Marshall Memo 1022

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 5, 2024

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"The stigma attached to mental health challenges is a product of our judgmental minds. People tend to judge negatively what they don't understand. That judgment leads to avoidance, which reinforces negativity and further blocks understanding."

Juan-Diego Estrada and Steven Popp in "4 Pillars of School Mental Health" in *Educational Leadership*, February 2024 (Vol. 81, #5, pp. 32-37)

"Remember, the minute a student is feeling publicly shamed or humiliated, you have left the learning zone."

Cheryl Blankman (see item #3)

"Kindergarten mathematics instruction is critical for students' future academic success."

Michael Gottfried, Tina Fletcher, and Meghan Comstock (see item #7)

"It is stressful to host a crucial conversation. Not having it is worse."

Dan Rockwell in "7 Tips to Succeed with Difficult Conversations" in *Leadership Freak*, February 1, 2024; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

"Get your thoughts out of your head and down on paper. Your brain feels better when it sees you writing."

Dan Rockwell (*ibid.*)

"If the goal of a data wall isn't centered around the idea of developing systems of support, as well as taking proactive measures that ensure students are closing the gap of achievement in targeted areas, then it may be time to reinvent your data wall and the way it's used to set instructional goals."

Autumn Mosby (see item #4)

1. The Perils of Historical Simulations – and a Better Approach

In this *Middle School Journal* article, Karen Burgard and Michael Boucher Jr. (Texas A&M University) and Tina Ellsworth (Northwest Missouri State University) cite recent U.S. newspaper articles that castigated teachers for having students simulate being on a slave ship, picking cotton, and taking part in a slave auction. The outcry about racially insensitive simulations has happened at the same time as a flood of legislation aimed at restricting teachers from addressing issues of race, racism, and injustice.

This is an unfortunate trend, say Burgard, Boucher, and Ellsworth, because understanding these issues is central to a good education. But they believe the way many teachers are dealing with parts of the history, social studies, and civics curriculum needs improvement – especially the use of simulations.

Video simulations and game-based virtual experiences are widely used in STEM, economic planning, and financial literacy classes. "The research regarding these types of simulations," say the authors, "tends to show positive effects on student learning, noting a higher level of student engagement and a deeper knowledge of the content and concepts."

In classes on the Revolutionary War, Ellis Island, the 1929 stock market crash, and living during the Great Depression, simulations aim to help students understand the worldview and experiences of historical figures and get a better grasp of long-ago events. Around fifth grade, many students' interest in social studies begins to wane, and teachers use simulations to get kids excited and involved in the subject matter.

Are simulations effective? Burgard, Boucher, and Ellsworth say the research doesn't show an advantage over reading primary-source documents; the impact depends on how well teachers prepare and handle classroom dynamics. Heavily scripted simulations can take away the authenticity of the play-acting, and students' lack of background knowledge can limit their takeaways to a superficial understanding of complex historical events.

With complex and traumatic events like the Trail of Tears, slavery in the American South, and the Holocaust, things are a lot trickier. Simulations are likely to treat horrific events too lightly, trivialize and dishonor the memories of victims, ask students to defend the indefensible or justify the unjustifiable, and leave students confused and in many cases demeaned and traumatized. At the same time, simulations can't capture what happened in any depth. "The students know that the simulation *isn't real*," say the authors, "and when the bell rings they will go to their next class. This type of disconnect makes it even more difficult for students to obtain the deep learning that teachers are hoping for."

Burgard, Boucher, and Ellsworth strongly advise against using simulations with topics like these. "Research does not support that these activities deepen students' historical empathy," they say, "nor help them develop a firm conviction that the actions of the characters are abhorrent and should not be repeated. Students do not need to imagine the reasons for oppression; they can read the actual slave codes or the Nuremberg laws for themselves. It is more important that students find people to emulate who have advanced human rights, advanced understanding, and created a better world. It is better to have students focus on solutions, rather than a deep dive into the pathologies that created oppression, terror, and death."

What are the alternatives for developing students' understanding of complex events and building empathy for those who positively shaped history? *Primary sources*, say Burgard, Boucher, and Ellsworth. Handled well, the actual words of people who lived decades and centuries ago can reveal their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and motivations. Teachers should get students studying oral interviews, eyewitness accounts of events, letters, journals, and newspaper articles, and also visiting museums and historical sites. Online resources from the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the National Council for the Social Studies are valuable as well.

