Marshall Memo 1023

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 12, 2024

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"It's perfectly normal."
Robie Harris (see item #1)

"Average players want to be left alone. Good players want to be coached. Great players want to be told the truth."
Doc Rivers

"Withholding feedback is choosing comfort over growth."
Adam Grant

"As I've learned more about the science of motivation, I've come to understand that while grades motivate some students, they aren't a particularly good motivator, not just for the students who don't care about grades, but also for the students who do."
Teresa Preston in "Chasing What Matters" in *Kappan*, February 2024 (Vol. 105, #5, p. 4); Preston can be reached at tpreston@pdkintl.org.

"A good problem-solving task involves students getting stuck, experimenting, and getting unstuck."
Stephen Caviness, Crystal Wallen and Lorraine Stewart (see item #5)

"Explicit teaching of basic skills does not have to mean rote, boring whole-class instruction."
Seth Parsons and Joy Dangora Erickson (see item #3)

"The saddest sound a superintendent hears at the start of a board meeting is the ripping sound as board members open their packets for the first time."
Nicholas Caruso (see item #8)

1. A Tribute to Robie Harris

Robie Harris, renowned author of books on children's sexual health, died last week at 83. Here's the *New York Times* obituary. Her best-known book, *It's Perfectly Normal*, has sold more than a million copies and been translated into 27 languages. It's also one of the most banned books in the United States. Here are a few quotes from Robie Harris:

• Our children do not grow up in bubbles, so they already know a lot about risky behavior. However, they also have a lot of misinformation about what is risky and what is not. That's why they need to have an honest understanding and not a sugarcoated understanding of sexuality. And I believe that is what serves our children and teens best.

• I write books for children because in some small way I hope that they will find the words I write useful, reassuring, interesting, and at times humorous, and also in some small way help them to stay emotionally and/or physically healthy by giving honest, accurate, up-to-date, and age-appropriate information."

• I would never say that every family, or school, or library, or health organization, or religious group must have the books I write. But those who choose to should have the right to that choice. And yes, all the work I do is also connected not only to my right to read and write, but to children's and teens' right to read.

• I believe that our librarians are the real heroes in our democracy. They are the keepers of our democracy by allowing children, teens, and adults to choose the books they want to read or may randomly come across in the library. This allows them to have access to ideas and information they may seek, or need, or come across by happenstance. Every librarian is on the front line of his or her community, defending that freedom. As a children's books author, I am only in front of my computer.

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2. How to Get Students to Care About What's Being Taught

In this *Kappan* article, Eric Anderman, Yue Sheng, and Wonjoon Cha (Ohio State University) say that one of the most frequent questions asked by students is *Why do I have to learn this?* It's a good question. In fact, it's also asked by educators when they're required to sit through PD that's not interesting or helpful.

As researchers on motivation, Anderman, Sheng, and Cha say that students' interest in a subject like science develops over time, influenced by parents' and peers' attitudes and beliefs, messages in the media, and personal experiences outside of school. But teachers'

instructional practices are one of the most important factors in boosting how much students value a subject, engage in class, achieve, and are interested in learning more – even pursuing a career in that area.

The authors have identified four ways students can value what's being taught – utility, attainment, intrinsic, and cost/benefit. With each, teachers can spark students' interest and engagement. Boosting motivation has real payoffs for teachers, not only in the satisfaction of seeing students more eager to learn and doing better, but also because there's joy in teaching motivated students – and fewer discipline problems.

Here are the ways students might value a classroom topic, each followed by a student comment from an eighth-grade social studies or a high-school chemistry class:

• *Utility value* – how useful students think it will be to learn a topic, particularly in light of their future plans. "I never used to like social studies, but my teacher introduced a lesson about food deserts. We discussed in class how we might address this issue in our neighborhood. I was able to see how something we learned in social studies was useful."

• *Attainment value* – how personally important students believe the topic is, particularly with regard to their identity and circumstances. "I didn't see myself as a scientist or chemist; I guess I subconsciously thought that it was for boys. However, after learning about female chemists who made great contributions, I came to think of chemistry as a more important subject."

• *Intrinsic value* – how much students are interested in and enjoy learning about it. "I never liked reading about history, but Mrs. Smith created online simulations of past events that we did in class. I really love doing those, and it helps me remember history better than just reading about it."

