Marshall Memo 792

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 24, 2019

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"The six most dreaded words for any employee: Can I give you some feedback?"

Ben Wigert and Nate Dvorak (see item #6)

"Teaching is a collective effort, and the most powerful predictor of a student's performance in a subject in any given year is what they learned in the previous grade. What any one teacher or school can achieve with students is critically dependent on the teaching quality of their colleagues."

Hollie Pettersson and Kerri Briggs in "Combating Teaching Attrition Rates: Start Locally" in *The Education Gadfly*, June 19, 2019 (Vol. 19, #25), https://bit.ly/2XvZNub

"For a scientist, a theory must offer predictions of new, yet-to-be-verified observations. If it doesn't, science doesn't move forward."

Daniel Willingham (see item #1)

"If you're not collecting evidence of impact, then you are really just having nice conversations around learning that may not be going anywhere."

Peter DeWitt (see item #5)

"Writing is a fundamental skill. Writers use this versatile skill to learn new ideas, persuade others, record information, create imaginary worlds, express feelings, entertain others, heal psychological wounds, chronicle experiences, and explore the meaning of events and situations."

Steve Graham (see item #2)

1. Distinguishing Theory, Empirical Generalizations, and Assumptions

In his regular column in *American Educator,* Daniel Willingham (University of Virginia) fields a question from a teacher who was told that learning educational theory isn't a good use of time. Willingham disagrees, arguing that theory can offer useful advice to teachers and school leaders, and can also help educators unlearn misconceptions that might be undermining their effectiveness (for example, erroneous beliefs about learning styles). But not all theory is helpful, he says, and describes three types of work done by researchers: theoretical statements, empirical generalizations, and epistemic assumptions:

• *Theoretical statements* – Although it would seem that theories should be useful for teachers and principals, Willingham says that's not the case. For researchers, theories are part of a four-step process: theories lead to predictions, then experiments, then observations, and then refined theories. "For a scientist," he says, "a theory must offer predictions of new, yet-to-be-verified observations. If it doesn't, science doesn't move forward." In other words, theories are tentative and may be proven wrong. For example, Piaget's theory of fixed stages in children's cognitive development turned out to be incorrect; children can sometimes perform at levels that are impossible according to Piaget's theory. Other well-known theories have been superseded by subsequent research, including Eric Erikson on personality development; Lawrence Kohlberg on moral development; and Lev Vygotsky on learning.

• *Empirical generalizations* – These are based on observing young people from varying backgrounds in many different situations over time, drawing solid conclusions about "what kids are like." These are almost always helpful to front-line educators. Some examples:

- Students remember what they think about and connect to prior knowledge.
- Being familiar with something doesn't mean it's been committed to long-term memory.
- Visual imagery improves memory.
- Students remember better when study is spaced over time.
- There's no evidence that students learn best using their preferred learning style.
- Praise can motivate, but there are many ways praise can backfire.
- Reading comprehension and higher-order thinking build on background knowledge.
- Cognitive development doesn't occur in discrete stages.
- Sleep is important for learning, and U.S. teenagers aren't getting enough of it.
- Passion for long-term goals, and stamina pursuing them, are associated with success.
- Extrinsic rewards can undermine motivation.

However, says Willingham, empirical generalizations can be over-applied or misapplied. For example, an extrinsic reward can sometimes be an effective bridge to intrinsic motivation, as

when a teacher gives a reluctant reader a small reward for trying a book, and the student gets hooked on reading it.

• *Epistemic assumptions* – These are statements about the nature of learning and knowledge that aren't grounded in empirical research or a theory-generating cycle. Some examples:

- Learning is social.
- Learning is natural.
- Everyone learns differently.
- Knowledge is constructed.

These are fuzzier than empirical generalizations, says Willingham, but they sound good and are easy to confuse with research-based findings. For example, saying "learning is social" is different from saying "kids learn best in social situations." The first is an epistemic assumption – a statement about the nature of learning – while the second is an empirical generalization – based on many observations of what students actually do. Not making this distinction can lead teachers astray. For example, a teacher who believes that "learning is social" might always have students working in groups. Similarly, believing that "everyone learns differently" could lead a teacher to think that whole-group instruction is never a good idea.

