Marshall Memo 451

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 10, 2012

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Gathering and assessing feedback are really the only ways teachers can know the impact of their teaching."

John Hattie (see item #1)

"Students welcome praise. Indeed, we all do. The problem is that when a teacher combines praise with other feedback information, the student typically only hears the praise."

John Hattie (*ibid.*)

"If students do an assignment simply because you asked them to, that's compliance. Compliance is reactive, not proactive. Of course, students should do what you ask, but they won't learn much unless they understand why you're asking."

Susan Brookhart (see item #3)

"Feedback can't be left hanging; it can't work if students don't have an immediate opportunity to use it… Feedback 'so they know better next time' is a waste of energy."

Susan Brookhart (*ibid.*)

"My own kids' success in life will be based primarily on their ability to be patient, persistent problem solvers; to show empathy for the people in global, virtual spaces with whom they will interact and network on a regular basis; and to show the initiative and entrepreneurial thinking that will help them forge their own path as our traditional definitions of work and career continue to shift. That's not to say that they might not need an understanding of differentiated equations and the Civil War. But that can't be the only focus of our assessments any longer."

Will Richardson in "Measuring the 'Immeasurable'" in *District Administration*, September 2012 (Vol. 48, #8, p. 92), http://bit.ly/NKXLNU

1. Making Feedback to Students Effective

(Originally titled "Know Thy Impact")

"Gathering and assessing feedback are really the only ways teachers can know the impact of their teaching," says Australian educator John Hattie in this *Educational Leadership* article. The problem is that not all feedback is effective. Hattie offers these suggestions for making feedback work:

• *Clarify the goal*. "The aim of feedback is to reduce the gap between where students are and where they should be," says Hattie. "With a clear goal in mind, students are more likely to actively seek and listen to feedback." The teacher might provide scoring rubrics, a completed example, the steps toward a successful product, or progress charts.

• *Make sure students understand the feedback*. "When we monitor how much academic feedback students actually receive in a typical class, it's a small amount indeed," says Hattie. Teachers need to check with students to see if they're getting it. This may involve asking them to interpret written comments and articulate next steps.

• *Seek feedback from students*. Do they need help? Different strategies? Another explanation? Teachers who listen to students can adapt lessons, clarify work demands, and provide missing information, all of which helps students do better.

• *Tailor feedback to students*. Novice students benefit most from task feedback, somewhat more proficient students from process feedback, and highly competent students thrive on feedback aimed at self-regulation or conceptual understanding.

- Task feedback – How well the student is doing on a particular task and how to improve.
- Process feedback – This might be suggested strategies to learn from errors, cues to seek information, or ways to relate different ideas.
- Self-regulation feedback – This helps students monitor, direct, and regulate their own actions as they work toward the learning goal – and helps build a belief that effort, more than raw ability, is what produces successful learning.

To move students from mastery of content to mastery of strategies to mastery of conceptual understanding, teachers need to give feedback that is *at* or *just above* their current level.

• *Use effective strategies*. One tip is to scope out entering misconceptions and have students think them through. Another is providing students with formative assessment information, giving them specific information on strengths and weaknesses. A third is to start with effective instruction and learning experiences. "Teachers need to listen to the hum of students learning, welcoming quality student talk, structuring classroom discussions, inviting student questions, and openly discussing errors," says Hattie. "If these reveal that student have

misunderstood an important concept or failed to grasp the point of the lesson, sometimes the best approach is simply to reteach the material."

• *Avoid ineffective feedback*. Researchers have found that praise and peer feedback are problematic. "Students welcome praise," says Hattie. "Indeed, we all do. The problem is that when a teacher combines praise with other feedback information, the student typically only hears the praise… The bottom line seems to be this: Give much praise, but do not mix it with other feedback because praise dilutes the power of that information." As for peer feedback, Graham Nuthall monitored students' peer interactions through the school day (using microphones) and found that most of the feedback students receive during the day is from other students – and much of it is incorrect. Peer feedback needs clear structure, such as a rubric and a set of guiding questions.

• *Create a climate of trust*. Students must understand that errors and misunderstandings are part of learning and not be afraid of negative reactions from peers – or the teacher – if they make mistakes.

"Know Thy Impact" by John Hattie in *Educational Leadership*, September 2012 (Vol. 70, #1, p. 18-23), www.ascd.org; Hattie can be reached at jhattie@unimelb.edu.au.

