Marshall Memo 995

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 17, 2023

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Quit is a four-letter word, but it shouldn't be a dirty one… Success does not lie in sticking to things. It lies in picking the *right* things to stick to, and quitting the rest."

Annie Duke (quoted in item #1)

"Like most teachers, I want to help my students learn, but I think it is possible to be 'too helpful.'"

Amanda Cullen (see item #2)

"Student-writers often take the shortest route to get the grade they desire. This is the path of writing for the teacher or giving the teacher what they want, rather than a process that centers self-expression, risk-taking, struggle, agency, and resilience."

Seth Czarnecki (see item #5)

"Teachers are always looking for ways to take off points."

A ninth-grade student (quoted in *ibid*.)

"Students do not learn mathematics deeply by being told information and then mimicking a very specific set of procedures to solve a problem. Students need *experiences* investigating mathematical ideas through problem-based tasks that build on their existing knowledge. Only later do these ideas get *formalized* with a discussion that connects student thinking to the intended learning outcomes of the day. When we do this successfully, students will leave our classrooms empowered with a new understanding of mathematics as a discipline, more flexible and transferable problem-solving skills, and stronger identities as mathematics learners."

Sarah Stecher, Luke Wilcox, and Lindsey Gallas in "Experience First, Formalize Later" in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, July 2023 (Vol. 116, #7, pp. 520-528); Stecher can be reached at sarah@calc-medic.com.

1. To Quit or Not to Quit, That Is the Question

In this *Mind/Shift* article, Linda Flanagan describes a parent's dilemma. A daughter who had previously loved and excelled at soccer is definitely not enjoying it in her first year in high school. She isn't scoring as she did before, hasn't connected with the coach, and is ready to quit mid-season. Should she be allowed to do that?

Flanagan quotes decision-making expert and author Annie Duke (who used to be a professional poker player): "Quit is a four-letter word, but it shouldn't be a dirty one… Success does not lie in sticking to things. It lies in picking the *right* things to stick to, and quitting the rest."

But it's not that simple; several cognitive biases can get into our heads and distort our judgment:

- Slogans and exhortations – *Winners never quit and quitters never win*.
- Second-guessing – *What would have happened if I hadn't given up?*
- The sunk cost fallacy – *I can't abandon this after putting in so much time and effort*.
- The endowment effect – *I own this, so it's more valuable*.
- The omission-commission bias – *It's worse to commit a mistake than simply allowing an error to happen.*

All these can push us to hang in there till the bitter end.

Duke suggests several steps that can push back on these cognitive biases and help us make good decisions about whether to stick with something or quit:

- Clarify your overarching, long-term goal and consider various paths for getting there.
- Consider what bad outcomes might look like.
- Spell out "kill criteria" – a list of signals that tell us it's time to quit because the chance of a bad outcome is too high.
- Write down a "state and date" deadline – *If I haven't done X by Y, I'll quit* – to force the decision by a specific time.

Many people find it difficult to think about long-term benefits versus immediate costs and benefits, says Duke, and that's especially true of teenagers, who tend to be impulsive and caught up in the here and now. Thinking through long-term goals and outcomes is a helpful process.

In the case of the discouraged soccer player, how would you advise her? Since there are only six more weeks in the season, you might urge her to hang in there and make a long-term decision on whether to quit soccer at that point. In the interim, there are several questions she might keep in mind. Might she fall back in love with the sport? What signals might tip the

scales toward soccer being her sport after all? Being more aggressive on the field? Clicking with her teammates? Being excited about practice? And what signals would point to the opposite conclusion? With those questions in mind, and a sense of agency over future outcomes, she could make a plan on how to make a decision in six weeks – with an alternative activity if she decides to quit soccer.