Willingham concludes with several suggested takeaways on theory and research for teachers and school leaders:

- Distinguish between epistemic assumptions, theories, and empirical generalizations.
- Know that lack of scientific evidence doesn't mean that a classroom practice is bad.
- Keep learning. Willingham includes a list of 16 websites, books, and other resources.

"Ask the Cognitive Scientist: Should Teachers Know the Basic Science of How Children Learn?" by Daniel Willingham in *American Educator*, Summer 2019 (Vol. 43, #2, p. 30-36, 43), https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2019/willingham; Willingham can be reached at willingham@virginia.edu.

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2. Improving the Teaching of Writing K-12 Schools

"Writing is a fundamental skill," says Steve Graham (Arizona State University) in this article in *Review of Research in Education*. "Writers use this versatile skill to learn new ideas, persuade others, record information, create imaginary worlds, express feelings, entertain others, heal psychological wounds, chronicle experiences, and explore the meaning of events and situations." The central role of writing, says Graham, "exacts a toll on those who do not learn to write well, as this can limit academic, occupational, and personal attainments." That's the fate of two-thirds of U.S. students, according to a 2012 NAEP report: only one-third of eighth and twelfth graders performed above the basic level; the remainder showed only partial mastery of grade-level writing skills.

Why such dismal outcomes? Graham believes it's because of the way writing is taught, which results from a set of societal attitudes and a profound lack of knowledge about writing. Some teachers follow best practices and get good results, but most do not. According to 28

studies conducted in classrooms around the world, there are several problems: (a) not enough classroom time is spent on writing; (b) students don't write frequently enough and seldom write extended compositions; (c) teachers don't use effective strategies such as writing for a real audience, orchestrating collaboration among students, and using formative assessments; (d) students aren't using digital tools when writing; and (e) the needs of students with disabilities aren't addressed sufficiently.

Graham believes that to turn around this situation, there need to be some basic understandings among policymakers, school leaders, and teachers about why writing must be included "as a central and prized component of the school curriculum" – and how to teach it most effectively. Here is Graham's list:

- Writing is vital to students' future academic and occupational success.
- Writing has this outsized effect, says Graham, because it "provides students with a tool for visibly and permanently recording, connecting, analyzing, personalizing, and manipulating key ideas in text."
- Writing proficiency develops incrementally over time, through deliberate practice.
- Although writing is more challenging for some students than for others, all students can learn to write well if instruction is differentiated appropriately.
- It's essential to teach writing at every grade, and for teachers to communicate across grades on goals, strategies, and outcomes.
- There must be clear, explicit goals in writing classrooms, including using writing for authentic and varied purposes.
- There is no single agreed-on way to teach writing, but it's important that goals, curriculum, instructional methods, and assessments are aligned.
- Sufficient instructional time is essential for students to develop proficiency as writers.
- A safe, supportive, and motivating classroom environment is foundational.
- It's helpful for teachers to have a positive identity as writers, enjoy teaching writing, and believe in its central importance to their students.
- Teachers need to be supported with ongoing, high-quality professional development.
- Students' beliefs about writing, in particular their writing identity, can support or hinder their development as writers.
- Writing has a specialized knowledge base (spelling, grammar, syntax, etc.) that students need to master.
- Explicit teaching, feedback, and mentoring are key factors in developing writing skill.
- Writing is not a single skill; teachers need to address its many facets.
- Writing has strong synergistic connections with reading, listening, and speaking.
- It's helpful to connect writing to other subject areas and students' lived experience.
- Writing enhances students' performance in other school subjects.
- Writing instruction needs to take into account the types of writing students will do at home, in higher education, and on the job.
- Writing is a social activity, and writing instruction should incorporate students' interactions with their various audiences and mentors.

Graham closes with a plea for a coherent, high-quality, and consistent vision of this vital part of the K-12 curriculum: "If students are to receive the writing instruction they need and deserve, there must be a coherent vision for how writing is taught in the classroom, across classrooms and grades in a school, within the district and across districts within a state, across states, and within the nation." And that, says Graham, should flow from the knowledge base listed above and be shaped and supported by grassroots input and involvement by teachers and school leaders.

"Changing How Writing Is Taught" by Steve Graham in *Review of Research in Education*, March 2019 (Vol. 43, p. 277-303), available for purchase at https://bit.ly/321UBhg; Graham can be reached at steve.graham@asu.edu.