Back to page one

2. Dylan Wiliam on Getting Feedback Right

(Originally titled "Feedback: Part of a System")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, British researcher Dylan Wiliam says that when a student receives feedback, there are eight possible take-aways, only two of which are desirable:

• If the student hasn't yet reached the learning goal, he or she might:
- Increase effort
- Reduce aspiration
- Decide the goal is too hard
- Ignore the feedback

• If the student has reached or exceeded the goal, he or she might:
- Exert less effort
- Increase aspiration
- Decide the goal is too easy
- Ignore the feedback

This shows how difficult it is to get feedback right, says Wiliam: "The way [the student] will react to feedback is difficult, if not impossible, to predict; it depends not only on the feedback given, but also the context in which the feedback is given, and even the relationship between the recipient and the person giving the feedback."

Is competition a helpful way to orchestrate feedback? If students are told they are falling short and believe the goal is attainable, competition might very well motivate them to increase their effort. A study of basketball teams that were one point behind at halftime showed that they ended up victorious more often than teams that were one point ahead at halftime.

But competition can be counterproductive. When students don't think they have a chance of succeeding, they often give up. Competition can even be bad for high achievers if they believe grades are more important than learning. Psychologists call this a *performance orientation* – students who adopt this mindset may avoid challenging situations, take the easy way to getting high grades – or even cheat. Students are more likely to adopt a performance orientation if they believe intelligence is fixed. "When students with this view of learning are given a task in the classroom, they rapidly make a judgment about their chances of success," says Wiliam. "If they think there is a danger that they'll fail while many others in the class succeed, they are likely to disengage from the task. After all, it's better to be thought lazy than dumb." Students with the *growth mindset*, on the other hand, see challenges as an opportunity to get smart.

Given how tricky it is to give effective feedback, what can teachers do? For starters, make the classroom a safe place for mistakes. Teachers should also preach that smart is not innate; it can be attained through effective effort. "In this regard," says Wiliam, "the most important word in a teacher's vocabulary is 'yet.' When a student says 'I can't do this,' the teacher adds, 'yet.'" Wiliam has three additional suggestions:

• *Downplay scores*. "When students receive both scores and comments," he says, "the first thing they look at is their score, and the second thing they look at is someone else's score. One language-arts teacher got around this by writing comments on slips of paper and having students figure out which comments went with which essay.

• *Focus on things that are within students' control*. "Telling a student to 'be more systematic' isn't helpful.

• *Make sure students are working harder than the teacher*. One teacher told a student that five equations in a problem set were solved incorrectly and said, "Your challenge is to find them and fix them." For students who had solved all the equations correctly, the teacher said, "Make up three equations for others to solve; one harder, one at about the same level, and one easier than the ones you've just solved."

"Feedback: Part of a System" by Dylan Wiliam in *Educational Leadership*, September 2012 (Vol. 70, #1, p. 30-34), www.ascd.org; Wiliam can be reached at dylanwiliam@mac.com.

Back to page one

3. Helpful, Learning-Focused Feedback

(Originally titled "Preventing Feedback Fizzle")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, author/consultant Susan Brookhart says that effective feedback is:

• *Based on a learning target and success criteria* – This gives purpose to the feedback; otherwise, it comes across as the teacher telling the student what to do. "If students do an assignment simply because you asked them to, that's compliance," says Brookhart. "Compliance is reactive, not proactive. Of course, students should do what you ask, but they won't learn much unless they understand why you're asking." Students need a user-friendly

description of what they're going to learn, how they're going to demonstrate proficiency, and the criteria for mastery.

• *Linked to clear criteria* – "When the learning target and the performance of understanding don't match exactly and the criteria aren't clear, students often experience feedback as evaluation or grading rather than information for improvement," says Brookhart.

• *Timely* – "It arrives while the student is still thinking about the work and while there's still time for improvement," she says.

• *Descriptive of the work, not the student personally* – The feedback mentions strengths to build on, weaknesses that can be improved, and gives at least one suggestion for a next step.

• *Clear and specific* – It shows what to do next, but leaves the student with some thinking to do.

• *Differentiated* – It meets individual students' needs, giving the appropriate amount of support.

• *Followed by the opportunity to digest, understand, and use it* – "Feedback can't be left hanging," says Brookhart; "it can't work if students don't have an immediate opportunity to use it… Feedback 'so they know better next time' is a waste of energy." The follow-up work should happen before grades are given.

