Marshall Memo 1005

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 2, 2023

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1. “Moral disengagement” among educators – causes and solutions
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Quotes of the Week

“If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.”
Shirley Chisholm (quoted in “Instructional Leadership” by Jennifer Cooper in *Knowledge Quest*, September/October 2023, Vol. 52, #1, pp. 10-18)

“Although the vast majority of teachers approach their work with great care, social conditions can propel otherwise moral people to engage in harmful practices.”
David Morris and Jason Chen (see item #1)

“Activities that involve groups working together should be followed by individual assessment to gather accurate data about what each student took away from their group learning task.”
Connie Hamilton (see item #4)

“School improvement is most surely and thoroughly achieved when teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practice.”
Judith Warren Little, 1990

“A valuing teacher-student relationship goes nowhere without challenge, and challenge will always be resisted outside a valuing relationship.”
Claude Steele, 1992

“Schools that resort to the ‘if only’ strategy spend their time looking out the window for the solutions to their problems. Schools that commit to the ‘can do’ strategy spend their time looking in the mirror. Which way are you looking?”
Richard DuFour, 2004

“Data is not the plural of anecdote.”
Unknown

1. “Moral Disengagement” Among Educators – Causes and Solutions

In this *Theory Into Practice* article, David Morris (St. Mary’s College of Maryland) and Jason Chen (William and Mary School of Education) say K-12 educators are drawn to the profession because they want to support students’ intellectual, social, and emotional growth. But there are situations where some educators stray from this mission – for example, changing a grade so a student can stay on an athletic team, engaging in subtle discrimination, or failing to report a colleague’s unethical behavior.

What’s going on when educators act in these ways? “Moral disengagement,” the authors believe, leads a person to put aside the beliefs that normally guide their behavior. “Although the vast majority of teachers approach their work with great care,” say Morris and Chen, “social conditions can propel otherwise moral people to engage in harmful practices.” It’s helpful for educators to be aware of eight ways this can happen:

- Justifying an action as furthering a larger social, political, or moral goal – for example, not covering historical material that might diminish students’ patriotism.
- Comparing an action to a less-desirable alternative or future harm – for example, not reporting a student’s drug dealing to facilitate admission to a selective college.
- Sanitizing undesirable actions by using innocuous or virtuous terms – for example, characterizing a student’s degrading words as “teasing.”
- Placing responsibility on an authority figure – for example, saying one was following orders to change students’ grades on a standardized test.
- Deflecting blame to a larger group – for example, not accepting responsibility for addressing bullying that takes place in hallways and common spaces.
- Minimizing, disregarding, or disputing the harm of one’s actions – for example, making light of classroom comments like “That’s so gay” or “That’s retarded.”
- Justifying mistreatment by considering some students less than human – for example, giving low-quality work to low-achieving students because they’re “thick-headed.”
- Blaming certain students for their background – for example, justifying harsh discipline because “these kids” are rebellious or poorly raised.

Morris and Chen describe conditions that can facilitate or even encourage these types of moral disengagement in schools.

• *Exposure to immoral models* – “What people learn, think, and do can be powerfully influenced by their observations of others,” they say (citing Albert Bandura). “In schools,

modeling plays a critical role in acculturating teachers. Educators look to mentor teachers, colleagues, and administrators to learn the norms of teaching." If novice teachers see cruel and abusive behavior toward students, it warps their own moral sensibilities. This is especially true when school leaders behave unethically; given the top-down dynamic in most schools, this can "trickle down" to subordinates.

• *Conformity pressures* – In the 2015 Atlanta cheating scandal, some educators justified their actions by saying they wanted to be team players. "People are more likely to displace or diffuse responsibility for misdeeds when conforming to others' unethical behavior," say Morris and Chen. "Teachers who have witnessed other educators harming students have described having to reconcile their sense of loyalty to colleagues with their moral responsibility to students." One study found that 20 percent of U.S. teachers say failure to report colleagues' unethical behavior, including child abuse, is a frequent occurrence.

• *Pressures from above* – Accountability pressure associated with the No Child Left Behind era led many educators to "teach to the test" and focus so much on data that they lost sight of best classroom practices. "When students are valued primarily for the scores they produce," say Morris and Chen, "their needs are more easily neglected." This can lead to practices like encouraging low-achieving students to stay home on testing days and even altering students' test papers.