"When Should You Let Your Kid Quit?" by Linda Flanagan in *Mind/Shift,* June 5, 2023

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2. Helping Students, But Not Too Much

In this article in *Mathematics Teacher; Learning & Teaching PK-12*, Amanda Cullen (Illinois State University) confesses that from third grade through college graduation, she hated math. Cullen worked hard, got good grades, was in gifted and honors classes, and did well on standardized tests, but she lacked confidence and agency and did not have a positive math identity. Looking back, she sees that she excelled by memorizing and mimicking what her teachers demonstrated, not by deeply understanding the content and skills. When she struggled with a concept, she avoided asking for help for fear of belying her "good at math" reputation.

Reflecting on her current work as a mathematics education professor, Cullen says she's no longer a math hater, but she has some concerns about how her earlier experiences may have affected her pedagogy. "Like most teachers, I want to help my students learn," she says, "but I think it is possible to be 'too helpful.'" Here's an example of doing too much when a group of middle-school students had great difficulty with this problem:

When a bag of marbles is shared equally among three people, two marbles remain.
When it's shared among four people, three marbles remain.
When shared among five people, two marbles remain.
When shared among six people, five marbles remain.
The bag has fewer than 100 marbles.
How many marbles are in the bag? How do you know?

The struggling students did 25 minutes of "brute force" trial and error and got nowhere. Cullen prompted them to be more purposeful in choosing numbers to test and consider the implications of the number of marbles left over, but kids' frustration increased. Concerned that they were hopelessly stuck, Cullen asked, "Have you tried thinking about two more than a multiple of five?"

This gave students a leg up, but Cullen has two worries. First, her hint narrowed their thinking (versus a question like, "What have you tried?"). Second, her question may have communicated that she didn't believe they were capable of solving the problem without her help. In short, Cullen is concerned that she wasn't helping them develop competence, confidence, and agency. Reflecting on her error, she believes it happened because she thought students had crossed the line from productive to unproductive struggle. That's a crucial teaching moment; productive struggle is where the most learning takes place.

This episode has led Cullen to be much more careful in how she intervenes when students have difficulty. "As a self-check at the end of each lesson," she says, "I have started asking myself: Who did most of the mathematical work today? Who did most of the mathematical talk through explanation or justification today? Were my questions focused on mathematical thinking, reasoning, and sense making – or correct or speedy answers?"

"Access Without Agency, Competence Without Confidence" by Amanda Cullen in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, July 2023 (Vol. 116, #7, pp. 486-87); Cullen can be reached at almille@ilstu.edu.

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3. Teach Me to Fish: Teacher Feedback That Empowers Students

In this article in *Scientific American*, social psychologist Camilla Mutoni Griffiths (Stanford University) says it's easier and quicker for educators to simply correct students when they make mistakes. "But this approach can take away a student's opportunity to learn, grow, and demonstrate that they can rise to the occasion," says Griffiths. Quickly fixing a student's error can also unintentionally convey the message that they don't have the capacity – and can't develop the capacity – to fix it themselves.

Griffiths and two colleagues conducted a study of middle- and high-school teachers' feedback to students, looking at whether students were passive recipients or had some agency, control, and freedom in how to respond to teachers' comments. The researchers were struck with how positively students reacted when given the opportunity to independently revise their work, becoming active participants in the process. Griffiths et al. believe this approach – which they call *agentic* feedback – helps students thrive academically, especially students from marginalized backgrounds.

Griffiths compares examples of feedback that is directive – corrections and prescriptions – versus feedback that prods and empowers students to improve their work:

- *Directive* – The teacher corrects a student's spelling errors.
- *Agentic* – The student is asked to revise an essay because it has multiple spelling errors.
- *Directive* – The teacher rewrites a student's topic and transition sentences.
- *Agentic* – The teacher leaves this note: "A topic sentence should signal what the paragraph is about. Can you try reworking this sentence to reflect the paragraph?"

When the researchers asked students for their reactions to the two approaches, students saw that agentic feedback required more work on their part, but appreciated the fact that they could choose how to move forward in ways that made sense to them. Students also picked up on their teachers' high expectations; agentic feedback implicitly said, "I know you can do this."

