Marshall Memo 665

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 12, 2016

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Schools that try to do everything are likely to accomplish nothing well."
Grover "Russ" Whitehurst (see item #1)

"Surely soft skills are important and schools have an important role in shaping them. But the reality is that research on soft skills is soft."
Grover "Russ" Whitehurst (*ibid*.)

"Encourage and reward students for persistence and hard work rather than trying to increase their grit. Provide opportunities for students to learn to work productively with others instead of focusing on their development of cooperation and empathy. Instead of trying to increase students' conscientiousness, provide task-relevant instruction on how to manage time and complete assignments, and meaningful consequences for doing so. Arrange classroom instruction and other school-based activities so that all students can experience success and growth based on their work rather than trying to get students to see themselves as self-efficacious or to have a growth mindset."
Grover "Russ" Whitehurst (*ibid*.)

"We can appreciate that any important decision – about criminal justice, diversity policies in higher education, gun control, or immigration – will inevitably have winners and losers, and so one can always find someone to empathize with on either side of the issue."
Paul Bloom (see item #2)

"At school you are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism. A certain amount of knowledge you can indeed with average facilities acquire so as to retain, nor need you regret the hours you spend on much that is forgotten, for the shadow of lost knowledge at least protects you from many illusions. But you go to a great school not so much for knowledge as for arts and habits: for the habit of attention; for the art of expression; for the art of assuming at a moment's notice a new intellectual position; for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation; for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms; for the art of working out what is possible in a given time; for discrimination; for mental courage and mental soberness."
William Johnson Cory, 1875

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1. What Should Schools Be Doing About Social-Emotional Learning?

In this Brookings *Evidence Speaks* paper, Grover "Russ" Whitehurst takes a critical look at the "soft skills" being embraced by many U.S. schools. The ESSA provision that states must include at least one non-academic measure in their accountability plans has opened the door to social-emotional learning as one measure of school success. One consortium of California districts has proposed giving 40 percent weight to this domain, including a component with students' self-assessments of growth mindset, self-efficacy, self-management, and social awareness. "Surely soft skills are important and schools have an important role in shaping them," says Whitehurst. "But the reality is that research on soft skills is soft." Here are his main concerns:

• *Vague definitions* – Social-emotional competencies include character, virtue, personal qualities, emotional intelligence, non-cognitive skills, and 21st-century skills – everything from completing homework to optimism, grit, social awareness, and a growth mindset. "The complexities and challenges for schools and educators of including such disparate behaviors, thoughts, and dispositions into the overarching grab bag of soft skills are large," says Whitehurst. "Schools that try to do everything are likely to accomplish nothing well. Thus, the first challenge for soft skills education reform is a coherent answer to the question: What are we talking about and trying to influence?"

Whitehurst believes that right now, we don't have enough clarity on what exactly it means, for example, for a student to engage in "responsible decision making" – and how that looks different for a second grader and a high-school senior. "Without specificity at the level of what students need to learn and examples of how to teach it, there is no clear path to the development of curriculum and instructional practices, teacher training, or meaningful assessment and accountability." Therefore, Whitehurst concludes, it's "premature and unhelpful for educators to define a school's mission, select its curriculum and programs, measure its success, and be held accountable for something as amorphous as the various synonyms for soft skills."

• *Distinguishing traits from behaviors* – For the last 100 years, psychologists have been trying to understand human personality, and their efforts closely parallel the current work on social-emotional skills, including the desire to define broad patterns of human behavior through questionnaire data and the goal of identifying individual differences that predict later outcomes. The difference is that after a century of research, psychologists pretty much agree on the so-called Big Five OCEAN personality traits:

- Openness to experience;
- Conscientiousness;
- Extraversion;
- Agreeableness;
- Neuroticism.

Psychologists also agree that each of these is (a) dimensional – that is, a person can be high or low or somewhere in between on each one; (b) statistically unique – that is, an individual's placement on one trait doesn't predict placement on any of the others; and (c) each trait doesn't predict specific behaviors in particular situations but a tendency to respond in similar ways in a wide range of circumstances.