Brookhart includes a description of how *not* to structure feedback. A middle-school language arts teacher tells students that their learning target is "summarizing nonfiction text" and gives them a packet with a chapter in their social studies text divided into five sections, with space under each for students to write summaries. She reminds students that a summary restates the big ideas of the text, leaving out details, and says they will know they have succeeded when they can write their own summaries of chapter segments using those criteria and earn at least 75%. After students finish, they hand in their work and the teacher follows up with thoughtful, hand-written feedback on each paper with suggestions for next steps. Then she moves on to the next lesson. Here's what Brookhart says makes this lesson a "double fizzle":

- The teacher didn't provide a clear target. "Summarizing nonfiction text" isn't a daily learning target; it's a major skill spanning several years. A better learning target might be, "I can summarize information on ecosystems from my textbook, and I'll know I can do it when I can put all the important ideas in a single paragraph."
- Students didn't get criteria for proficient summarizing. Attaining at least 75% is an evaluative criterion that doesn't help students as they write their summaries.
- Students didn't get examples or models of proficient summaries.
- The teacher's helpful feedback was summative, given after the exercise was finished. It would have been much more helpful if she had stopped students after they wrote their first summary, given them detailed feedback, and then had them apply what they learned to the other four passages.

"Preventing Feedback Fizzle" by Susan Brookhart in *Educational Leadership*, September 2012 (Vol. 70, #1, p. 24-29), www.ascd.org; Brookhart is at susanbrookhart@bresnan.net.

Back to page one

4. Asking Students Text-Dependent Questions

"The types of questions that students are asked about a text influence how they read it," say Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey of San Diego State University in this helpful article in *Principal Leadership*. "If students are asked recall and recitation questions, they learn to read for that type of information. If they are asked synthesis questions, they learn to read for *that* type of information. Unfortunately, many of the questions that students are asked are about personal connections, which may not even require that they have read the text at all."

For example, a teacher might ask students reading a chapter about the global water shortage, *Has your family made any changes to reduce water consumption?* An observer in this class might see a lively discussion and lots of student engagement – but how much actual reading and thinking was going on? "It is important that teachers know how to engage students beyond simply asking them to tell a personal story," say Fisher and Frey. "The content itself can and should be used to engage."

This is a key element in the Common Core language-arts standards: they challenge teachers to pose questions that require students to read the text carefully and produce evidence to support their responses, which builds a strong foundation of knowledge upon which to make personal connections. "The emphasis should be on using explicit and implicit information from the text to support reasoning," say Fisher and Frey. They suggest seven types of text-dependent questions (not all of which need to be asked about an individual passage):

• *General understanding* – This type of question asks students to look for the gist of the text they have read.

• *Key details* – Asking students *who, what, where, when, why,* or *how*, including nuanced details. These questions should focus on important information in the text, not trivia.

• *Vocabulary* – Focusing on word definitions, using context or structure to figure out unfamiliar words, ideas or feelings evoked by key words, shades of meaning, word choice, figurative language, idioms, and confusing words or phrases.

• *Text structure* – Asking students to think about how the text is organized – for example, the use of character dialogue to propel action or the problem-and-solution structure.

• *Author's purpose* – Asking whether the text intends to inform, entertain, persuade, or explain something, and whether the author has a particular bias and leaves out certain information.

• *Inferences* – Asking students how the parts of a text build to the overall point or effect. "This means that they must probe each argument in persuasive text, each idea in informational text, or each key detail in literary text," say Fisher and Frey. "Importantly, inference questions require students to read the entire selection so that they know where the text is going and how they can reconsider key points in the text as contributing elements of the whole."

• *Opinions, arguments, inter-textual connections* – These questions should come after students have read and reread the text and developed their understanding through other types of questions.

"Text-Dependent Questions" by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey in *Principal Leadership*,

September 2012 (Vol. 13, #1, p. 70-73), www.nassp.org/pl0912fisher; the authors can be reached at dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu and nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu.

Back to page one

5. Five Myths About Keeping Students Back

In this article in *Principal Leadership*, Shane Jimerson (University of California/Santa Barbara) and Tyler Renshaw (Louisiana State University) debunk these myths about retaining students:

• *Myth #1: Retention is a gift of time and helps students catch up*. "Research reveals that students who are struggling academically do not typically catch up to comparable promoted peers," say Jimerson and Renshaw.

• *Myth #2: Repeating the grade will help students achieve and adjust*. In fact, research says retention is associated with negative outcomes in reading, math, science, and language arts and also in peer relationships, self-esteem, and behaviors that cause problems.

• *Myth #3: Retention does no harm*. Quite the contrary, studies have found that retention is correlated with emotional distress, low self-esteem, poor peer relationships, cigarette smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, early sexual activity, and violent behaviors.

• *Myth #4: Retention prevents further school failure*. In fact, retained students are 5-10 times more likely to drop out of high school than non-retained students.