"Reexamining the Classroom Simulation: Guidelines for Making Affirming Pedagogical Choices" by Karen Burgard, Michael Boucher Jr., and Tina Ellsworth in *Middle School Journal*, January 2024 (Vol. 55, #1, pp. 4-12); the authors can be reached at kburgard@tamusa.edu, mboucher@tamusa.edu, and tellsworth@nwmissouri.edu.

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2. How to Handle "Trigger Warnings" in High-School Classrooms

(Originally titled "Thinking Harder About 'Trigger Warnings'")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Philadelphia teacher Matthew Kay describes how trigger warnings were given before performances at citywide poetry slams a decade ago – for example, "self-harm," "abuse." Each was followed by a number of audience members standing up and leaving the auditorium, returning when the poet was finished.

Recently at Kay's high school, there's been a discussion about whether teachers should give trigger warnings before potentially disturbing topics. When Kay teaches *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, he discusses the author's treatment of death and the symbolism of the Grim Reaper. By this point in the year, Kay knows which students have recently experienced loss and pulls them aside, giving them the option to step out (they're still accountable for reading the book).

"For me," says Kay, "this illustrates the difference between a student's 'safety' and their 'comfort.' As I see it, students are owed the former. They should know that their teacher is not reckless or cavalier about their text selection, their facilitation of conversations, or any other aspect of the class. They should feel like their teacher makes a legitimate effort to know them and is willing to make reasonable adjustments based on this knowledge."

But he does not believe that students are owed "ceaseless 'comfort.'" Unlike a poetry slam, students are required to be in school, but the goal is the same – stretching students' minds. "These conversations might include uncomfortable topics like death, racism, and war," he says. "A student might very well feel a sense of discomfort as their mind either confronts new perspectives or reflects deeply on their own experience. This is, when handled well by a caring and professional teacher, called *learning*. As we all refine the mechanics of 'opting out' in our own classrooms, we must not forget this."

"Thinking Harder About 'Trigger Warnings'" by Matthew Kay in *Educational Leadership*, February 2024 (Vol. 81, #5, pp. 76-77); Kay can be reached at mrkay@notlight.com.

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3. Problems with Classroom Behavior Charts – and Some Alternatives

(Originally titled "Your Clip Chart Is Ruining Your Classroom Culture")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Cheryl Blankman (Ramapo College) says she often sees behavior clip charts in classrooms. Each student's name is on a clothespin and moved up or down a colorful display – "Ready To Learn," "Making Good Choices," and less-positive descriptors.

"Here's the problem," says Blankman: "Public shaming is public shaming, no matter how colorful and bright you make it. Managing behaviors by way of a system that puts students on display with the looming shame of being called out publicly for missteps invariably creates an environment where psychological safety cannot develop." The optimal environment for adults and students, she says, is high expectations and psychological safety – a lot is expected and it's okay to take risks and make mistakes.

But my clip chart works! say some teachers. Clips can get compliance, but "at what cost?" asks Blankman. "For students with anxiety, the worry of where they are on the clip chart can be a pervasive distraction… Students who struggle with self-regulation may find themselves frequently clipped down, knowing that everyone knows they are not meeting teacher expectations."

What's the alternative? Blankman suggests these steps, adapted from guidance issued by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs:

• *Establish shared expectations and post them*. Work with students to describe what an ideal learning environment looks like, sounds like, and feels like – including expectations for the teacher – and what happens when expectations aren't met. "Normalizing mistakes promotes psychological safety," says Blankman, "and makes it easier for students to process and learn from them when they inevitably occur."

• *Teach and model expectations*. The more explicit teachers are – using graphics, stories, non-examples, and curriculum connections – the more likely students are to internalize common expectations.

• *Pre-correct for desired behaviors*. Transitioning to an activity – group work, a project, a Socratic seminar – is a good time to go over expectations, giving just-in-time reinforcement.

• *Praise productively*. Giving students positive feedback that is timely, authentic, and action-oriented increases the chance that positive behaviors will recur.