The research on soft skills is relatively new, so it's not surprising that there isn't a strong consensus – in fact, says Whitehurst, there's "a Tower of Babel when it comes to constructs and measures." But there are some parallels with the Big Five – for example, in the Chicago Consortium's description of social skills, *cooperation* and *empathy* are similar to Agreeableness, *assertion* is similar to Extraversion, and *responsibility* is similar to Conscientiousness. And some social-emotional learning programs have used the Big Five traits in developing their questionnaires.

The problem, says Whitehurst, is that OCEAN personality traits and most of those being used in current social-emotional learning programs are "highly heritable." Studies of identical twins reared together and apart have shown that between 40 and 50 percent of the variance in OCEAN personality traits is due to genes, whereas only 7 percent is due to environment. Can schools implementing social-emotional learning programs change these deeply embedded personality traits? This is an empirical question, says Whitehurst, but the results from a rigorous study of the KIPP charter schools are not encouraging. Along with academic achievement, KIPP is strongly committed to and seriously invested in improving students' character, which the organization sees as crucial in its own right and a pathway to students' future success. The study showed that KIPP schools have been successful at improving students' math and reading achievement, but on 12 social-emotional skills, students did markedly better on only one – collaboration with peers.

The theory of action underpinning social-emotional learning programs in schools is that (a) soft skills are causally linked to students' academic and life achievement; (b) schools can affect soft skills through curriculum, school climate, and focused training; and (c) the school's impact on soft skills leads to improved student outcomes in other domains, including academic achievement. The KIPP study and others like it suggest that almost all the social-emotional skills measured are very resistant to change – or at least that schools haven't yet figured out how to change them.

• *Accountability* – Whitehurst says there are many unanswered questions on the validity of indicators of social-emotional skills; on separating the value-add of schools from factors outside the school; on isolating the impact of individual teachers; on identifying the kind of training needed to improve teachers' skills at strengthening their students' soft skills; on the relationship of proxy measures (like suspensions) and questionnaire items (like a student's

response to a question about mindset); and on the way disruptive students with low social-emotional skills affect the students around them.

"We are at the very beginning of understanding what educators should be doing in schools to advance students' soft skills, how the outcomes of those efforts can be measured, and who should be held responsible for what, and how," Whitehurst concludes. Given all that, here are his recommendations for how to proceed:

- Focus on improving student behavior, not personality traits and dispositions. "Encourage and reward students for persistence and hard work rather than trying to increase their grit," he says. "Provide opportunities for students to learn to work productively with others instead of focusing on their development of cooperation and empathy. Instead of trying to increase students' conscientiousness, provide task-relevant instruction on how to manage time and complete assignments, and meaningful consequences for doing so. Arrange classroom instruction and other school-based activities so that all students can experience success and growth based on their work rather than trying to get students to see themselves as self-efficacious or to have a growth mindset."
- Develop, communicate clearly, and provide learning opportunities and meaningful consequences for observance of rules and expectations for respectful social interactions.
- Use measures of soft skills that are naturally occurring and useful as feedback at the classroom and individual level.
- Focus on students who are significantly off-track in their social-emotional behavior or self-management skills.
- Pay particular attention to teachers, coaches, and other adults in the school who have a track record of problems with interpersonal interactions with students.
- Put in place systematic ways to learn from and improve the reform efforts.

"Hard Thinking on Soft Skills" by Grover "Russ" Whitehurst in a Brookings *Evidence Speaks* paper, March 24, 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/research/hard-thinking-on-soft-skills/

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2. The Downside of Empathy

In this *Wall Street Journal* article, Yale psychology professor Paul Bloom lists the ways that emotional empathy – the seemingly positive ability to feel others' pain and joy – can lead us to be tribal and biased when it comes to moral and political judgments. Some examples:

• In a 2010 study, researchers gave an electric shock to male soccer fans and then had them watch as the same shock was administered to other men. When subjects were told recipients of the shocks were fans of their team, their empathic response was strong, but when they were told the victims favored the opposing team, empathy was measurably weaker.