Embedded in the way teachers give feedback to students is the issue of encouragement and praise. Psychologists have identified something called *positive feedback bias* – the tendency of teachers to give African-American students more positive feedback and less criticism than they give white students. "Receiving only praise can be disempowering," says Griffiths, "because it limits the potential for learning and growth."

Agentic feedback can and should include criticism when it's warranted, she says, "but it scaffolds critique with information to support next steps." For example, a teacher might say, "This part of your presentation is a little unclear. Start this section with a plain-language summary of what you want to say and then elaborate on it." This approach applies to adult workplaces as well. Rather than telling someone how they should do something, a boss might ask, "How could you approach this issue differently in the future?"

"Agentic feedback is not revolutionary," Griffiths concludes. "It uses skills and concepts you likely already have in your arsenal: giving advice rather than prescriptions; asking questions rather than correcting; and affirming while providing guidance. But our research shows exactly why – and for whom – this feedback can be most effective. Whether in the classroom or in the office, 'teaching someone to fish' with agentic feedback not only helps people become more self-sufficient but also helps them believe in their potential to learn."

"Useful Feedback, More Than Praise, Helps Students Flourish" by Camilla Mutoni Griffiths in *Scientific American*, June 15, 2023

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4. Timothy Shanahan on Building Students' Reading Stamina

In this article on his website, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) answers a teacher's question on how much sustained reading students should do before the teacher pauses for discussion. Shanahan says while he's not aware of research on this specific question, there are studies on differences in students' reading stamina. A perennial classroom challenge is what to do with kids who can't sustain their attention and energy for longer passages.

Why the variation among students? Longer texts are more complex linguistically, with a higher level of sophistication and more interconnections among the parts. Reading longer texts also places greater psychological demands on readers, asking more of the student's memory, reasoning, inferencing, and motivation. Stamina – the ability to hang in there with longer and more-challenging texts – needs to be built up gradually, just like the ability to run longer distances. Distance runners don't start training with a full marathon. For grades 2-3 and up, Shanahan has several suggestions in the same vein:

• *Consistency* – "If you want kids to build reading stamina," he says, "they must read. They must read pretty much every day" – during lessons, having a favorite book handy when there's downtime, and of course outside of school. A significant amount of their classroom reading should be "accountable" – accompanied by follow-up questions, writing, and discussions in ELA, social studies, science, and math classes to check for understanding and clear up errors and misconceptions. Round-robin reading will not accomplish this, says Shanahan.

• *Gradually increasing demands* – The length and complexity of what students are asked to read should increase in two ways, he suggests: the text segments students read prior to discussion or another activity, and the amount of classroom reading each week. His guidelines:

- Second grade – 400-word chunks by spring;

- Third grade – 500-600 words;
- Fourth grade – 700 words.

The key to making each incremental increase of sustained reading (about 4-5 percent each week) is good comprehension, says Shanahan, which means constantly checking in on all students. "I would also strongly recommend that you let the kids in on what you are up to and talk about the importance of sustained concentration… Encourage students to talk about issues like mind wandering and how to resist that, or what to do when they are not understanding."

• *Harder shorter texts* – Endurance runners "punctuate their longer, easier runs with shorter, more-demanding ones," says Shanahan. The analogy in reading classes (once or twice a week) is having students read 50-100-word passages that are one or two grade levels above their current level. "I wouldn't spring this on the kids," he says. "I'd tell them what I'm up to. Their speed is not the issue, but high comprehension is, so they should slow down as much as they need to and work hard to make sense of the text. These 'crunches' provide wonderful opportunities for learning" – vocabulary, ideas, confidence – and then the class returns to longer grade-level texts.

• *Take a break* – "Runners and cyclists work hard," says Shanahan, "but they also do cross training and take days off." Similarly, students should intersperse concentrated academic work with different activities like physical education, art, and music – or perhaps a week of fun reading after several weeks of demanding text segments.