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3. Hearing All Students' Views In Discussions of Hot Topics

In this *ACUE Community* article, Harry Brighouse (University of Wisconsin/Madison) ponders the perennial question of how to get shy students and those who aren't confident about their opinions to participate in class discussions (he teaches a course on moral and ethical issues). "Even with techniques like think-pair-share and good questions," says Brighouse, "students can be nervous about expressing their thoughts about controversial political and ethical issues, especially when they believe that their thoughts may not be widely shared." Brighouse suggests two strategies:

• *Surveying students in the first week of the semester* – His online questions focus on issues they'll discuss, including: *Do you think someone with an income above the median has an obligation to give away 10 percent to the poor? Is cloning for reproductive purposes wrong? Do you consider yourself a feminist? What are your political leanings? What are your views on the division of labor within a household?* The anonymous survey gives Brighouse a picture of the spectrum of views he'll be working with, and, because he shares the overall results with students, they can see how their views compare to their classmates'. Often they're surprised to learn that they're not the only ones with certain beliefs.

• *Withholding his own views* – Getting students to think critically about important issues is tricky, says Brighouse. It requires "stepping back somewhat from the opinions we have received from our cultures, communities, and families, and then articulating, evaluating, and weighing the reasons for and against those and other opinions. This is not merely a cognitive process… it takes courage, especially in a setting in which you do not know, and therefore cannot be sure that you can trust, your interlocutors." Brighouse worries that if he tips his hand on an issue, even if he tells students to ignore his views:

- Students who disagree with him might withhold their own views for fear that they will be judged harshly or marked down.
- Students who agree with him might conclude that they don't have to do the work of articulating their thinking;
- All students might feel subtly pressured to echo his opinions in their written work.

Was Brighouse successful hiding his own opinions? In a recent end-of-course survey, he asked if students had changed their minds on any of the issues (most had) and what they thought his views were. Half of the students said they didn't know what he believed, and the other half was evenly split about where he stood. "When I present the findings at the end of the term," he says, "even those who thought they knew what I believed realized that they didn't."

"Giving Voice to Students' Opposing Views: Creating Conditions for Respect and Inclusivity in Class Discussion" by Harry Brighouse, *ACUE Community*, (Association of College and University Educators), May 7, 2019, https://bit.ly/2N8XRnz; Brighouse can be reached at mhbrigho@wisc.edu.

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4. Leading Transformational Change in Schools

In this Consortium for Policy Research in Education paper, Jonathan Supovitz (University of Pennsylvania), John D'Auria (William James College), and James Spillane (Northwestern University) say the work of school leaders falls into three basic areas:

- Putting out fires – that is, reacting to immediate needs such as discipline problems, a concerned parent, or a personnel issue;
- Maintaining the organization – being visible around the school, attending meetings, and supervising classrooms;
- Leading improvement efforts – orchestrating enhancements to the program, whether the ideas originate inside or outside of the school.

The ratio among these three varies from school to school. One mark of an effective leader is spending more time on improvement activities, which should reduce the time spent putting out fires and make the routine maintenance of the organization more purposeful and effective.

Supovitz, D'Auria, and Spillane believe that principals can't do this work alone; they need to distribute leadership skillfully, not just to the obvious people (department heads, teacher leaders) but more broadly to a network of colleagues who can take reform initiatives into every classroom and office. This requires building trust and psychological safety within the organization and fostering a climate of mutual learning (as opposed to blame).

Supovitz, D'Auria, and Spillane also suggest three skills that enhance the impact of the leadership team:

• *Listening in stereo* – That is, tuning in to the content of a conversation and also the way it's expressed, including non-verbal cues, body language, and tone.

• *Being curious when faced with criticism and ideas that sound wrong* – Adopting a "learning stance," say the authors, involves shifting "from certainty about one's own point of view to curiosity about how someone else thinks differently… a genuine quest to understand where the other person is coming from."

• *Balancing inquiry with advocacy* – The authors advise staying in inquiry mode as long as possible, because once we become advocates, we're less likely to ask questions and get input and more likely to underestimate possible problems and become defensive in the face of resistance.

