Marshall Memo 638

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
May 23, 2016

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Sometimes it's useful to make a deliberate 'mistake,' agreeing to dinner with a guy who is not your normal type. Sometimes you don't really know what you want and the filters you apply are hurting you."

David Brooks (see item #2)

"It's not like just providing a laptop to every student will automatically increase student achievement."

Binbin Zheng (see item #6)

"For all our talk about noncognitive skills, nobody has yet found a reliable way to teach kids to be grittier or more resilient. And it has become clear, at the same time, that the educators who are best able to engender noncognitive abilities in their students often do so without really 'teaching' these capacities the way one might teach math or reading – indeed, they often do so without ever saying a word about them in the classroom."

Paul Tough (see item #1)

"If you are a teacher, you may never be able to get your students to *be* gritty, in the sense of developing some essential character trait called grit. But you can probably make them *act* gritty – to behave in gritty ways in your classroom. And those behaviors will help produce the academic outcomes that you (and our students and society at large) are hoping for."

Paul Tough (*ibid.*)

"Almost any experience is improved by paying full attention to it."

Kelly McGonigal (see item #5)

"Decisions may be the product of culture. But culture is the product of decisions."

Jerry Useem (see item #3)

1. Successfully Educating Children Who Have Experienced Toxic Stress

In this article in *The Atlantic*, author Paul Tough notes three recent developments in U.S. schools: (a) As of 2013, a majority of public-school students (51 percent) were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; (b) Despite two decades of national attention, the achievement gap between poor and better-off students has not appreciably narrowed; and (c) Research on non-cognitive skills – resilience, conscientiousness, optimism, self-control, and grit – has captured the attention of educators and parents as a key variable in student success.

"But here's the problem," says Tough. "For all our talk about noncognitive skills, nobody has yet found a reliable way to teach kids to be grittier or more resilient. And it has become clear, at the same time, that the educators who are best able to engender noncognitive abilities in their students often do so without really 'teaching' these capacities the way one might teach math or reading – indeed, they often do so without ever saying a word about them in the classroom."

So how are noncognitive skills shaped? For fortunate children, they come from a number of subtle, intricate environmental forces at home and in classrooms. Kids who grow up with calm, consistent, warm, and responsive parenting, and without significant adversity, internalize these messages: *You're safe; life is going to be fine. Let down your guard; the people around you will protect you and provide for you. Be curious about the world; it's full of fascinating surprises*. Almost all of these children will do well when they get to kindergarten.

But toxic stress at home produces physiological and neurological adaptations that have a very negative effect on children's development. There is a very strong correlation between adverse experiences in the home – abuse, neglect, and adult dysfunction – and later health and behavioral problems. "When parents behave harshly or unpredictably – especially at moments when their children are upset – the children are less likely over time to develop the ability to manage strong emotions and respond effectively to stressful situations," says Tough.

Children's threat-detection system – which links the brain, the immune system, and the endocrine system – is shaped by severe and chronic stress, raising blood pressure, increasing the production of adrenaline, and heightening vigilance. "On the emotional level," says Tough, "toxic stress can make it difficult for children to moderate their responses to disappointments and provocations. A highly sensitive stress-response system that's constantly on the lookout for threats can produce patterns of behavior that are self-defeating in school: fighting, talking back, acting up, and more subtly, going through each day perpetually wary of connection with peers

or teachers." Executive function is also weakened, impeding children's ability to navigate the complexity and constant distractions of school.

"In the classroom," says Tough, "neurocognitive difficulties can quickly turn into academic difficulties. Students don't learn to read on time, because it is harder for them to concentrate on the words on the page. They don't learn the basics of number sense, because they are too distracted by the emotions and anxieties overloading their nervous systems. As academic material becomes more complicated, they fall further behind. The more they fall behind, the worse they feel about themselves and about school. That creates more stress, which tends to feed into behavioral problems, which leads to stigmatization and punishment in the classroom, which keeps their stress levels elevated, which makes it still harder to concentrate – and so on, throughout elementary school."

When these children reach middle and high school, problems escalate. Teachers and principals tend to assume that when students misbehave, "they're doing so because they have considered the consequences of their actions and calculated that the benefits of misbehavior outweigh the costs," says Tough. "So our natural response is to increase the cost of misbehavior by ratcheting up punishment." Suspension rates for poor and minority youth are orders of magnitude higher than for their more-affluent and white peers. But the forces leading to misbehavior are far from rational, and harsh punishments are ineffective in motivating troubled youth to behave, concentrate, and succeed.