• *Myth #5: Retention in early elementary school is okay; it's later retention that causes problems*. Actually, research has found no difference in negative consequences between students who are retained early on versus later.

True, some students benefit from retention, say the authors. However, "there is no proven method for predicting who will and who will not."

Since retained students most often have these characteristics – low-SES, African-American or Hispanic, from homes with low educational attainment, reeling from multiple school moves, frequently absent from school, and displaying a variety of behavioral difficulties – retention is a significant factor in widening the achievement gap. That's because students who already have multiple risk factors are more likely to be retained, making things worse.

So what do Jimerson and Renshaw suggest? Not social promotion, which can lead to a similar array of negative consequences when students move on without the skills needed to be successful. The middle ground, they say, is effective early intervention, specifically:

• *Schoolwide interventions* – First, there needs to be a positive school climate so all students feel welcome and valued. Second, the school needs good assessments to identify and begin to monitor struggling students at the very beginning of each school year. Third, a student support team needs to meet regularly and use assessment data to craft the most effective interventions. Fourth, a school-based mental health program should intervene with students who are not on track to be successful. Fifth, extended-day, extended-year, and summer programs should provide extra time for students who are behind. Sixth, tutoring and mentoring programs can use peer, cross-age, and adult support for struggling students. Finally, students

need opportunities to explore postsecondary and career options and support to develop a plan for the future.

• *Classroom interventions* – First, teachers should use research-based, culturally sensitive instructional strategies. Second, effective behavior management strategies can increase pro-social behavior and behavior problems. Third, teachers should use systematic assessments and progress monitoring with modifications to instructional strategies in light of data. Fourth, teachers should bring in school psychologists, social workers, and administrators to provide additional support for high-risk students. Finally, it's important to involve parents, providing materials, structured activities, and guidance so they are an effective part of the effort to prevent failure.

• *Home and community interventions* – "Family engagement in students' school experiences is a strong protective factor against academic failure," say Jimerson and Renshaw.

"Retention and Social Promotion" by Shane Jimerson and Tyler Renshaw in *Principal Leadership*, September 2012 (Vol. 13, #1, p. 12-16), http://www.nassp.org

Back to page one

6. Does Minimum Grading Inflate Grades and Lead to Social Promotion?

In this *Educational Researcher* article, James Carifio and Theodore Cary (professor and researcher at University of Massachusetts/Lowell) report on their study of seven years of student grading data from an urban high school. They wanted to see if the practice of minimum grading (which the school used throughout the study) had the negative effects critics allege: grade inflation or social promotion.

Minimum grading, which usually involves setting 50 as the lowest grade students can get, is a response to the devastating impact that one or two atypically low grades can have on students' overall achievement, leading them to give up hope of passing. The problem is inherent in the 100-point grading scale, in which failing grades make up a disproportionate 3/5 of the scale – "a badly lopsided scale that is heavily gamed against the student," say Carifio and Cary. "Current 100-point grading scales stand in sharp contrast to the original use of the 100-point scale in the 19th century, where an average grade was 50, and grades either above 75 or below 25 were rare."

The argument for minimum grading is that it keeps struggling students in the game, motivating them to keep working because they feel more in control of their achievement. Critics argue that minimum grading waters down academic standards, inflates grades, and provides an unfair and unearned boost to students who are not cutting the mustard. Districts that implement minimum grading sometimes encounter fierce, ideologically driven opposition. In fact, the governor of Texas recently signed legislation outlawing minimum grading (which 1,000 of the state's 1,139 districts were using in some form). Six districts have taken the state to court in an effort to continue using minimum grading.

Carifio and Cary's study of one Massachusetts high school's grades addressed these questions:

• *How often were minimum grades assigned and how often did they result in a passing course grade?* Over the seven-year study, 1,159 minimum grades resulted in students passing the course. This was an average of 165 instances a year and involved about 142 students each year – in other words, minimum grades were benefiting a good many students, not just a few low achievers. Looking at these figures financially, Carifio and Cary estimate that minimum grading saved the school at least $150,000 a year on summer school costs, or more than $1 million over seven years.

• *Did the use of minimum grading result in grade inflation or social promotion?* The researchers found no evidence of increased grade inflation or social promotion. In fact, student attrition declined over this seven-year period, and the composite performance index on state test scores went up significantly – 20 points in math (from 61.9 to 81.9) and 16 points in English language arts (from 70.7 to 86.8). The conclusion: "[M]inimum grading is both a low-cost and low-risk strategy based on sound educational and psychological theory," say Carifio and Cary.

