Marshall Memo 917

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 3, 2022

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Children are a wonderful gift. They have an extraordinary capacity to see into the heart of things and expose sham and humbug for what they are."

Desmond Tutu, who died last week at 90

"Resentment and anger are bad for your blood pressure and your digestion."

Desmond Tutu

"School was a crashing bore and a terrible chore, until one day when I was cast as the girl with the mandolin in 'Sleeping Beauty.'"

Carla Fracci, dancer, who died last year at 85

"Both of us learned to listen to our students and let our genuine curiosity fuel an environment of mutual discovery in which we became fellow learners and explorers with our students."

Neil Gupta and Douglas Reeves (see item #1)

"Students get to decide when and how to invite us in. We need to accept the invitations."

Chad Prather (see item #2)

"I believe instructional coaches can and should have expertise – they just shouldn't act like experts."

Jim Knight in "Should Coaches Be Experts?" in *Educational Leadership*, December 2021/January 2022 (Vol. 79, #4, pp. 80-81); Knight is at jimknight@mac.com.

"Bad PD is an affront to the human soul."

Dave Stuart Jr. (see item #5)

1. Finding Our Way to Genuine Student Engagement

(Originally titled "The Engagement Illusion")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Ohio district leader Neil Gupta and Douglas Reeves (Creative Leadership Solutions) say that some educators settle for the appearance of student engagement, allowing students to play what amounts to a magic trick on teachers and administrators. "Many students know how to 'play school,'" say the authors: "be quiet in class, take notes when anything is written on the board, smile, and nod now and then." An administrator observing a class without this critical awareness might be fooled by a compliant pretender – or jump to the conclusion that an intermittently disruptive student is totally uninterested in school. Gupta and Reeves list four common misconceptions about student engagement:

• *Illusion #1: The teacher as maestro*. "Teachers sometimes are led to believe that it is their job to perform for the class," say the authors, "as well as for instructional coaches and administrators who drop into the classroom," with the teacher's expertise on full display. But a clear sign of low student engagement is if students are doing less talking than the teacher. A truly engaging lesson is often noisier and messier, with students not afraid to take risks and make mistakes.

• *Illusion #2: What I'm interested in, they'll be interested in*. The authors each learned the hard way that students weren't connecting with the sports, family vacation, and cultural references being deployed. But when Gupta discovered his science students' interest in cars and racing, they eagerly used the *distance = rate x time* formula to record and analyze the speed of cars outside the classroom window, even persuading a police officer to share readings from his radar gun. "Both of us," say Gupta and Reeves, "learned to listen to our students and let our genuine curiosity fuel an environment of mutual discovery in which we became fellow learners and explorers with our students." Listening to kids' playground, lunchroom, and hallway chatter can provide key entry points for teaching and learning.

• *Illusion #3: Students learn for the sake of learning*. Many students lack teachers' intrinsic motivation and demand an answer to the perennial question, *When will I ever need to know this in life?* Some teachers invest time at the beginning of a unit to uncover prior knowledge, misconceptions, viewpoints, questions, and interests, then create thought-provoking essential questions and search for the right teaching resources.

• *Illusion #4: There's such a thing as a perfect lesson plan.* Not so, say Gupta and Reeves; teachers must adapt nimbly throughout each day, continuously searching for the right blend of challenge and support, orchestrating productive struggle, trying to guide all students to

success. No lesson plan survives contact with students, they say; by the end of the day, it's covered with "annotations, excisions, and marginal additions."

"The Engagement Illusion" by Neil Gupta and Douglas Reeves in *Educational Leadership*, December 2021/January 2022 (Vol. 79, #4, pp. 58-62); the authors can be reached at neil.gupta@creativeleadership.net and douglas.reeves@creativeleadership.net.

Back to page one

2. A Lesson on Malcolm X Fails – and Then Succeeds

(Originally titled "The Code for Student Engagement")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Nashville educator Chad Prather describes his energetic attempts to get high-school history students engaged in a lesson on Malcolm X. "He's one of the most misunderstood voices of American history," said Prather, and asked students to list up to five facts or ideas and write three questions they wanted answered. Students ignored this warm-up activity, turning to their phones and chatting; one boy's head was on his desk. "We were only minutes in," says Prather, "but the lesson was already dead."

