Marshall Memo 1079

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 17, 2025

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Learning and memory are so fundamental to us, so enmeshed throughout cognition, that 'solving' memory, unpacking its neural mechanisms and being able to conceptualize it fully will, I believe, result in revelations across neuroscience."

> Eleanor Maguire, a cognitive neuroscientist whose research transformed our understanding of memory, died January 4th at 54. Maguire was best known for her research on how the hippocampus of London cabbies enlarges as they memorize 25,000 streets and thousands of landmarks. Here's the *New York Times* obituary.

"My second-grade teacher, Ms. Edson, told us: If something feels too hard to do, it just means that the first step isn't small enough. So often when we're struggling, we tell ourselves that it's a sign that we're broken or that something is our fault, and then we freeze. But when something is too hard in the moment, tell yourself Ms. Edson's advice."

> Becky Kennedy, clinical psychologist and founder of Good Inside, quoted in "Simple Health Tips That Experts Swear By" in *The New York Times*, January 28, 2025

"Giving a phone to your kid would be like handing them to the wolves."

> Jovie, a Minnesota artist, in "12 Americans on How They Use TikTok", a focus group moderated by Katherine Miller and Margie Omero in *The New York Times*, March 2, 2025

"We must make student success the starting point in planning all professional learning experiences and activities."

> Thomas Guskey (see item #2)

"There should be no shame in a mental health diagnosis, whether it is depression, anxiety, or conduct disorder. Recognizing problems for what they are is the first necessary step to addressing them."

> James Blair and Daniel Willingham (see item #4)

1. Different Feedback Strategies to Meet Individual Teachers' Needs

In *The Learning Professional*, author/leadership coach Keith Young and district director of student services Judith Mendoza Jimenez suggest three levels of feedback based on teachers' needs and levels of experience: rapid response, moderate engagement, and expansive intervention.

• *Rapid response* – Many classroom issues can be addressed quickly, say Young and Jimenez, "without the need for extended sit-down feedback sessions." For example, during a classroom visit, an observer might prompt the teacher to check for understanding or focus on disengaged students by whispering to the teacher, handing them a note, or sending a text. "I didn't have to wait until the end of the day to learn what the students needed," said a teacher who appreciated the quick feedback. [Here's a detailed discussion of real-time coaching.]

Another approach is having a brief feedback chat in the corridor immediately after an observation. An elementary principal found these informal conversations built rapport and helped teachers make minor instructional tweaks. Similarly, a district administrator observing a school's faculty meeting pulled the principal aside and unobtrusively suggested a way to get input from reluctant colleagues.

• *Moderate engagement* – "Some feedback needs more than a quick chat," say Young and Jimenez, "structured enough to get into detail, yet flexible enough to fit into a busy school day." Novice teachers might be asked to co-teach a lesson with a seasoned colleague, actively engaging with a new teaching idea without having to take full responsibility for the lesson, then debriefing afterward. Administrators might also orchestrate peer observation cycles to get teachers into each other's classrooms and spread effective practices.

"It was powerful to see my colleague handle the same challenges I face – and to learn from their solutions," said one teacher. "I also realized I need to plan my complex thinking questions in advance because improvising them during the lesson rarely worked for me."

Another moderate engagement strategy is teachers recording videos of lessons and reviewing them afterward with an instructional coach. This is like athletic teams looking at game videos, say Young and Jimenez, "allowing educators to see missed opportunities, analyze strategies, and plan for improvement."

For very proficient teachers who seldom need corrective feedback, the best approach might be to have them coach themselves based on rubrics, classroom videos, or an analysis of their students' work. One experienced art teacher reviewed her students' portfolios at the end of a semester and made a number of changes in pedagogy, lesson pacing, and scaffolding.

• *Expansive intervention* – Longer, more in-depth coaching can help teachers develop new practices, improve student engagement, perhaps confront biases. An Arizona science department head engaged in a semester-long, twice-a-week coaching cycle with a novice teacher to plan lessons, observe classroom dynamics (especially student-led labs), and debrief after each classroom visit. "It wasn't just about tweaking a lesson here or there," said the teacher. "It was like a deep dive into everything – how I pressed my students, how I understood the standards, how I communicated during the lab, even how I handled their mistakes. I went from feeling overwhelmed to watching my students own their learning."

