is true for students when teachers say their names wrong, or don’t make the effort to learn them.

Memorizing 125 or more names is daunting to some teachers, especially those who believe they’re “hopeless with names.” For starters, says Merrigan, get rid of that fixed mindset. “Like any skill, learning names takes practice and the right strategies,” she says. “Model humility with your students. You’ll likely make some mistakes, and that’s OK. Be explicit about the strategies you’re using; this helps students develop their own memory skills.” Here are the tricks she’s picked up:

• *Practice saying names out loud*. Once you’ve done an icebreaker activity and students have their names on paper “tents” at their desks, walk around the room saying each name just loud enough for you to hear it.

• *Use retrieval*. As you move around the class during a learning activity, test yourself on the names within each group. At the end of class, have students line up in a different sequence and test yourself again, asking students not to help you out as you struggle to remember some names. Cognitive research has shown that when we struggle successfully to retrieve a memory, it sticks better, and when we're unsuccessful, it alerts us to what we haven't learned yet.

• *Make it fun*. Have students stand in a circle and toss a soft object to another person, saying their name before throwing. As the game proceeds, the object is tossed to everyone in the circle and the pace is picked up; perhaps a second object is added.

• *Make it visual*. Have students create a folded paper name tent on their desks with a drawing of something that starts with the same letter as their name (for example, rainbows for Rae). A visual association helps commit names to memory.

• *Make it meaningful*. Ask students to share the origin of their names and make two-minute presentations to the class, which helps everyone learn names and know more about each person.

• *Say it right*. One strategy that's helpful with unfamiliar names and pronunciations is having each student use Padlet to record a ten-second video in which they pronounce their name slowly and clearly, provide a rhyme, and say how it's not pronounced – for example, *My name is Rae, it rhymes with day, just like Ray Charles. My name is not Re-ah or Ry.* The teacher can watch these videos as often as necessary, and the videos can be uploaded to the school's learning management system to help all staff with correct pronunciation.

"5 Tips for Learning Students' Names" by Rae Merrigan in *Edutopia*, August 5, 2024

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4. What Should Teachers Do When Students Don't Do the Reading?

(Originally titled "Adapting Discussions to Unpredictable Attendance")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Philadelphia high-school teacher Matthew Kay says that early in his career, he taught at a school with very uneven student attendance. "So every day and every discussion," he says, "had to make sense within the context of a single class period."

In Kay's current school, student attendance is better, and he uses quizzes to hold kids accountable for doing their homework. But even students who did the reading may have done it while multitasking, half awake, or wolfing down lunch just before class. The lesson Kay learned in his first school has stuck with him: *Always be ready for nobody to have done the reading*. He believes in a level playing field for class discussions: even students who didn't do the reading should have a chance to participate and learn. Besides, he says, "Everyone could always use a review."

One approach is reading the most important passage aloud, as dramatically as possible. Year after year, when his classes get to the *Lord of the Flies* scene where Simon dies, students who swear they did the reading gasp, "Wait, they *ate* him!" Now they're engaged.

Another approach is giving a quick summary of the reading with a little "selling" of its importance. It's tempting to ask questions about the reading, but that can produce awkward silences and a passive-aggressive dynamic in which students punish an over-eager teacher. "Again, what's the point?" asks Kay. "Just tell them what happened! Now we can ask our interesting prompts and get going."

"Adapting Discussions to Unpredictable Attendance" by Matthew Kay in *Educational Leadership*, July 2024 (Vol. 81, #9, online only); Kay can be reached at mrkay@notlight.com.

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5. Adding Social Justice Content to Math Textbook Problems

In this 2015 article from *Mathematics Teaching in the Middle School* (highlighted in the current issue of *Mathematics Teacher*), Ksenija Simic-Muller (Pacific Lutheran University) suggests four areas in which math textbook problems on proportional reasoning can be modified to include issues of social justice – areas in which students might have opinions, sparking higher engagement:

• Population growth:
- Original problem: Does the population growth from 1,000 to 2,000 people have the same implications (social, economic, and so on) for a community as a growth from 100,000 to 101,000? Explain.
- Modified problem: Between 2000 and 2010, the population of Tacoma grew from 193,556 to 198,397, whereas the population of Olympia grew from 42,514 to 46,478. Both cities grew by 4,000-5,000 people. Does this growth have the same impact on both cities? Explain.
- What changed: Real numbers from real cities, a more mathematically complex problem, and lots to discuss about the implications for the cities.

