Marshall Memo 1058

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 21, 2024

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Delivering long blocks of direct instruction without stopping to assess can lead to big gaps in learning."

Jennifer Gonzalez (see item #1)

"The power and status of school mathematics often manifest themselves in decisions about what content gets taught, to which students, and by which teachers."

Julia Aguirre et al. (quoted in item #2)

"Students' academic careers were decided at the age of eight. This had to stop."

Melissa Pearson and Susan Totaro (*ibid.*)

"'Where does this information come from?' is one of the most important questions we can ask to avoid getting duped online."

Sam Wineburg and Nadav Ziv (see item #5)

"Although reading and spelling are related, they are distinct skills, with spelling requiring much more precision compared to reading… Reading is a recognition task, and spelling is a production task."

Taylor Seymour, Ramona Pittman, Emily Binks-Cantrell, & Malatesha Joshi (item #4)

"Too much emphasis on the test, rather than the skills it is designed to measure, can result in higher scores without improving the academic and social skills of students in the Commonwealth."

John Papay et al. in "The MCAS As a Graduation Standard: Findings from a Research-Practice Partnership" from the Annenberg Institute paper, July 2024

"Do you want to be helped, hugged, or heard?"

Quoted by Charles Duhigg in his new book, *Supercommunicators: How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection*

1. Key Insights on During-the-Lesson Assessment of Student Learning

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez summarizes her podcast interview with Jenn David-Lang and Kim Marshall, in which they share takeaways from their Best of Marshall Memo collection of articles on Assessment for Learning:

• *Keep checks for understanding brief and frequent*. "Delivering long blocks of direct instruction without stopping to assess can lead to big gaps in learning," says Gonzalez. Better to inject formative assessments several times during a lesson. Harvard physics professor Eric Mazur saw game-changing gains in students' achievement – especially their depth of understanding – when he began including several cycles of Question-Poll-Convince Your Neighbor-Consolidate in his classes.

• *Plan "hinge" questions*. Assessment guru Dylan Wiliam is an advocate of building in short, mid-lesson questions to check on whether students have grasped what's been taught so far. A well-constructed hinge question (for example, tell which of these fractions is biggest: 4/5, 1/8, 2/2, 5/16) builds in common misconceptions and gives the teacher immediate feedback on how many students understand the concept or skill.

• *Use a system that checks all students*. Some teachers check for understanding by asking, "Any questions?" or having students signal their level of understanding with thumbs-up, thumbs-sideways, or thumbs-down. These commonly used strategies often fail to reveal gaps in student understanding. Better to use high-tech polling (Kahoot, Plickers, or other digital polling programs) or low-tech approaches like small whiteboards or students responding to multiple-choice questions by holding one, two, three, or four fingers on their chests.

• *Create a culture that normalizes mistakes*. When formative assessments are low-stakes, students will take risks and explore their level of understanding without fear of negative consequences. Jeff Howard of the Efficacy Institute coined the term FADAF – Failure And Difficulty Are Feedback – and when students are struggling, urges them to "FADAF this one." (Here's a Jon Saphier interview with Jeff Howard on his approach to achievement motivation.)

• *Follow up on students' responses*. "Giving a formative assessment is pointless if we don't do something in response to the results," says Gonzalez. Some effective practices:

- Telling students to "convince your neighbor" that their understanding is correct;
- Reteach the concept to a small section of the class while other students work independently;
- Have students visit learning stations that provide instruction for the different ways students may have misunderstood.

The key is prompt follow-up that directly addresses errors, misunderstanding, and confusion revealed by the formative assessment.

"5 Condition for Getting Formative Assessments Right" by Jennifer Gonzalez in *Cult of Pedagogy*, October 14, 2024

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2. A New Jersey District Detracks Math in its Upper-Elementary Grades

In this article in *Mathematics Teacher*, Melissa Pearson and Susan Totaro say their high-performing suburban district (West Windsor-Plainsboro) used to give third graders a math assessment and place them in achievement-grouped math classes starting in fourth grade. In 2015, district leaders took a critical look at this practice. "Students' academic careers were decided at the age of eight," say Pearson and Totaro. "This had to stop." The district began to think through what detracking math would look like, and for how many grades. The goal: moving from "pockets of excellence" to supporting all students learning mathematics at high levels.