Most school suspensions and other punishments are for non-violent infractions – talking back to teachers, breaking the rules, disruptive behavior. "With the neurobiological research in mind," says Tough, "it's easy to see that kind of behavior – refusing to do what adults tell you to do, basically – as an expression not of a bad attitude or a defiant personality but of a poorly regulated stress-response system. Talking back and acting up in class are, at least in part, symptoms of a child's inability to control impulses, de-escalate confrontations, and manage anger and other strong feelings – the whole stew of self-regulation issues that can usually be traced to impaired executive-function development in early childhood."

What this suggests, says Tough, is that we need to rethink classroom pedagogy, taking into account the burdens with which many children are entering school. He reports on one failed effort: Harvard professor Roland Fryer conducted a number of experiments in large school districts using monetary rewards to get students to read books, come to school, study harder; to get teachers to teach in ways that improve test scores; and to get parents to attend report-card conferences. Fryer's incentive studies are one of the biggest and most thorough educational experiments ever. They had virtually no impact, and in one case students who were given rewards did worse. "The impact of financial incentives on student achievement," says Fryer, "is statistically zero in each city."

Why didn't monetary rewards work? Tough believes that children growing up in difficult circumstances already have important extrinsic incentives to do the right thing in school – the prospect of higher earnings, better health, and less chance of being arrested and incarcerated. "Young people know this," he says. "And yet when it comes time to make any of the many crucial decisions that affect their likelihood of reaching those educational milestones,

kids growing up in adversity often make choices that seem in flagrant opposition to their self-interest, rendering those goals more distant and difficult to attain."

A better explanation of these young people's behavior, says Tough, is self-determination theory. Its leading proponents are Edward Deci and Richard Ryan of the University of Rochester. They believe people are driven by three basic needs – competence, autonomy, and human connection – and that intrinsic motivation is sparked when these needs are being satisfied. "The problem," says Tough, "is that when disadvantaged children run into trouble in school, either academically or behaviorally, most schools respond by imposing more control on them, not less. This diminishes their fragile sense of autonomy. As these students fall behind their peers academically, they feel less and less competent. And if their relationships with their teachers are wary or even contentious, they are less likely to experience the kind of relatedness that Deci and Ryan describe as being so powerfully motivating for young people in the classroom. Once students reach that point, no collection of material incentives or punishments is going to motivate them, at least not in a deep or sustained way…

"If we want students to act in ways that will maximize their future opportunities – to persevere through challenges, to delay gratification, to control their impulses – we need to consider what might motivate them to take those difficult steps." Deci and Ryan believe that if teachers are able to create an environment that fosters competence, autonomy, and connection, students are much more likely to feel motivated to work hard.

Tough goes on to describe an intriguing study done by Northwestern University economist Kirabo Jackson on two data points from North Carolina's ninth graders: their standardized test scores, and a composite measure of their noncognitive status (attendance, suspensions, on-time grade progression, and overall GPA). Jackson found that his noncognitive measure was a better predictor than test scores of students' college attendance, adult wages, and future problems with the law.

Jackson then looked at English and algebra teachers' impact on students' test scores and noncognitive status. Some teachers were consistently successful at raising students' standardized test scores, but there was another cohort of teachers, overlapping only a little with the first, who reliably raised students' performance on his noncognitive measure. "If you were assigned to the class of a teacher in this cohort," says Tough, "you were more likely to show up to school, more likely to avoid suspension, more likely to move on to the next grade. And your overall GPA went up – not just your grades in that particular teacher's class, but your grades in your other classes, too…

"Jackson's data showed that spending a few hours each week in close proximity to a certain kind of teacher changed *something* about students' behavior. And that was what mattered. Somehow these teachers were able to convey deep messages – perhaps implicitly or even subliminally – about belonging, connection, ability, and opportunity. And somehow those messages had a profound impact on students' psychology, and thus on their behavior. The environment those teachers created in the classroom, and the messages that environment conveyed, motivated students to start making better decisions – to show up to class, to persevere longer at difficult tasks, and to deal more resiliently with the countless small-scale

setbacks and frustrations that make up the typical students' school day. And those decisions improved their lives in meaningful ways. Did the students learn new skills that enabled them to behave differently? Maybe. Or maybe what we are choosing to call 'skills' in this case are really just new ways of thinking about the world or about themselves – a new set of attitudes or beliefs that somehow unleash a new way of behaving."