• *Correct constructively*. Corrections "should begin with global prompts or redirections whenever possible," says Blankman. "Remember, the minute a student is feeling publicly shamed or humiliated, you have left the learning zone… When you do need to address a student's behavior individually, keep the student's dignity in the forefront. Be brief, be objective, be specific, and then be quick to acknowledge and praise any resulting effort to get back on track."

"Your Clip Chart Is Ruining Your Classroom Culture" by Cheryl Blankman in *Educational Leadership*, February 2024 (Vol. 81, #5, online); see Memos 618 and 751 for other articles on behavior charts.

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4. Making Data Walls More Than Multi-Colored Wallpaper

In this *Edutopia* article, Missouri instructional coach Autumn Mosby has strong opinions about school data walls, which typically display students' achievement levels at the Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic level in color-coded charts in a staff-only area. All too often, says Mosby, there isn't follow-up (*Now what?*) and some teachers feel publicly shamed and not supported – they already knew their students were behind!

"If the goal of a data wall isn't centered around the idea of developing systems of support," says Mosby, "as well as taking proactive measures that ensure students are closing the gap of achievement in targeted areas, then it may be time to reinvent your data wall and the way it's used to set instructional goals." She suggests these key features of an effective data wall:

- Reading and math data are broken down into specific components.
- These big ideas are the headings so deficits in proficiency are visible at a glance.
- Patterns and trends are also visually evident.

A data wall with these characteristics can spark conversations about areas that need attention and connections between domains.

Of course before data are displayed, teams have to decide on the best assessments to determine students' achievement levels in reading (decoding, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and more) and math (specific skills and conceptual understanding). Then teachers decide on the thresholds for proficiency so students can be placed at the appropriate level on the display. Mosby says that in her experience, assessments should be given three or four times a year and the data wall updated.

As the assessments are scored and student data generated, it's important to have a digital document to store the results – perhaps a color-coded Excel file – so information on students' performance levels in each domain is readily accessible to teachers and administrators. When it's time to mount the data on the wall, Mosby recommends displaying domains horizontally across the wall and grade levels vertically, with color coding at the four

proficiency levels, so the number of students at each level and each domain is clearly visible (click the article link below for an example).

This is all well and good, but without discussion and action, it's just a pretty display: "You can find yourself rich in data points," says Mosby, "but be left feeling information poor." After each round of assessments, it's vital to have grade-level and course data meetings with an instructional leader and make meaning of the data wall. What are the patterns? Where are students doing well? What can we celebrate? Where are interventions needed? What groupings of students will be most helpful? Who will work with each group? Are there areas that need schoolwide attention? Ideally everyone walks out of these data meetings with specific instructional action steps.

Why not just keep achievement data in a digital document? "Displaying the data on a physical wall," says Mosby, "holds so much more power when it comes to vertical alignment conversations among the domains, and keeps the focus of instruction at the forefront of the minds of those administering it. Maintaining a birds-eye view of student performance building-wide is critical in the goal-setting process and encourages teachers to share ideas and best practices."

This can produce a feeling of collective efficacy among teachers, she concludes – one of the research-based keys to accelerating student achievement.

"Reinventing Your School Data Wall" by Autumn Mosby in *Edutopia*, December 13, 2023

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5. Timothy Shanahan on Reading Comprehension Versus Learning

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) distinguishes between reading comprehension and learning from a text. "It's an important distinction if we seek to teach reading effectively," he says. Here are his thoughts on each:

• *Comprehension* – This is basically grasping the meaning and meaningfulness of what's read, which is important to getting it into memory. Some see teaching comprehension as mostly for the elementary grades. Before the current emphasis on reading strategies, comprehension instruction was often about having students practice answering questions about passages. The increasing emphasis on teaching reading strategies was supposed to make students active readers, applying their metacognition, practicing discrete skills (main idea, inferencing) being aware of whether they were understanding, and being able to apply the skills to new texts.

• *Learning* – Advocates of knowledge acquisition disagree with the content-agnostic approach of reading strategy instruction – the idea that it doesn't matter what students read because they can apply the strategies they learn to any text. Learning advocates emphasize the importance of high-quality texts and reading several on a topic to deepen learning. They suggest using more-effective reading strategies than answering questions or highlighting text – for example, asking yourself questions about what you've read and summarizing a text in your own words.