Why? For students who didn't already know something about Malcolm X or weren't curious to learn more, there was no avenue for success. *Another thing I don't know*, they might be thinking. Also, to a student living in the here and now, the lesson didn't seem worthwhile. "Against Instagram, gossip, and sleep, all of which met very current needs, my prior-knowledge check felt inconsequential," says Prather. "With no spark, I couldn't ignite the rest of the lesson."

That evening, watching a rerun of *The Wire*, he was struck by Omar Little's statement, "A man's got to have a code." The next morning, he played a video of that scene and gave students this assignment: *What's your code? You have seven minutes to write (prose or poetry) or draw. You won't have to share, and Prather won't read anything without your invitation. You can listen to music if you have earbuds and pick your song quickly. Work silently.*

Students buckled right down, says Prather, "Pens blazing, phones away, heads bowed." Seven minutes later, they demanded more time. The boy whose head was down the day before wrote two full pages about the total lack of loyalty in his life. His code: *Trust no one*. Other students wrote deeply personal essays and some gave permission for him to read them aloud. This provided a segue to an assignment: *Malcolm X was both loved and feared. Why? What was his code? You've identified yours. Can you identify his? Do you connect with his? What would he say about yours?* Students watched a short biographical video and then did a close reading of Malcolm's final 1965 speech.

With this prologue, students understood what Prather was asking, watched the video intently, and, with some modeling and scaffolding, began annotating the speech: inferences, questions, connections. Malcolm's code became clear: *Think for yourself; don't believe everything you hear. Speak so others take you seriously. Stand up and defend yourself; don't get pushed around*. By the end of the week, most students – not all, but most – had written a persuasive essay on what Malcolm would have thought of their school's motto.

Prather draws several lessons from this success. First, "students will invest more deeply when they feel *present* in the content or components of the lesson." Second, knowing and listening to students sparks changes in pedagogy; the head-on-desk student's statement about trust inspired Prather to look for ways to "have his back" for the remainder of the year. Third, think about how to make lessons relevant to students' lives; provocative essential questions are especially helpful. Fourth, differentiate assignments so all students can succeed: "If the hurdles are way too high," says Prather, "(or way too low, for that matter), then the race becomes disrespectful." Finally, stay tuned to how students are doing and constantly adapt.

"Students get to decide when and how to invite us in," Prather concludes. "We need to accept the invitations. *Embracing* kids – understanding and accepting them – makes possible a more-compassionate pedagogy, one that *nourishes* and *guards* more authentically. Embrace. Nourish. Guard. That's my code."

"The Code for Student Engagement" by Chad Prather in *Educational Leadership*, December 2021/January 2022 (Vol. 79, #4, pp. 52-57)

Back to page one

3. Positioning English Learners for Classroom Success

In this article in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, Erin Smith (University of Southern Mississippi) describes an interaction in an algebra class. Students are sitting in groups discussing different methods for finding the roots of quadratic equations. The teacher approaches one group and asks Ahmad, a multilingual student, what the group has discussed so far. Another student, Brian, answers and the teacher responds, "What makes you say that?" Brian replies, "You can use it anytime." The teacher asks Ahmad whether he agrees, and the boy shrugs. "Are there some situations where another method might be more efficient?" asks the teacher. A third student offers, "Maybe." The teacher says, "I want your group to discuss this, and I will come back later."

A missed opportunity, says Smith. She draws on the research on *positioning*, defined as the social expectations and range of options on what a person can say and do in a given interaction. Initially, this teacher "positioned Ahmad as a leader by asking him to report on the group's discussion," says Smith, "but did little to challenge Brian as he took over the conversation." The teacher might have redirected the conversation back to Ahmad, saying, "Brian, I asked Ahmad to share," or "Ahmad, why did your group say the quadratic method is best?" Either approach would have drawn Ahmad out and provided him with authentic opportunities to use language – essential for mathematics and language learning – also showing that he was a valued student with ideas worth sharing.