What is the secret sauce of these teachers? Tough believes the scholar doing the most thoughtful work on this question is Camille Farrington, a former high-school teacher now working at the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. The 2012 report she wrote with her colleagues, "Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners" (available at http://bit.ly/1pwnNJ3) contains some answers. "There is little evidence that working directly on changing students' grit or perseverance would be an effective lever for improving their academic performance," the report said. "While some students are more likely to persist in tasks or exhibit self-discipline than others, *all* students are more likely to demonstrate perseverance if the school or classroom context helps them develop positive mindsets and effective learning strategies."

Farrington's report drew a distinction between stable character traits like grit, which are difficult to change, and academic perseverance, which is highly dependent on the specific context. A student might demonstrate academic perseverance in math but not in history, in tenth grade and not in eleventh. "In essence," says Tough, "what Farrington found was this: If you are a teacher, you may never be able to get your students to *be* gritty, in the sense of developing some essential character trait called grit. But you can probably make them *act* gritty – to behave in gritty ways in your classroom. And those behaviors will help produce the academic outcomes that you (and our students and society at large) are hoping for."

The key to academic perseverance, says Farrington, is students' academic mindset, and as Stanford researcher Carol Dweck and others have shown, adults have a tremendous impact on this. "Messages that teachers convey – large and small, explicit and implicit – affect the way students feel in the classroom, and thus they way they behave there," says Tough. Farrington has distilled the voluminous mindset research to four key beliefs that, if students embrace them, produce academic perseverance:

- *I belong in this academic community.*
- *My ability and competence grow with my effort.*
- *I can succeed at this.*
- *This work has value for me.*

But there are two problems: First, many students who experienced trauma early in their lives are resistant to these beliefs – they're more likely to think, *I don't belong here. This is enemy territory. Everyone in this school is out to get me.* Second, many U.S. schools don't do a very good job nurturing these four beliefs, especially for disadvantaged youth – in fact, "no excuses" discipline policies often create a downward spiral of negative beliefs that are diametrically opposed to the Farrington four.

The good news, Tough says, is that a small number of educators are using the recent insights about the impact of toxic childhood stress to reshape school environments. "These

efforts," says Tough, "target students' beliefs in two separate categories, each one echoing items on Farrington's list: first, students' feelings about their place in the school (*I belong in this academic community*), and then their feelings about the work they are doing in class (*my ability and competence grow with my effort; I can succeed at this; this work has value for me*)." Tough cites two examples of promising efforts:

• Turnaround for Children, whose intervention teams of 3-4 people are working in New York City, Newark, and Washington D.C. schools addressing the psychological needs of potentially disruptive students, helping teachers become more strategic and less confrontational with classroom management, and encouraging student-centered instructional approaches like cooperative learning.

• EL Education (formerly Expeditionary Learning), which is working in 150 schools nationwide to develop students' academic mindsets using two strategies: belonging and relationships (through Crew, a daily, multiyear discussion and advisory group for students); and highly active, engaging classroom pedagogy – lots of student discussion, group activities, demanding long-term projects conducted by groups of students, and regular student self-assessments, including student-led report card conferences.

"Teachers and administrators at EL schools talk quite a bit about character," says Tough, "– their term for noncognitive skills. The central premise of EL schools is that character is built not through lectures or direct instruction from teachers but through the experience of persevering as students confront challenging academic work… In general, when schools do try to directly address the impact that a stress-filled childhood might have on disadvantaged students, the first – and often the only – approach they employ has to do with their students' emotional health, with relationships and belonging." But belonging isn't enough. To be truly motivated, students also need to believe they are doing work that is challenging, rigorous, and meaningful.

"How Kids Really Succeed" by Paul Tough in *The Atlantic*, June 2016 (Vol. 317, #5, p. 56-66), http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/how-kids-really-succeed/480744/; this article is excerpted from Tough's new book, *Helping Children Succeed: What Works and Why* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

Back to page one

2. What Are the Implications of Corporate Leadership Practices for K-12?

In this article in *The Atlantic*, writer Jerry Useem contrasts the exemplary behavior of Johnson and Johnson after the first reports in 1982 that someone had slipped poison pills into bottles of Tylenol (all Tylenol bottles were removed from stores nationwide, people were warned not to consume pills they had already purchased, and the company took a $100 million loss) with the recent emissions cheating by Volkswagen – "a company that, by contrast, seems intent on poisoning its own product, name, and future," says Useem. Why did these two companies behave so differently?