However, the authors believe that minimum grading goes only part of the way to mitigating the unfairness of the 100-point grading scale. Comparing students' grades to their state test scores, it was evident that grades were still under-reporting the achievement of many students. "The results suggest that policy makers who are looking to institute reforms that lead to fairer, more accurate, and more consistent student assessment will need to look beyond minimum grading to more substantive reforms, such as instituting standards-based grading and proficiency scales…"

"The Minimum Grading Controversy: Results of a Quantitative Study of Seven Years of Grading Data from an Urban High School" by James Carifio and Theodore Cary in *Educational Researcher*, September 2012 (Vol. 41, #6, p. 201-208), http://bit.ly/U4FRmz; the authors can be reached at James_Carifio@uml.edu and tedcarey@comcast.net.

Back to page one

7. Catching Up with Students on the Instructional Use of Social Media

In article in *District Administration*, consultant Rob Mancabelli describes how an eighth-grade student used Facebook to do math homework with her friends. "We're all online together," said the girl, "so if I have questions, I get them answered while doing my homework, instead of the next day or even later. Sometimes my friends even explain the math better than the teacher, and we send each other links to stuff online." Mancabelli asked which teacher had set up the group, and it turned out the teacher didn't know about it. "Please, please don't tell the teacher," pleaded the girl, afraid that she and her friends would get in trouble for "cheating."

What's wrong with this picture? Students are having a powerful learning experience, using technology strategically, the teacher isn't involved – and students want to keep it that way. This anecdote reflects three shifts in how we think about teaching and learning:

• Shift #1: Teachers need to see connecting students via technology as part of their job. "In fact, this kind of individualization of content and instruction is the Holy Grail in

education," says Mancabelli. "Among the challenges inherent in this are teaching them to do it safely, in age-appropriate ways, and improving access for students on the wrong side of the digital divide."

• Shift #2: Technology makes possible much more rapid feedback on learning, as these students discovered doing their math homework. Schools need to speed up their assessments and response time to keep up with the accelerating pace of learning.

• Shift #3: There's a widening generation gap with technology, with too many teachers regarding social media as cheating or a waste of time. "Our professional development needs to focus on creating connected educators who learn in networks and, therefore, can teach students how to use these skills in ways that enhance their ability to learn," concludes Mancabelli.

"Three Essential Shifts in Learning" by Rob Mancabelli in *District Administration*, September 2012 (Vol. 48, #8, p. 100), http://bit.ly/QJC2k3

Back to page one

8. Grit – Necessary But Not Sufficient

In this *Education Gadfly* commentary on Paul Tough's new book, *How Children Succeed* [see Marshall Memo 450, #5 for more], Robert Pondiscio of the Core Knowledge Foundation worries that most people's big takeaway from the book will be, "It's all about character" or "Grit trumps cognitive ability." In fact, the book tells the story of one student's unsuccessful attempt to pass the rigorous entrance examination for Stuyvesant High School in New York City and makes a different point: grit and character matter, but to compensate for big gaps in knowledge and skill, schools need to provide years of intense, effective content instruction.

The story of this student is instructive. He was a chess master in his Brooklyn middle school, and could have beaten any member of Stuyvesant's chess team. But when his teacher, Elizabeth Spiegel, took on the challenge of preparing him for Stuyvesant's entrance exam in six months, she found that his math skills were at the second and third-grade level. She pushed him hard, counting on his keen intelligence and likening math to chess, which he had picked up quickly. But math is different from chess; it takes years to build the knowledge, vocabulary, and skills necessary to operate at the high-school level.

"It might not have been possible to turn him into an elite student in six months, as Spiegel had hoped," says Tough. "But how about in four years? For a student with his prodigious gifts, anything seems possible – as long as there's a teacher out there who can make succeeding in school as attractive a prospect as succeeding on the chessboard."

"Is Grit Enough?" by Robert Pondiscio in *The Education Gadfly*, Sept. 6, 2012 (Vol. 12, #33), http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-weekly/

Back to page one

9. Short Item:

a. Common core "shifts" – These documents from the New York State Education Department outline the six shifts in ELA and the six in math that the Common Core implies: http://engageny.org/resource/common-core-shifts/

Back to page one

\

Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, 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 others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 43 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 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).

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

Website:

If you go to http://www.marshallmemo.com you will find detailed information on:

- How to subscribe or renew
- A detailed rationale for the Marshall Memo
- Publications (with a count of articles from each)
- Article selection criteria
- Topics (with a count of articles from each)
- Headlines for all issues
- Reader opinions (with results of an annual survey)
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

Subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in Word or PDF)
- All back issues (also in Word and PDF)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or log-in

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Better Evidence-Based Education
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice