Marshall Memo 878

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 15, 2021

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"What's the most important thing I need to know about you?"

The final question in a beginning-of-school survey given to her middle-school math students, in "Relevant Curriculum Is Equitable Curriculum" by Chaunté Garrett in *Educational Leadership*, March 2021 (Vol. 78, #6, pp. 48-53)

"It's really hard to make massive gains in skill and performance and talent, especially overnight. But it's fairly easy to make small changes every day."

Jeff Haden (see item #2)

"In a world that will likely always involve some level of remote learning or work, it's more important than ever that we understand and accept that our role as educators is to teach time management and other executive-functioning skills, not just expect our students to have them and get frustrated when they don't."

Emily Rinkema and Stan Williams (see item #7)

"It's hard to get traction for improvement with a team of defensive educators. Building a culture of nondefensive ownership of our biases is a crucial first step in any improvement process."

Sarah Fiarman, Kristin Kyles-Smith, and Alison Lee (see item #3)

"Shouldn't the schools that serve poor children be the very best schools we have?"

Caitlin Flanagan in "Private Schools Are Indefensible: The Gulf Between How Rich Kids and Poor Kids are Educated in America Is Obscene" in *The Atlantic*, April 2021 (Vol. 327, #3, pp. 50-60)

1. Is Tutoring the Best Intervention for Covid-19 Unfinished Learning?

In this Thomas B. Fordham Institute paper, Michael Goldstein (Match Education) and Bowen Paulle (University of Amsterdam) say that high-dosage tutoring has "huge potential" for addressing the lost learning of so many students due to the coronavirus. But they worry that implementing tutoring at scale will produce disappointing results. First, the research on tutoring is not unanimously positive: a good many unsuccessful programs were terminated before being written up; plus, there's the problem of implementing tutoring on a large scale.

Goldstein and Paulle list some attributes that have been suggested for an effective tutoring program:

- Substantial tutoring time each week;
- Mandatory for targeted students;
- Strong, sustained tutor-tutee relationships;
- Aligning tutoring with the school curriculum;
- Close monitoring of student knowledge and skills;
- Oversight of tutors to assure quality interactions.

Sounds straightforward, right? "If you believe tutoring is simple," say Goldstein and Paulle, "then the path to scale is easy: Get some cash, use it to pay smart and kind adults to sit across from kids and teach, create some rules, and get to work."

But sometimes tutoring flops. Natalie Wexler, a noted education writer, described a recent one-on-one session she conducted in a school. The tutee stared straight ahead, refused to answer questions, "clearly hated the whole exercise, and eventually refused to come." This student wished she was back with her classmates where she might actually be learning something, as opposed to practicing the skill of the week – summarizing – with a book about the Golden Gate Bridge.

"Natalie's example was with one student," say Goldstein and Paulle. "Frequently there are two to four kids in a tutorial. Some are not paying attention, eyes drawn to the windows, or covertly scanning phones in their laps. Some are confused, brows furrowed. Some are irritable, lips pursed, sighing theatrically at the slightest challenge, rolling their eyes at each task change. Often the tutor is talking too much, over-explaining. Often both parties are bored with the curriculum. Maybe the Zoom session just timed out. Maybe Kid 1 was tight with Kid 2 in September, but they had a big fight, and now they hate each other. Maybe Kid 3 was 'sort of OK' with tutoring but became resentful when the tutor called her mom and mentioned missed assignments."

Likening tutoring in schools to the challenge of creating a new vaccine, Goldstein and Paulle say that in human cells, things are constantly changing, and successful vaccines have to be designed to adapt to those changes. Similarly, school conditions are always in flux: "New schedules. New leadership. New priorities. New internal politics." A tutoring program that tries to create a recipe (a list of best practices) and apply it consistently won't do well in this environment. Conventional, rule-following managers are not good at adapting to change, say Goldstein and Paulle. A different kind of leader is needed for tutoring programs to succeed at scale: people who thrive on solving problems.

"These unusual managers obsessively look for problems caused by school changes," they say, "fiercely try to fix them, and humbly realize that often their first and second and third 'fix attempts' might not work. They persist until they get the right result." Their hypothesis is that if tutoring programs are led by managers like this, they can succeed at scale.

But first there needs to be an open competition, as with Covid-19 vaccines, for "candidate" tutoring programs tried out with small populations of students. Those that are successful (which will be a small percentage) should then be tried with a larger population of students, and again, the failures discarded – and so on. Again, the key ingredient is managers who embrace failure and uncertainty, keep trying, and constantly improve tutoring interventions.