At Johnson and Johnson, years before the Tylenol crisis, chief executive James Burke challenged the company's long-standing "Credo" and forced a high-level debate about what

Johnson and Johnson's values really were. When the crisis hit, the reaction flowed naturally and logically from corporate values that really meant something. At Volkswagen, less-than-ethical behavior had been slowly, over a period of years, reclassified as okay – what sociologist Diane Vaughn calls "the normalization of deviance." Lofty mission and value statements can be revealed as empty rhetoric by leaders' actions. At a 2008 corruption trial that sent one Volkswagen executive to jail, Ferdinand Piech, the company's chairman, referred to alleged use of VW funds on prostitutes as mere "irregularities" and chided a lawyer for mispronouncing *Lamborghini* ("Those who can't afford one should say it properly," he jibed). This was right around the time that the emissions cheating began.

A more subtle process unfolded in the months leading up to the Challenger space-shuttle disaster. Engineers and managers at rocket manufacturer Morton-Thiokol had observed damage to the crucial O-rings in previous shuttle launches, but created a "script" that rationalized the failures as acceptable risks. "They were not merely *acting* as if nothing was wrong," says Useem. "They believed it, bringing to mind Orwell's concept of doublethink, the method by which a bureaucracy conceals evil not only from the public but from itself."

How can thoughtful, well-educated people be capable of such foolishness? "Executives are bombarded with information," explains Useem. "To ease the cognitive load, they rely on a set of unwritten scripts imported from the organization around them. You could even define corporate culture as a collection of scripts." These are efficient, relieving leaders of the burden of figuring out how to handle each new problem. But scripts can keep people from stepping back and analyzing what's really going on. Sociologist Vaughn says that scripts can also "expand like an elastic waistband," accommodating new information that should seen as a flashing red light.

One common factor in disastrous corporate decisions, says Useem, is ambitious goals set by out-of-touch leaders that collide with reality. NASA promised a "routine and economical" shuttle program that would launch 60 times a year. Ford Motor Company president Lee Iacocca demanded a car weighing no more than 2,000 pounds, costing no more than $2,000, ready for production in 25 months. These goals put huge strain on designers and engineers as they wrestled with design flaws that would ultimately result in the O-rings failing on a cold day in Florida and the Pinto exploding when it was rear-ended. "We know what strain does to people," says Useem. "Even without it, they tend to underestimate the probability of future bad events. Put them under emotional stress, some research suggests, and this tendency gets amplified. People will favor decisions that preempt short-term social discomfort even at the cost of heightened long-term risk. Faced with the immediate certainty of a boss's wrath or the distant possibility of blow-back from a faceless agency, many will focus mostly on the former."

What James Burke did at Johnson and Johnson was to anticipate this tendency – and the possibility of disaster – and introduce a set of counter-scripts. "It was a conscious effort to tinker with the unconscious criteria by which decisions at his company were made," says Useem. "The result was an incremental descent into integrity, a slide toward soundness, and the normalization of referencing 'Our Credo' in situations that might otherwise have seemed

devoid of ethical content." An organization's values and culture start at the top. "Decisions may be the product of culture," concludes Useem. "But culture is the product of decisions."

"What Was Volkswagen Thinking?" by Jerry Useem in *The Atlantic*, January/February 2016, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/01/what-was-volkswagen-thinking/419127/

Back to page one

3. David Brooks on Deciding Better

In this *New York Times* column, David Brooks explores what he calls the "choice explosion" over the last 30 years – the ever-expanding variety of options Americans have on what we eat, media sources, spiritual beliefs, lifestyles, identities. Our culture has always embraced individual choice, says Brooks, as compared, for example, to the Japanese, who prefer more choices being made for them. But research shows that experienced decision-makers quite frequently choose badly – 83 percent of corporate mergers and acquisitions don't increase shareholder value and 40 percent of senior hires don't last 18 months in their new positions. "It's becoming incredibly important to learn to decide well," says Brooks, "to develop the techniques of self-distancing to counteract the flaws in our own mental machinery." Some pointers:

• *Assume positive intent*. In a conflict, if we start with the belief that others are well-intentioned, it's easier to absorb information from people we'd rather not listen to.