• *Cost-benefit value* – how worthwhile students think it is to spend time on the topic in a trade-off with other activities. "I like Ms. Wilson's class, but some of her homework takes too much time. I sometimes need to skip soccer practice to do assignments."

Anderman, Sheng, and Cha suggest the following research-based, low-cost ways to increase the value students place on their subject matter – and thus their motivation:

- Invite guest speakers (utility value) – A ninth-grade Spanish teacher brings in a former student who is now an accountant and she describes how she doubled the number of clients when she advertised that she is fluent in Spanish.
- Engage parents in communicating about the value of academic content (utility value) – A fifth-grade math teacher sends home dinnertime conversation starters, giving parents prompts for talking about parts of the math curriculum and its importance to future academic work and career opportunities.
- Increase personal relevance (attainment value) – A seventh-grade social studies teacher has students spend three minutes at the end of class journaling about a connection they've made between their current unit (the three branches of government) and something in their lives.

- Provide opportunities for choice (intrinsic value) – A third-grade teacher has students sort themselves into reading groups based on interests – soccer, haunted houses, superheroes, Taylor Swift, and kittens.
- Make it worthwhile (cost-benefit value) – A tenth-grade geometry teacher builds rubrics into her homework so students can get through the assignments more efficiently: hints for each step of the problem-solving process for the first three problems and reminders in later problems referring to the earlier hints. The teacher also puts a time limit on each assignment, telling students to stop after 30 minutes so they don't spin their wheels on problems they can't solve on their own.

"'Why Do I Have to Learn This?'" by Eric Anderman, Yue Sheng, and Wonjoon Cha in *Kappan*, February 2024 (Vol. 105, #5, p. 8-12); the authors can be reached at anderman.1@osu.edu, sheng.195@osu.edu, and cha.170@osu.edu.

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3. A Missing Element in Some Primary-Grade Reading Classes: Motivation

In this *Kappan* article, Seth Parsons (George Mason University) and Joy Dangora Erickson (Endicott College) say five research-based components of early reading instruction are important – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. But they believe there's been insufficient emphasis on a sixth component: motivation. From recent visits to classrooms and their own children's experience, Parsons and Erickson have seen too many primary-grade students being turned off to reading.

"Explicit teaching of basic skills does not have to mean rote, boring whole-class instruction," they say. "If we are truly going to follow scientific research, then motivation must be part of the equation." Here are ways that can happen in classrooms:

• *Authenticity* – Effective teachers embed literacy instruction in authentic texts for authentic purposes – for example, using students' own questions to drive reading, writing, and creativity:

- *How do caterpillars change into butterflies?*
- *What was life like when dinosaurs roamed the planet?*
- *How do volcanoes explode?*

Systematic, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and *writing* can be woven into answering questions like these, using teacher-created decodable texts and nonfiction books, and having students create their own products and performances – a caterpillar life-cycle plan, a dinosaur ABC book.

• *Collaboration* – "Students are motivated to learn when they work together on reading and writing activities," say Parsons and Erickson. Teachers can combine basics with practice by having students read appropriate texts to peers and engage in readers' theater – short scripts that get students practicing foundational skills together for an authentic purpose.

• *High-interest texts* – In kindergarten and first grade, students have developed strong interests, and reading motivation is boosted when they have a chance to read books that matter to them – for example, caring for a pet, learning how to become a park ranger, Pokémon,

reading with a Spanish-speaking parent. "The integration of high-interest texts in school reading programs," say the authors, "supports key goals from reading science and motivation science."

• *Appropriate challenge* – Finding the Goldilocks level of difficulty with reading tasks – not too hard, not too easy – "is another principle of motivation that should inform science of reading instruction," say Parsons and Erickson. "Therefore, differentiation in reading instruction and reading tasks is crucial to ensure students at different ability levels have assignments that meet their challenge needs." This points to a center-based approach where students go to carefully prepared study areas addressing their individual strengths and needs, ideally with several adults in the classroom to support center work.

"Where Is Motivation in the Science of Reading?" by Seth Parsons and Joy Dangora Erickson in *Kappan*, February 2024 (Vol. 105, #5, p. 32-35); the authors can be reached at sparson5@gmu.edu and jdangora@endicott.edu.