Some might say, "Well, shouldn't I position every student for mathematical success?" Sure, says Smith, but it's especially important for multilingual students "because they continue to be underserved in mathematics education."

"Positioning happens all the time," says Smith, "in *every* interaction, and cannot be avoided. It happens in face-to-face interactions, on the phone, in e-mail, through books, and so on… It is not a matter of whether to position students, but *how* to position students, so they can

be mathematically successful" – but it's complex "and requires constant reflection on your discourse." She presents four research-based actions that help position multilingual students for success:

• Craft individual mathematics, language, and social-emotional goals for each EL student – for example, sharing their math thinking with the class at least three times a week, or using specific strategies to manage frustrations with math learning.

• Engage ELs in math discussions and facilitate student-to-student discourse – for example, asking a multilingual student to explain their strategy for solving a problem or complimenting a student on a strategy.

• Assign ownership for mathematical ideas to multilingual learners – for example, asking, "Who else used Halona's very good strategy?"

• Explicitly point out the valued ways multilingual learners think and act mathematically – for example, "Zora had a *really cool idea*. Can you explain your idea?"

"Positioning Multilingual Learners" by Erin Smith in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, December 2021 (Vol. 114, #12, pp. 916-925); Smith can be reached at erin.marie.smith@usm.edu.

Back to page one

4. Why Do City Teachers Leave, and Why Do They Stay?

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Andrew Brantlinger (University of Maryland) reports on his study of the career trajectories of math teachers in the New York City Teaching Fellows program. This selective alternate certification program recruits and trains career changers, career seekers, and recent college graduates and places them in hard-to-staff city schools.

Brantlinger found a high rate of attrition: nine years after entering the program, only 35 percent of two cohorts of Teaching Fellows he studied were still working in New York City public schools; of those, some were still in the classroom, some were teacher leaders, some administrators. Other former Teaching Fellows remained in education, with 20-25 percent in another public or private K-12 setting. Another 10 percent were in roles in the broader education sector, such as nonprofit and philanthropic organizations. Others were in graduate school, left education, or had left the labor force. A few quit teaching and later returned.

By following two cohorts of Teaching Fellows over nine years, Brantlinger was able to identify the factors that drove attrition. Some Teaching Fellows left voluntarily or were "discontinued" during their training or summer internships. Others chose to leave or were encouraged to do so during their first year or at the end of that year. Those who left the New York City schools said the following were highly important reasons (percents rounded off):

- Dissatisfaction with the principal – 33%
- Student discipline problems – 33%
- Dissatisfaction with administrators other than the principal – 27%
- Dissatisfaction with staff dynamics or teacher professionalism – 22%
- Disenchantment with teaching mathematics (preferred another subject) – 20%

- Dissatisfaction with standards-based accountability – 18%
- Dissatisfaction with the influence of standardized tests on the curriculum – 17%
- Dissatisfaction with lack of influence over school policies and practices – 17%
- Concern for their own safety – 11%
- Pay not high enough to support desired standard of living – 10%

An interesting difference: career changers initially had more trouble adjusting to classroom challenges, but they were more likely to still be in New York City schools a decade later than Teaching Fellows who were recent college graduates.

Brantlinger's conclusion: "On their own, strategies designed to attract high-achieving recent graduates and professional career changers to teach core subjects like mathematics will not solve long-standing teacher turnover and shortage issues in high-needs urban schools." He points to the key in-school factors that retain teachers – not just Teaching Fellows – over the years.

"Entering, Staying, Shifting, Leaving, and Sometimes Returning: A Descriptive Analysis of the Career Trajectories of Two Cohorts of Alternatively Certified Mathematics Teachers" by Andrew Brantlinger in *Teachers College Record*, September 2021 (Vol. 123, #9, pp. 28-56); the author can be reached at amb@umd.edu.

Back to page one

5. What Good PD Looks Like

"Bad PD is an affront to the human soul," says Dave Stuart Jr. in this online article. "It is not a small problem. It is experienced by many of us as pain." Stuart says the mistakes he's made leading hundreds of presentations have helped him compile the characteristics of truly helpful professional learning:

- It is delivered by a credible individual who demonstrates care, competence, passion, and urgency.
- It targets timeless topics, fundamental understandings, and competencies that apply to every person in the room.
- It is both intellectually rigorous and refreshingly simple.
- It couldn't have been conveyed in an e-mail.
- It treats teachers like multi-faceted souls in need of encouragement, equipment, and understanding.
- It clarifies and focuses, giving teachers fewer but better things to think about.
- It takes only the time it needs, not a second more.
- It helps teachers do their job.