• *Use the 10-10-10 rule*. How will we feel about this decision 10 minutes from now, 10 months from now, and 10 years from now?

• *Get out of your comfort zone*. A survey of newly-married women found that 20 percent weren't initially attracted to the men they married. "Sometimes it's useful to make a deliberate 'mistake,'" says Brooks, "agreeing to dinner with a guy who is not your normal type. Sometimes you don't really know what you want and the filters you apply are hurting you."

• *Avoid narrow-framing*. "Whenever you find yourself asking 'whether or not,' it's best to step back and ask, 'How can I widen my options?'" says Brooks. Rather than deciding whether or not to fire someone, ask how the person's role could be shifted to take advantage of strengths and avoid weaknesses.

• *Develop a better understanding of the anatomy of decision-making*. This might mean a course in schools, especially important for disadvantaged youth. "Poorer Americans have fewer resources to master decision-making techniques," says Brooks, "less social support to guide their decision-making, and less of a safety net to catch them when they err… Those who experienced stress as children often perceive threat more acutely and live more defensively."

"The Choice Explosion" by David Brooks in *The New York Times*, May 3, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/opinion/the-choice-explosion.html?_r=0

Back to page one

4. Strategic Planning 101

In this *District Management Journal* article, John J-H Kim and Kriti Parashar describe the strategic planning process they have developed working with numerous school districts:

- Mission and vision – Long-term district aspirations;
- Theory of action – Fundamental beliefs about what will lead to long-term success;
- Priorities – Broad areas of focus to support the theory of action;
- Measurable goals – Specific and measurable targets related to district priorities;
- Initiatives – Projects related to priorities to achieve the measurable goals;
- Action steps – An articulation of what steps need to occur, by when, and by whom.

Kim and Parashar conclude with ten mistakes to avoid in the strategic planning process:

• Don't start without first gaining a clear, fact-based understanding of the district's current strengths and challenges.

• Don't draft a plan that skims the surface: address the root causes by asking *Why* five times to get at the underlying issues.

• Don't shortchange developing a cogent theory of action. "The strongest theories of action are focused, easily understood by virtually all district stakeholders, and guide critical tasks and workflows, organizational arrangement, and culture in the district," say the authors.

• Don't treat every idea as a good idea; develop a list of fewer than five high-impact priorities. "Manage expectations that not all ideas may find their place in the final plan," say Kim and Parashar.

• Don't forget to include specific, measurable action plans. This includes the roles and responsibilities of school and central staff, key milestones, and necessary budget shifts.

• Don't forget to include many parts of the organization, not just academics. Although student achievement is the ultimate outcome, other departments such as finance, human resources, and operations play key roles.

• Don't just engage in open-ended discussions with stakeholders about their concerns and hopes. Elicit specific, actionable feedback on a draft of the strategic plan.

• Don't forget to include lagging (output-oriented) as well as leading (input-oriented) metrics to track progress.

• Don't just layer new initiatives on top of existing ones. "Seek to leverage and build upon the work being done in the district and create a coherent and aligned approach to moving the work forward," say the authors.

• Don't forget to establish clear implementation and monitoring processes. "Effective implementation requires detailed planning and communication, cultivation of leadership capacity, and the analytics to monitor progress," conclude Kim and Parashar. "The implementation plan and monitoring process must also be tailored to the district's strengths, weaknesses, and available resources."

"Strategic Planning for Today's Challenges" by John J-H Kim and Kriti Parashar in *The District Management Journal*, Spring 2016 (Vol. 19, p. 12-27), www.dmcouncil.org

Back to page one

5. The Virtues of Single-Tasking

In this *New York Times* article, Verena von Pfetten reviews some findings from recent research on multitasking:

- Interruptions as brief as two or three seconds double the number of errors people make on a task they're performing.
- We have finite neural resources that are depleted every time we switch between activities, which can happen more than 400 times a day.
- Multitasking is cognitively exhausting – it's one reason people feel tired by sundown.
- The more we multitask, the more distractible we are.
- Multitasking is self-reinforcing: the more we allow ourselves to be distracted, the more we feel the need to be distracted.
- Switching between activities decreases our enjoyment of any one of them.
- Having a cellphone in view markedly reduces empathy and rapport between two people having a conversation.
- And the counterintuitive bottom line: multitaskers actually get less done.

What does all this imply? *Single-tasking*, says von Pfetten, sometimes called monotasking or unitasking: "Not the same as mindfulness, which focuses on emotional awareness, monotasking is a 21st-century term for what your high-school English teacher probably just called 'paying attention.'" Psychologists have documented a number of advantages to focusing on one thing, including the obverse of the list above: fewer errors, less distractibility, more enjoyment, deeper and more satisfying conversations, less fatigue, and improved productivity. "Almost any experience is improved by paying full attention to it," says author Kelly McGonigal. "Attention is one way your brain decides, 'Is this interesting? Is this worthwhile?'"

Very busy people – parents and teachers, for example – may find single-tasking challenging because they're constantly pulled in so many different directions. "In those cases, try monotasking in areas where you can," suggests von Pfetten: conversations with your children, reading a book in bed before going to sleep, dinner or drinks with friends." Exercise is also helpful for focusing. Another strategy is starting small, giving yourself just one morning a week to experience again what it's like to immerse yourself in one thing. And in conversations, concludes McGonigal, "Practice how you listen to people. Put down anything that's in your hands and turn all your attentional channels to the person who is talking. You should be looking at them, listening to them, and your body should be turned to them."

"Drop Everything and Read This" by Verena von Pfetten in *The New York Times*, May 1, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/01/fashion/monotasking-drop-everything-and-read-this-story.html

Back to page one

6. Better News for One-to-One Laptop Programs

In this *Education Week* article, Leo Doran and Benjamin Herold report on a first-of-its-kind meta-analysis of 15 years of research on the impact of one-to-one school laptop initiatives. Contrary to skeptical reports in recent years, this study found a statistically

significant positive impact on student test scores in ELA, writing, math, and science when students were given one-to-one access to laptops. A further review of 86 additional papers found modest evidence of more student-centered and project-based instruction, improved student engagement, better teacher-student relationships, and increased student use of technology for reading, writing, Internet research, note-taking, and completing assignments. Students expressed "very positive" attitudes about using laptops in school, and studies consistently found higher student engagement, motivation, and persistence when laptops were used. (The researchers cautioned that their study applied only to laptops, not tablets, smartphones, and desktop computers.)

"It's not like just providing a laptop to every student will automatically increase student achievement," said study honcho Binbin Zheng of Michigan State University, "but we find that it's the first step." That said, the effect of laptops was noticeably less than other interventions such as smaller class size or individual tutoring. Laptop results, says Zheng, are "small but noteworthy." The real benefit of using laptops, says Elliot Soloway of the University of Michigan, is going beyond "instructive" electronic-worksheet activities to "constructive" learning, from "teaching kids to remember something to teaching them how to figure something out."

"Many of the benefits of 1-to-1 laptop programs are not detected by standardized tests," says Zheng. "For the many programs whose purpose is to help each student be a better 21st-century citizen, we need to develop and use corresponding measures."

"1-to-1 Laptop Initiatives Boost Student Scores, Study Finds" by Leo Doran and Benjamin Herold in *Education Week*, May 18, 2016 (Vol. 35, #31, p. 11), www.edweek.org; the full study is entitled "Learning in One-to-One Laptop Environments: A Meta-Analysis and Research Synthesis" by Binbin Zheng, Mark Warshauer, Chin-Hsi Lin, and Chi Chang, published online in early 2016 in *Review of Educational Research*, available for purchase at http://rer.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/02/03/0034654316628645.abstract?rss=1.

Back to page one

7. An Analysis of Middle-School Classroom Assignments

This Education Trust report by Joan Dabrowski is a follow-up to a September 2016 analysis of the rigor and Common Core alignment of student assignments in two urban districts (see Marshall Memo 602 for a summary). The four criteria used to analyze assignments were:

- Alignment with Common Core standards;
- Soliciting text-based responses from students;
- Cognitive challenge, especially the creation of a piece of extended writing;
- Motivation and engagement – Students have choice of task, product, process, or text; the topic is poignant and uses real-world materials; and there are connections with students' experiences, goals, interests, and values.

Dabrowski's report contains a detailed critical analysis of six middle-school assignments:

- A grade 7 ELA end-of-unit writing task;
- A grade 8 ELA close-reading assignment;

- A grade 7 American history assignment on the Constitutional Convention debates;
- A grade 8 Socratic Seminar on Black Lives Matter versus All Lives Matter;
- A grade 6 science writing prompt on the seasons;
- A grade 7 writing prompt on flower structures.