What encourages moral *engagement*, leading educators to be faithful to their personal standards and reject narratives that lead them astray? A major factor, say Morris and Chen, is "social environments that emphasize personal accountability and the humanity of others." They suggest these actions:

• *Modeling ethical practice* – The daily behavior of principals, instructional coaches, lead teachers, mentors, and other colleagues has a direct impact on teachers, especially those just entering the profession. Video case studies and role-playing can be especially effective. It's also helpful when teachers' thoughts and needs are acknowledged and treated with respect.

• *Reducing ambiguity about ethical responsibilities and harm* – "A lack of explicit conversations about professional ethics can leave teachers confused about their ethical duties," say Morris and Chen. "Unfortunately, ethical codes for teachers tend to be vague, unenforceable, and inconsistent across school districts." Leaders need to be clear about the ethical code, providing specific examples of expected and unacceptable actions and actual stories of how students are harmed when educators stray from basic principles.

• *Instruction that humanizes students* – When teachers are culturally conscious and incorporate students' heritage languages in the classroom, that neutralizes a deficit orientation that may be present in a school. "This approach," say Morris and Chen, "engages teachers' moral self-sanctions by infusing their pedagogical practices with a strong ethic of care."

"A Social Cognitive Perspective of Educators' Moral Agency" by David Morris and Jason Chen in *Theory Into Practice*, Summer 2023 (Vol. 62, #3, pp. 306-317); the authors can be reached at dbmorris@smcm.edu and jachen@wm.edu.

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2. Four Ways a School Can Reach Aspirational Goals

In this article in *Independent School*, Tim Fish says that when he asks school leadership teams about their purpose – why their school exists, what makes it unique, the most important work they do – people surprise him by not talking about programs and curriculum but rather about *community, relationships, contributing to society,* and *joy*. And yet the day-to-day life of K-12 students and educators is more mundane, not reflective of these aspirations. "The machine often seems to get in the way of the magic," says Fish.

How can schools realize their lofty goals on an ongoing basis, with students doing more than just "doing school"? Fish says he's been obsessed with this question as he's visited scores of schools and produced 40 episodes of the *New View EDU* podcast. The answer, he believes, is designing schools around four interconnected strands:

• *Traditional pedagogy* – Looking back, Fish is critical of his own teaching. Although his fourth-grade classroom was well-organized and engaging, he believes it was too teacher-centered and didn't give students enough choices and experiences with ambiguity. "I felt it was my responsibility to step in whenever students hit a wall," he says, "or carry them over it. I removed productive struggle and, in doing so, took away the opportunity for them to construct their own learning." He believes schools need to give serious thought to when teacher-centered pedagogy works – which it does some of the time – and when teachers need to change their approach.

• *Flow learning* – This is when teachers "transition from delivery to design," says Fish, become "architects of the learning environment and leave the cognitive construction to the students… tackling challenging tasks, making mistakes, and persevering to learn… completely absorbed in an activity." To achieve this state of "flow," teachers need to weave in choice, pose challenging and complex tasks, and set goals that are ambitious yet achievable. To maximize learning experiences like these, Fish believes schools need to rethink schedules, lesson and unit plans, classroom pedagogy, and homework assignments.

• *Interdependent learning* – This happens when teachers orchestrate meaningful group projects in which, says Fish, students "learn to give for the good of the group; they learn to take responsibility, to let go of their own ideas, to listen, to commit. The team's work is bigger than the individual student, and each student feels that they are part of something important. They experience the joy of being needed and realize that they need others as well." Student-directed theatrical productions are a prime example of this kind of learning. How can that dynamic more often be present in classrooms?

• *Learning in community* – The first three strands develop what David Brooks calls "résumé virtues" that pay off in the employment marketplace (see Memo 583 for a summary of this article). The fourth strand focuses on "eulogy virtues" to which most schools aspire – empathy, kindness, character, bravery, humility, and a selfless commitment to improving the larger community. "I believe the world needs communities that build eulogy virtues, now more than ever," says Fish. "I see the fourth strand in action in student-led DEI work, community partnerships and outreach, and Habitat for Humanity trips. I also see it in the classroom, in

advisory, in restorative justice work, and in athletics" – and in certain school traditions and rituals.

These four, Fish concludes, "intentionally considered and working together, help schools transform lives, give students the skills they need to thrive no matter what they decide to do, and make the world a better place… The important thing is that they are all present and that together they can help you define and deliver on your purpose."