• Similarly, researchers have found people have strong empathy with others who have treated them fairly versus those who have cheated them, empathy with people who have cooperated with them and much less with competitors.

• Empathy shuts down when we believe someone is responsible for his or her own

suffering – for example, a study found less empathy for an AIDS victim who got the disease through intravenous drug use than for someone who was infected via a blood transfusion.

• A 2005 study found people were more likely to donate to help develop a drug that would save the life of one child than for a drug that could save eight children – and the effect was even stronger when they were shown a photograph of the child who would be saved.

• People feel a stronger urge to help abused dogs or oil-soaked penguins than to alleviate the suffering of millions of people in other countries or marginalized populations in their own country.

• There's stronger empathy for a child who has been sickened by a faulty medicine than for those who would get sick and possibly die without it.

"In moral and political debates," says Bloom, "our positions often reflect our choice of whom to empathize with. We might feel empathy with minorities abused and killed by law enforcement – or with the police themselves, whose lives are often in peril. With minority students who can't get into college – or with white students turned away even though they have better grades… With the Syrian refugee who just wants to start a new life, or the American who loses his job to an immigrant… We can appreciate that any important decision – about criminal justice, diversity policies in higher education, gun control, or immigration – will inevitably have winners and losers, and so one can always find someone to empathize with on either side of the issue."

If the alternative to empathy is being paralyzed by indecision or succumbing to apathy, should we stick with empathy, despite its flaws? Not so fast, says Bloom. There's a third way: compassion – feelings of warmth, concern, and care for others, feeling *for* versus feeling *with* them, accompanied by the urge to help make things better for them. In his research, Bloom has found that empathy and compassion tap different aspects of human nature – you can be high on one and low on another. In fact, brain researchers have found that empathy and compassion activate different parts of the brain. They have also found that empathy is more difficult and unpleasant – more exhausting. "This is consistent with other findings suggesting that vicarious suffering not only leads to bad decision-making," says Bloom, "but also causes burnout and withdrawal. Compassion training, by contrast, led to better feelings on the part of the meditator and kinder behavior toward others. It has all the benefits of empathy and few of the costs… Limiting the impact of empathy actually made it easier to be kind."

Bloom concedes that empathy has a strong allure. "It is often irresistible to try to feel the world as others feel it," he says, "to vicariously experience their suffering, to listen to our hearts. It really does seem like a gift, one that enhances the life of the giver. The alternative – careful reasoning mixed with a more distant compassion – seems cold and unfeeling. The main thing to be said in its favor is that it makes the world a better place."

"The Empathy Trap" by Paul Bloom in *The Wall Street Journal*, December 3-4, 2016 (p. C1-C2), no free e-link available; adapted from Bloom's 2016 book, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (Ecco, 2016)

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3. Questions About the "Power Pose" Research

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Tom Bartlett reports on recent research questioning Amy Cuddy's much-ballyhooed finding that striking an expansive Wonder Woman stance for a couple of minutes can build confidence and boost performance [see Memo 492 for a summary of one of Cuddy's articles]. A TED talk by Cuddy has been viewed almost 38 million times, she's had countless TV and radio interviews, and her 2015 book, *Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges*, was a best seller.

But Bartlett says the research behind Cuddy's thesis (published in *Psychological Science* and *Harvard Business Review*) has "begun to crumble." One of Cuddy's co-authors, Dana Carney, recently posted a detailed *mea culpa* in which she sided with the study's critics. "I do not believe that 'power pose' effects are real," wrote Carney, saying that the sample size was "tiny," the effects "small and barely there in some cases," the reported testosterone boost probably came from another stimulus, and subjects' self-reported feelings of power were "p-hacked" – that is, subjects were asked questions and researchers then focused on the answers that supported their hypothesis.

What's the story? Bartlett asks. "For that matter, how could such questionable research migrate from a journal to a viral video to a best seller, circulating for years, retweeted and forwarded and praised by millions, with almost no pushback? The answer tells us something about the practice and promotion of science, and also how both may be changing for the better."

Cuddy's thesis began to unravel when Eva Ranehill of the University of Zurich tried to replicate the power pose study with a larger sample size and somewhat more sophisticated methodology. She was disappointed to find no decline in cortisol levels and no increase in testosterone, confidence, or willingness to take risks. Ranehill asked around and found that others had been unable to replicate Cuddy's results – in fact, one study found that striking a power pose resulted in a *lower* level of confidence. Andrew Gelman of Columbia University, who specializes in analyzing psychological research that proves to be invalid, believes this mostly occurs not through deliberate deception but because researchers deceive themselves as they seek support for their desired outcome in a "garden of forking paths."

Although there have been some recriminations and accusations of sexism in the debunking of Cuddy's research (and indeed, many of the critics have been male), Cuddy herself has moderated her stance ("Hormones are not the primary emphasis in any of my work – my book, my research, or my teaching. I simply encourage people to look at the entire evolving body of evidence, across disciplines, when trying to sort out how these complex relationships among posture and movement, social stimuli, nervous system responses, hormones, and so on, are or are not related") and TED has inserted a partial disclaimer ("Some of the findings presented in this talk have been referenced in an ongoing debate among social scientists about robustness and reproducibility").

Still, some people continue to find Cuddy's power pose ideas helpful, even inspiring, and "we're not talking about a cure for cancer here," says Bartlett. "Why does it matter if people stand like Wonder Woman in front of the mirror for two minutes each morning? Really,

what's the harm?" But there can be harm, he concludes – to the "science brand" – if less-than-definitive research makes its way into the mainstream and is found to be invalid and ultimately bogus. He's encouraged that journals are more cautious and that Cuddy's 2010 study would probably not be published today. He believes there's a sense among social psychologists to not rush their ideas into the popular press before more thorough peer review and replication.

"Power Poser: When Good Ideas Go Bad" by Tom Bartlett in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 9, 2016 (Vol. LXIII, #16, p. B4-B7), http://bit.ly/2gzaeEN

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4. Making an "Irrelevant" Novel Into a Dynamic Learning Experience

In this *AMLE Magazine* article, Lesley Roessing (Armstrong State University) describes how she started her teaching career as a substitute for a group of reluctant ninth graders in their basic English class. The students were supposed to be reading Ray Bradbury's novel, *Dandelion Wine*, which is about a childhood summer experience with his grandfather in a small American town in the late 1920s. Nothing could have been further from the reality of these urban adolescents, says Roessing: "After a few minutes with the students, even I, brand-new and idealistic as I was, could tell they had no intention of reading the novel. In front of me were the endless lists of vocabulary words, end-of-chapter 'discussion' questions, and quizzes I was pretty sure they all would fail – and they wouldn't care." *What to do?*

Then she had a brainstorm – they would turn the book into a 30-minute radio news show. There would be lead stories, local news, human interest stories, feature articles, sports, weather, the economy, lifestyle, commercials. For the next few days, students worked in two groups, one learning about the structure and content of each type of news story by reading newspapers and listening to broadcasts, the other reading the novel and looking for possible stories. Students now had a purpose for reading, says Roessing. "Even through they did not personally connect to the characters and events in the novel, they had a purpose for learning about them: to report on them. This novel became more of a window than a mirror."

For the next two weeks, the class followed a regular pattern. Students listened to Roessing's 15-minute mini-lectures on different types of news stories (using newspaper and broadcast clips as "mentor texts"), background information on the 1920s, and the finer points of writing leads, script writing, interviewing, and persuasive writing techniques. Then during the 45-minute workshop time, students formed groups, each planning a segment of the broadcast, and pored over the novel using sticky notes to jot down ideas for news segments. "Within their groups," says Roessing, "they flipped back and forth through the pages of the novel, reading and re-reading; questioning and explaining and arguing over events and dialogue; analyzing details and events and setting. They searched for newsworthy events, wrote scripts, and played with word choice. They created jingles and ads to advertise dandelion wine and dandelion wine recipe books, green apple pie, and sneakers. They drafted summer weather reports and human interest stories based on events and characters from 1928… The classroom was abuzz with laughter and singing… Absenteeism was at an all-time low."

When Radio Show Day arrived, students were ready, perched on desks arranged in a circle, and enthusiastically performed their half-hour show. For Roessing, "it wasn't the quality – or quantity – of the product that mattered; it was the quality of the process – the reading, analyzing, and synthesizing of the information read and application to 'real' situations. It also was the quality of the learning community that was built during those two weeks." In terms of academic content, here's what she believes they accomplished:

- Writing in narrative, informative, and persuasive modes for an authentic purpose and audience;
- Making the reading-writing connection;
- Talking (and singing) and listening connected to a text;
- Reader response as they talked and wrote about the text;
- Synthesis of text, taking students back to the book to re-read for deeper meaning;
- Active, experiential, project-based learning;
- Use of supplemental mentor texts and research materials;
- Higher-order thinking, including analysis, application, and synthesis
- Student responsibility, choice, and engagement;
- Differentiation and individualization, valuing different strengths and talents;
- Tapping into multiple intelligences;
- Interdisciplinary subject matter, going well beyond the normal confines of an English class.

"Necessary Noise: The Importance of Collaborative Learning" by Lesley Roessing in *AMLE Magazine*, February 2016 (Vol. 3, #6), http://bit.ly/2gsV1nW; Roessing can be reached at lesley.roessing@armstrong.edu.

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5. The Ten Best Graphic Novels of the Year

In this feature in *School Library Journal*, Brigid Alverson, Lori Henderson, Esther Keller, Mike Pawuk, Scott Robins, and Eva Volin list the graphic novels they believe are the best of 2016:

• *Compass South: Four Points* by Hope Larson, illustrated by Rebecca Mock (Farrar), grades 5-7 – Alex and Cleo devise a plot to pose as twin boys and seek their fortune in 19th-century New York.

• *Ghosts* by Raina Telgemeier (Scholastic), grades 3-7 – Two sisters, one with cystic fibrosis, deal with fear of ghosts in a small coastal town.

• *Hilda and the Stone Forest* by Luke Pearson (Nobrow), grades 1-5 – One big chase scene involving a young girl in a world of magical, often menacing creatures.

• *Hippopotamister* by John Patrick Green (First Second), grades K-3 – Red Panda convinces his buddy Hippo to run away from a rundown zoo and get jobs in the outside world.

• *March: Book Three* by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, illustrated by Nate Powell (Top Shelf), grade 8 and up – This is the third book in a trilogy on the Civil Rights Movement,

dealing with the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Freedom Summer in Mississippi, and the 1964 Democratic Convention.

• *Mighty Jack* by Ben Hatke (First Second), grades 5-9 – A modern riff on Jack and the Beanstalk.

• *Narwhal: Unicorn of the Sea* by Ben Clanton (Tundra), grades 1-4 – A silly and cheerful narwhal makes friends with a jellyfish and they share facts about their species.

• *The Nameless City* by Faith Erin Hicks (First Second), grades 4-8 – An adventure fantasy in a city ruled by the Dao clan, one of a series of conquerors.

• *Science Comics: Dinosaurs* by MK Reed, illustrated by Joe Floor (First Second), grades 4-8 – A new look at many species of dinosaurs and the paleontologists who study them.

• *Snow White* by Matt Phelan (Candlewick), grade 5 and up – A retelling of the classic fairy tale set in the vaudeville era, with the evil stepmother a famous actress, the mirror as a stock market ticker, and the seven dwarfs as street urchins.

"Top 10 Graphic Novels" by Brigid Alverson, Lori Henderson, Esther Keller, Mike Pawuk, Scott Robins, and Eva Volin in *School Library Journal*, December 2016 (Vol. 62, #12, p. 51-53), http://www.slj.com/2016/11/reviews/best-of/top-10-graphic-novels-2016/#_

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If you have feedback or suggestions,
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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 45 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 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).

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Communiqué
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Essential Teacher
Exceptional Children
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Literacy Today
Mathematics in the Middle School
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time Magazine