"Good readers can read significantly lengthy texts while sustaining, attending, and holding key information in memory," says Shanahan. "They manage to do this not just with texts that they find easy or that they enjoy reading, but with those they will need to read to succeed academically and in other social and professional venues. Teachers should operate more like strength and conditioning coaches, helping students not only to know more, but to develop stamina needed for success."

"Reading Stamina and Dividing Reading Texts for Classroom Discussion" by Timothy Shanahan in Shanahan on Literacy, July 10, 2021 and July 15, 2023; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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5. A Novel Approach to Grading and Responding to Students' Writing

In this article in *English Journal*, Massachusetts teacher Seth Czarnecki says that every few years, he and his high-school English department colleagues score a sample student composition and discuss what grade it should get. One teacher might give it a C because the thesis was unclear and paragraphs lacked topic sentences. Another might argue for a B- because it had solid quotes and some analysis. Teachers never leave these meetings with a clear consensus on the grade.

"What always strikes me about this process," says Czarnecki, "is the way we center the grade in the conversation." When he assesses his own students' writing, he feels a similar pressure to focus on grades, standards, and rubrics; he reads "with one eye on the writing and the other on the grade," worrying about how he can justify a number or a letter to the student

(and an anxious parent). Czarnecki looks for errors and things to fix, making marginal notes like *awk, frag, amb*, or ✓. "When we are distracted by the grade," he says, "the human element is lost. We see the paper and not the person behind it." Students pick up on this: in the words of one of his ninth graders, "Teachers are always looking for ways to take off points."

This is an example of the tail wagging the dog, or in educationese, Campbell's Law: a high-stakes metric distorting and corrupting the process – the pressure of tests and grades resulting in suboptimal writing instruction. "Student-writers often take the shortest route to get the grade they desire," says Czarnecki. "This is the path of writing for the teacher or giving the teacher what they want, rather than a process that centers self-expression, risk-taking, struggle, agency, and resilience."

After a decade searching for a better way, Czarnecki believes he's found it: *labor-based grading*, as advocated by Asao Inoue in his eponymous 2019 book. The idea is to assign grades for student writing based on the amount of time they put into it (B is the default, meeting a specific number of minutes and process steps; "extra labor opportunities" are available if the student gets feedback from multiple readers, engages in the school's writing center, and more). Then the teacher responds to the writing from a personal, non-grading stance. Inoue believes this promotes equity, builds trust, increases motivation, and focuses students on the substance and quality of their writing.

For the teacher, Czarnecki believes, the labor-based approach has significant benefits (while taking about the same amount of time as traditional grading). The student submits a piece of writing with the hours devoted to it, and the grade is decided before the teacher reads it. "Rather than writing feedback to defend a grade," says Czarnecki, "we are free to engage authentically, rather than authoritatively. We can be curious, confused, inspired, and moved. Yes, we can and should offer coaching and critical feedback; however, we may do so without having to wield a carrot or a stick… My advice to the writers, should they choose to revise, is not framed as mandates or directives, but instead, as opportunities."

"Grades and scores will continue to be a feature of the American public school classroom for many more years," concludes Czarnecki. "It's not inevitable, however, that they take up all the oxygen in the room. Instead, we can embrace a pedagogy that places the writer, not the grade, at the center of our work. Doing so, I believe, will prove to students that their writing has the power to move readers both inside and beyond the classroom."

"Labor-Based Grading: A New Ethic of Writing Feedback" by Seth Czarnecki in *English Journal*, July 2023 (Vol. 112, #6, pp. 56-62); Czarnecki is at sczarnecki@nsboro.k12.ma.us.

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6. High Schools' Impact on Students' Short- and Long-Term Outcomes

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Amber Northern reports on a new Harvard-Brown University study of the impact of 106 Massachusetts high schools (traditional, charter, and vocational) on students' downstream success. Looking at students who entered ninth grade in 2003, researchers were able to track data on:

- Tenth-grade grades;
- High-school attendance;
- Intent to go to college;
- Being on track to graduate from high school;
- Enrolling in college;
- Graduating from two- or four-year colleges;
- Earnings at age 30.

