Marshall Memo 1055

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 30, 2024

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"When students and teachers are engaged in work that is challenging, adventurous, and meaningful, learning and achievement flourish."

Vision statement of EL Education in its 2023 annual report

"The reason that we pitch in to pay for public education is that all of us benefit when all children – not just our own kids – are well-schooled and can access the knowledge needed to make their way successfully through life, ultimately ensuring the prosperity and security of the larger society."

Michael Petrilli and Devon Nir in "The 'Á la Carte Education' Accountability Conundrum" in *Education Gadfly*, September 26, 2024

"Depending on your perspective, assessment is either the holy grail or the third rail of the inquiry revolution in social studies."

Beau Dickenson, Kathy Swan, and Gerry Swan in "Teaching to a Better Test: Using the Inquiry Design Model to Reframe State-Mandated Assessment in Social Studies" in *Social Education*, September 2024 (Vol. 88, #4, pp. 247-254)

"Education should transmit and support students in understanding widely used facts in a world where facts are contested. A shared set of facts is perhaps the lowest common denominator of a good education and functioning democracy. But amid the rise of misinformation, AI-altered media, and partisan echo chambers, our common fact base is fragile. Schools can [help] students of all ages understand what makes information a fact, what constitutes valid expertise, and how facts can help to solve problems across subject areas."

Kent McGuire and Matt Wilka in "A Democratic Vision for Public Schools" in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Fall 2024 (Vol. 22, #4, pp. 38-47)

1. How to Compliment Students for Correct Math Answers

In this article in *Mathematics Teacher*, Danielle Moloney Gallagher and Temple Walkowiak (North Carolina State University) and Jonee Wilson (University of Virginia) say that when we respond to students' correct mathematics answers with comments like "Good job," we miss an opportunity to position students as math thinkers. In response to students' thoughtful contributions, the authors recommend using compliments that are prompt, specific, and explicit – for example, "Excellent point, Sarah. Your explanation helps us see the connection between your table and Henry's graph."

Gallagher, Walkowiak, and Wilson argue that highlighting and amplifying the importance and usefulness of students' contributions:

- Supports agency and a sense of efficacy;
- Contributes to a positive mathematics identity and favorable associations with the subject;
- Provides valuable feedback on what it means to do mathematics.

Among the behaviors that deserve this kind of affirmation:

- Explaining math solutions and the thinking behind them;
- Making connections to students' lives;
- Using math to understand and think critically about the world;
- Showing perseverance;
- Taking risks and contributing ideas without knowing the answer;
- Using more than one representation to communicate an idea.

When commending students' worthwhile contributions, say the authors, "it is important to consider *who* we position as competent, *what* we position (i.e., which types of contributions), and *how* we position students as competent."

- *Who* – Research has shown that students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners are seldom asked to go beyond basic math procedures to the underlying mathematical ideas.
- *What* – Students are often complimented for giving the right answers and being compliant in class versus engaging in higher-level thinking and making connections.
- *How* – There's a big difference between praising an answer with "Excellent" and saying, "That's a great strategy because…" It's specific and provides a rationale.

"Remember that everything takes practice," conclude Gallagher, Walkowiak, and Wilson. "There is no expectation for perfection… We do not believe it is practical, for

example, to provide a rationale every time you commend a student's socio-mathematical contributions. Rather, we view our framework as a tool for analysis and reflection to consider how the practice of positioning students as competent can be elevated."

"Positioning Students as Thinkers and Doers of Mathematics" by Danielle Moloney Gallagher, Temple Walkowiak, and Jonee Wilson in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, September 2024 (Vol. 117, #9, pp. 630-644); the authors can be reached at dmolone@ncsu.edu, tawalkow@ncsu.edu, and vma8ze@virginia.edu.

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2. A Teacher Describes His Journey Simplifying Grading

In this article in *Grading for Growth*, STEM teacher Robert Talbert says that a decade ago, he made a "decisive break" from traditional percentage-based grading. Why? Because he believed the old approach was giving false positives and false negatives, stressed students out, and created hurdles for students who needed other ways to show what they'd learned.