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4. Inquiry vs. Direct Instruction – Which Works Best?

In this Hechinger Report article, Jill Barshay explores the research of several groups of scholars on the relative merits of direct instruction (teachers tell students or students read textbooks) and inquiry instruction (students conduct experiments and figure out answers like scientists). Inquiry instruction has been popular in U.S. science classes and was supported by a 1996 report from the National Research Council. But in a 2021 report in *Educational Psychology Review,* scholars raised serious questions about that research and argued that direct instruction was more effective.

Then in 2023, another group of researchers, in an article in *Educational Research Review*, argued that a *combination* of inquiry and direct instruction worked best, with each used for its strong suit:

- Direct instruction to help students learn essential content and skills;
- Inquiry instruction to develop conceptual understanding and spark a love of science.

Barshay lists her takeaways from following this head-spinning, ongoing debate:

• Students need a strong foundation of knowledge and skills before inquiry learning can be successful. They don't need complete mastery, but having the basics under their belts before exploring open-ended questions is essential.

• Unstructured inquiry projects where students are groping in the dark doesn't build conceptual understanding. Inquiry works best when students get a lot of guidance and feedback as they explore. Sometimes a clear explanation is helpful – a dose of direct instruction in the middle of inquiry.

• Low-achieving students appear to benefit more from guidance than middle- and high-achieving students, and low-achievers also need more guidance. This suggests that direct instruction is best for novices.

• Direct instruction can contain varying amounts of inquiry, including students solving problems, practicing new skills independently, and doing projects and experiments. "The core

difference," says Barshay, "can be a subtle one and hinge upon whether the teacher explains the theory to the students first or shows examples before students try it themselves (direct), or if the teacher asks students to figure out the theories and the procedures themselves, but gives them explicit guidance along the way (inquiry)."

• It's boring for students to learn the same way all the time – another reason for a hybrid approach. Even traditionalists admit that fun exploration can be a positive element.

Barshay concludes: "Beyond the academic sniping and nitpicking, the two sides seem to have found some common ground."

"Proof Points: Two Groups of Scholars Revive the Debate Over Inquiry vs. Direct Instruction" by Jill Barshay in The Hechinger Report, January 22, 2024; Barshay can be reached at barshay@hechingerreport.org.

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5. Getting Students Working on Challenging, Open-Ended Math Problems

"A good problem-solving task involves students getting stuck, experimenting, and getting unstuck," say Stephen Caviness (Syracuse University) and sixth-grade teachers Crystal Wallen and Lorraine Stewart (River Bend Middle School, Sterling, Virginia) in this *Mathematics Teacher* article. "When students approach a problem with uncertainty, they have an opportunity for productive struggle."

Using a "Thinking Classroom" format (see Memos 976, 992, and 1013), heterogeneous groups of three students work standing up at vertical surfaces (with one marker) tackling "Open Middle" problems, which have the following characteristics:

- A "closed beginning" – students get a specific prompt to solve a challenging problem;
- Students haven't been taught a prescribed method for solving the problem;
- An "open middle" – there are multiple approaches for solving the problem;
- Problems are designed to be accessible to all students, even those not on grade level;
- Students must approach the problem with their own reasoning and creativity;
- A "closed end" – there are several possible solutions.

"The Open Middle structure," say Caviness, Wallen, and Stewart, "provides ample opportunities for teachers to respond to student struggle and help them to embrace struggle as a norm when solving problems."

They conclude: "These tasks are powerful tools for creating a culture of collaboration in which students acknowledge and embrace the various thinking strategies that their peers have to offer… We believe that Open Middle tasks are worthwhile to implement in your classroom because they help students to embrace uncertainty, persevere through struggle, and be creative with mathematics."

"Embracing Uncertainty, Struggle, and Creativity with Open Middle" by Stephen Caviness, Crystal Wallen, and Lorraine Stewart in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, February 2024 (Vol. 117, #2, pp. 138-141); the article includes three videos of students working on a problem. The authors can be reached at scavines@syr.edu, crystal.wallen@lcps.org, and lorraine.stewart@lcps.org.