A quote from Julia Aguirre et al. guided the discussion: "The power and status of school mathematics often manifest themselves in decisions about what content gets taught, to which students, and by which teachers." It would have been logistically simple to make all math classes heterogeneous, but of course this change involved new challenges: differentiating instruction for a wide range of skills, knowledge, and self-beliefs within each class, as well as addressing some parents' concerns that the rigor level would be watered down. Pearson and Totaro describe the steps the district took (based on Justin Reich's model):

• *Define a vision*. What was the problem to which detracking was the solution? That students in the lower tracks were missing out on conceptually challenging math, and when they got to high school, they weren't in upper-level courses – with lifelong consequences. In 2016, the district adopted this statement: *All learners should have access to rigorous, high-level mathematical content in an environment where risk-taking, deep conceptual understanding, and growth mindset are the norm*.

• *Model risk-taking, learn from research, and build trust*. "At its best, learning is messy," say Pearson and Totaro. "If we expect teachers to shift their instructional practices, we must model our expectations." In discussions with experts, traveling to conferences, and reading relevant research, initiative leaders explored the root causes of disproportionality in high-school math classes, examined beliefs about math ability and learning, and identified teaching methods that would level the playing field.

• *Support teacher development*. The district hired two upper-elementary math coaches and launched a 27-hour summer Math Institute to build the beliefs and pedagogical skills to teach heterogeneous classes. The teachers and principals who attended discussed different classroom structures, observed and debriefed classes taught by highly effective teachers, and explored new instructional materials.

• *Support teacher-to-teacher learning*. The Math Institute positioned teachers as experts and built on the collegial experiences they had over the summer (there was an accelerated institute for those who couldn't attend). During the year, upper-elementary PLC teams were given twice-weekly release time dedicated to mathematics. The math coaches and lead teachers modeled lessons in classrooms and discussed student work and instructional challenges in the PLC meetings. "We learned early on in that first year," say Pearson and Totaro, "that an unintended message teachers received was throw away all their old lessons." That misconception was addressed right away.

• *Plan for scale and build capacity*. The detracking proceeded one grade at a time, starting with fourth grade, focusing support, classroom observations, and feedback on that group of teachers.

• *Celebrate faculty*. "Positioning teachers as the experts created a space for them to shine," say Pearson and Totaro. They made a point of spending time in classrooms and having teachers present their growth to their colleagues. Some teachers became instructional coaches, taking their insights to another level. Here's a statement from one such teacher: "When I learned to believe that my mathematicians were capable of great things, provided rich tasks and slowed for productive struggle, the result was deeper discussions and an increase in conceptual knowledge."

• *Assess progress toward the vision*. It's now been seven years since the launch of the district's detracking initiative. Some data points [including communication from the authors since the publication of this article]:

- All fourth and fifth-grade math classes are heterogeneous.
- There are multi-level courses in middle school and 9th-grade Algebra II, opening up more pathways for students.
- More "college prep" and "honors" students are working side by side.
- More students are participating in higher-level courses – from 7 percent to 26-28 percent over the course of the initiative.

"We continue to assess our progress through formal data dives, walkthroughs, and conversations with students, families, and teachers," conclude the authors. "We continue to examine the structures that perpetuate disproportionalities."

"Detracking Math: Transforming Teaching and Learning" by Melissa Pearson and Susan Totaro in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, October 2024 (Vol. 117, #10, pp. 747-753); the authors can be reached at melissa.pearson@wwprsd.org and susan.totaro@wwprsd.org.

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3. Black and Latin Students' Sense of Belonging, Classroom by Classroom

In this article in *Urban Education*, DeLeon Gray (North Carolina State University/ Raleigh) and five colleagues say students' sense of belonging at school is a key factor in their mental health, motivation, and academic achievement. But for students of color, there are often barriers to a sense of belonging – in the curriculum, classroom pedagogy, teacher-student

relationships, school culture, student governance and leadership, and school discipline. These factors may be compounded by additional obstacles: fewer financial resources, high turnover of school personnel, and fewer social and academic supports.

Gray and his colleagues say that previous research on students' sense of belonging has described it in general, schoolwide terms, producing findings that are not very informative or helpful. They believe students' sense of belonging exists at a more granular level, and conducted a study with 225 urban sixth graders to explore that theory. What they found was that in spite of the many barriers to these students' sense of belonging, individual teachers could instill a strong sense of belonging "within their immediate sphere of influence – the classroom," and thereby boost their students' engagement and achievement.