"Strand Theory" by Tim Fish in *Independent School*, Fall 2023 (pp. 78-83)

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3. Assistant Principals, Discipline Referrals, and Racial Disparities

In this article in *Urban Education*, John Williams (Texas A&M University/College Station) and Chance Lewis, Tehia Starker Glass, Bettie Butler, and Jae Hoon Lim (University of North Carolina/Charlotte) report on their study of how assistant principals in urban middle schools handled their role as discipline gatekeepers.

The researchers were particularly interested in the issue of racial disparities in discipline referrals. Nationally, African-American students account for 39 percent of out-of-school suspensions and 33 percent of expulsions, while making up only 15 percent of the K-12 population. Discipline is most challenging and important in middle schools, say Williams et al.; suspensions and expulsions happen more frequently and can seriously damage students' social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Why do so many teachers refer African-American students for disobedience, defiance, and disruption compared to referrals for white students? Some possible reasons:

- Ineffective classroom management;
- Intercultural conflict;
- Racial threat;
- Implicit and explicit cultural/racial bias.

These factors come into play as educators deal with what might be considered common behaviors among adolescents – disengagement, disrespect, excessive noise, and dress code violations.

Middle school assistant principals must deal with "multiple conflicting issues," say Williams et al. They need to carry out their principals' mandate to enforce schoolwide discipline policies, ensure a safe and orderly school, support teachers' demands that a disruptive student be removed, provide differentiated and culturally responsive discipline recommendations (which often requires making extensive inquiries), watch for racially disproportionate referrals – and fit all this into their incredibly busy days.

Two of the APs in the study, who were white, noticed how some teachers treated African-American and white students differently but believed they were colorblind – that is, giving consequences without regard to race. The APs found it difficult to address the "animus" behind some teachers' actions. Only after observing multiple instances of black students being disciplined for the same behaviors that white students got away with, and hearing the

counternarratives offered by black students, did these APs come to grips with the problem. But even then, it was difficult for them to address racism and racial bias among their colleagues.

For two of the APs in the study who were African American, things weren't any easier. They were cautious about giving constructive feedback to white teachers, say the researchers, "each feeling the need to adjust how they spoke to certain white teachers who consistently saw themselves as being 'in the right' or disconcerted when speaking of implicit racial bias and how they engaged African-American students in their classroom." These assistant principals heard students' complaints about unfairness, tried to assuage them, saw teachers' "racial cognitive dissonance," felt the need to prove themselves with white colleagues, and were fearful about losing their jobs or being reassigned to another school if they spoke up.

The bottom line is that when assistant principals were asked to deal with discipline referrals relying only on their own judgment, the referral, and the teacher's (often angry) comments, APs were put in the position of accepting the teacher's narrative as the truth. This reinforced the unequal power dynamic and often resulted in racially disparate suspensions and expulsions. Educators believed they were colorblind, but they were in fact blind to racial dynamics under the surface.

One way out of these dilemmas, say Williams et al., is effective professional development on unconscious bias, cultural competence, and classroom management for all staff members in a school. A more immediate step is for principals to create a forum in which students' counternarratives can be heard, shedding light on the events that *preceded* the office referral, which is often where the problem lies.

The challenge is time. As one assistant principal said, "narratives are great, and I wish I had time to spend to hear what each student has to say, but unfortunately I am constantly moving from one incident to the next." This points to the need for increased staffing levels, including counselors and social workers, and better schoolwide preventive practices.

"The Discipline Gatekeeper: Assistant Principals' Experiences with Managing School Discipline in Urban Middle Schools" by John Williams, Chance Lewis, Tehia Starker Glass, Bettie Butler, and Jae Hoon Lim in *Urban Education*, October 2023 (Vol. 58, #8, pp. 1543-1571); Williams can be reached a jwilliams3@tamu.edu.

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4. How to Get the Most Out of Student Group Work

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Connie Hamilton says too many teachers give up on cooperative learning in their classrooms when things don't go as expected. She suggests ways to optimize cooperative learning:

• *Collaboration by design* – Some teachers let students decide when to work with classmates. Hamilton believes teachers should make the decision on group versus solo work based on whether the task is designed with collaboration in mind.

• *Assigning partners* – Some teachers randomize groups, but Hamilton says this misses the opportunity to group students based on skill level, common interests, personality, or

connections among students. The teacher might use "clock partners" to organize different pairings, announcing when students should join each of several groups.

• *Group size* – Hamilton says there are some class activities where using different size groups is a good idea – perhaps several groups of 4 or 5, a few pairs, and some students working alone, varying the challenge level among groups.

