Marshall Memo 932

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
April 18, 2022

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Quotes of the Week

"Organizations that build trust view a once-a-week check-in between employees and team leaders as the core human ritual at work. During this chat the team leader will not be checking up on or appraising the person or giving feedback. Instead, the leader will be talking about the short-term past and future, asking, 'What did you love about last week?' 'What did you loathe?' 'What are your priorities this coming week?' 'How can I best help?'"

Marcus Buckingham in "Designing Work That People Love" in *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2022 (Vol. 100, #3, pp. 66-75)

"While I loved my job as an English teacher, I had always dreaded grading."

Alexis Wiggins (see item #4)

"Uncoupling the work from lettered and numbered values allowed all of us to refocus on the work itself, not the student. Assessment suddenly felt like the tool it was meant to be, not a weapon."

Alexis Wiggins (*ibid.*)

"At a time when our society is deeply divided and when a surge of antisemitic, anti-Asian, Islamophobic, and anti-black racism threatens the social fabric, it feels urgent that we develop new language for discussing the relationship between identity, ancestry, history, and science. DNA analysis could help create that language by offering more nuanced ways of looking at individual origins and a more unifying narrative about our shared heritage… The stories embedded in our genes beg to be told. They tell of ancestral diversity that stretches back thousands of years and ultimately underscores all that we – despite superficial physical differences – have in common."

Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Andrew Curran in "DNA Provides New Language to Talk About Race" in *The New York Times*, March 6, 2022

1. The Beatles Spark Innovative Planning

In this article in *School Administrator*, Joseph Porto describes how he used his lifelong passion for the Beatles to spark a discussion about planning and goal-setting. As a novice superintendent, he kicked off his first staff meeting by playing two Beatles songs, *She Loves You* and *Strawberry Fields Forever*, asking his team to compare and contrast the instruments, lyrics, and song structure. "The group plunged into the activity," says Porto, "with everyone buzzing quietly about this odd but exciting start with their new superintendent." A few minutes later they reported their findings:

- *She Loves You*, released in 1963, was a simple pop-hit formula song about young love, using guitars, bass, percussion, and vocals.
- *Strawberry Fields Forever*, released in 1967, featured a precursor to the synthesizer, horns, a string quartet, and a distorted, dreamlike vocal track, using an almost symphonic sound to delve into self-awareness, self-doubt, and whimsy.

Porto asked how the Beatles, in just a few years, progressed from pop songwriters to sophisticated composers. His colleagues offered ideas on what might have accounted for the transformation: brainstorming, innovation, risk-taking, a growth mindset.

Porto then challenged his team to think about the kinds of attitudes and activities that would take the school district from where it currently was to even better performance. "The staff generated an impressive array of ideas that ultimately became the foundation of our shared vision and initial strategic plan," he says. As the plan was implemented, he frequently returned to the Beatles analogy, for example:

- *Blackbird* to illustrate that less is more;
- *The White Album* for getting back to basics (this album followed the experimental *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *Magical Mystery Tour*);
- The yin-yang teamwork of Lennon and McCartney.

"Whatever your personal passion might be as an education leader," Porto concludes, "try connecting it to an analogy for your next staff workshop. The journey could be amazing for you and those along for the ride."

"Passion for The Beatles and the Power of Analogies" by Joseph Porto in *School Administrator*, April 2022 (Vol. 79, #4, pp. 12-13); Porto can be reached at jmp2211@hotmail.com.

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2. How to Counteract Procrastination

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, psychologist/author Alice Boyes says procrastination is all too common. "We feel guilty about it and criticize ourselves for it," she says. Why don't we stop? Boyes believes there are three reasons: the absence of effective habits and systems; intolerance for certain emotions; and unhelpful patterns of thinking. Here's her analysis of each – and a menu of suggestions:

• *Habits and systems* – The common assumption about procrastinators is that they're undisciplined, weakly choosing leisure and fun over hard work. A more recent (and kinder) explanation is that procrastinators haven't developed systems and habits that make self-control easier and help us tackle imposing tasks and resist distractions. Here are two ways to develop systems and habits:

- Have a consistent schedule for doing deep work. This is the kind of work – difficult, central to the mission, long-term – that's most often the victim of procrastination. It's helpful to always do deep work at the same time every day, or immediately after another specific activity (like going through e-mail).
- Create a system for taking on new tasks. Things that are unfamiliar and outside our wheelhouse tend to get avoided. Boyes suggests thinking of a challenging task you completed successfully, identifying the steps you took, and making those steps a template. This is better than trying to copy someone else's method.

