Marshall Memo 854

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 21, 2020

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Maybe this is a nerdy-history-teacher way to frame this, but I was a nerdy history teacher. We have a choice between the Hoover path and the F.D.R. path. The Hoover path is the continued dismantling of public-sector responsibilities. It's cutting resources for schools, doing less, hoping for less. In contrast, the F.D.R. approach would recognize how deeply interconnected we all are and make our investments accordingly."

John King, Jr. in "Will This Be a Lost Year for America's Children?" in *The New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 2020

"To have a job without a workplace, you must build an office of the mind. Structure, routine, focus, socialization, networking, stress relief – their creation is almost entirely up to you, alone in a spare bedroom or on your couch, where your laptop might vie for attention at any given moment with your pets or kids. If the coffee pot runs dry, there is no one to blame but yourself."

Amanda Mull in "A Cubicle Never Looked So Good" in *The Atlantic*, October 2020 (Vol. 326, #3, pp. 30-32)

"Completing isn't the same as learning."

Ryan Steinbach, "How to Help Middle-School Students Learn to Work Independently" in *Edutopia*, September 15, 2020

"Lessons drive the tech, not vice-versa."

Jon Saphier in "Preparing for Virtual Learning" in RBT newsletter, September 16, 2020

"So if you've felt guilty that you're spending your days slinging Chromebooks and fixing logins, don't. That's exactly what students and teachers need from you right now."

Justin Baeder in a Principal Center e-mail, September 14, 2020

"Poetry in schools has too often run a predictable course that keeps students at arm's length or makes the form feel intimidating and inaccessible: Read some Emily Dickinson and Shakespeare, throw in a dash of T.S. Eliot and Langston Hughes, and call it a unit."

Kate Stoltzfus in "Teach Living Poetry" in *Education Update*, September 2020 (Vol. 62, #9, pp. 2-3)

1. Ways to Avoid Correcting Overload

"For the better part of my first three years as a teacher, student papers acted as the chains that shackled me to my desk day after day," says Matthew Johnson in this article in *Cult of Pedagogy*. He wanted to continue teaching, but he didn't want to live that way anymore, dealing with "a never-ending torrent of student work in need of feedback and assessment." Looking desperately for a way out, Johnson stumbled on a 1912 article headlined, "Can Good Composition Teaching Be Done Under Present Conditions?" The answer, more than a hundred years ago, was no. The challenge, then and now, is how teachers can give students feedback on their writing that meets these research-based criteria:

- Written in clear language;
- Given regularly;
- Ideally while students are still creating, versus after the final draft;
- Returned in a timely manner.

For teachers who work with a large number of students (Johnson has 158), providing feedback like this is extremely challenging, which means one of three things is likely to happen: students rarely get high-quality feedback; teachers seldom assign written work; or teachers burn out.

But there is an alternative – Johnson calls it Flash Feedback – and he's written a book about it. Here are the key components:

• *Focus on one or two learning objectives*. "Covering too many topics tends to overload students," he says, "so they learn no lessons (or no lessons deeply), and it takes too long."

• *Get students doing the heavy lifting*. When the teacher does more work than students, it holds kids back in two ways: they're less likely to remember what's taught (little cognitive retrieval and effort), and the amount of feedback they receive will be greatly reduced. With Flash Feedback, says Johnson, "students must be the primary ones finding answers, patterns, and approaches, as the teacher plays the role of the guide standing well off to the side."

• *Use systems and technology*. There are many redundancies and time-wasters in standard feedback on written work. Saving even 15 seconds per paper adds up to 40 minutes saved when taken to scale.

• *Have a Plan B for special cases*. Spillover time needs to be built into the system for students and situations where things aren't working smoothly.

Johnson describes three types of Flash Feedback he's used with his students. All have been especially helpful with remote learning during the pandemic.

