Marshall Memo 716

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 18, 2017

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"This is no longer an *Encyclopedia Britannica* world in which someone can thumb through a reference book to check the veracity of someone's assertion. Everyone must be equipped with the skills of an analyst."

Joan Richardson in "When the President Is a Liar" in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2017 (Vol. 99, #4, p. 4), www.kappanmagazine.org

"Critical thinkers are amiable skeptics. They are flexible thinkers who require evidence to support their beliefs and recognize fallacious attempts to persuade them."

Heather Butler (see item #1)

"The public schools are one of the few places where diversity of opinion exists in a context that requires communication. There is, then, an opportunity in schools to discuss controversial issues in a context where participants have real disagreements and positions in which they have some investment."

Jonathan Zimmerman and Emily Robertson (see item #3)

"Technological innovation has created wonders but displaced millions of workers. The meritocracy has unleashed talent but widened inequality. Immigration has made America more dynamic but weakened national cohesion. Globalization has lifted billions out of poverty but pummeled the working classes in advanced nations. What's needed is reform of our core institutions to address the bad byproducts, not fundamental dismantling."

David Brooks in "What's Wrong with Radicalism" in *The New York Times*, December 12, 2017, http://nyti.ms/2B8dcOS

1. Which Is More Important in Life, Intelligence or Critical Thinking?

In this article in *Scientific American*, Heather Butler (California State University/ Dominguez Hills) says the advantages of having a high I.Q. are undeniable: "Intelligent people are more likely to get better grades and go farther in school. They are more likely to be successful at work. And they are less likely to get into trouble (e.g., commit crimes) as adolescents."

But Butler's family delights in pointing out times when she, a university professor, "makes really dumb mistakes." The assumption is that a person with a high I.Q. is smart in the everyday sense of the word. But what do I.Q. tests contain? Vocabulary questions, math problems, pattern recognition, visuospatial puzzles, and visual searches. It's not surprising that measured intelligence doesn't predict some very important life outcomes, including well-being, life satisfaction, and longevity. And people who score high on I.Q. tests still do stupid things.

So what is the secret of a long, happy, satisfied life? Critical thinking, says Butler – a collection of cognitive skills (including verbal reasoning, argument analysis, hypothesis testing, judging probability and uncertainty, decision-making, and problem-solving) that gets us thinking in a rational and goal-oriented fashion in everyday life. "Critical thinkers are amiable skeptics," she says. "They are flexible thinkers who require evidence to support their beliefs and recognize fallacious attempts to persuade them. Critical thinking means overcoming all sorts of cognitive biases (e.g., hindsight bias, confirmation bias)."

Butler and her colleagues recently completed a series of studies correlating negative life events experienced by adults in the U.S. and abroad with people's intelligence and critical thinking skills. Some examples of problems in different arenas:

- Academic – I forgot about an exam;
- Financial – I have over $5,000 of credit card debt;
- Legal – I was arrested for driving under the influence;
- Health – I contracted a sexually transmitted infection;
- Interpersonal – I cheated on a romantic partner I'd been with for a year.

"Repeatedly, we found that critical thinkers experience fewer negative life events," reports Butler. "This is an important finding because there is plenty of evidence that critical thinking can be taught and improved… Anyone can improve their critical thinking skills. Doing so, we can say with certainty, is a smart thing to do."

"Why Do Smart People Do Foolish Things?" by Heather Butler in *Scientific American*, October 3, 2017, http://bit.ly/2xX58xw; Butler can be reached at hbutler@csudh.edu.

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2. Walking the Gauntlet at a Young Age

In this *New York Times* article, Shanita Hubbard (Northampton Community College) says there's an intersection "in almost every hood that teaches young girls a lesson about power, racism, and sexism. In the projects, where I grew up, I had to pass it almost every day to get home from school." Young men hung out on the corner playing music, arguing about who the best rapper was – and harassing girls and women who passed by. "This is where young girls like me learned to shrink into themselves and remain silent," says Hubbard. "On this intersection, like so many others in the world, your body and sense of safety were both up for grabs." On a good day, if accompanied by a friend, the abuse was merely verbal. But on a bad day, she was subjected to threatening words and physical grabbing. Resisting only made things worse; once she was chased home and had to run into a store and wait until her tormentors went away.