How did this work? The researchers used the Opportunities to Belong instrument to interview students on six key teacher actions, which tended to be closely related. Here they are, with a sampling of quotes from individual students:

• Opportunities to receive meaningful feedback – *She's very helpful and she's always trying to make sure that everybody gets a turn at something. She's always trying to push us past the limit, trying to make us do seventh grade and eighth grade work and stuff.*

• Opportunities to learn communally – *If she looks at me and I'm like sad or depressed or something, she'll ask me what's wrong. And then if I don't want to talk about, she'll send me to a counselor or try her best to help me and not put so much pressure on me.*

• Opportunities to make real-world connections – *She does give us some details of what's happening in society and what happened back in time. She does it a lot. She has like old lady wisdom. I wish I had her for my grandma.*

• Opportunities for emotional expression – *She would sometimes tell my parents, or just pull me out to tell me I was okay and get to the problem, try to help me.*

• Opportunities for individualized support – *If someone is frustrated or doesn't know what the problem is talking about, they will let me help them and get it right for them.*

• Opportunities to share ideas and opinions – *We usually have class-wide conversations. So whenever you say something, you get a grade for participation and not only that, they will listen to what your opinions are and they will sometimes implement it into how they teach.*

Gray et al. found major differences in how much these encouragers of belonging were present in different classrooms, and the amount of student engagement that accompanied them. "The high degree of variance explained in our outcomes," they say, "suggests that opportunities to belong not only significantly predict students' engagement patterns, but provide substantive information on the degree to which changes in teachers' provision of belonging opportunities may be linked with changes in students' participation levels during class."

The researchers' takeaway: "We recommend that school administrators and instructional coaches consider introducing belonging design principles when talking with educators about the concrete, actionable steps they can take and roles they can play in honoring and affirming their students. In so doing, they may give rise to teachers' use of novel and

emergent instructional practices as underlying pedagogical principles become explicitly and intentionally embedded within school reform efforts."

"Urban Middle Schoolers' Opportunities to Belong Predict Fluctuations in Their Engagement Across the School Day" by DeLeon Gray, Brooke Harris-Thomas, Joanna Ali, Taylor Cummings, Tamika McElveen, and Tamecia Jones in *Urban Education*, November 2024 (Vol. 59, #9, pp. 2583-2618); Gray can be reached at dlgray2@ncsu.edu.

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4. The Case for Including Spelling in Early Literacy Screenings

In this *Reading League Journal* article, Taylor Seymour, Ramona Pittman, Emily Binks-Cantrell, and Malatesha Joshi (Texas A&M University) say that assessing spelling tells a lot about students' literacy knowledge, including:

- The sounds they hear;
- Their knowledge of phonemes, orthography, and morphology;
- Their familiarity with spelling patterns that are reciprocal to decoding;
- Their writing fluency (because spelling difficulties clutter working memory);
- The vocabulary they use when writing (avoiding words they don't think they can spell).

And yet spelling is rarely included in the early literacy assessments that are required by more and more states. This is a mistake, say Seymour, Pittman, Binks-Cantrell, and Joshi, because:

• Early spelling proficiency provides unique and distinct information about later spelling and literacy performance. Scores on a kindergarten spelling assessment are better predictors of later difficulties, say the authors, than phonological awareness, letter-sound knowledge, and reading ability.

• Spelling data can inform instruction and intervention, identifying students who need targeted help to prevent spelling difficulties from impeding their reading and writing development.

• Being asked to spell a word reveals a child's phonemic awareness, orthographic knowledge, and morphological awareness. Spelling approximations – for example, writing *tak* for *take* and *skipt* for *skipped* reveals partial understanding, while writing *pr* for *take* and *skiped* for *skipped* points to deeper problems. Both provide valuable insights about underlying linguistic abilities and knowledge, with direct instructional implications.

• Spelling challenges are a hallmark of dyslexia, providing diagnostic and instructional clues. "Although reading and spelling are related," say the authors, "they are distinct skills, with spelling requiring much more precision compared to reading… Reading is a recognition task, and spelling is a production task… Spelling requires the retrieval of word-specific graphemes" – knowing, for example, that *sleep* is not spelled *sleap*, *sliep*, or *slepe*.