• *Targeted response* – The usual approach with a pesky subject like correct use of commas is for the teacher to circle every comma error on students' papers, but this is time-consuming and unproductive. Instead, Johnson has students write a one-page paper on any topic they wish, the only requirement being that they correctly use at least four examples of each type of comma the class has studied. Students turn in their papers via Google Classroom, and Johnson uses the Find function (command F) to highlight all the commas in each piece. He can then quickly scan for correct and incorrect usage. "By keeping the scope of the paper and feedback focused and using the technology tools available," he says, "I can give specific, individual, and meaningful feedback in less than a minute per student." The result: much more student learning of the targeted skill.

• *Micro-conferences* – Conferring one on one with students is valuable for four reasons: there's individualized instruction and feedback; misconceptions can be cleared up; relationships are built; and students feel heard by a caring adult. But if each conference takes five minutes and there are more than 100 students, that's daunting. The solution: focusing and structuring student conferences so they take 1-2 minutes. Here's an example of how Johnson does micro conferences during a unit on paraphrasing:

- Students write a rough draft of a paraphrasing paper and bring it to class.
- The class reads and discusses mentor texts with strong paraphrasing.
- Students pick a page in their own drafts and highlight each incidence of paraphrasing.
- They rate each paraphrased passage from 1 to 10 based on the exemplar, and write at least four sentences justifying their rating.
- Students call Johnson over for a brief conference, with each student sharing their ratings, comparing them to the exemplar, and Johnson acting as a gadfly guiding them to improve their work.

This approach uses time very efficiently, he says: "The students have already laid the groundwork and highlighted the paraphrased sections, allowing us to jump right in at a high level. Further, by focusing just on paraphrasing, a minute is not too short to go deep, answer questions, and figure out meaningful action steps forward for the student."

• *Wise interventions with negative students* – Shifting the mindsets, beliefs, and behaviors of challenging students is often painfully slow, but Johnson says it can happen much more quickly if teachers are strategic about picking and disrupting the precise moments that fuel the student's negative dynamic. A study of middle-school students found that one group did twice as much revision of an essay as another group; students in the first group received sticky notes from the teacher that said, *I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know you can reach them*, while the second group got sticky notes that said, *I'm giving you these comments so that you'll have feedback on your paper*. The first group did better, the researchers believe, because the note containing high expectations disrupted students' fear that their teachers didn't believe in them.

Johnson cites another study that found that when a random person on the street is approached by a stranger on a rainy day asking to use their phone, they are four times more likely to do so if the stranger precedes the request by saying, "I'm sorry about the rain."

Researchers believe this is because the brief comment establishes a relationship, and the brain is programmed to respond in a more friendly way to a request. Johnson puts this insight to work in his classes by writing quick notes to students referring to something a student said in class or an aspiration they shared at some point.

"By being focused and carefully structured," he says, "Flash Feedback allows us to make feedback a part of class that is as regular as the bells in the halls. It also allows us to teach many more personalized lessons each semester; gives us regular points of contact with students, which have been shown to improve performance and relationships; and best of all, can be done quickly, allowing teachers to break those shackles to student papers and take a day at the beach every once in a while."

"Flash Feedback: How to Provide More Meaningful Feedback in Less Time" by Matthew Johnson in *Cult of Pedagogy*, May 10, 2020

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2. Empowered Online Teaching

In this *Edutopia* article, Lindsay Mitchell boils more than a decade of her experience teaching online into six strategies for working successfully in a remote setting:

• *Be authentic*. "Attempting to incorporate another teacher's style will not always work," says Mitchell. "You can use approaches that bring you joy as an educator – and if you can find a way to incorporate the interests of your students, the odds of having a successful environment improve."

• *Go with familiar, easy-to-use tools*. It's a good idea to curb your enthusiasm for new online resources to avoid overload. You might poll students on their familiarity with tools like Flipgrid, Google Forms, Padlet, Parley, and others – and which they've used successfully.

• *Keep it simple*. Importantly, this doesn't mean dumbing down curriculum. "Tasks can be technologically simple to complete but still require depth of knowledge," says Mitchell. Lack of complexity is also helpful for students whose Internet bandwidth and devices can't handle complex programs.

• *Build in choice*. This means giving students several options for how to show their understanding – for example, after reading a passage, students can write a bullet-point list, create a timeline, or make a short video.