"The Narrow Path to Do It Right: Lessons from Vaccine Making for High-Dose Tutoring" by Michael Goldstein and Bowen Paulle in a Thomas B. Fordham Institute paper, March 2021; Paulle can be reached at B.Paulle@uva.nl.

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2. Continuous Improvement 101

"It's really hard to make massive gains in skill and performance and talent, especially overnight," says Jeff Haden in this article in *Inc*. "But it's fairly easy to make small changes every day." He gives the example of Britain's three-year effort to take its cycling team to a first-ever victory in the Tour de France.

Coach Sir Dave Brailsford analyzed the individual components of a world-class cyclist, and cycling team, and focused on improving each one by one percent. "Not 20 percent," says Haden. "Or 10 percent. Or even 5 percent. Just 1 percent… Think small, not big. Think progression, not perfection. Think small improvements to create a major improvement." Some of the elements they focused on:

- Experimenting in a wind tunnel to tweak cycler aerodynamics.
- Painting the floor of the team truck white so dust was easier to spot and clean up, which improved bicycle maintenance.
- Having cyclists frequently wash their hands to avoid illness during competition.
- Being meticulous with food preparation.
- Having cyclists bring their own pillows and mattresses so they could sleep in familiar postures.

The spirit of incrementally improving routine activities became part of the team's culture. "There's something inherently rewarding about identifying marginal gains," says Brailsford. "People want to identify opportunities and share them with the group. Our team became a very positive place to be."

These and other refinements, along with a rigorous training regimen, gave the British team a significant competitive advantage. After three years, one member, Bradley Wiggins, won the Tour de France and an Olympic gold medal. In three of the next four years, another, Chris Froome, won the Tour de France.

How does this apply to a workplace or school? By breaking down the parts of routine tasks and making small but meaningful improvements. Even if an improvement saves only 10 seconds or brings about seemingly small improvements, it adds up. "You don't have to get a lot better at one big thing," says Haden. "You can just get a tiny bit better at a whole lot of things." Some possible areas:

- Managing e-mail;
- Using online collaboration platforms;
- Making recurring decisions;
- The way meetings are run (or having fewer meetings);
- [Small changes in teaching and assessment practices.]

"Improvement feels good," says Haden. "Improvement is fulfilling. Fulfillment provides the motivation to seek further improvement. The result is an endless cycle of effort, success, fulfillment, motivation, effort, success."

"Why Brilliant Leadership Minds Embrace the Rule of 1 Percent" by Jeff Haden in *Inc*., March 12, 2021

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3. Getting Teacher Teams Focused on Equity

(Originally titled "Is Your Approach to Continuous Improvement Colorblind?")

"It's hard to get traction for improvement with a team of defensive educators," say author/leadership consultant Sarah Fiarman, Kristin Kyles-Smith (Two Rivers Public Charter School), and Alison Lee (EL Education) in this article in *Educational Leadership*. "Building a culture of nondefensive ownership of our biases is a crucial first step in any improvement process." They suggest five steps for addressing racial inequities and unconscious biases in schools.

• *Break down assessment and survey results by race, gender, and ELL status*. "Every school will have different variations of student populations to pay attention to and different ways to sort the data to learn where to investigate," say Fiarman, Kyles-Smith, and Lee. "But key problems will remain invisible when schools neglect to disaggregate their data." For example, a survey might show that 90 percent of students say they have an adult they trust in the school, but what if the 10 percent who don't are mostly African-American girls? Other possible data sources to disaggregate and analyze: benchmark tests, AP enrollment, which students raise their hands in class, who tries out for chorus or Math Olympics.

• *Take an honest look at what's working for which students*. Skillful facilitation of teams can help teachers make the connection between their classroom practices and patterns of student achievement – something that's often avoided when educators blame outside-of-school conditions or take an I-taught-it-they just-didn't-learn-it attitude.

• *Shift to the language of personal responsibility*. This is difficult in schools where few students of color are achieving, but Fiarman, Kyles-Smith, and Lee say educators need to look past undeniable social and economic inequities and see current patterns of student achievement as *"absolutely abnormal*." A sign that this crucial attitude shift has taken place would be hearing this in a team meeting: "I still haven't landed the right strategy to get all my students to complete independent reading. What are you doing that's getting better results?"

• *Identify root causes and effective strategies*. The authors describe a Baltimore school in which teachers believed that students' low assessment results pointed to after-school remediation, summer school, and repeating a grade. They jumped from data to solutions without considering whether daily teaching practices might be part of the problem. The school's leaders scheduled time for English teachers to meet with a broader group of colleagues (including those who taught AP classes) and observe each other's classes. As a result, better teaching practices spread from teacher to teacher. One example: teachers who had been using rote Do Now assignments at the beginning of classes experimented with asking students to grapple with more-engaging prompts and saw immediate improvement. "Along the way," say Fiarman, Kyles-Smith, and Lee, "teachers came to see that the intervention students needed more meaningful, challenging classroom learning – not additional hours of worksheets after school."

• *Look within*. In addition to the steps above, the authors recommend that educators push themselves with questions like these:

- What has allowed us to be complacent about low performance from students of color?
- Do we dole out harsher punishments to these students?
- Are we more focused on compliance over independent thinking?
- Whose skills, values, and experiences do we appreciate and celebrate?
- What prevents us from engaging students and other stakeholders in the process of improvement?

"True improvement work," conclude Fiarman, Kyles-Smith, and Lee, "requires transforming ourselves as well as our practices."

"Is Your Approach to Continuous Improvement Colorblind?" by Sarah Fiarman, Kristin Kyles-Smith, and Alison Lee in *Educational Leadership*, March 2021 (Vol. 78, #6, pp. 16-21); the authors can be reached at sarahfiarman@gmail.com, kristina.kyles@gmail.com, and lee.y.alison@gmail.com.

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4. How Three California Schools Treated Students' Use of Social Media

In this article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Matthew Rafalow (University of California/ Berkeley) reports on his study of three California middle schools that had similar technology

tools and resources for all students, a similar focus on technology-based instruction, and similar teachers (mostly white women). Students in all three schools had lots of experience using digital technologies in their personal lives, and they were skilled at using online platforms and tools to communicate with peers and create and share new media.

"Importantly, though," says Rafalow, "the schools differed in their student demographics" – and that corresponded with the very different ways teachers thought and talked about digital skills and the classroom opportunities they offered students. Here's how the differences played out:

• *A school serving mostly wealthy white students* – Teachers described the skills students gained from digital play as *essential* to their success because they fostered individual creativity. One teacher likened kids' informal, off-the-books digital activity to Steve Jobs and other tech pioneers tinkering in their garages. "At this school," says Rafalow, "students were encouraged to take what they learned from online play and apply it to their work in the classroom."

• *A school serving mostly middle-class Asian-American students* – Teachers at this school saw students' personal digital activity as a *threat* to learning, and forbade or heavily monitored non-school technology use, including Facebook and Instagram. One teacher referred to students' informal tech apps as "this garbage." Educators appeared to be drawing on stereotypes of driven Asian Americans to justify their traditional pedagogical approach, and minimized students' online participation in classrooms.

• *A school serving mostly working-class Latinx students* – Teachers at this school saw the skills students were picking up from informal technology use as *irrelevant* to the mission of the school. "Those skills from playing video games don't translate to schools," said one teacher. "So they have fast phones? So what? The kids we teach, if we're being realistic, they need skills for hands-on jobs. Like how to fix a new-wave car. If they learn technology, it's for those purposes."

The very different way students' digital skills and experiences were treated in these schools suggests, says Rafalow, "that even if our schools succeed in closing the nation's existing gaps in digital access and skills, technology education would likely remain grossly inequitable. All three of these schools had plenty of technology available, all three were committed to providing technology-based instruction, and all three sets of students had developed, in the process of using social media and playing around online, a broad range of digital skills. However, only at the first school were these skills treated as assets to be valued and built upon. At the other two schools, serving less-affluent students of color, those very same digital skills were viewed with scorn or indifference."

"Digital Equality Requires More Than Access" by Matthew Rafalow in *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2020 (Vol. 102, #6, pp. 26-29); Rafalow can be reached at mrafalow@berkeley.edu.

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5. Teaching Students How to Ask Good Questions

"Most of what students discuss and write in school is in response to questions their teachers pose," says veteran New York City educator Joan Brodsky Schur in this article in *Social Education*. She believes teaching and learning benefit when students formulate their own questions – but when asked to do this, students often ask low-level questions, sending classmates on a hunt for specific facts in a text. "We cannot blame students if they don't know how to ask higher-level thinking questions," says Schur; "teachers are trained to believe that is their job. But unless students learn to formulate their own inquiries, they remain passive learners guided by the questions of others."

Recent social studies standards (C3 and NCSS) call for students to be able to construct questions starting in sixth grade, culminating in independent inquiries by high-school graduation. Schur suggests a protocol from the Right Question Institute to build students' question-asking skills. In a unit on the Cold War, for example, students are asked to spend 15 minutes brainstorming questions – perhaps prompted by a photograph of a fallout shelter – with one student acting as a scribe. Students then sort the questions into those that are closed – the correct answer can be found on Wikipedia – and those that are open-ended, inviting disagreement and debate. Both types of questions can play a part in a social studies unit, but the latter go deeper:

- *Closed questions* elicit answers that define terms, satisfy curiosity, give context, draw on prior knowledge, and provide evidence to support an argument.
- *Open questions* introduce complexities, invite debate from different perspectives, draw on big-picture thinking, connect different places and eras, and suggest the need for further research.

Some examples of closed questions for a unit on the Cold War:

- When did the Cold War begin and end?
- What was one promise the Soviet Union failed to keep to its allies in 1945?
- Who first developed the term domino theory?
- Which countries became satellites of the Soviet Union?
- What event escalated the Cold War?
- What did Americans fear most during the Cold War?
- What percentage of Americans built bomb shelters?
- Did Ronald Reagan end the Cold War?

Some examples of open questions for the unit:

- If the Soviet Union was our ally during World War II, why did it become our enemy so soon after?
- In what ways was the Cold War an outgrowth of World War II?
- On what basis can we decide who started the Cold War?
- How were fears of nuclear war manipulated by both sides?
- How did the use of figurative language (Cold War, Iron Curtain, satellites, dominos) affect people's emotions and perceptions?
- Why was the Berlin Wall built?

- To what degree was President Reagan responsible for ending the Cold War?
- What were the effects of the end of the Cold War?
- What were the consequences of applying the domino theory to Vietnam in the 1960s?
- On what basis could we argue that the Cold War continues today?

Students might then be asked to sort questions into chronological order; categorize and analyze questions according to which field they fall into: history, geography, sociology, economics, civics, psychology, anthropology; and perhaps group them into the six types of Socratic questions:

- Asking for clarification;
- Probing assumptions;
- Probing reasons and evidence;
- Exploring viewpoints and perspectives;
- Looking at implications and consequences;
- Asking questions about questions.

"What Makes a Question Valuable? Teaching Students to Pose Their Own Questions" by Joan Brodsky Schur in *Social Education*, January/February 2021 (Vol. 85, #1, pp. 40-44); this article is excerpted from Schur's recent book, *Teaching Writing in the Social Studies* (NCSS, 2020).

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6. Two Approaches to Rigor in High-School Social Studies

In this article in *Principal Leadership*, Brian Gibbs (University of North Carolina/ Chapel Hill) says the word "rigor" is frequently bandied about in K-12 schools, but what does it mean? Interviewing and observing 21 high-school social studies teachers and reflecting on his own classroom experience, Gibbs formulated a continuum: Rigor for Academics is at one end and Rigor for Democracy at the other. Here is a description of a teacher enacting each approach:

• Rigor for Academics – A unit on the U.S. Civil War:

- In the first five minutes of class, there's a short multiple-choice quiz on the textbook homework reading.
- The teacher delivers a lecture on the major battles of the Civil War.
- Students occasionally ask a clarifying question, for example, "Was it Seminary Ridge or Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg?"
- Occasionally there's a more penetrating question like, "Why don't we consider the Sons of Liberty to be a gang of anti-intellectual thugs? Is it because they were on our side?"
- Students occasionally work in small teams to break down primary-source documents read for homework.
- At least twice a week there is a 5-10-question multiple-choice quiz on facts, names, dates, places, and events.
- Every Friday students take a longer test with 30 multiple-choice questions.

- Every two weeks students write a document-based or traditional essay.
- At the beginning of the semester the teacher gave students support on their essays, but after that, students were on their own.

• Rigor for Democracy – A unit on the 2008 financial crisis:

- The previous night's homework was to write 15 questions about seven readings on the Occupy Movement, the Progressive Movement, and the New Deal.
- The teacher says, "Circle up and talk to a partner. Which text describes the best way out of a financial crisis?"
- As students discuss in pairs, the teacher circulates and listens.
- After 15 minutes, the teacher calls the class together and says, "Remember, the point of discussion is to engage each other intellectually. We are examining these texts for ideas; we are then going to evaluate those ideas, combine them with other information from class, and apply them to our current economic crisis. To do this, we can't have any interruptions or personal attacks. Now, which text has the best solution to our financial crisis?"
- Students discuss the question, showing their grasp of the content, asking questions, making arguments, and trying out solutions.
- As the discussion winds up, there are no clear-cut answers, but students' thinking has been propelled forward.
- At the beginning of the year, students read shorter, more straightforward texts; subsequent readings are longer with more-challenging vocabulary and greater conceptual complexity.
- Students write frequently, in multiple genres.
- Historical content becomes steadily more "unpleasant" as students read about violence, racism, misogyny, classism, and homophobia.

Parents and fellow educators are more familiar with the first teacher's approach to rigor, says Gibbs, and often more comfortable with it. It's the traditional college-bound AP pedagogy and curriculum. The second teacher's approach is more controversial; many teachers steer clear of hot-button issues, fearing negative reactions from students and parents, and may feel unprepared to teach them.

"The hard question we have to ask as a profession is this," says Gibbs: "What do we want for our children? Do we want students to be prepared for college by learning the less complicated and largely celebratory nationalist interpretation of history similar to Teacher 1? Or is part of rigor engaging in difficult and challenging history through a lens of inquiry and discussion more like Teacher 2? This is a conversation we need to have."

"Academic Rigor" by Brian Gibbs in *Principal Leadership*, March 2021 (Vol. 21, #7, pp. 50-53); Gibbs can be reached at bcgibbs@email.unc.edu.

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7. Helping Students Manage Their Time

"In a world that will likely always involve some level of remote learning or work, it's more important than ever that we understand and accept that our role as educators is to teach time management and other executive-functioning skills, not just expect our students to have them and get frustrated when they don't," say author/consultants Emily Rinkema and Stan Williams in this *Education Week* article. They suggest four steps:

• *Clearly articulate the components of effective time management*. These include breaking down a complex task into its component parts, assessing their relative importance, estimating how long each will take, and allocating time to meet a deadline. As assessment expert Rick Stiggins says, students can "hit any target that they can see and stands still for them" – which suggests creating a time management rubric.

• *Give students time to practice*. Students need to hone their skills as they wrestle with hypothetical time-management scenarios.

• *Design a task-specific formative assessment*. Teachers need real-time data on how students are doing with executive functioning (separated out from the actual work they're performing).

• *Give students timely feedback*. This means "slowly and intentionally helping all our students build the skills and habits that will lead them to be more-effective managers of their time," say Rinkema and Williams.

"Remote Learning Makes Time Management Even Harder" by Emily Rinkema and Stan Williams in *Education Week*, March 10, 2021 (Vol. 40, #25, p. 19)

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8. Online Library of Congress Resources for Science and Social Studies

In this article in *Social Education*, Michael Apfeldorf, an educational resources specialist at the Library of Congress, promotes the use of historical newspaper articles in history and science classes. One example: a 1913 article in a Bridgeport, Connecticut newspaper exhorting families to quarantine children if they showed signs of measles, which in those days killed one in ten infected kids (the piece had this memorable title, "Measles Make Many Mothers Mourn"). This article, with clear relevance today, addressed a common misconception in 1913: that having "measles parties" would create herd immunity and protect children.

Apfeldorf cites a number of links that teachers can use to put online science and history articles to work in classrooms:

- Research guides in science and technology with links to background material and primary sources;
- Everyday Mysteries – provocative questions and interesting science facts;
- Webcasts – recorded conversations with experts in various fields, including the Earth and Space Lecture Series;

- The "Inside Adams" blog, pointing readers to the Library of Congress's collection of books, journals, prints, photographs, digital collections, finding aids, and webcasts on science, technology, and business;
- Ask a Librarian allows researchers of all ages to get reference help from subject-matter specialists.

"Science Literacy and Citizen Behavior: Helping Students See the Connections Using Historical Newspaper Articles" by Michael Apfeldorf in *Social Education*, January/February 2021 (Vol. 85, #1, pp. 16-19)

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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 other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 50 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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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
Cult of Pedagogy
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
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
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
Teaching Tolerance
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
Urban Education