• *Directions* – Sometimes it works to read the directions aloud to students, but it may be better to have students read them independently and repeat or paraphrase to a partner what they're supposed to do.

• *Multiple steps* – Rather than reading out all the steps, which can tax students' working memory, it's often better to post the steps and have students revisit them as needed.

• *Dealing with questions* – Teachers do too much of the work for students, says Hamilton. Better to build students' independence by answering a question with a question, referring to the resources provided, or challenging students to problem-solve.

• *Role assignments* – Instead of letting students figure out roles themselves, Hamilton suggests initially assigning who will be the speaker, listener, record-keeper, detective, summarizer, process observer, etc.

• *Role proficiency* – Students often need a mini-lesson on how to perform these group tasks. It's best to train students on them one at a time, says Hamilton: "The goal is for all students to have all the skills and be able to apply these soft skills fluidly without the need to be assigned a specific role."

• *Housekeeping roles* – There's a tendency to assign roles like "materials manager" or "time-keeper" to certain students. Better to have higher-cognitive roles performed by all students, says Hamilton, so everyone contributes to substantive learning tasks some of the time.

• *The teacher's role* – "During collaborative learning," says Hamilton, "the goal is for students to learn from and with one another – not you." The teacher should be students' last resort after using available tools, working with groupmates, and engaging in a little productive struggle.

• *Individual questions* – Hamilton suggests that students be required to access all resources, including group members, before asking the teacher.

• *When students are stuck* – When students get frustrated, it's natural to want to support them. Hamilton suggests asking questions like, *What strategy might work? Where have you seen a similar problem? How are you going to tackle this?*

• *Standing back* – Rather than helping out, Hamilton believes the teacher should observe, listen, and gather anecdotal data: "Carry a clipboard or tablet to document what students are grasping, what is challenging, and who has provided evidence of learning."

• *Checking in* – "Do not interrupt," says Hamilton. "Stay invisible by listening from a short distance to hear and observe how students are doing." Of course this will be much easier if students are clear about the learning task and increasingly independent.

• *Grading* – "Group grades do not reflect how each student stacks up against the target," says Hamilton. "Activities that involve groups working together should be followed by

individual assessment to gather accurate data about what each student took away from their group learning task."

• *Quality of tasks* – Getting students collaborating for lower-level work undermines the value of groups, says Hamilton. If students are capable of performing a task independently, that's the way they should work. Group work should be reserved for tasks where a variety of ideas and perspectives will benefit each student's learning.

• *Feedback* – Hamilton suggests giving students feedback on the content their group produces and also on their problem-solving, respectful listening, patience, clear thinking, and the other qualities we expect them to exhibit in group work.

"17 Tweaks That Make a Big Difference in Group Work" by Connie Hamilton in *Cult of Pedagogy*, October 1, 2023

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5. Instructional Coaches "Invite Themselves" Into Classrooms

In this *Kappan* article, Jen Munson (Northwestern University) and Evthokia Stephanie Saclarides (University of Cincinnati) say a major concern among instructional coaches is that "teachers retain the professional authority to determine if, when, and for what purpose they grant coaches access to their classrooms and practice." The rationale for this teacher autonomy is that they're more likely to see coaching in a positive light and decide to engage with a coach.

But this choice structure presents a tricky challenge to instructional coaches, say Munson and Saclarides. Access to classrooms is something coaches must "carefully and actively earn." Without it, coaches can't do their jobs, so how do they pull it off? In interviews with 28 coaches in a school district in the southeast U.S., the authors identified successful practices in six areas:

• *Relational strategies* – Successful coaches built teachers' trust by coming across as nonjudgmental, reliable, respectful, and competent. They explained what they would and wouldn't do and emphasized that they were there not to evaluate but to support good teaching while maintaining confidentiality.

• *Structural strategies* – Coaches embedded themselves in schools' PD, planning, and communication routines, attending grade-level and subject-area meetings and facilitating district and school professional development sessions. This meant coaches were attuned to teachers' needs and were "at the table" when opportunities arose. Some coaches produced newsletters, e-mails, and bulletin boards and used scheduling apps to make it easy for teachers to make appointments.

• *Direct offers* – The coaches went straight to teachers and teams with materials they thought would be helpful: lessons, activities, math manipulatives, and tech hardware. They also offered to teach model lessons, co-teach, observe classes, and provide feedback. Coaches were strategic about starting with teachers they believed would be most receptive, hoping that word of mouth would open other doors.