• *Emotions and mental health* – "We tend to avoid tasks that stir up negative emotions," says Boyes – sadness, doubt, anxiety, boredom, stress. In periods of uncertainty and overload, we're more likely to experience negative emotions – and procrastinate. If certain tasks stir up unsettling emotions, Boyes suggests:

- Disentangle your feelings. "Accurately identifying your emotions – something psychological researchers term *emotional granularity* – will help you manage them," she says. Rate emotions on a 1-to-10 best-to-worst scale and start with tasks with the highest number. If a task feels boring, find a way to make it fun and reward yourself when it's done. If it sparks resentment, reframe it in terms of its potential to develop your skillset.
- Use self-compassion to overcome strong negative emotions. When Boyes gives a high-stakes presentation, she's triggered by the memory of a talk she gave early in her career that went badly. When this happens, she gets in touch with that memory and tells herself, "That's a normal and understandable feeling. But I was a beginner then, and I'm not now. It's OK to learn through experience."

• *Unhelpful thought patterns* – Two examples: there's a common tendency to underestimate the complexity of tasks that have a long timeline and leave too much to the last minute; and big tasks may feel more difficult than the steps needed to complete them. If this seems to be what's going on, Boyes suggests:

- Reverse brainstorming – Think of ways to make the task impossibly hard – for example, doing it perfectly the first time – or something you'd want to avoid doing – copying the style of a colleague. Then come up with their opposites – accepting that

mistakes and imperfections will occur, and approaching the task in your own way, harnessing your own strengths.

- Accept that some work will be friction-filled – We often choose to check easier tasks off our to-do lists while avoiding tasks that are more fraught but will have more impact. "Don't make the mistake of equating frictionless work with productivity," says Boyes. "When you feel tense or challenged, for instance, you might conclude that you're moving in the wrong direction or not making enough progress. It's important to understand this phenomenon and recognize when it's happening."
- Limit yourself to short work periods. The guilt associated with putting off an important task can lead us to think we need to put in a marathon session – which produces more procrastination. Boyes suggests strictly limiting ourselves to 90 minutes today, or working on it for ten minutes today and picking it up again tomorrow, adding ten minutes every day, like training oneself for an endurance race.

"How to Stop Procrastinating" by Alice Boyles in *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2022 (Vol. 100, #3, pp. 143-147)

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3. How Principals Can Find Out What Teachers and Students Really Think

(Originally titled "School Leaders: If You Want Feedback, Ask for It")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Jenn David-Lang (The Main Idea) says principals need to be intentional if they want to get helpful feedback. Her suggestions:

• *One-on-one meetings* – In regular check-ins, ask teachers for a "glow" (*What is one way I'm supporting your teaching?*) and a "grow" (*What is one way I could do better?*). This normalizes speaking up, says David-Lang, letting teachers know that feedback is something the principal wants and expects.

• *Regular debriefs* – After the opening day of school, parent-teacher conferences, and other schoolwide events, have colleagues brainstorm what went well and what could be improved next time.

• *Varied feedback structures* – For those who aren't comfortable speaking up in meetings, online questionnaires (Google Forms, Survey Monkey), e-mailed questions, or focus groups open the door. Possible questions:

- *In what ways might my communication be more effective?*
- *In lesson debriefs, what is the most and least helpful thing I do?*
- *Implementing the new phonics program, what went well and what didn't?*

During the pandemic, many principals made frequent use of electronic surveys.

• *The consultancy protocol* – This structured process is helpful for addressing a dilemma – for example, finding better ways to get parents involved in their children's learning, getting tired teachers engaged in professional learning. One person describes the issue, answers clarifying questions, and then is silent while colleagues provide feedback and brainstorm possible solutions.