These four points, say Seymour, Pittman, Binks-Cantrell, and Joshi, are a strong argument for supplementing existing early literacy screenings with a spelling component. With kindergarten and other students who aren't yet able to spell whole words, it's important to use scoring metrics that give students credit for partial spellings (versus correct/incorrect scoring)

and provide diagnostic information for the specific kinds of instruction that will be most helpful. Teachers can devise their own rubrics to get maximum value from spelling assessments, say the authors.

"The Case for the Inclusion of Spelling in Early Literacy Assessments" by Taylor Seymour, Ramona Pittman, Emily Binks-Cantrell, and Malatesha Joshi in *The Reading League Journal*, September/October 2024 (Vol. 5, #3, pp. 5-12); Pittman can be reached at Ramona.pittman@tamu.edu.

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5. The Remarkable Accuracy of Wikipedia

In this *Boston Globe* article, Sam Wineburg and Nadav Ziv (Stanford University) say that when Wikipedia was first launched in 2001 as a free, volunteer-run information source, there was a lot of trash-talk about how unreliable it was. "Print encyclopedias," say Wineburg and Ziv, "were curated tomes whose physical weight seemed to convey their intellectual validity. But here, suddenly, was a crowdsourced compendium of information for which all you needed was an IP address, not a PhD, to contribute."

At first there was reason to be wary: members of Congress tampered with their entries, foreign governments spread disinformation, and factual errors sometimes remained for years. The head of Britannica warned that Wikipedia's lack of quality control would turn it into "a hulking mediocre mass of uneven, unreliable, and, many times, unreadable articles." Even today, say Wineburg and Ziv, "the early impression of Wikipedia as an online zoo run by volunteer vandals lingers like a bad middle-school nickname."

Well, in 2012 Britannica stopped publishing its print edition, and its online rival emerged as a reliable source for pretty much any subject. Wineburg and Ziv's research team, Digital Inquiry Group, found that fact checkers at major news organizations consult the site, as do many physicians (perhaps yours). "That's because," they say, "over the years, Wikipedia has erected guardrails to protect information – from bots that flag changes from unrecognized IP addresses to administrators who receive alerts when alterations are made to controversial pages… Only top-level contributors, who have a proven track record of reliable and accurate edits, can lay their hands on such entries."

There are still errors, and bias can creep in despite a policy of "neutral points of view," but Wikipedia, say Wineburg and Ziv, "remains a testament to collective human intelligence." Its reliability is built on transparency and networked information, areas where it outperforms AI chatbots. "Large language models such as ChatGPT offer up answers of unknown origin," say the authors. "You have no idea how the chatbot arrives at the answer it produces." In addition, answers vary depending on slight variations in the prompt.

Use Wikipedia and use it often, say Wineburg and Ziv. Why? Because it almost always gives its sources, which is the best defense in an age of misinformation. "'Where does this information come from?' is one of the most important questions we can ask to avoid getting duped online." In fact, Wikipedia poses a challenge to generative AI: can it pass a new Turing test: the Wikipedia test – transparency, evidentiary standards, and collective wisdom. Some AI

products are getting the memo: there's a plug-in for ChatGPT to search Wikipedia and provide links to articles to expand the search.

"Wikipedia's secret," conclude Wineburg and Ziv, "was to lean on a new innovation, the Internet, while preserving the old-fashioned role of people and community. As we move forward with artificial intelligence, we should remember that we have some pretty good human intelligence already. Let's not squander it."

"Go Ahead and Use Wikipedia for Research" by Sam Wineburg and Nadav Ziv in *The Boston Globe*, October 20, 2024; Wineburg can be reached at wineburg@stanford.edu.

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6. Mini-Observations 3.0

In this summary of the third edition of Kim Marshall's book, *Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation* (Jossey-Bass, 2024, on Amazon), Jenn David-Lang lists the key features of this alternative to traditional evaluations. There are three broad categories of Marshall's system for supervising classroom *teaching*:

• *Sample daily reality*
- Frequent – aiming for ten a year, which is about two a day for most supervisors;
- Short – about ten minutes, which is enough to start a discussion with the teacher;
- Systematic – being strategic about seeing different parts of lessons, different groups;
- Unannounced – to get an accurate sense of the daily practice and prevent problems.