"Certainly," says Shanahan, "the knowledge crew is right about the importance of books worth reading. This means science and social studies texts. But it also means reading worthwhile literature (cultural touchstones), and fiction that conveys important things about the human condition (our relationships, our motivations, and so on)… Strategy advocates like these ideas, but strategy instruction can get pretty procedural, without much attention to the content."

However, says Shanahan, neither approach is paying enough attention to teaching students how to comprehend. One stresses reading skills, the other knowledge acquisition. So what are reading teachers supposed to do? Shanahan has these suggestions:

• In directed or guided reading lessons (where students read a text with the guidance and supervision of a teacher) focus on reading valuable texts from which we want students to gain important content knowledge.

• Ensure that these texts are challenging. "If kids can comprehend the text on their own," says Shanahan, "then it is not the right text for a reading lesson." A major goal in teacher-directed reading lessons is helping students "negotiate the difficulties of a text."

• Building deep knowledge requires more than just reading and answering questions. Students should read more than one text on a subject, take part in discussions, presentations, and debates, and write reports, critiques, comparisons, and analyses.

• Those who advocate teaching comprehension strategies "should get serious about what constitutes comprehension strategy," says Shanahan. One truly important skill is self-monitoring – being aware of when our eyeballs are reading but we're not understanding. "Surprisingly, many students, even college-age students, read with little understanding and do nothing about it," he says. We need to teach students what to do when they don't understand a word, when a sentence doesn't make sense, when they get confused about which character or concept is being talked about. Students need to be taught how to solve these problems on their own and develop the tenacity to persist when they are confused. And, adds Shanahan, don't allow the study strategies to distract from the content that's being learned.

Shanahan concludes with a comment on the commonly used study skill of highlighting text. Researchers have found that this is an ineffective strategy. Why? Because many students don't have enough understanding of the text to know what's important, and end up highlighting almost everything. A better approach: provide important background knowledge and teach students an important reading strategy: how to use titles, subheadings, boldfacing, graphics, and other clues authors use to structure meaning.

"I Want My Students to Comprehend; Am I Teaching the Wrong Kind of Strategies?" by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, February 3, 2024; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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6. Anticipating Algebra Difficulties in Fourth and Eighth Grades

"The struggle of students to solve algebraic equations has been identified as a major challenge in mathematics education," says Henry Borenson in this article in *Creative*

Education. Problems like these are challenging for many students in Algebra 1 classes:

$4x + 3 = 3x + 9$ $2(2x + 1) = 3x + 12$

Difficulties in eighth and ninth grade algebra classes have precursors in earlier grades, says Borenson, including confusion about:

- The equal sign – Many elementary students are used to seeing it as an operational signal that a solution is coming next, versus a relational sign saying that the total value of each side is the same.
- The meaning of a term like 4x – Is it a two-digit number written in base 10, in which case (if x is 3), it's 43? Or do we add up the numbers, in which case it's 7?
- The subtraction property of equality.
- How to distribute an expression like 2(2x + 1)

This points to the importance of pre-algebra work in the upper-elementary and early middle-school math classes to prepare students for what's coming.

But Borenson believes several commonly used strategies have not been successful, including transposition, and the subtraction property of equality taught abstractly. If students don't have a conceptual understanding of what's going on, they are performing meaningless operations and their work is full of mistakes.

One approach researchers have tried in an effort to help students solve equations is using the idea of balance with concrete materials. But if students see the manipulatives as cumbersome and more complicated than necessary, they may prefer to solve the questions mentally. A variation on this is using a 15-minute video to show objects being placed on either side of a balance scale. This method was more successful in boosting the understanding of most students – but not of those who entered the study with the lowest achievement.

The key seems to be giving students a concrete version of the balance model where they can easily manipulate the unknown and the constants and intuitively grasp the need to balance what's on both sides. Building on this insight in the 1980s, Borenson conducted a two-year research project and came up with Hands-On Equations, a series of 25 sequential lessons to help upper-elementary and middle-school students master key pre-algebra concepts.

In Borenson's model, game pieces representing weights are placed on a flat balance scale image. Students simplify the equation using "legal moves" that correspond to mathematical properties. For example, removing a blue pawn from each side of the balance corresponds to the subtraction property of equality. In the first six lessons, students use the concrete objects (click the article below for details). In the seventh lesson, students transition to pictorial representations of the solution using only paper and pencil.