"Checking in Update: More Assignments from Real Classrooms" by Joan Dabrowski, Education Trust Equity in Motion Series, April 2016, http://bit.ly/25hOe8p; Dabrowski can be reached at joandabrowski@gmail.com.

Back to page one

8. A Critique of a Study on Overrepresentation in Special Education

In this *Educational Researcher* article, Russell Skiba (Indiana University/ Bloomington), Alfredo Artiles (Arizona State University/Tempe), Elizabeth Kozleski (University of Kansas/Lawrence), Daniel Losen (UCLA Civil Rights Project), and Elizabeth Harry (University of Miami) respond to a 2015 article by Paul Morgan et al. (see Marshall Memos 594 and 596), which argued that students of color are in fact *under*represented in special-education classes. "When a set of findings is published in a highly respected, peer-reviewed source and appears so dramatically at odds with the long-standing knowledge base of a field," say Skiba et al., "it is reasonable to examine the conceptualization, data, analyses, and conclusions in order to attempt to understand why these findings are so discrepant from previous literature." Their critique has three main points:

• Inaccurate database – Skiba et al. argue that the Morgan paper used a small and arguably unrepresentative sample of the available data, and that Morgan's findings of underrepresentation of minority students in special education are contrary to contemporaneous studies that found overrepresentation.

• Weak evidence that poverty explains special-education identification – "Simply put," say Skiba et al., "Morgan and colleagues have no basis *in their own data* for concluding that racial/ethnic disproportionality can be accounted for by poverty, since few of their SES variables entered their equation significantly, and none in the direction predicted."

• Oversimplification by assuming only underrepresentation – Skiba et al. argue that the Morgan paper glosses over the complex nature of special-education disproportionality. There is over- and underrepresentation in special education assignments across five racial/ethnic groups, they say, and a sweeping finding of underrepresentation for children of color is not warranted. "Future research must transcend a binary logic that blames either children or schools, or argues that the problem is under- instead of overrepresentation," they conclude. "A critical issue that must be addressed in future research is, what happens after special-education placement? Do students from disparate groups get the interventions and supports that they need across types of settings?… What the field does not need are simplistic investigations that overreach both their data set and their own analyses."

"Risks and Consequences of Oversimplifying Educational Inequities: A Response to Morgan et al. (2015)" by Russell Skiba, Alfredo Artiles, Elizabeth Kozleski, Daniel Losen, and Elizabeth Harry in *Educational Researcher*, April 2016 (Vol. 45, #3, p. 221-225), available for purchase

at http://edr.sagepub.com/content/45/3/221.abstract?rss=1; Skiba can be reached at skiba@indiana.edu.

Back to page one

9. A Critique of the Critique

In this *Educational Researcher* article, Paul Morgan (Pennsylvania State University/ University Park) and George Farkas (University of California/Irvine) refute the three criticisms of their 2015 study made by Skiba et al. in the article just above. "The best available evidence," say Morgan and Farkas, "indicates that minority children in the United States are less likely to receive [special-education] services than white, English-speaking children, even when displaying the same relative need."

They point to technical flaws in the Skiba critique of their database and of their argument about the role of family poverty, and say their findings have been replicated in numerous follow-up studies. "Children's academic achievement, not their family's SES, was the strongest control variable," say Morgan and Farkas. "This was the case for each disability condition that we examined." On the third critique (oversimplification), Morgan and Farkas contend that they did acknowledge the complexity of disproportionality, but found that "minority overrepresentation was entirely absent following control for known confounds, particularly academic achievement."

"Are we helping all children with disabilities that we are supposed to be helping?" they ask. "Our analyses suggest that, as a field, we are not. These inequities should be addressed so that all children with disabilities, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, or language use, are receiving the help that is their civil right and society's promise."

"Are We Helping All Children That We Are Supposed to Be Helping?" by Paul Morgan and George Farkas in *Educational Researcher*, April 2016 (Vol. 45, #3, p. 226-228), available for purchase at http://edr.sagepub.com/content/45/3/226.full.pdf+html; Morgan can be reached at paulmorgan@psu.edu.

Back to page one

If you have feedback or suggestions,
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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 44 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
Better: Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
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
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Literacy Today
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
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 Journal of the Learning Sciences
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 Magazine
Wharton Leadership Digest