• *Student voice* – The principal meets with a small panel of students and asks for feedback on specific issues – for example, grading, the school's dress code, supports for LGBTQ students.

• *Attitude is key* – Teachers and students will continue to provide authentic feedback, says David-Lang, if it's always received with a warm thank-you and leaders remain "curious, not furious," asking themselves, even if the feedback seems annoying or off-base at first, *What's right or useful about this?*

• *Following up* – The best way to encourage staff and students to give feedback is for the principal to act on good advice, making needed changes in routines, policies, or behaviors. "That will open the door to those who previously had been unsure about sharing their honest thoughts," says David-Lang. "And when you do make those changes, be noisy about it" – give public credit to those who made the suggestions.

"School Leaders: If You Want Feedback, Ask for It" by Jenn David-Lang in *Educational Leadership*, April 2022 (Vol. 79, #7, 58-61); David-Lang can be reached at Jenn@TheMainIdea.net.

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4. Incentivizing Learning and Growth Over Grades

(Originally titled "The Assessment System That Made Me Love Grading Again (Yes, Really!)")

"While I loved my job as an English teacher, I had always dreaded grading," says Alexis Wiggins in this article in *Educational Leadership*. As a rookie teacher, she was endlessly frustrated that her high-school students kept making the same errors in their writing – fragmented sentences, vague language, superficial thesis statements – after she'd burned the midnight oil writing marginal notes on those problems in earlier papers. Wiggins decided to try a different approach: using a rubric, she rated students' drafts at three levels:

- Publishable – A+, A, or A-
- Revisable – B+ to D – Something needs to be fixed
- Redo – Incomplete or F – Completely misses the mark

Wiggins allowed students to revise their papers as many times as they wanted, and most worked hard to improve their writing.

The downside, says Wiggins: "It was killing me. I couldn't handle the volume of revised papers." She abandoned the idea.

Ten years later, Wiggins decided to give revision-based teaching another try. She kept the Publishable/Revisable/Redo categories, but used a more-detailed, standards-based rubric. It spelled out the Publishable standard – performance at the highest level – and students were assessed on whether they hit the standard or not. The new system worked, says Wiggins. Here's why:

• *Better feedback for students* – Because there was a detailed description of Publishable work, commenting on students' drafts took less time – the rubric did half the work: "I could simply highlight the rubric descriptor, leave a short comment, and suggest a meeting if the

student needed more feedback." Wiggins also showed students examples of exemplary work from previous students or published work.

• *Focused on learning, not a grade* – Students no longer wept when they got papers back, nor did they ask at the end of the semester what they could do to pull up their grade. "Now," says Wiggins, "as if someone had waved a magic wand, I suddenly had zero conversations about grades with students. Zero. The only questions students now had were about how to improve their work. It was like all my English teacher dreams had come true."

• *Streamlined grading* – With more-precise rubrics and exemplars of good writing, grading was faster and more effective; it was simply feedback against the goal of Publishable. "I wasn't rereading whole drafts each time," says Wiggins; "now I would merely review the previous rubric's feedback and look for the criteria that had been marked as not yet Publishable." Students used the feedback to make rapid progress; by January many assignments were already Publishable or needed only minor tweaks.

In addition, the tension around grades – a B+ versus an A- that students thought would make a difference in their college ambitions – was drastically reduced. Without grades on their drafts, which students had previously seen "as representative of their *own* value as learners," says Wiggins, "there were no more charged emotions. No more tears or crushed looks. Uncoupling the work from lettered and numbered values allowed all of us to refocus on the work itself, not the student. Assessment suddenly felt like the tool it was meant to be, not a weapon." In anonymous surveys, 19 of the 20 students in the course said this was the best assessment system they had ever experienced. The consensus: "Every class should do this."

Several colleagues at Wiggins's Texas high school tried the system with the same positive results, and she believes it should work at the middle and elementary levels as well. She does have these cautionary notes:

- Figure out the total number of assessments for the grading period up front.
- Close the door on student revisions two weeks before final grades are due.
- Several times a semester, give students an update on the grade they will get if they choose not to make further revisions.
- Keep track of quizzes, homework, and notes, but don't make formative work part of students' grades. "This is so we can focus on the bigger skills in the summative work and revision process," says Wiggins.