In a study conducted by Borenson with 123 fourth and 105 eighth graders in a diverse group of schools, mostly in the southeast U.S., the fourth and eighth graders were all taught the first seven lessons of Hands-On Equations by teachers who had no special qualifications or preparation. On a pencil-and-paper pre-test on linear equations, eighth graders predictably scored much higher than the fourth graders. Here were some highlights on the post-tests, which were taken with and without manipulatives:

- Fourth and eighth graders did much better than on the pre-test.

- They scored at almost identical levels.
- Eighth graders gained two standard deviations over their pre-tests.
- Fourth graders gained three standard deviations over their pre-tests.
- Fourth graders' post-test scores were higher than eighth graders' pre-test scores.

"Hands-On Equations Balance Model Enhances Algebraic Equation Solving in Upper-Elementary and Middle-School Students" by Henry Borenson in *Creative Education*, August 2023 (Vol. 14, #8, pp. 1-23); Borenson can be reached at henry@borenson.com.

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7. The Quality of Math Instruction in Different Kindergarten Classrooms

"Kindergarten mathematics instruction is critical for students' future academic success," say Michael Gottfried (University of Pennsylvania), Tina Fletcher (Walton Family Foundation), and Meghan Comstock (University of Maryland/College Park) in this article in *Teachers College Record*. The authors report on their study of whether the level of math instruction in about 2,900 U.S. kindergarten classrooms in 2010-11 varied depending on students' academic level.

What did the researchers find? First, that kindergarten teachers with more students performing below grade level devoted about the same amount of time to mathematics as teachers with higher-performing students.

Second, the study found that traditional math pedagogy – doing textbook problems and worksheets and completing math problems on the chalkboard – was used to the same degree in classrooms with different levels of student achievement.

Third, the study found that having students solve math problems with a partner or in small groups was also equally common in different classrooms.

Finally, Gottfried, Fletcher, and Comstock found that teachers used "ambitious math practices" less frequently as the percentage of students performing below grade level in their classes increased. This did not vary with teachers' level of experience and their stated expectations of students.

The researchers defined ambitious practices as how often students were asked to explain how a math problem was solved. "This finding is concerning," say the researchers, "given that problem solving is highly emphasized in current mathematics standards and is one aspect of ambitious mathematics instruction called for in the mathematics education field more broadly."

Gottfried, Fletcher, and Comstock conclude: "This finding suggests that being deemed below grade level in kindergarten actually does relate to the types of instruction those students receive, which, given the association between kindergarten mathematics and future success, may set students on a trajectory of less-rigorous mathematics experiences and lower academic success. Although assessments of student performance in kindergarten may be intended to identify areas for additional support for these students, a negative ramification may be that such assessments may actually result in these students receiving fewer high-quality mathematics experiences."

"Teaching Mathematics in Kindergarten: How Does Instruction Differ by Classroom Ability?" by Michael Gottfried, Tina Fletcher, and Meghan Comstock in *Teachers College Record*, October 2023 (Vol. 125, #10, pp. 102-130); Gottfried can be reached at mgottfr2@upenn.edu.

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8. Recommended Young Adult Novels with a Different Twist

In this *English Journal* article, Saba Khan Vlach (University of Iowa) recommends prize-winning young adult books that are different from the more-common "hero's journey," where the lead character is separated from family and friends and embarks on a journey of self-discovery and comes of age. In the five books Vlach spotlights, "The protagonists… *become*, not because their family histories have been taken away or diminished in importance, but because those histories are revealed to them."

- *Maizy Chen's Last Chance* by Lisa Yee, middle grades
- *Hollow Fires* by Samira Ahmed, grade 7-12
- *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* by Jen Ferguson, grade 7 and up
- *We Deserve Monuments* by Jas Hammonds, grade 8 and up
- *All My Rage* by Sabaa Tahir, grade 8 and up

"The Honor List of 2022 Prize-Winning Young Adult Books: Family Stories in YA Literature" by Saba Khan Vlach in *English Journal*, November 2023 (Vol. 113, #2, pp. 19-24); Vlach can be reached at saba-vlach@uiowa.edu.

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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
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 Ed (formerly Ed. Magazine)
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