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6. Tasks That Get Students Thinking in Math Classes

In this editor's note in *Mathematics Teacher*, Beth MacDonald (Illinois State University) lists nine characteristics of classroom mathematics tasks (Lannin et al., 2013) that will challenge students and make their reasoning visible so it can guide instruction:

- Has a low floor for entry and a high ceiling for extending to higher-level activities;
- Includes a relevant and interesting context;
- Connects previous knowledge to new learning;
- Allows for multiple solution approaches and strategies;
- Involves students in an inquiry-oriented or exploratory approach;
- Encourages the use of multiple representations;
- Provides opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate the math practices;
- Engages students in explaining the meaning of the result;
- Aligns with relevant math content standards.

"By loving and embracing the authentic sensemaking of children," says MacDonald, "we are better able to improve our mathematics teaching and empower all our students' mathematics abilities."

"Loving Our Students' Mathematics" by Beth MacDonald in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, February 2024 (Vol. 117, #2, pp. 82-83); MacDonald can be reached at blmacd1@ilstu.edu.

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7. Feedback Without the "Ack!"

In this article in *Stanford Magazine*, Kamakshi Ayyar reports on her interview with David Dodson, author and Stanford Business School professor, about his suggestions for giving feedback to employees. Dodson believes these conversations are important for three reasons: employees' professional growth, letting people know where they stand, and setting a workplace culture of high performance.

But many leaders aren't good at giving critical feedback and are uncomfortable with difficult conversations. They wing it, leaving miscommunication and hurt feelings in their wake, or they avoid it, leading colleagues to ask, *What is the boss not telling me?*

The key, says Dodson, is to give people feedback about job performance so they're clear about the evaluator's positive intent: *I want you to be the best you can be*. Here's his six-step framework for a feedback conversation that should last no more than a few minutes and use only a few sentences:

• *Be clear about expectations*. This might be a statement like, "I need this report delivered to the team in a timely manner so we can use the information to make a good decision."

• *Share how expectations will be measured*. "If you're not clear on what the measurement is," says Dodson, " then you're leaving it all gray on what your expectations

really are." So what does *In a timely manner* mean? It has to be more specific: *On the last day of this month!*

• *State the problem*. Just the facts, Ma'am. *The report was a day late*. "Feedback is not a place where you air your frustrations or criticisms," says Dodson. "If you're fretting over how [to] deliver feedback in a way that doesn't hurt someone's feelings, that is actually very time-consuming. If you've created a culture of radical candor, you don't have to worry about every little word you say."

• *Ask about obstacles*. There may be a good reason that prevented the report from being on time, and the manager needs to know about that. Being open to hearing about difficulties eliminates the unfortunate dynamic of the employee walking away thinking that the boss doesn't understand. If the employee brings up an obstacle about which the manager wasn't aware, it's a good idea to take some time to decide what to do. "Thinking on your feet generally is not the path for good decision-making," says Dodson.

• *Offer support*. When there's a truly problematic obstacle, it's time to ask, "Is there anything I can do?" or "What support can I give you?"

• *Agree at closure*. At the end of the feedback meeting, both people need to be clear about what's been agreed – or decreed. It may not be exactly what each person wanted, says Dodson, but "What's not okay is not to have alignment."

"Six Tips to Take the 'Ack!' Out of Feedback" by Kamakshi Ayyar in *Stanford Magazine*, January 16, 2024

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8. School Boards: Some Do's and Don'ts

In this *American School Board Journal* article, Nicholas Caruso Jr. (Connecticut Association of Boards of Education) says he's had a "dream career" working with excellent public servants doing important work, but "certain issues seem to crop up regularly, even among the best-intentioned board members." Here are his suggestions on ways school board members can be most effective – and avoid some common problems:

• *Focus on the right stuff*. "The reason school boards exist is to ensure that every child gets a quality education," says Caruso. "Every second that you and your board are spending on other matters is a distraction… Making sure the board establishes a clear vision, provides the resources to support that vision (along with your superintendent's operational plans), holding the district accountable to achieve the vision, and communicating all of this to your community should be the board's No. 1 priority."

• *Put children before politics*. Partisan politics can tear school boards apart and get in the way of their mission, says Caruso: "Leave politics out of board business."

• *Follow policy*. The vision and goals a board has articulated, and its policy manual, are the North Star, he says. "Boards should refer to policy whenever they make a decision. Rarely is there no connection to policy in a board decision."