Seeking "radical simplicity," Talbert considered a Pass/No Pass approach, but felt the need for something in between those polarities – three-level grading that had room for students' work that was close to passing but not quite there. However, he noticed that three levels conveyed the impression that the top level was "good enough" and didn't give him a way to show appreciation for truly outstanding work. "And in my courses," he says, "this is exactly what I was getting: *good enough*. There wasn't much incentive for *excellence*."

That led to the four-level **EMRF** rubric (click the article link for a graphic flowchart). It's basically a pass/fail rubric in which the teacher asks two questions about a student's work. First, does it meet specifications, and if so, is the work really excellent or just okay? The first two levels of the **EMRF** rubric convey that the student's work demonstrates understanding of the concept and meets the assignment's expectations, with two gradations of completeness and communication:

- **E**xcellent/Exemplary– The work meets or exceeds the expectations of the assignment. Communication is clear and complete. Mastery of the concepts is evident. There are no nontrivial errors. This work could be used as a classroom example.
- **M**eets Expectations – Understanding of the concepts is evident through correct work and clear, audience-appropriate explanations. Some revision or expansion is needed, but no significant gaps or errors are present. No additional instruction on the concepts is needed.

The second question is about the specifications: is the work a reasonably good-faith effort that shows some understanding or is it really unacceptable? The second two **EMRF** letters are critical of the student's understanding and success meeting the assignment's expectations, with two levels of understanding:

- **R**evision Needed – Partial understanding of the concepts is evident, but significant gaps remain. Needs further work, more review, and/or important explanations.

- **F**ragmentary – Not enough information is present in the work to determine whether there is understanding of the concepts. The work is fragmentary or contains significant omissions – or there are too many issues to justify correcting each one.

Students in Talbert's classes can take assessments again, and he's found that the four-point scale motivates students at the **M, R,** and **F** levels to put in extra effort to move up the scale (click the article link for his criteria for A, B, and C grades).

What about the label for the bottom grade, **F**ragmentary? It was intended to take the sting out of what could be seen as failure, but over time, Talbert found that "the branding in students' minds is too strong." He decided to change the label for the bottom grade to **N** for **N**ot Assessable, and the rubric became **EMRN**. In some cases when students submit work that earned an **N**, Talbert doesn't give that grade and provides verbal feedback. He has found this is helpful in motivating students to put in additional effort.

Recently, Talbert is gravitating back to a two-level approach to grading: **S**uccess and **R**etry. "Having looked at a piece of student work," he says, "I ask, does the work demonstrate thorough understanding of the concepts, and does it meet the expectations outlined in the assignment?"

- If Yes, he marks the work as **S**uccess, then gives feedback, including kudos for excellent work.
- If No, he marks the work as **R**etry, then gives feedback. If the work is fragmentary or systematically flawed, he tells the student that and offers no other feedback.

Talbert closes with a description of a conversation with a student who'd received a **R**evision Needed grade because of an initial algebra error but argued for **M**eets Expectations because he'd worked through the rest of the procedure correctly. What was different, says Talbert, was that the student "was not grubbing for points – what's the 'point'? – but rather presenting a coherent and well-considered explanation for why, in his opinion, his work meets the standards for **M**" (he wasn't arguing for an Excellent).

Talbert ended up not changing the grade because the standard was clear that a correct answer was necessary, and the student accepted that. "It wasn't about points," he says, "it was about quality and there's a world of difference here. And the student was OK with this, and did '**E**' level work the next time. That's a narrative that I want to support."