"The Assessment System That Made Me Love Grading Again (Yes, Really!)" by Alexis Wiggins in *Educational Leadership*, April 2022 (Vol. 79, #7, 24-29); Wiggins can be reached at awiggins@ceelcenter.org.

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5. Frequent Writing, Rapid Feedback, and Student Ownership

(Originally titled "Reimagining the Writing Cycle")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, instructional coach Julie Sloan and high-school English teacher Elizabeth Peters (Boston Public Schools) say grading students' writing is a daunting task that's often put off for days or weeks, and when it's returned, students often

glance at their grades and stuff papers into backpacks, never to be seen again. Timely feedback is vital to becoming a better writer, and teenagers' attention spans are short, so what are teachers to do?

Sloan and Peters propose that rather than having students produce long, polished pieces at the end of a unit or term, teachers should use a different approach. The details:

• *Foundational instruction in writing* – Teachers focus on transferable, clearly defined writing skills and show students models of effective writing.

• *More-frequent, shorter writing assignments* – Every week (or every other week) students compose a short, on-demand piece of writing in class.

• *Prompt feedback* – Teachers block out time in their weekly schedules (perhaps Thursday afternoons) and blitz through the writing with the goal of getting it back to students the next day. Sloan and Peters say it's important to set limits on how much time this takes, so the pile of correcting doesn't build up.

• *Feedback codes* – Completing this process is manageable because the compositions are short and teachers use shorthand feedback codes – for example, R1 means "Reasoning needs more explanation." The goal is not to "fix" each piece of writing but give students next steps to improve it themselves. "This approach," they say, "frees teachers to make only a few, well-chosen comments and then move on to the next student's writing." The feedback codes, ideally developed by teacher teams, become a shared language about quality writing, replacing "pet peeves" with a depersonalized analysis of common problems with teenagers' writing – what it means, for example, when teachers say a student's writing is "vague." A common set of codes also sets clear expectations, addressing the key issue of equity.

• *Student ownership* – In class the next day, students look at the teacher's feedback, decode the annotations, figure out what needs to be revised, and get to work. "No matter how earnest or how thorough our feedback to students is," say Sloan and Peters, "it only matters if students see it, internalize it, and use it to improve their work… Students also often enjoy this process of 'figuring it out' by owning their own work and decisions. Codes can help free teachers from the tendency to do the thinking for their students and place the responsibility – and the joy – of authentic writing and decision-making onto the student writers themselves." Students' work is the lesson for that day – one less prep for the teacher.

• *Goal-setting* – Students set a goal for the following week, focusing on particular areas of improvement. When they get their revised compositions back the following week, they reflect on their progress and see how their general writing skills are developing.

• *A predictable routine* – Repeating this process week after week provides deliberate practice, a key ingredient in improvement. "Having a regular, predictable writing and revising routine," say Sloan and Peters, "builds the idea that becoming a writer is not about inborn skill; it's about *practice*. People become better through writing and revising regularly."

"Reimagining the Writing Cycle" by Julie Sloan and Elizabeth Peters in *Educational Leadership*, April 2022 (Vol. 79, #7, online only)

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6. Setting the Stage for Student-Led Parent Conferences

"Traditional parent-teacher conferences are exhausting for teachers and tend to counteract the learner-driven environments we seek to create for students," says writer/ consultant Paul Emerich France in this article in *Edutopia*. He makes the case for student-led conferences in which students reflect on what went well and what they struggled with, and talk about next steps.

Logical as this sounds, orchestrating student-led conferences is not without challenges. France suggests the following steps:

• *Have students keep portfolios of their work*. In parent conferences, students will have an easier time describing their learning if they have lots of tangible artifacts at their fingertips. It's a good idea to use sticky notes to help students identify the best artifacts to illustrate learning and struggles. Building portfolios – essentially scrapbooks of learning – should start at the beginning of the year, fostering a continuous process of reflection as students decide what they add to their portfolios.