• Crime rates:
- Original problem: In 2000, City A, with a population of 55,489, reported 214 violent crimes. In the same year, City B, with a population of 185,217, reported 639 violent crimes. Which city has the worse crime rate? Explain your answer in one sentence.
- Modified problem: In 2010, there were 471 violent crimes in King County and 335 violent crimes in Thurston County. King County had 1,931,249 inhabitants and Thurston County had 252,264. If we consider only violent crimes to determine community safety, which county was safer and why?
- What changed: Real data, more-complex mathematics, and couching the issue in more personal terms: which was safer?

• Race and Congress:
- Original problem: Find the distribution of 1,000 delegates that is representative of the U.S. population.
- Modified problem: Compare the racial and ethnic composition of the current U.S. Congress with one that would equitably represent the U.S. population (a table provides

the number of each racial group and the current numbers of each in the U.S. House and Senate).

- What changed: From solving proportions to comparing ratios and percentages, shifting from hypothetical to actual figures, and highlighting an equity issue in U.S. politics.

• Immigration:

- Original problem: Given a table showing U.S. immigration data from 1820 to 2000 and a table of total population each year, make two separate line graphs, one showing total immigration numbers, the other showing the rate per 1000 population. Describe the key message of each graph. Which do you think gives a "better" comparison of immigration to the U.S.? Why?
- Discussion: The original problem can spark a good discussion because it begs the question of what "better" means.

"Social Justice and Proportional Reasoning" by Ksenija Simic-Muller in *Mathematics Teaching in the Middle School*, October 2015 (Vol. 21, #3, pp. 162-168); Simic-Muller can be reached at simicmka@plu.edu.

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6. Prompts to Get Students Doing Informal Writing

"Routine, low-stakes writing should be part of every student's literacy diet," says Paige Tutt in *Edutopia*. "The goal is to help students feel empowered to communicate ideas clearly and convincingly, while increasing their confidence as writers in preparation for longer, high-stakes writing."

For this kind of informal writing and subsequent class discussions, the quality of prompts is important. Here are some suggestions (click the article link for more).

Elementary school:

- I wish my teacher knew…
- What is one thing you would do to make your school, town, or city a better place?
- If you met an alien, what three questions would you ask?
- I will never forget the day…

Middle school:

- What do the friends you hang out with have in common? How are you like them? Different from them?
- What contributes to someone being a bully?
- Describe a flavor (salty, sweet, bitter…) to someone who has never tasted it before.
- What would you like to tell adults in the future about being a young person now?

High school:

- You're hired to decide how best to use $20 billion to save the world. What's your plan?
- How much control over your life do you have? What makes you say that?
- What are three of your most profound learning experiences? Where and when did they occur?

- Pick two characters from different books you've read this year and have them get in an argument about something.

"54 Excellent, Low-Stakes Writing Prompts" by Paige Tutt in *Edutopia*, August 2, 2024

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7. The Joys of Learning Another Language

In this *New York Times* article, airline pilot Mark Vanhoenacker describes how easy it was for him to use an app to get a translation of a sign in a Japanese garden. Which raises the question: "With this magic at our fingertips, is the study of foreign languages now pointless?" There is certainly some uptake on that idea: only one in five U.S. high-school students are enrolled in world language courses, and in colleges world language departments have fewer and fewer students.

Vanhoenacker pushes back. "Foreign languages are more rewarding than ever," he says, "in part because technology has made them easier than ever to learn… New digital tools help us fit language learning into daily life."

He fell in love with learning languages growing up in rural western Massachusetts, and during a 1991 homestay in Japan he began to master Japanese. Vanhoenacker is now an apostle for the value of language learning, citing studies on how it enhances memory, creativity, concentration, and academic achievement. "For all of us," he says, "language learning is a gym for the brain."