"How My Use of the EMRN Rubric Has Changed Over Time" by Robert Talbert in *Grading for Growth*, September 23, 2024

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3. A Middle-School Curriculum on Argumentation

In this article in *Social Education*, Chauncey Monte-Sano (University of Michigan) and Ryan Hughes (University of North Carolina/Greensboro) describe a three-year curriculum they developed – *Read. Inquire. Write.* – designed to develop the skills of argumentation. Their goal was to scaffold learning for English learners and students reading below grade level so that by eighth grade, students would understand how to construct and critique an argument and

formulate a counterargument. *Read. Write. Inquire.* has five one-week investigations spread through each year, with students asked to respond to a realistic scenario in each module:

• *Sixth grade: Interpreting arguments* – Students learn to write a claim, cite specific and relevant evidence, and explain their reasoning on why the evidence is reliable and supports their claim. In one of the modules, students view a PBS documentary on the water supply in Mexico City and are asked to grapple with the question: *Why is access to water unequal in and around Mexico City?* Sixth graders study causation and write a fully developed argument but don't necessarily look at alternative perspectives.

• *Seventh grade: Critiquing an argument* – Students analyze another person's argument and rebut it by questioning its claim, evidence, and reasoning. In one module, students read primary source documents on democracy in ancient Greece and are asked to critique an essay submitted to a fictional essay content on the strengths of Athenian democracy. They focus on the essential question, *Was democracy in ancient Athens a good form of government?* and write to the essay judges with their comments on the fictional essay.

• *Eighth grade: Developing counterarguments* – Students write an argument and then formulate a counterargument that takes into account possible rebuttals and counterclaims vis-à-vis their claims, evidence, and reasoning. In one module, eighth graders study Reconstruction, focusing on the question, *Did the promise of freedom come true for African Americans after the Civil War?* Students write a letter to a museum suggesting how to tell the story of Reconstruction and respond to someone with a competing interpretation – triumph versus tragedy.

By implementing this curriculum and fostering a culture of inquiry across sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, conclude Monte-Sano and Hughes, "middle school teachers can prepare students to write complex arguments and critically engage with historical and social issues, enabling them to become informed and active participants in shaping the world around them."

"Read. Inquire. Write.: A Scaffolded Progression to Support Diverse Learners' Social Studies Argument Writing in Middle School" by Chauncey Monte-Sano and Ryan Hughes in *Social Education*, September 2024 (Vol. 88, #4, pp. 234-240); the authors can be reached at cmontesa@umich.edu and rehughe2@uncg.edu.

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4. How Important Is It for Pre-Schoolers to Learn Their ABCs?

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) responds to a question on whether students' knowledge of their ABCs is a reliable predictor of future reading proficiency. The educator who sent this query noted that in an affluent school district, fewer and fewer children were entering kindergarten knowing all the letter names – and yet reading scores were high.

Shanahan says researchers have consistently found a correlation between early knowledge of letter names and future reading skill. But the correlation isn't perfect, meaning

there are plenty of students who enter school not knowing all letter names and yet become proficient readers. In other words, correlation doesn't mean causation – so how important is letter knowledge to learning to read?

Actually, says Shanahan, "There is no obvious functional role for letter names in reading, so it has long been supposed that ABC knowledge is a proxy for some other variable." Two possibilities:

- Intelligence – "Being able to remember up to 52 meaningless symbols must reveal something about attention, perseverance, memory, and so on," says Shanahan.
- SES – Well-off parents who teach letter names before kindergarten continue to provide other kinds of reading support going forward.

But these two explanations don't hold water, says Shanahan. IQ isn't as good a predictor of later reading progress as ABC knowledge, and studies show that lower-income parents are more committed to teaching ABCs than their more-affluent counterparts. And weirdly, ABC knowledge is a better predictor of *math* than reading proficiency. "Now come on," says Shanahan. "That really makes no sense."

What research does recommend is teaching the *sounds* that letters make – phonemic awareness – along with letter names, which "almost triples the payoff," Shanahan reports. His bottom line: "Teach kindergarteners decoding and word reading including phonemic awareness, letter names, letter sounds, how to write the letters, morphology, and spelling. And I would encourage activities like invented spelling. That's the surest way to achieve decoding ability." He adds: "Other things are needed to bolster the language comprehension part of the equation."