• *Make self-reflection a classroom routine*. If students aren't regularly thinking and talking about what they've learned, the skills they've building, their difficulties, and their aspirations, says France, parent conferences will be "clunky and superficial." The best approach is for teachers to compile a collective class journal with students, and pause at the end of each lesson to reflect on what worked, what didn't, and how they can follow up in future lessons.

• *Rehearse using sentence starters*. Students' sharing in conferences will benefit from practice with phrases like these:

- This artifact shows I am succeeding with….
- This one shows I am still challenged by….
- I used to…. Now I….
- Today, I succeeded by….
- Today, I struggled with….
- Next time, I will….
- I am puzzled by….
- I am wondering….

If this is the first time students have led a conference, they'll need modeling and practice – perhaps role-playing with classmates and seeing a demonstration in front of the class.

• *Generate criteria for what a well-run conference looks like* – for example, using the sentence starters, showcasing exemplary work, and effective voice and body language.

• *Be ready to jump in and support*. "Family dynamics and student personalities create a lot of uncertainty when starting learner-led conferences," says France. There are moments when teachers will want to share their own reflections or ask a probing question. Having students take the lead in a parent conference and showcasing their work is a major shift; the more they run the show, the better.

• *Trust the process*. Some parents may be uncomfortable with a kid rather than the teacher running the conference, says France, "as they, too, have been conditioned to believe

that education is something that is done to students, as opposed to a process for student empowerment and liberation." Hand-holding and support may be necessary with some parents, but seeing their children handle the challenge is often enough to convince them of the value of the process.

"Getting Started with Learner-Led Conferences" by Paul Emerich France in *Edutopia*, April 8, 2022

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7. More Recommended Poetry and Verse Novels for Children

In this feature in *Language Arts*, Ted Kesler, Mary-Kate Sableski, Gabrielle Halko, and Heidi Mordhorst recommend children's books on the theme of "learning on the move":

- *Woke: A Young Poet's Call to Justice* by Mahogany Browne, Elizabeth Acevedo, and Olivia Gatwood, illustrated by Theodore Taylor III, grade 3-6
- *Grasping Mysteries: Girls Who Loved Math* by Jeannine Atkins, grade 3-5
- *The Canyon's Edge* by Dusti Bowling, grade 5-8
- *Flooded: Requiem for Johnstown* by Ann Burg, grade 5-8
- *When You Breathe* by Diana Favid, illustrated by Billy Renkl, grade K-3
- *Mexique: A Refugee Story from the Spanish Civil War* by Maria José Ferrada, gr. 3-5
- *Summer Feet* by Sheree Fitch, illustrated by Carolyn Fisher, grade PreK-3
- *All He Knew* by Helen Frost, grade 5-8
- *Snow Birds* by Kirsten Hall, illustrated by Jenni Desmond, grade 1-3
- *BenBee and the Teacher Griefer* by K.A. Holt, grade 5-8
- *On the Horizon: World War II Reflections* by Lois Lowry, illustrated by Kenard Pak, grade 5-8
- *A New Green Day* by Antoinette Portis, grade PreK-3
- *Land of the Cranes* by Aida Salazar, grade 4-8
- *On a Snow-Melting Day: Seeking Signs of Spring* by Buffy Silverman, grade PreK-2
- *By and By: Charles Albert Tindley, the Father of Gospel Music* by Carole Boston Weatherford, illustrated by Bryan Collier, grade 3-5
- *Green on Green* by Dianne White, illustrated by Felicita Sala, grade PreK-3
- *The World Below the Brine* by Walt Whitman, illustrated by James Christopher Carroll, grade 2-4

"Excellence in Children's Poetry and Verse Novels" by Ted Kesler, Mary-Kate Sableski, Gabrielle Halko, and Heidi Mordhorst in *Language Arts*, March 2022 (Vol. 99, #4, pp. 275-280)

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8. Short Item:

A Video Debunking Learning Styles – This 14-minute video cleverly unpacks the common belief that people learn best when taught in their preferred learning style.

“The Biggest Myth in Education” by Derek Muller on YouTube, July 9, 2021
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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 52 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 150 articles each week, and selects 8-10 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.

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- A free sample issue

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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 Express
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
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