Beyond those benefits, and the pleasure he gets from chatting in Japanese with passengers on his planes, Vanhoenacker loves the unique features of each language. English has words like *sheet*, which describes a variety of flat, thin items like paper, pastry, or metal. "But Japanese has hundreds of these words," he says, "including *hon* for long, thin things such as pencils, river, and flights, and *rin* for flowers and attached – as opposed to unattached – wheels… A Japanese speaker might describe snowflakes falling *hara hara* – twirling down like petals – or *shin shin* – steadily on a cold night." Subtleties like these can never be captured by translation apps.

"What Google Translate Can't Give Us" by Mark Vanhoenacker in *The New York Times*, July 21, 2024

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8. Recommended Books on Middle-School Relationships

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Laura Dooley-Taylor recommends books about tween relationships, in all their drama and complexity:

- *The Science of Friendship* by Tanita Davis, grade 3-7
- *Honey and Me* by Meira Drazin, grade 5-8
- *Maya Plays the Part* by Calyssa Erb, grade 3-7
- *Other Side of Perfect* by Melanie Florence and Richard Scrimger, grade 4-8

- *Match Point!* by Maddie Gallegos, grade 4-7
- *Table Titans Club* by Scott Kurtz, grade 5-8
- *Walkin' the Dog* by Chris Lynch, grade 5-8
- *Blue to the Sky* by Sylvia McNicoll, grade 5-7
- *Running in Flip-Flops from the End of the World* by Justin Reynolds, grade 3-7
- *Grounded* by Aisha Saeed, Huda Al-Marashi, & Jamila Thompkins-Bigelow, grade 5-8
- *Eli Over Easy* by Phil Stamper, grade 5-8
- *Free Period* by Ali Terese, grade 4-7
- *The Braid Girls* by Sherri Winston, grade 3-7
- *Summer At Squee* by Andrea Wang, grade 3-7

"Break-Ups and Make-Ups: 14 Books That Tackle Tween Friendships" by Laura Dooley-Taylor in *School Library Journal*, August 2024 (Vol. 70, #8, pp. 48-51)

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9. Short Items:

a. A James Baldwin Tribute – In this New York Times piece, author Robert Jones Jr. pays tribute to James Baldwin, who would have turned 100 on August 2nd. Jones provides a short appreciation of six books: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *Sonny's Blues* (1957), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *The Devil Finds Work* (1976).

"The Essentials: James Baldwin" by Robert Jones Jr. in *The New York Times*, August 4, 2024

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b. A Study on Flashcard Retrieval Practice – In a study of second graders memorizing multiplication facts, researchers found that using retrieval practice via flashcards was an effective strategy.

"The Effect of Retrieval Practice on Fluently Retrieving Multiplication Facts in an Authentic Elementary School Setting" by Fieke Ophuis-Cox, Leen Catrysse, and Gio Camp in *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, October 2023, spotted in *Independent School*, Spring 2024.

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c. A Counterintuitive Finding on College Applications – This study showed that when high-achieving college applicants looked at Naviance data (a widely available online tool that reports college acceptance rates for graduates from specific high schools correlated with their academic performance), applicants were more likely to undermatch – that is, apply to less-selective colleges. This shows how information on college competitiveness can lead to unintended consequences if it's not understood well.

"Showing High-Achieving College Applicants Past Admissions Outcomes Increases Undermatching" by Sabrina Tomkins, Joshua Grossman, Lindsay Page, and Sharad Goel in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, October 2023, spotted in *Independent Schoo*l, Spring 2024.

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d. An Anonymous Student Survey on Absenteeism – This *Educational Leadership* sidebar includes a questionnaire (from a book by Jessica Sprick and Tricia Berg) designed to uncover reasons students are missing school. Click this link for the full list of 30 questions.

"Why Aren't Students Coming to School?" from *Teacher's Guide to Tackling Attendance Challenges* (2019) by Jessica Sprick and Tricia Berg, in *Educational Leadership*, July 2024

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If you have feedback or suggestions, 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 other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 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). Every week there's a podcast and HTMI version as well.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education