• *Conduct board meetings with civility and decorum*. It's vital to follow a well-thought-out agenda aligned with district goals, says Caruso, following Roberts Rules of Order and doing the public's business in a way that reflects well on everyone involved.

• *Behave*. Among the problems he has witnessed: temper tantrums, off-color language, throwing things, insulting and threatening other board members, the superintendent, and staff, and falling asleep on the podium. "Many of these same board members would be the first to object if they saw their students acting in the same way," says Caruso. It's important that board members treat citizens who speak at meetings with respect, keeping in mind that public speaking is nerve-racking for most people. It's especially unwise for board members to criticize professional staff during meetings: "Don't air dirty laundry in public."

• *Cultivate patience*. "Board members are movers and shakers," says Caruso. "You want to do it all *now*, and you want to know it all *yesterday*. Keep that enthusiasm but understand that it takes a while to learn the issues, the politics, and the people." This advice is particularly important for new board members.

• *Respect closure*. "There are few things more destructive than a board member publicly chastising board colleagues for making a 'bad' decision," he says. "The subtleties will be lost on the public, who will only see a board in chaos." Members should fight hard for their position and then accept the will of the board and support it.

• *Don't be a Lone Ranger*. Caruso remembers a board member who often visited the district's high school on the hunt for problems and came to board meetings with a legal pad full of detailed criticisms. A board of education is a corporate entity empowered to handle policy, says Caruso. For day-to-day school operations, its members "have no more authority than any other member of the public. This is management territory, and board members are guests, not the boss."

• *Don't micromanage*. Superintendents really don't like it when board members get into the weeds of daily operations – for example, arguing about the wattage of light bulbs being ordered. The board's job is setting policy and goals, monitoring implementation, and empowering the superintendent to run the district day by day.

• *Don't play gotcha*. Any question on policy and operations is fair game in a board meeting, says Caruso. It's good to give the superintendent a heads-up on concerns from the community that a board member plans to ask about. Surprise questions designed to score points or embarrass the superintendent are unfair and disruptive.

• *Do your homework*. "The saddest sound a superintendent hears at the start of a board meeting," says Caruso, "is the ripping sound as board members open their packets for the first time."

• *Don't carry the ball for people with specific agendas*. Board members are often approached by friends, neighbors, district staff, parents, or political supporters lobbying for a particular position. Caruso urges board members to memorize and abide by the following response: "This problem could end up requiring board action, and if I am involved in it at this level, I will be unable to act on it as a member of the board because it could be a violation of due process. You really need to go through the proper channels."

• *Don't have your own hidden agenda*. That might be bringing in a new program, getting a brother-in-law a job as football coach, or firing the superintendent. Board members' job is much bigger than a single issue, and they need to be above-board and refer issues like these to the board chair for possible inclusion on a future board agenda.

• *Maintain confidentiality*. Sunshine laws require school boards to operate in public, says Caruso, and that builds credibility and trust. Certain matters can or must be discussed in executive sessions; it's unethical and may be illegal for board members to divulge what is discussed in those closed meetings.

"13 Mistakes Board Members Make" by Nicholas Caruso Jr. in *American School Board Journal*, February 2024 (Vol. 211, #1, pp. 20-23); Caruso can be reached at ncaruso@cabe.org.

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9. Inclusive Books for Elementary Classrooms

In this article in *Language Arts*, New York City teacher Úrsula Tua Santiago recommends books that promote several kinds of diversity:

- *Sam's Super Seats* by Keah Brown, illustrated by Sharee Miller
- *I Talk Like a River* by Jordan Scott, illustrated by Sydney Smith
- *In the Blue* by Erin Hourigan
- *Titi Chabeli* by Laura Rexach Olivencia, illustrated by Carla Torres Dávila
- *Bodies Are Cool* by Tyler Feder
- *A Day with No Words* by Tiffany Hammond, illustrated by Kate Cosgrove
- *Song in the City* by Daniel Bernstrom, illustrated by Jenin Mohammed

"Cultivating Inclusive Classrooms with the Use of Children's Literature" by Úrsula Tua Santiago in *Language Arts*, January 2024 (Vol. 101, #3, pp. 222-225): Santiago can be reached at tua.ursula@gmail.com.

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

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

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

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers 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