Reflecting on these experiences twenty years later, Hubbard has a new perspective. The young men who harassed her had great power over her, but they were victims of those who had much more power: police officers who stopped and frisked them, sometimes abused them, sometimes arrested them, sometimes killed them. And this has led communities to mobilize on behalf of street-corner men and fight against over-policing and brutality.

"But when your community fights for those same people who terrorize you," says Hubbard, "it sends a very complicated and mixed message. Even worse, sometimes the community members fighting back consist of young women who were once the little girls walking home from school doing their best to be invisible in hopes of avoiding what nobody ever called sexual assault. That sends a message that your pain is not a priority. It tells you that perhaps you are not a victim, because those who are harming you are also being harmed and we need to focus our energy on protecting them."

"The intersection of race, class, sexism, and power is dangerous," Hubbard concludes, "and the most vulnerable women among us must navigate it alone."

"Can Black Women Say #UsToo?" by Shanita Hubbard in *The New York Times*, December 16, 2017, http://nyti.ms/2kBYpRu

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3. Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom

In this article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Jonathan Zimmerman (University of Pennsylvania) and Emily Robertson (Syracuse University) say that unlike earlier eras in U.S. history, there's now a broad consensus that it's okay for teachers to discuss controversial topics as part of their mission of preparing "intelligent American citizens" who are capable of arriving at reasoned opinions about important public questions. But which issues are legitimate topics for classroom discussions? Climate change? "Religious freedom" to discriminate against gay couples? The right for parents to deny vaccinations to their children? Zimmerman and Robertson suggest two criteria for deciding on suitable topics:

- The issue must one about which knowledgeable people currently disagree.

- It must matter deeply to members of the general public.

Using these criteria, the authors say that the gay couples question is well suited for classroom discussion, since at this point (maybe not in a few years), there is a lively, unresolved debate on the issue. But to discuss the existence of climate change or the medical importance of vaccinations is not appropriate since there's an overwhelming consensus among scientists on each issue and they're "simply not subject to reasonable debate." A discussion about the social and political *implications* of climate change, on the other hand, is ideal for the classroom – "how humans might reduce it; which kinds of national and international reforms would best serve that goal; who should pay for the resulting costs, and so on."

The foundation for such discussions must be respect for legitimate experts. "Surely," say Zimmerman and Robertson, "we have a duty to instruct young people about areas in which true scientific consensus exists so they do not mistake a fake controversy for an actual one." As Daniel Patrick Moynihan quipped several decades ago, people are entitled to their own opinions, but not to their own facts.

In addition, teachers need respect and support as they wade into controversial issues in social studies, science (evolution), and literature (*Huckleberry Finn*). Training and well-thought-out structures are important – for example, when the second Iraq war began, a high school in suburban New York sponsored a full-day discussion of opposing views. Teachers were briefed, five students and two social studies teachers presented pro and con arguments to the full student body in the gymnasium, and then students dispersed to classrooms to continue the conversation.

The key is conducting classroom debates with civility and reason, as contrasted to the shouting and disrespect that characterize many television and Internet debates. Well-run discussions are especially important because of the growing polarization of the U.S. in recent years, with increasing numbers of citizens having little contact with people who hold opposing views. "The public schools are one of the few places where diversity of opinion exists in a context that requires communication," conclude Zimmerman and Robertson. "There is, then, an opportunity in schools to discuss controversial issues in a context where participants have real disagreements and positions in which they have some investment."

"The Controversy Over Controversial Issues" by Jonathan Zimmerman and Emily Robertson in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2017 (Vol. 99, #4, p. 8-13), www.kappanmagazine.org; Zimmerman can be reached at zimmj@gse.upenn.edu.

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4. More on Classroom Discussions of Hot Topics

In this article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Karen Hess (University of Wisconsin-Madison) is interviewed by editor Joan Richardson. Hess describes how as a beginning social studies teacher in a large high school, she was told "in a nice but firm way that it was my job to learn how to lead high-quality discussions of important historical and contemporary questions and issues… There was a clear sense of what good practice looked like, and that to do it well you needed a clear sense of what you wanted students to learn and what it meant for them to learn

those things." One precept was the difference between empirical questions and policy questions:

- Empirical questions can be answered through systematic observation, experimentation, and inquiry – for example, Is the planet warming because of human activity? (Yes)
- Policy questions are open to debate, with multiple, competing right answers – for example, Should we have a single-payer health care system?