• *Indirect strategies* – Coaches created opportunities for teachers to approach them without asking directly. They gathered information about individual teachers' goals and each

school's culture, and made themselves visible and available for teachers to invite them in, saying yes to all invitations, including classroom celebrations and performances.

• *"Cloaked" coaching strategies* – Coaches sometimes asked to observe a class, try out a lesson themselves, or observe a particular student – the real purpose being to establish a coaching relationship. Other cloaked strategies included working with teacher teams, describing new policies or district initiatives that affected all teachers, and not referring to their work as coaching. "These opaque strategies have limitations, however," say Munson and Saclarides, "because they could undermine their goal of establishing trusting professional relationships with teachers."

• *Pitching-in strategies* – These included offering to perform duties that were not part of their formal job description – for example, helping with teacher orientation, covering classes to free up teachers' time, making copies, trouble-shooting technology, helping with bulletin boards, and conducting student assessments. Coaches were somewhat reluctant to pitch in with some of these because they knew performing them could give teachers the wrong idea about their actual role.

Munson and Saclarides found that this district's coaches used multiple strategies, most often working on building trust and then making what they hoped was a well-timed offer of resources or support. Being in teacher team meetings and observing teachers' planning and data work provided many opportunities to suggest materials or ideas, providing a foot in the door for individual coaching. "Coaches were perpetually negotiating access to classrooms in complex, coordinated ways," say the authors.

Munson and Saclarides suggest that instructional coaches list the teachers with whom they've successfully gained access, what combination of the six strategies worked, which classrooms they haven't yet gotten access to, why that's the case, and what strategies might work with those teachers. Meeting regularly with other instructional coaches is a good way to reflect on these questions and continue to gain access to teachers – especially those whose instructional practices are in greatest need of improvement.

"How Coaches Get In" by Jen Munson and Evthokia Stephanie Saclarides in *Kappan*, October 2023 (Vol. 105, #2, pp. 32-36); the authors can be reached at jmunson@northwestern.edu and saclares@ucmail.uc.edu.

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6. The Track Record of Merit Pay in Dallas

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Amber Northern describes the trajectory of the Accelerating Campus Excellence (ACE) merit pay pilot program launched in 2016 in the Dallas schools. It followed the implementation of a new performance evaluation process two years earlier. Here's what happened:

- High-rated principals could make $13,000 more, assistant principals $11,500 more, teachers $6-10,000 more, instructional coaches $6,000 more.
- To get the pay increase, educators had to be accepted to work in one of the district's lowest-performing campuses, dubbed ACE schools.

- Educators already in those schools had to go through a rigorous screening to keep their jobs.
- Only 20 percent were retained; the rest (including principals) were assigned elsewhere.
- They were replaced by teachers from the pool of the highest performers.
- Researchers followed data in the initial cohorts of ACE schools, comparing them to a control group of non-participating schools with similar incoming student performance.
- ACE schools showed an immediate, significant improvement in student achievement, bringing their math and reading scores close to the district average.
- In the second and third year of the intervention, ACE schools' scores continued to rise, showing that the more exposure students had to highly effective educators, the better they did.
- Test scores in the control group schools flatlined.
- Student achievement gains in the ACE schools were so great that by 2019, three of the four initial ACE schools no longer qualified for the program.
- As a result, educator stipends were eliminated in those schools, along with after-school and other programmatic components.
- Over 40 percent of the high-performing teachers transferred out of their ACE schools, and those who remained were assigned to PD responsibilities outside the classroom.
- The former ACE schools then saw a sharp decline in student achievement, reversing most of the previous gains.
- Schools in the control group didn't experience these fluctuations.

What lessons can be drawn from Dallas's initiative? First, significant pay incentives can persuade educators to transfer to a low-performing school. Second, reconstituting a school's staff can make a dramatic difference. Third, good teaching and school leadership are keys to student achievement. And finally, if effective teaching and other programmatic elements are not sustained, everything falls apart.

"The Ups and Downs of Dallas's Pay-for-Performance Roller Coaster" by Amber Northern in *Education Gadfly*, September 28, 2023

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7. Short Item:

Project-Based Learning Units – Sprocket is a free website with a number of full-year project-based learning units, including grade 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 science, 9th grade ELA, AP environmental science, AP U.S. government and politics, and AP physics.

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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 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 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