Controlling for for incoming demographics and students' prior achievement, the researchers calculated the value each school added – how effectively it contributed to students' long-term outcomes. Based on the value-added data, some important findings:

• Similar students attending high value-added schools were 6 percentage points more likely to graduate from a four-year college and earn 13 percent more ($3,600) at age 30 than students attending low value-added schools – a significant difference.

• Short-term measures (e.g., tenth-grade test scores, attendance, college aspirations) were quite highly correlated with long-term outcomes. For example, schools that boosted four-year college graduation rates tended to be those that improved students' test scores and college aspirations.

• Short-term measures like attendance and tenth-grade test scores were significant predictors of future earnings, suggesting that high schools influence earnings *above and beyond* their impact on postsecondary attainment.

• It wasn't just higher-SES schools that boosted future outcomes; some schools with lower-SES student populations had a sustained positive impact on life outcomes.

• Vocational/technical high schools significantly boosted long-term earnings, even while having below-average effects on four-year college graduation rates (many students graduating from these high schools went straight into the workforce and/or delayed attending college). In the words of the report, "impact of CTE schools on later earnings does not run through educational attainments."

"All of this is good news," concludes Northern. "Poverty is not destiny for our young people, as high schools can help make a meaningful difference. Those that improve students' test scores and college aspirations more than we'd expect also improve longer-run outcomes more than we'd expected, so yes, test scores really do matter. High schools can also offer different pathways for improving different life outcomes for different types of students, but one thing *must* be the same: a high level of quality."

"Can Great High Schools Really Make a Difference for Low-Income Students?" by Amber Northern in *Education Gadfly*, July 13, 2023; the original study is "Understanding High Schools' Effects on Longer-Term Outcomes" by Preeya Mbekeani, John Papay, Ann Mantil, and Richard Murnane.

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7. Award-Winning Children's Books on Social Justice

In this feature in *Social Education*, Jennifer Gallagher and the awards committee

announce the Carter G. Woodson Book Awards for 2023 (click the article link below for cover images and short summaries):

Elementary winner and honorees:

- *Where We Come From* by Diane Wilson, Sun Yung Shin, Shannon Gibney, and John Coy, illustrated by Dion MBD
- *I Color Myself Different* by Colin Kaepernick, illustrated by Eric Wilkerson
- *Until Someone Listens: A Story About Borders, Family, and One Girl's Mission* by Estela Juarez and Lissette Norman, illustrated by Teresa Martínez

Middle level winner and honoree:

- *Overground Railroad: The Green Book and the Roots of Black Travel in America* (Young Adult Adaptation) by Candacy Taylor
- *Because of You, John Lewis: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship* by Andrea Davis Pinkney, illustrated by Keith Henry Brown

Secondary winner:

- *Day of Infamy: How a Century of Bigotry Led to Japanese American Internment* by Lawrence Goldstone

"Carter G. Woodson Book Awards, 2023" by Jennifer Gallagher and Committee in *Social Education*, May/June 2023 (Vol. 87, #3, pp. 164-167)

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8. Award-Winning Children's Books on Women in History

In this *Social Education* feature, Jennifer Gallagher and the awards committee announce the Septima P. Clark Book Awards for 2023 (click the article link below for cover images and short summaries):

Elementary winner and honorees:

- *Bessie the Motorcycle Queen* by Charles Smith, illustrated by Charlot Kristensen
- *A Life of Service: The Story of Senator Tammy Duckworth* by Christina Soontornvat, illustrated by Down Phumiruk
- *Annette Feels Free* by Katie Mazeika

Middle/Intermediate winner:

- *Sanctuary: Kip Tiernan and Rosie's Place, the Nation's First Shelter for Women* by Christine McDonnell, illustrated by Victoria Tentler-Krylov

"Septima P. Clark Book Awards, 2023" by Jennifer Gallagher and Committee in *Social Education*, May/June 2023 (Vol. 87, #3, pp. 164-167)

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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
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Ed (formerly Ed. Magazine)
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
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