"What Makes Good PD Good?" by Dave Stuart Jr. on his website, December 20, 2021; Stuart can be reached at dave@davestuartjr.com.

Back to page one

6. Can We Trust Student Survey Data?

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Christine Calderon Vriesema (University of Wisconsin/Eau Claire) and Hunter Gehlbach (Johns Hopkins University) say researchers have "a love-hate relationship" with the questionnaires they use. While surveys can provide valuable information on educators' and students' values, perceptions, and attitudes, there are three ways the results can be misleading:

- Some respondents' "introspective abilities" are questionable; people have been known to report on policies that don't exist and espouse impossible opinions.
- Biases may distort responses. Respondents may acquiesce or simply report back what others might find socially desirable; badly worded questions can also lead to bad data (e.g., floor or ceiling effects).
- Respondents may not take a survey seriously because of boredom or lack of motivation; this includes not bothering to think carefully about responses – "satisficing" – or giving deliberately false or humorous answers.

The validity of survey results matters, especially when data from student surveys are used to make consequential decisions. What can school leaders do to increase the trustworthiness of survey data?

Vriesema and Gehlbach looked at the results of a large California survey of elementary and secondary students' social-emotional learning to gauge how much suboptimal responding was going on – and to what extend this behavior changed survey results. They theorized that satisficing might happen when students: (a) pick the first plausible answer they see – one that is close enough rather than the most-accurate response; (b) agree with all the statements presented; (c) select the same answer choices in a straight line; (d) consistently check "don't know" or "not applicable;" and (e) skip items or don't finish the survey. Vriesema and Gehlbach decided to look for surveys where students didn't finish, didn't respond to items, and filled in answers in a straight line.

The results: using these criteria, it appeared that a little over 30 percent of students engaged in some form of satisficing as they filled out surveys, with male students more likely to do so than female students (among other subgroups, the differences were not significant). After testing the five hypotheses they set forth before looking at their data, and after conducting several additional exploratory analyses, Vriesema and Gehlbach concluded that satisficing behavior had a "surprisingly small" effect on the survey results.

But this might not always be the case. They suggest these guidelines for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers as they construct surveys and look at the results:

- Don't include reverse-scored items (a strategy designed to minimize straight-line responding) because these are confusing to some students and distort results.
- Find ways to boost students' motivation as they begin surveys so they put in their best effort.
- Decide on a reasonable set of criteria for spotting satisficing on surveys (e.g., students who didn't finish, didn't respond to items, or filled in answers in a straight line).

- Analyze survey results with and without respondents who engaged in satisficing to see if the conclusions change.
- Don't simply exclude the responses of every student who engages in satisficing; that may affect the validity of overall results. Straight-line responders and those who don't respond are candidates for further review.

"Assessing Survey Satisficing: The Impact of Unmotivated Questionnaire Responding on Data Quality" by Christine Calderon Vriesema and Hunter Gehlbach in *Educational Researcher*, December 2021 (Vol. 50, #9, pp. 618-627); the authors can be reached at vriesecn@uwec.edu and gehlbach@jhu.edu.

Back to page one

7. Retaining Low-Performing Teachers: A Triumph of Hope Over Reason?

In this *Educational Researcher* article, Luis Rodriguez (New York University) and Seth Hunter (George Mason University) analyzed why Tennessee principals retained low-performing teachers despite new policies that made dismissals easier. The most-common reason, say Rodriguez and Hunter: "an enduring belief that low-performing teachers would improve with time" (less than a quarter of principals said it was because of difficulty finding replacements). Did these teachers, put on notice and mostly given improvement plans, actually get better? In some cases they did, but Rodriguez and Hunter are skeptical – were principals making their hopes come true? The researchers believe the state's policies may have tilted too far in the direction of improvement versus dismissal.