Another idea is "ramble chats" – extended walk-and-talk conversations in which an instructional coach and an effective teacher talk informally about curriculum, pedagogy, and student learning – without the constraints of a formal agenda. "This type of feedback," say Young and Jimenez, "proves well-suited to teachers who are either highly experienced or highly self-reflective or, ideally, both. The open-ended and time-consuming nature of these conversations fosters deep reflection and creative problem solving."

The goal of this kind of differentiated support, conclude Young and Jimenez: "a professional learning culture where every individual feels seen, supported, and inspired to make changes – from quick adjustments to deep transformations. That kind of continuous improvement is possible when we reimagine feedback as not just a tool for addressing deficiencies, but as a catalyst for growth, innovation, and empowerment."

"3 Essential Feedback Categories for Inspiring Educator Growth" by Keith Young and Judith Mendoza Jimenez in *The Learning Professional*, February 2025 (Vol. 46, #1, pp. 34-37)

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2. Thomas Guskey on Planning Professional Learning with the End in Mind

In *The Learning Professional*, Thomas Guskey (University of Kentucky) says, "We must make student success the starting point in planning all professional learning experiences and activities." He suggests the following sequence:

• *Step 1: Identify the student learning improvements we want to achieve*. This involves answering three important questions:

- What do we want students to accomplish, academically or social-emotionally?
- How will we know if they have met those goals – i.e., assessments?
- What else might happen, positive or negative?

"Appropriate planning requires looking beyond the intended goals to the broad array of possible unintended consequences," says Guskey.

• *Step 2: Determine research-based strategies most likely to yield those improvements*. What is our theory of action? What are the instructional strategies and classroom practices that will bring about student success in our context, and how can they be successfully implemented?

• *Step 3: Clarify the organizational support and change needed*. This includes buy-in by leaders, time, technology, and adequate funding. It's also important to determine if the new

initiative necessitates changes in existing practices – for example, if teachers are currently averaging grades, that might discourage students from taking risks because one poor performance can pull down their grade.

• *Step 4: Identify the necessary professional knowledge and skills*. What must front-line educators know and be able to do to successfully implement new strategies and see successful student outcomes? The answers drive decisions on PD experiences.

• *Step 5: Choose the PD design that will enable educators to meet the goals*. "The most effective professional learning designs," says Guskey, "are customized to fit educators' current knowledge and skills, the context in which they work, and the improvements in student learning we hope to achieve."

"In Professional Learning, FORM Should Follow FUNCTION" by Thomas Guskey in *The Learning Professional*, February 2025 (Vol. 46, #1, pp. 22-25); Guskey can be reached at guskey@uky.edu.

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3. Audience-Driven, In-Class Writing in High School Social Studies

In *Edutopia*, New Jersey teacher Henry Seton describes how his 10th-graders write letters to a family member or key stakeholder as culminating assessments in World History units. Here are the details of one recent unit:

• Seton introduced a unit on how World War II has been romanticized and mythologized. He told students they would be working on a letter on the topic and encouraged them to think of a specific family member or friend who would receive the letter.

• Five lessons were devoted to exploring a variety of sources with students taking notes: testimonies from World War II veterans, Isabel Wilkerson's work on the connections between Nazism and American history, a Ken Burns film on how the U.S. helped and did not help Jewish refugees from the Holocaust, and more.

• Students wrote detailed outlines for their letters in class (pencil and paper) while Seton circulated and gave appreciation and suggestions.

• Students wrote their final letters by hand in class, using their draft and any notes they'd taken so far (laptops and pre-written drafts were not allowed). They used and cited sources according to AP history course standards.

• Seton read the letters, giving detailed feedback to students whose writing needed improvement and helping students polish writing that would represent his class and the school to an outside audience. He then composed a cover e-mail explaining the rationale for the unit.

• Students shared letters with their chosen recipients, in person or remotely (via FaceTime), had a conversation about the content, and wrote a reflection about the interchange (some students made short TikTok-style videos).

"This approach is largely AI-proof," says Seton, "since students are doing most of the outlining and all the drafting in class. I will occasionally have a student panic and use AI to write their outline, but this is usually obvious because the outline will not match the sources we studied in class." The authentic letter assessment, he concludes, has significant benefits:

- Student engagement and buy-in "spikes," says Seton.
- The quality of writing improves, including creativity and authenticity.
- Reluctant writers write more, and with more passion and pride.
- For Seton, grading the letters is easier (because of the quality), more fun, and more rewarding.