"The Role of Letter Names in Learning to Read Is Still Curious" by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, September 28, 2024; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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5. Handling Parent Conferences When a Student Is Having Difficulty

In this *Edutopia* article, veteran Colorado educator Tanner Jones says "students, teachers, and parents or guardians all feel some trepidation at the thought of getting together for a conference or a meeting to discuss the academic, social, or behavioral struggles of a student." Kids sometimes feel the grown-ups are ganging up on them and parents can get defensive about being seen as inadequate parents.

To prevent these dynamics, Jones suggests starting the conference with the metaphor of a three-legged stool: the student working hard, the teacher teaching skillfully, the parents providing support and encouragement. "When all the legs of the stool work together," he says, "it provides balance, and the weight of the student's success is shared equally among the three legs so that no one leg feels like it has to hold everything all up alone." Most important, the student needs to know that it's not a bunch of adults intent on engineering bad feelings and belittling, but rather knowing the specific steps that will bring about success in the classroom.

Jones has found success with a broad lead-off question for the student: "How are things going for you this quarter – in terms of school, sports or clubs, friends?" – then shifting to a question about how the class is going – likes and dislikes, is the material interesting, engaging, or boring? – then asking in which subjects the student is doing well, and finally zeroing in on the areas the student would like to improve – for example, turning in homework on time or studying better for tests.

Having built a positive tone and then put the problem on the table, it's time for the teacher to ask, "What can your parents and I do to support you?" Jones has found that students are sometimes flippant – *Don't give me homework*. Sometimes they're insightful – *I could use a little space from my siblings in the evening to work quietly*. But often the response is, *I don't know*. With the latter, it's time for specific suggestions: study tools, sitting apart from peers in class, a study hall during lunch, an hour of quiet time after dinner, some no-cellphone time, a better sleep schedule, a Friday check-in on grades and progress.

At the end of the meeting, the teacher sums up the tasks and responsibilities of each leg of the stool, and ideally everyone leaves with a positive feeling and a clear sense of how things will get better.

"Maintaining Balance in Parent-Teacher-Student Discussions" by Tanner Jones in *Edutopia*, September 19, 2024

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6. Guidelines for a School Counselor Dealing with a Student in Crisis

In this article in *ASCA School Counselor*, Jaimie Stickl Haugen (William & Mary University) and Phillip Waalkes (University of Missouri/St. Louis) describe the following scenario: A student tells a high-school counselor that a classmate had spoken about wanting to kill himself. The counselor calls the student in and he denies any intention to commit suicide. He pleads with the counselor not to tell his parents because he's the quarterback of the school's football team and fears that his parents won't let him play in Friday's championship game.

What should the counselor do? Haugen and Waalkes go through the eleven steps of the ASCA Ethical Decision-Making Model:

- *Define the ethical dilemma*. The counselor has to decide between maintaining confidentiality with the student and the parents' right to know.
- *Identify potential cultural, religious, and worldview factors and power dynamics.* The counselor was herself a student athlete, which built empathy with the student's anxiety about the upcoming game, and she is also attuned to her power position vis-à-vis the parents.
- *Apply ASCA ethical standards to relevant district policies*. Despite the constraint of confidentiality, the district's safety protocols tell employees to contact parents and guardians about safety concerns.
- *Consult with appropriate professionals.* The counselor shares the facts with the counseling coordinator, who advises telling the parents.