• *Observe perceptively*
- Being humble, curious, and low-tech – Marshall argues for no laptops or iPads;
- Deciding on one "leverage point" – but there doesn't have to be a criticism;
- Getting the big picture – the teacher's goals, the curriculum unit, personal issues.

• *Affirm, coach, and evaluate*
- Face-to-face debriefs – ideally in the teacher's classroom when students aren't there;
- Brief follow-up summaries – no more than 160 words with no scoring at this point;
- Courage – stepping up to the plate with mediocre and ineffective practices;
- Rubric summarizing – at the end of the year, drawing on all these inputs.

In addition to this direct work with classroom *teaching*, Marshall suggests that supervisors continuously monitor and improve student *learning* – focusing on teachers' formative assessments, teachers' use of the "retrieval effect" to shift learning to students' long-term memory, and PLC teamwork around student work and assessments – as well as supervising and commenting on unit and lesson *planning* to fine-tune curriculum implementation.

David-Lang's summary includes Marshall's nine recommendations for how superintendents can support this approach to teacher supervision, coaching, and evaluation, and her own PD suggestions for making the most effective use of the book.

"The Main Idea Summary of *Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation, Third Edition*" by Jenn David-Lang, October 2024

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7. Free Online Resources for the U.S. Election

As November 5th approaches, says Kara Yorio in this *School Library Journal* article, "Students are likely seeing a mix of mainstream media stories, influencer takes, memes, clips from speeches, and more. There is no way to avoid it." An important contribution librarians and other educators can make is to build the skill of discerning where information is on a continuum from reliable to unreliable – and think about the motives of those who spread bogus information, "the motivation and methods of political messaging." Some helpful websites:

• The Living Room Candidate – Political commercials from 1952 to 2024, with lesson plans comparing and contrasting approaches to political persuasion over the years.

• National Association for Media Literacy Education – Includes downloads of core principles and key questions about media literacy, including "Meet the Media Monsters," a lesson plan for grades 3-5 on consuming and sharing media.

• News Literacy Project Misinformation Dashboard – Tracks 2024 election misinformation, helping students see the tactics and narratives that influence public opinion.

• PBS NewsHour Classroom: Media Literacy – Lessons on debates, political polarization, and violence, and specific topics, including the Kendrick Lamar-Drake feud.

• Project Look Sharp – Ithaca College provides elementary, middle-, and high-school lessons on media analysis and decoding.

• Teaching Elections – Inquiry-based lesson plans, curriculum links, an election map, election news updates, and fact-checking sites.

"More Than Just the Facts" by Kar Yorio in *School Library Journal*, October 2024 (Vol. 70, #10, pp. 12-14)

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8. Recommended Books for Young Children on Good Manners

In this *School Library Journal* article, New York City school librarian Jess deCourcy Hinds suggests books that speak to the issue of manners in libraries, classrooms, and beyond:

- *But Excuse Me That Is My Book* by Lauren Child, preschool-grade 2
- *Perfectly Polite Penguins NOT* by Georgiana Deutsch, illustrated by Ekaterina Trukhan, preschool-grade 2
- *Sonny Says Mine!* by Caryl Hart, illustrated by Zachariah Ohara, preschool-grade 1
- *Library Lion* by Michelle Knudsen, illustrated by Kevin Hawkes, preschool-grade 3
- *How to Apologize* by David Larochelle, illustrated by Mike Wohnoutka, preschool-kindergarten
- *Me First* by Helen Lester, illustrated by Lynn Munsinger, kindergarten-grade 3
- *Thanks a Ton!* by Sabrina Moyle, illustrated by Eunice Moyle, preschool-kindergarten
- *No, David!* by David Shannon, preschool-grade 1

- *Manners with a Library Book (Way To Be!: Manners)* by Amanda Doering Tourville, illustrated by Chris Lensch, preschool-grade 2
- *How Do Dinosaurs Show Good Manners* by Jane Yolen, illustrated by Mark Teague, preschool-kindergarten

"Mind Your Library Manners" by Jess deCourcy Hinds in *School Library Journal*, October 2024 (Vol. 70, #10, pp. 34-37)

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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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- The current issue (in Word or PDF)
- All back issues (Word and PDF) and podcasts
- An easily searchable archive of all articles so far
- The "classic" articles from all 20 years

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
Ed Magazine
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 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
Language Magazine
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