"Authentic Social Studies Assessments Through Student-Written Letters" by Henry Seton in *Edutopia*, March 4, 2025; Seton can be reached at hseton@gmail.com.

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4. Getting a Handle on Aggressive Behavior Among Students

"Student aggression causes considerable disruption for both peers and teachers," say cognitive scientists James Blair (University of Copenhagen) and Daniel Willingham (University of Virginia) in *American Educator*. "Aggressive students make it harder for their classmates to learn, diminish teacher job satisfaction, and contribute to educator burnout over time." About 1-2 percent of students are considered aggressive, and this is a problem around the world.

The authors define aggression as intentional behavior meant to cause either physical or psychological pain. A student spreading a social media rumor to cause embarrassment to a peer is aggression (even if it doesn't achieve its goal), whereas carelessly bumping into another student, leading to injury, is not.

Psychologists distinguish between *instrumental* aggression – used to achieve a particular goal (like a preschooler punching a classmate to make him relinquish a playground swing) – and *reactive* aggression – a response to a provocation, threat, injustice, or frustration. Either can take place within what are considered normal social interactions – for example, a basketball player trash-talking an opponent or President Andrew Jackson using a cane to defend himself against an assassination attempt. The key is understanding what's within bounds and what isn't. For example, if Jackson had used his cane to attack a man who criticized his hat, it would have been considered unwarranted aggression.

When a student's aggression is outside of a school's norms and part of a persistent pattern, that's a sign that the child needs significant support. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th edition) recognizes two types of aggression in young people:

- Oppositional defiant disorder (primarily before age 10) – a combination of angry/irritable mood, vindictiveness, and defiant behavior over at least 6 months.
- Conduct disorder (usually age 10-18) – committing aggressive acts toward people and animals, destruction of property, deceitfulness, violation of community rules, and showing a persistent tendency to violate the rights of others and flout rules.

Up to 70 percent of children with conduct disorder are also diagnosed with ADHD – inattention, difficulty focusing, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, and that overlap can be confounding.

Making a diagnosis of oppositional defiant disorder or conduct disorder can be a start to getting appropriate treatment, say Blair and Willingham, but other factors may be involved – exposure to violence at home or among peers, depression, anxiety disorder, or PTSD. Bias can also be involved; it's well-established that African-American students are over-diagnosed for aggression and often referred for disciplinary action rather than treatment. "This is problematic," say the authors, "because misdiagnosed youth may not have access to needed medications, in-school accommodations, or community-based therapies."

Because getting a correct diagnosis for an individual student can be difficult, Blair and Willingham believe it's helpful to pay attention to four underlying mental processes that can give rise to aggression. One of these is often present with students with heightened levels of aggressiveness:

• *Acute threat response* – The normal mammalian response to a threat is freezing for a mild threat, fleeing from a more-serious threat, and fighting a menacing attacker or rabid animal. What's different in some children is an exaggerated response to what seems to others like a mild threat or manageable frustration – for example, explosive rage at being denied a toy or being socially challenged by a peer or teacher. It's likely that factors in the child's environment play a part in such responses, yet some young people with a turbulent childhood develop coping mechanisms and are resilient.

• *Response control/behavioral disinhibition* – Brain scientists point to the role of specific areas of the brain in whether a child can pay attention in class and resist giving in to a distraction. If a kid feels the urge to grab another's belongings, it's more likely to happen if response control is weak, and if the grabber has a tendency toward aggression, there's going to be an even bigger problem.

• *Reward- and punishment-based decision-making* – Vital to students making good day-to-day decisions are several brain regions that deal with positive and negative reinforcement for behavior. Sadly, some kids make decisions for short-term rewards – playing hooky, for example – rather than decisions that will produce better long-term benefits. "Poorer decision-making increases the risk the individual will engage in aggression," say Blair and Willingham, "and also increases the risk for future substance abuse."

• *Empathy* – Brain regions that respond to distress in others, coupled with those dealing with decision-making, reduce the probability that people will harm others. But if these brain regions are not working well for a student, there's more chance they will be aggressive in pursuit of their goals. "They are more likely to use weapons at school (rather than simply threaten to use them)," say Blair and Willingham, "and continue to attack another child even when that child is attempting to disengage."