"Meaningful and Sustainable School Improvement with Distributed Leadership" by Jonathan Supovitz, John D'Auria, and James Spillane, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, June 14, 2019, https://bit.ly/2FvApe1; the authors can be reached at jons@gse.upenn.edu, John_DAuria@williamjames.edu, and j-spillane@northwestern.edu.

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5. What Instructional Leadership Looks like

In this *Education Week* article, author/consultant Peter DeWitt says the research on instructional leadership is "a sort of black box" – we don't know nearly enough about how principals guide teachers' work in classrooms. With the traditional type of school principal – the kind DeWitt had when he was a teacher – there's not much talk about instruction. "If I'm a teacher and my leader doesn't spend much time in my classroom," he says, "or we talk very little about instruction and spend more time talking about discipline, I'm probably not going to be too confident that my leader is an instructional leader." The picture would be very different if there were frequent classroom visits, conversations about what was observed, and faculty meetings delving into instructional dilemmas and ideas.

DeWitt shares his latest attempt to break instructional leadership into its component parts. "Leaders do not have to be experts in each one," he says, "but developing an understanding about them is important."

- Concepts of learning – being able to distinguish factual, conceptual, and deeper understandings in classroom visits and discussions with colleagues;
- Student engagement, both academic and social-emotional; both are important to understanding student disengagement and alienation;
- Instructional strategies that produce different levels of learning – factual, conceptual, and deeper understandings that transfer to new and different contexts;
- Collective efficacy – Too many principals approach this "as if it's the thing they need to build," says DeWitt. "The reality is that we build collective efficacy when we bring diverse people together and focus on an improvement that will impact students."
- Understanding the science of effectively implementing ideas so they have an impact on student learning;
- Evidence of impact – "If you're not collecting evidence of impact," concludes DeWitt, "then you are really just having nice conversations around learning that may not be going anywhere."

"Does Instructional Leadership Have to Be So Complicated?" by Peter DeWitt in *Education Week*, May 5, 2019, https://bit.ly/2Ybj7tI

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6. Shifting from Infrequent "Feedback" to In-the-Moment Coaching

"The six most dreaded words for any employee," say Ben Wigert (Workplace) and Nate Dvorak (Gallup) in this *Workplace* article: "Can I give you some feedback?" Surveys show that few managers give feedback that is helpful to their underlings. That's because

"feedback" is associated with a top-down, hierarchical, command-and-control ethos; it's usually formal, infrequent, and unhelpful. "Often, managers don't adequately observe performance," say Wigert and Dvorak, "or have enough expertise to tell employees how work should actually be done."

In decentralized organizations [like schools] where employees have a lot of autonomy and there's a premium on creativity, say the authors, "managers can't just give employees feedback about what they did 'right' or 'wrong.' They must listen, ask questions, gain context, and create a two-way dialogue… Employees should feel encouraged to share their perspective, ask questions, and bring issues to their manager. And it should be a *busy* two-way street."

"Feedback focuses on the past," they continue; "coaching conversations focus on the future." And these open-ended conversations happen frequently, based on intimate, detailed knowledge of colleagues' work. Leaders "may not be the experts in every situation, but they can shape conversations and deliver support in a way that leads to continual improvement."

"Feedback Is Not Enough" by Ben Wigert and Nate Dvorak in *Workplace*, May 16, 2019, https://bit.ly/2MEi1Wn

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7. Cutting Teens Some Slack

In this *Washington Post* article, Nashville teacher and director Braden Bell describes the awards night he leads for graduating eighth graders who have taken part in at least two of his plays during their time at the school. There's a slide show of their roles in the performances and then Bell reads a letter on each student with funny stories, memories, and character-revealing moments. "It's a powerful night," he says. "I frequently have to stop several times to regain my composure. I almost always have to pass the tissue box around multiple times to the parents present."

Each year he's done this, a few parents come up to him afterward and say they were surprised to hear another side of a student their own child had negative interactions with – perhaps mean comments or bullying. They realize they had misjudged, misunderstood, or written off a child. "Something magical – no, sacred – happens when adults hear details about other people's children," says Bell. "They move past stereotypes and clichés and begin to see them as humans – complex, complicated, messy humans who have strengths as well as weaknesses, virtues in addition to vices. In other words, they start to see other people's children with the same full perspective through which they see their own."