"Making Do: Why Do Administrators Retain Low-Performing Teachers?" by Luis Rodriguez and Seth Hunter in *Educational Researcher*, December 2021 (Vol. 50, #9, pp. 673-676); the authors can be reached at luis.a.rodriguez@nyu.edu and shunte@gmu.edu.

Back to page one

8. Why Is a Day of Zoom Meetings So Exhausting?

In this article in *Stanford News*, Vignesh Ramachandran describes a study by Jeremy Bailenson (Stanford University) identifying four reasons for Zoom fatigue – and an antidote for each:

• *Excessive amounts of close-up eye contact* – During in-person meetings, people look down at handouts, jot notes, look at the speaker, and glance at others. On a Zoom call, everyone is looking at everyone else on the screen, with listeners treated nonverbally as if they are speaking. "Social anxiety of public speaking is one of the biggest phobias that exists in our population," says Bailenson. "When you are standing up there and everybody's staring at you, that's a stressful experience." In addition, other participants' faces seem uncomfortably close, sized as they would be in an intimate or tense conversation; this can cause a hyper-aroused state.

Solution – Take Zoom out of the full-screen mode and reduce the size of the Zoom window relative to the monitor to minimize face size and increase the space between you and the grid.

• *Constantly seeing yourself during video meetings* – "In the real world," says Bailenson, "if somebody was following you around with a mirror constantly – so that while you were talking to people, making decisions, getting feedback – you were seeing yourself in a mirror, that would just be crazy." On Zoom calls, seeing yourself in real time causes self-consciousness and stress.

Solution – Use the "hide self-view" button or right-click your image so your face isn't visible.

• *Less getting up and moving around* – During in-person meetings and phone conversations, people can move and walk around; during Zoom calls, you're confined to the narrow space covered by the camera. "There's growing research now," says Bailenson, "that says when people are moving, they're performing better cognitively."

Solution – Turning off the camera occasionally and getting up is helpful, as is an external keyboard and more space between you and the camera.

• *Higher cognitive load* – Bailenson says that during a video meeting, we can't use gestures, nonverbal cues, body language, and quick glances at others. That means we have to work harder to fully and comfortably express ourselves and understand others.

Solution – During long meetings, give yourself an "audio only" break. "This is not simply you turning off your camera to take a break from having to be nonverbally active," says Bailenson, "but also turning your body away from the screen so that for a few minutes you are not smothered with gestures that are perceptually realistic but socially meaningless."

Bailenson and his colleagues have created a 15-item Zoom Exhaustion & Fatigue Scale to measure how people feel during videoconferences, available here.

"Stanford Researchers Identify Four Causes for 'Zoom Fatigue' and Their Simple Fixes" by Vignesh Ramachandran in *Stanford News*, February 23, 2021; the full study, published in *Technology, Mind and Behavior*, is available here; Bailenson can be reached at bailenso@stanford.edu.

Back to page one

9. Short Item:

Connecting research and practice – In this *Phi Delta Kappan* article, Joel Malin (Miami University/Ohio) describes the perennial effort to bridge the gap between academic studies and front-line K-12 educators. He describes three "intermediaries" currently making this connection: *Edutopia, The Marshall Memo,* and *Usable Knowledge*.

"How Educational Intermediaries Connect Research and Practice" by Joel Malin in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2021/January 2022 (Vol. 103, #4, pp. 37-43); Malin can be reached at malinjr@miamioh.edu.

Back to page one

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 50 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 HTML version as well.

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for a year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and how to pay by check, credit card, or purchase order.

Website:

If you go to http://www.marshallmemo.com you will find detailed information on:

- How to subscribe or renew
- A detailed rationale for the Marshall Memo
- Publications (with a count of articles from each)
- Article selection criteria
- Topics (with a running count of articles)
- Headlines for all issues
- Reader opinions
- About Kim Marshall (bio, writings, consulting)
- A free sample issue

Subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in Word and PDF)
- All back issues (Word and PDF) and podcasts
- An easily searchable archive of all articles so far
- The "classic" articles from all 16+ years

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
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
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
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
Phi Delta Kappan
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