"The good news," says Hess, "is that many teachers understand this and want to engage kids in genuine deliberations about real political issues."

One misconception, aided and abetted by Hollywood movies about schools, is that classroom discussions should be spontaneous and unplanned. Hess believes seat-of-the-pants discussions are almost always low-quality because most students don't know enough to conduct a rigorous and interesting debate and the majority of students don't participate. "One reason you want preparation is that you want students already to have been exposed to multiple and competing ideas before you begin the discussion," she says. "You also want to ensure that everyone is ready to participate because if that's the case, you're more likely to have more participation in the discussion." Teachers also don't want students to come in totally certain about a particular opinion; they should be versed in both sides of an argument and prepared to change their minds if they're convinced.

Should teachers share their own opinions on controversial issues with students? In their research, Hess and her colleagues found that with students 17-18 years old, the quality of discussions was not affected one way or the other by teachers revealing their own views. Hess is less certain about the lower grades. She found that students overwhelmingly want teachers to say what they themselves believe about issues, but don't like it when teachers press them to accept those views or treat a policy subject as if there's only one right answer. She noted two worrisome findings in studies of students from low-income families: first, teachers who shared their positions were more likely to have them misrepresented; second, students were less likely to participate in discussions when teachers stated their own views.

In schools where almost everyone has the same beliefs on controversial issues, there's the danger of teachers allowing an echo chamber in which students don't hear opposing views. It takes a high level of self-awareness and some courage for teachers to orchestrate balanced discussions and get students outside their comfort zones. Learning to lead good discussions is hard, says Hess, "but it can be learned. This is not an art. This is something teachers can learn how to do. We can teach them how to get better at leading discussions among students."

Where should teachers draw the line between free speech versus hate speech in classrooms? At one level, it's simple, says Hess: "You can't personally insult people. You can't use epithets, etc." But it gets more complicated when students believe they're expressing a genuine, legitimate perspective and others consider it insulting. In addition, some areas raise people's sensitivities – homosexuality, immigration, and other hot topics. But if teachers avoid these subjects, students will still talk about them in corridors, bathrooms, buses, and social media. "The best teachers we worked with struggled with this," says Hess – and they didn't avoid difficult topics. "They also did a lot to ensure that discussions were as civil and as high

quality as they could possibly be. They worked to make sure students were ready for discussion. They talked to students before and after class."

"Using Controversy as a Teaching Tool: An Interview with Diana Hess" by Joan Richardson in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2017/January 2018 (Vol. 99, #4, p. 15-20), www.kappanmagazine.org; Hess can be reached at dhess@wisc.edu.

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5. How Should Personalized Learning Be Handled?

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Jeff Murray, the parent of two high-school girls, builds on a recent article by Daniel Willingham on three dimensions of personalization:

- Personalized *pacing* is a must-have, says Murray.
- Personalized *pedagogy* is a "nice-to-have."
- Personalized *content* is "largely to be avoided, at least until the end of the K-12 experience."

• *Personalized pacing and pedagogy* – Murray loves his daughters' school's personalized pacing, which compresses year-long courses into one semester, with content chunked into discrete units and subunits with clear goals, high expectations, frequent teacher-created assessments, and immediate support for students when they're not succeeding. "[P]edagogically tailored remediation is baked in, "says Murray. It can be delivered "in homework, in a study hall, or after school in office hours. Whatever works to make the material understandable to students must be available." Sometimes there's a focused "recovery week" to boost struggling students to proficiency so they don't have to take the whole semester course again.

Of course personalized pacing requires lots of up-front preparation by teacher teams. There must be clarity on what students need to know, do, and understand by the end of each unit; assessments must accurately define proficiency at every step in the continuum; remediation support must be thorough and rigorous so teachers can fix learning problems in real time; and parents must understand how acceleration and remediation work. But once all that is in place, things should run smoothly – with less day-to-day teacher preparation time and, most important, fewer student failures and retentions.

• *Personalized content* – Murray's daughters attended a Montessori school in the primary grades and were free to choose their activities from an array of classroom materials. This was fine up to a point (making calendars was a big favorite), "but it also allows for procrastination and outright avoidance of topics of lesser interest," says Murray. "That's where my family hit the wall with Montessori education – math avoidance. For me and my wife, that was a no-go: We were okay with our kids picking whatever they wanted from the buffet, but they still needed to eat their vegetables, too." After preschool, they chose a more traditional school where math "was never optional."