- *Consider the student's chronological age and developmental level*. The student is a mature 16-year-old but is under tremendous pressure to perform in the upcoming game.
- *Consider legal and ethical rights of parent/guardian and student.* The student has the right to privacy, but because he is a minor, his parents need to be involved.
- *Apply the ethical principles of beneficence (working for the good of the individual and society), autonomy (controlling the direction of one's life), nonmalfeasance (avoiding actions that cause harm), justice (treating individuals equitably and fostering fairness and equality), fidelity (honoring commitments and keeping promises), and veracity (being truthful).* Prominent in the counselor's mind are the student's mental health and well-being and the harm that might be done by not informing the parents.
- *Determine potential courses of action and their consequences.* The counselor rules out spending time fact-finding among the student's friends because the potential harm is imminent, and decides to tell the parents.
- *Evaluate the selected action.* The counselor believes this is how she would treat others in the same situation, it's something that could be publicly reported, and it's what she would advise another counselor to do in a similar situation.
- *Implement the course of action and analyze the outcome*. She calls the student to her office and as she calls his parents, he discloses that he planned to kill himself before Friday's game. The parents are shocked and coordinate with the counselor to get the student into an inpatient facility. The counselor believes she did the right thing.
- *Identify any inconsistencies in school and district policies for potential revision*. When reporters contact the counselor to ask why the student isn't playing in the championship game, she refers the questions to the central office, but realizes the district doesn't have a policy for employees responding to press queries in such a situation and makes a recommendation for appropriate changes.

"Navigate Ethical Dilemmas Step-by-Step" by Jaimie Stickl Haugen and Phillip Waalkes in *ASCA School Counselor*, September-October 2024 (Vol. 62, #1, pp. 6-10); questions about school counseling ethics can be sent to ethics@schoolcounselor.org.

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7. Recommended Nonfiction Graphic Novels

In this *School Library Journal* article, Brigid Alverson suggests eight recently published nonfiction graphic novels:

- *Jackson's Wilder Adventures, Vol. 1* by Sarah Davidson, grade 1-5
- *Club Microbe* by Elise Gravel, grade 1-3
- *Lost at Windy River: A True Story of Survival* by Trina Rathgeber, illustrated by Alina Pete, grade 3-8
- *Big Jim and the White Boy: An American Classic Reimagined* by David Walker, illustrated by Marcus Kwame Anderson, grade 7-9
- *Giga Town: A Guide to Manga Iconography!* by Fumiyo Kouno, grade 8 and up

- *Milk Without Honey* by Hanna Harms, grade 8 and up
- *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by James Loewen and Nate Powell, illustrated by Nate Powell, grade 8 and up
- *Side Quest: A Visual History of Roleplaying Games* by Samuel Sattin, illustrated by Steenz.

"Keeping It Real" by Brigid Alverson in *School Library Journal*, September 2024 (Vol. 70, #9, pp. 51-54)

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8. Short Items:

a. A Webinar with Jonathan Haidt – Last Tuesday, Jenn David-Lang hosted the author of the best-selling book *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* in a one-hour webinar. Haidt discussed his findings about the negative impact of cellphones, social media, and the paucity of unstructured play on young people. In addition to making the webinar freely available, David-Lang created this summary of the book.

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b. An Animated Infographic on Reading – In this video, U.K. teacher Christopher Such walks us through the components of teaching young children to read.

"The Reading Map – A Primer" by Christopher Such, September 16, 2024

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c. A Mountain Biker Explores Newtonian Physics on a Moving Train – This remarkable video (a shameless promotion for Red Bull and Prada) shows David Godziek performing ramp stunts on a moving train. The train and rider move at the same speed in opposite directions, creating the impression that the rider is horizontally stationary. Enjoy!

"World First! Mountain Bike Flips on a Moving Train" by Jason Kottke, September 16, 2024

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d. A Quiz on Misconceptions About Learning – In this *Education Week* article, Sarah Sparks challenges us to distinguish between correct and erroneous beliefs about learning and the brain, including brain cell connections, detecting novelty, right-brain/left-brain dominance, developmental phases, expert vs. novice thinking, brain capacity usage, learning styles, testing, native language learning, and dyslexia. Be brave – test yourself!

"Quiz: Can You Spot the False Claims About Learning and the Brain?" by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, September 18, 2024

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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)
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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
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