These four mental processes – threat response, disinhibition, reward-based decision-making, and empathy – may be affected by genetic factors, increasing the chance of aggressive behavior. When people hear that aggression may have genetic roots, there's a tendency to conclude nothing can be done – it's in the DNA. Not true, say Blair and Willingham. There are also genetic risk factors for depression, obesity, asthma, heart disease, and diabetes, "but that doesn't mean children suffering from these health issues cannot be helped."

In addition, scientists don't yet understand the genes involved. That's why we need to pay attention to home, community, and environmental factors that may be involved. Blair and Willingham believe educators should watch for signs of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, especially if it is persistent and severe, and also evidence of neglect, which appears to reduce the brain's response to reward. Environmental factors may also be involved, including toxins and lead paint poisoning.

What should educators do to address aggressive behavior in their schools? Blair and Willingham list these psychosocial and pharmacological interventions that can be effective in reducing children's clinical aggression, whatever the cause.

• *Cognitive-behavioral therapy* – This targets deficits in regulating emotions and social problem-solving skills through structured strategies designed to produce changes in a child's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It might include helping identify the antecedents and consequences of aggressive behavior, learning strategies for recognizing angry feelings, regulating expressions of anger, generating new ways of thinking about things that trigger aggression, and rehearsing new strategies.

• *Parent management training* – This aims to change family interactions, especially maladaptive behaviors like harsh and inconsistent discipline that may be prompting a child's irritability and aggression. The training may also zero in on actions that reinforce a negative dynamic – for example, a child throws a violent tantrum about going to school because he's being teased and the parents conclude they can't send him to school in that state – teaching the child that tantrums work.

• *Neuroleptic (anti-psychotic) medications* – These are reported to have some impact on reducing aggression, say Blair and Willingham, but the mechanism remains unclear and more research is needed.

• *Adderall-type medications* – These have been shown to reduce aggression risk in young people with ADHD, perhaps by making a potentially aggressive child more responsive to distress in others and more likely to restrain themselves. However, for children with enhanced threat responsiveness, these medications may actually increase aggression.

Blair and Willingham close with three pieces of advice for front-line educators. First, when there's aggressive behavior, it's natural for teachers to try to talk with the child and observe the behavior to try to figure out the triggers. "That's of course appropriate," say the authors, "but it's also essential to remember that every public school district is required by federal law to have a process in place to identify students who need additional support. We recommend that you contact the school administrator who is in charge of that process the *first* time you are suspicious the child may need help." This, along with careful documentation, will start the process and inform intervention.

Second, say Blair and Willingham, even if aggressive behavior reaches clinical levels and requires mental health support, "it's important to keep in mind that the majority of aggressive children can be helped. There are no 'bad kids' who are beyond help. In particular, the stereotype about boys of color from lower-income families as being violent and beyond help is incorrect… and early intervention is always better."

Finally, minimizing the problem helps no one. "We've seen educators and families shrink from the suggestion that a child's aggressiveness might be a symptom of mental illness," say Blair and Willingham. "This shrinking away fosters the stigmatization of mental illness and prevents the child from receiving needed help. There should be no shame in a mental health diagnosis, whether it is depression, anxiety, or conduct disorder. Recognizing problems for what they are is the first necessary step to addressing them, and in many districts, for accessing the services that will help the child thrive in school."

"Ask the Cognitive Scientist: Understanding Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom" by James Blair and Daniel Willingham in *American Educator*, Winter 2024-25 (pp. 1-20); the authors can be reached at robert.james.blair@regionh.dk and willingham@virginia.edu.

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5. Can We Win the Battle with Distraction and Interruption?

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, journalist Rebecca Knight says we swim in a sea of diversions, both external and self-inflicted, and reports on her interviews with several time management experts. "We've trained our brain to need and want interruptions," says psychologist/author Zelana Montminy. "It's almost like we're addicted to distractions." Social media algorithms are specifically designed to exploit this vulnerability.

We try to multitask, but studies show that it makes our work take longer, leads to more errors, and increases stress. "Your executive function – your brain's CEO – gets fatigued," says informatics professor Gloria Mark (UC/Irvine). "And it struggles to filter out distractions or make decisions, leaving you even more susceptible to interruptions."

How can we stay focused and on track with so much working against us? Knight synthesizes the experts' advice:

• *Lay the groundwork*. "You need to prioritize foundational habits like sleep, hydration, and physical activity," says Montminy. "You could try all the mental health hacks in the world, and you're not going to get anywhere if you're not sleeping well and not hydrating." She also recommends a dedicated workspace, a particular desk setup, and a consistent routine that primes you for deep work. Mark suggests making it harder to be distracted by turning off notifications, locking away your phone during work time, and using app blockers to hide digital temptations.