But now that Murray's daughters are in their last two years of high school and have college expectations fulfilled or planned (the vegetables have been eaten, so to speak), he has no problem with personalized content – higher-level electives, college credit-bearing courses,

interest-driven research, community service projects, student-led theatrical productions, and other explorations with an advisor to oversee inputs and products.

• *Technology* – "In my experience, technology is an adjunct to personalized learning, not the center of it," says Murray. "My children can attest that laptops and tablets are valuable and one-to-one technology programs in schools should certainly be expanded, as should home internet access. But the personalization part of personalized learning is inside the student, not inside the machine."

"First-Person Perspective: Personalized Learning Is Real – And It Works" by Jeff Murray in *The Education Gadfly*, December 13, 2017 (Vol. 17, #50), http://bit.ly/2kJsQVY

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6. Inappropriate Responses to a Grieving Friend, and How to Do Better

In this *USA Today* article, Sheryl Sandberg (Facebook) and Adam Grant (University of Pennsylvania) list the four missteps many people make trying to comfort someone who is dealing with a serious emotional challenge. This is especially vivid for Sandberg, who lost her husband just a few years ago and experienced all of these:

• *Wrong move #1: Telling the person to think positive* – "Time heals all wounds." "Everything happens for a reason." Psychologists have found that the most unhelpful "help" is being urged to cheer up and recover. "Pressuring people to be happy is a surefire way to make them sad," say Sandberg and Grant; "feeling bad about feeling bad just makes us feel worse." A better approach is gently inviting the person to express his or her feelings.

• *Wrong move #2: Trying to empathize* – "Your brother is sick from chemo? I totally know how you feel – my mother had the same reaction." Sociologists have a name for this: conversational narcissism, putting ourselves in the spotlight. You probably don't know how the other person feels, and even if you do, the focus should be on their experience, not your own.

• *Wrong move #3: Offering advice* – "Go to the gym. Sweat off the grief!" "Come to the holiday party; drinking eggnog will help." Sandberg and Grant have some unsolicited advice: "Don't give unsolicited advice. Consider just admitting, 'I wish I knew the right thing to say. I'm so sorry you're going through this – but you will not go through it alone.'"

• *Wrong move #4: Asking if there's anything you can do* – We genuinely want to help, but this puts the burden on the suffering person to decide what to ask for and feel comfortable asking. Better to just do something – Invite the person to dinner. Make a playlist of songs that aren't about joy or snow. Drop off a home-cooked meal. Or just show up. "When you're at a loss for words," conclude Sandberg and Grant, "the best thing you can do is spring into action. Actions don't just speak louder than words – they're felt more deeply, too."

"Holiday Blues: Four Mistakes We Make When Comforting Friends Who Are Struggling" by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant in *USA Today*, December 1, 2017, https://usat.ly/2AfDe0K

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7. Getting More Participation from Quiet Students

In this article in *Mind/Shift*, Elissa Nadworny asks how teachers should handle quiet, introverted children who seldom participate in class discussions. Many teachers have an unconscious expectation that students need to raise their hands and take part, and they give more attention to what one teacher called the "charismatic extrovert." Nadworny suggests several ways to make sure quiet students have more air time:

• Give them other ways to be engaged, including working with a partner, writing, or drawing. "Being present and connected doesn't have to take place through lots of speech," says curriculum developer Heidi Kasevich.

• Rein in the extroverts. Students who tend to dominate discussions might be pulled aside and asked to think W-A-I-T – "Why Am I Talking?"

• Get quiet students thinking about why they are so reticent. "Personality might be some of it," says Erica Corbin, an administrator at a New York City private girls' school, "and we also might have kids who are quiet because they have been shut down. We might have kids that are quiet because they anticipate being shut down whether they have been or not." Other factors might include stereotypes, biases, trouble at home.