Bell confesses his own tendency to judge middle-school students during the year. "Children are, by definition, immature," he says. "They act impulsively. They make mistakes. They have very little judgment. They certainly have little experience to draw upon… Yes, teens speak without thinking. They are prone to exaggerate and act without balance or moderation. They can be reflexively unkind and hostile… This is why they aren't allowed to drive or vote. It's why there are laws about drinking and sexual consent."

So he's learned to "extend grace, to offer a space in which I make no judgment. Or at least to hold open the possibility that the story I am seeing will be incomplete, even when a

child seems to be aggravating or difficult. Especially when a child seems to be aggravating or difficult."

"The Magic That Happens When Adults See Other People's Kids as Three-Dimensional Humans" by Braden Bell in *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2019, https://wapo.st/2N5s3jd

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8. Taking Full Advantage of ELLs' Language Knowledge and Skills

In this article in *Education Week*, Olivia Obeso (University of California/Los Angeles) says that her father and his siblings weren't allowed to speak Spanish in school and were punished when they did so. "Their teachers didn't consider that they were cheating their students out of the opportunity to develop their unique language skills," says Obeso.

In today's schools, things are different, but Obeso believes there's too much emphasis on compensating for the supposed 30 million word gap and teaching ELLs academic vocabulary. "Many assessments prevent multilingual students from demonstrating their full language ability," she says, "yet these tests are core to the education system in the United States. Teachers are held accountable for a narrow definition of ability. Communities' values and practices are often ignored in the schools that serve them."

What's needed, says Obeso, is a more flexible definition of language acquisition, recognizing that many students are more proficient in English (and their native language) than they appear, or than they give themselves credit for. Her classroom suggestions:

• Encourage flexible language practices. Let students use any language tools and formats that help them understand and organize their thinking.

• Raise students' language awareness. Help them see patterns in different languages so they're more conscious of the decisions they make as they speak and write.

• Promote the use of language in everyday situations. That includes practicing their developing skills as they communicate with educators, health-care providers, and job sites.

• Build student-centered classrooms. Lessons and projects should connect new learning to students' prior experiences and knowledge.

"A Language-Skills Reality Check" by Olivia Obeso in *Education Week*, June 19, 2019 (Vol. 38, #36, p. 24), https://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2019/06/19/index.html

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9. Who Gets Extra Time for High-Stakes Tests?

In this article in *Psychology Today*, Mitch Prinstein (University of North Carolina/ Chapel Hill) reports on inequities in the accommodations students receive for standardized tests, including the SAT and ACT. Prinstein says about five percent of students who take these tests are granted extra time by the College Board based on their IEPs, usually 50-100 percent additional time. This is well below the 15 percent of public-school students who have some

kind of disability, which means there are thousands of capable students with academic and other learning differences who aren't getting extra time on tests.

"Unfortunately," says Prinstein, "these students may now have an additional obstacle to contend with: widespread suspicion, in the aftermath of the blockbuster college admissions scandal code-named Operation Varsity Blues, of the very accommodations they need to thrive… The heavy news coverage has unfairly thrown the accommodations process into question and increased the stigma for families who are using it properly." Prinstein says schools must push back against this bias, providing psychological testing to students who genuinely need testing accommodations and leveling the playing field for all students.

[This *New York Times* article shows the racial and economic disparities in extra time given to New York City students taking the exam to qualify for the city's elite high schools: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/17/upshot/nyc-schools-shsat-504.html?searchResultPosition=1]

"The Truth About Getting Extra Time on the SAT" by Mitch Prinstein in *Psychology Today*, July/August 2019 (Vol. 52, #4, p. 48-51), no e-link; Prinstein is at mitch.prinstein@unc.edu.

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10. Short Item:

A physics curriculum for all learners – Positive Physics positivephysics.org, developed by Jack Replinger and inspired by his students in inner-city Memphis, breaks down intimidating problems into building blocks accessible to students of any academic background and helps them learn to love physics. Teachers can start for free and Jack hopes to find funding to make the entire site free. Read a full-length article about the site in Chalkbeat. Replinger can be reached at jreplinger@gmail.com.

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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 48 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.

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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
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Essential Teacher
Exceptional Children
Go Teach
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
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Education Gadfly
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 Magazine