• *Train your brain's attention*. Mark advocates writing the specific goals for a project on a sticky note and putting it within your visual field. Surrounding yourself with visual reminders of what you're trying to accomplish is very helpful, since we naturally concentrate on what's aligned with our objectives.

• *Preemptively savor a sense of accomplishment*. Look ahead several hours and ask, "How do I want to *feel*?" says Mark. "Picture the end result," advises Montminy. "Visualize what it looks like, sit in the feeling of it, and imagine the relief."

• *Cultivate meta-awareness*. This means observing our mental processes as they unfold, says Mark. "It's like slapping yourself awake and saying, 'Pay attention!' When you feel the

impulse to check social media, pause and ask yourself, *What's driving this behavior? Am I procrastinating? Am I avoiding challenging work*?" Montminy adds, "Don't use your device as a pacifier."

• *Tune into your energy patterns*. Most people's peak productivity is late morning and mid-afternoon, but there's variation depending on whether they are morning larks or night owls. Montminy suggests figuring out your best times of day and scheduling cognitively demanding tasks for those hours. "Understanding and adapting to your energy fluctuations helps you align your work schedule with your personal rhythm," she says.

• *Practice active listening*. "We've become accustomed to not being present with each other," says Montminy. "Shallow interactions have become the norm." The remedy is making a deliberate effort to practice active listening – maintaining eye contact, focusing on what the other person is saying, and asking thoughtful follow-up questions.

• *Replenish your attention reserves*. You can do that by taking intentional breaks and using them not to scroll on the cellphone but to stretch, meditate, read poetry, or just stare out the window. "You have limited cognitive resources," says Mark. "They're very precious. How do you want to distribute them over the course of your day?"

"7 Habits to Stay Focused in a World Full of Distractions" by Rebecca Knight in *Harvard Business Review*, February 4, 2025

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6. Notable Poetry Books

School Library Journal shares the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) 2025 list of high-quality books of poetry (click the link below for cover images and brief synopses):

- *I Heard: An American Journey* by Jaha Nailah Avery, illustrated by Steffi Walthall
- *Jam, Too?* by JaNay Brown-Wood, illustrated by Jacqueline Alcántara
- *Great Gusts: Winds of the World and the Science Behind Them* by Melanie Crowder and Megan Benedict, illustrated by Khoa Le
- *When I Wrap My Hair* by Shauntay Grant, illustrated by Jenin Mohammed
- *The Mistakes That Made Us: Confessions from Twenty Poets* by Irene Latham and Charles Waters, illustrated by Mercè López
- *A Plant Is a Poem* by Amanda West Lewis, illustrated by Oliver Averill
- *Queer and Fearless: Poems Celebrating the Lives of LGBTQ+ Heroes* by Rob Sanders, illustrated by Harry Woodgate
- *Leafy Landmarks: Travels with Trees* by Michelle Schaub, illustrated by Anne Lambelet
- *Wind Is a Dance* by Debra Kempf Shumaker, illustrated by Josée Bisaillon
- *This Land Is a Lullaby* by Tonya Simpson, illustrated by Delreé Dumont
- *Hoop Queens 2* by Charles Smith Jr.
- *It's Time to Hush and Say Good Night* by Citra Soundar, illustrated by Sandhya Prabhat

Next week's Memo will have the NCTE list of notable verse novels.

"NCTE's 2025 Notable Poetry and Verse Novels" in *School Library Journal*, March 2025 (Vol. 71, #3, p. 26)

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7. Short Item:

Graphics on Covid-19 – These 30 *New York Times* graphs show the impact of the pandemic on students' test scores, spending on children, measles vaccinations, time spent socializing, women in the labor force, online shopping, marriage rates, dining out, distance traveled, alcohol sales, and more. FYI, here's a complete compendium of Memo articles from that era.

"30 Charts That Show How Covid Changed Everything" by Aatish Bhatia and Ireneo Cabreros in *The New York Times*, March 19, 2025

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If you have feedback or suggestions, please e-mail kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers early Tuesday (there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTMI version. Artificial intelligence is not used.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed Magazine
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
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Language Magazine
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education