"How Schools Can Help Notice and Serve the 'Quiet Kids'" by Elissa Nadworny in *Mind/Shift*, July 6, 2016, http://bit.ly/2pHroYg

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8. The Surprising Impact of Short Interventions on Math Achievement

"What can be done to help secondary school students become more self-confident, work harder, and show higher performance in mathematics?" ask Brigitte Maria Brisson, Hanna Gaspard, Isabelle Häfner, Barbara Flunger, Benjamin Nagengast, and Ulrich Trautwein (University of Tübingen) and Anna-Lena Dicke (University of California/Irvine) in this article in *American Educational Research Journal*. The researchers describe a short intervention with 1,978 German ninth graders: one group spent 90 minutes reading a series of real-life quotes from young adults about the importance of mathematics in their lives, followed by two homework assignments reinforcing that content. Students in a second group were asked to write about the relevance of mathematics in their lives. And the control group conducted classroom business as usual.

What were the results with the two intervention groups compared to the control group? "Commenting on quotations about the relevance of mathematics fostered students' self-concept, homework, self-efficacy, teacher-rated effort, and test scores in mathematics until up to 5 months after the intervention," say the researchers. Writing about the relevance of math in their lives had a somewhat less positive impact: it "promoted students' long-term homework self-efficacy in mathematics to the same extent as the quotations conditions, but no statistically significant effects were found on other outcomes under study."

"Short Intervention, Sustained Effects Promoting Students' Math Competence, Beliefs, Effort, and Achievement" by Brigitte Maria Brisson, Anna-Lena Dicke, Hanna Gaspard, Isabelle

Häfner, Barbara Flunger, Benjamin Nagengast, and Ulrich Trautwein in *American Educational Research Journal*, December 2017 (Vol. 54, #6, p. 1048-1078), http://bit.ly/2kfNa1r; Brisson can be reached at Brigitte.Brisson@dipf.de.

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9. The Results of Shifting Less-Effective Teachers to Non-Tested Grades

In this article in *American Educational Research Journal*, Jason Grissom (Vanderbilt University) and Demetra Kalogrides and Susanna Loeb (Stanford University) report on their study of elementary principals in a large urban district who made "strategic decisions" to assign stronger teachers to grades with high-stakes standardized tests. The result, say the researchers, was some improvement in test scores in the upper grades, but there was a downside: non-tested primary grades ended up with some less-effective teachers, resulting in lower student achievement in those grades – which persisted into the tested grades. "These results," conclude Grissom, Kalogrides, and Loeb, "should give pause to school leaders aiming to boost school performance in the eyes of the accountability regime by focusing only on teacher effectiveness in high-stakes classrooms."

"Strategic Staffing? How Performance Pressures Affect the Distribution of Teachers Within Schools and Resulting Student Achievement" by Jason Grissom, Demetra Kalogrides, and Susanna Loeb in *American Educational Research Journal*, December 2017 (Vol. 54, #6, p. 1079-1116), http://bit.ly/2oGnJuR; Grissom can be reached at jason.grissom@vanderbilt.edu.

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10. How Long It Takes English Speakers to Learn a New Language

In this *Open Culture* article, Colin Marshall shares data (and a map) from the Foreign Service Institute on how long it takes for a native English speaker to learn certain languages:

Category I – Languages closely related to English: 23-24 weeks (575-600 hours):

- Afrikaans, Danish, Dutch, French, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, Swedish

Category II – Similar to English: 30 weeks (750 hours):

- German

Category III – Linguistic and/or cultural differences from English: 36 weeks (900 hours):

- Indonesian, Malaysian, Swahili

Category IV – Significant linguistic and/or cultural differences: 44 weeks (1,100 hours)

- Albanian, Amharic, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Bengali, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Burmese, Croatian, Czech, Estonian, Finnish, Georgian, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Khmer, Lao, Latvian, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Mongolian, Nepali, Pashto, Persian (Dari, Farsi, Tajik), Polish, Russian, Serbian, Sinhala, Slovak, Slovenian, Tagalog, Thai, Turkish, Ukrainian, Urdu, Uzbek, Vietnamese, Xhosa, Zulu

Category V – Exceptionally difficult for native English speakers: 88 weeks (2,200 hours)

- Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean

"A Map Showing How Much Time It Takes to Learn Foreign Languages: From Easiest to Hardest" by Colin Marshall in *Open Culture*, November 29, 2017, http://bit.ly/2oFNdIN

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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 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 HTMI 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
ASCD SmartBrief
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
Literacy Today
Mathematics Teaching in the Middle School
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