• *Be organized*. Students (and family members supporting them) benefit from a logical sequence of tasks, a clear rationale, and helpful infographics and charts to reduce the cognitive load of understanding the content. Hyperlinks can then give access to material with more depth and scope.

• *Be concise*. Since students are quite likely to be overloaded with assignments and instructions, the shorter and more bullet-pointed yours are, the better. "When we are with them personally, we can verbally reinforce what needs to be done," says Mitchell, "but this is not always possible in the remote format." Recording a short instructional video might be very helpful.

"6 Strategies for Successful Distance Learning" by Lindsay Mitchell in *Edutopia*, June 19, 2020

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3. The Way Assignments Are Presented to Students Makes a Difference

"There is so much to adapt to support students' at-home learning that it can feel overwhelming, and there's so much that feels out of our control," say consultants Katie Novak and Mike Anderson in this article in *Edutopia*. "Language is a simple and powerful thing we can control." A potentially engaging lesson or project can feel to students like an act of compliance if it's presented in the wrong way.

Here's an example from a social studies unit on the impact of geography on civilization. Two teachers have worked hard to incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, giving students multiple ways of accessing the content and showing their understanding: attending a live Zoom presentation, watching the recording, reading or listening to an online article, viewing a documentary, reading a textbook, etc. Note the difference in tone as these teachers present the assignment to students:

- Teacher A: "OK, everyone. I've got several choices for you to learn about how geography affects where people decide to live and the way they live. I expect you to choose at least two different resources to explore for me, and I want you to also pick one activity to try. To get full credit on the assessment, you will need to cite the resources you used."
- Teacher B: "OK, everyone. You have several choices for how you get to learn about how geography affects where people decide to live and the way they live. Don't forget to use at least two different resources, and then pick an activity to try. You can do more than one if you want! Remember to cite resources to give credit to other authors and organizations and boost the credibility of your work."

The first teacher's tone was compliance-oriented and used teacher-centric language – *I want… I expect… I've got…* – and used extrinsic motivation. The second teacher offered invitations and suggestions and spoke in the second person. Their language conveyed whether or not they expected students to do the assignment.

Novak and Anderson suggest that teachers make an audiotape or record a video of them giving directions to students to focus on maximizing positive, intrinsically oriented instructions:

- *Your next challenge is…* (versus *I expect you all to…*)
- *What's a goal you have…* (versus *I want you to…*)
- *Here are three things to try as you…* (versus *Here are three things you need to do…*)
- *You have several choices to consider…* (versus *I've created some choices for you…*)
- *Here's how to do high-quality work…* (versus *Here's how to get a good grade*).

"How to Choose Words That Motivate Students During Online Learning" by Katie Novak and Mike Anderson "How to Choose Words That Motivate Students During Online Learning" by Katie Novak and Mike Anderson in *Edutopia*, September 15, 2020

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4. Can History Teachers Be Neutral? Should They Be?

In this article in *Teaching Tolerance*, middle-school history teacher Jonathan Gold describes his evolving views on the question of being neutral with controversial topics. For years he believed in being objective and keeping his personal views to himself, even when students were intensely interested in what he thought. But Gold realized how much his judgment entered into selecting topics, texts, and pedagogy – and in how he evaluated students' work. "Was it ever possible," he wondered, "to disentangle my own biased assumptions from my teaching? Is neutrality possible or even desirable?" In addition, as Howard Zinn has pointed out, being neutral means accepting things as they are.

Gold was pushed over the edge when, on the last day of a recent school year, he got this note from a student: *Thank you for a great course. I learned that if you look at perspectives that are different, then you will see that everyone is right for different reasons*. Gold was dismayed; how could this student indulge in such moral relativism, oblivious to the fact that throughout history, many people have been wrong about a lot of things?

He concluded this was the result of his teaching history from "multiple perspectives" without assigning normative judgments and helping students see historical responsibility and causation. "Do we consider the perspective of the slaveowner and the enslaved person to be equally valid?" Gold asks. "There is room to examine both, and good historical justification for doing so, but just using 'perspectives' feels too neutral and too blasé about the role power and injustice played in shaping events in the past and the history that emerged out of them." Without perspective and an analysis of power, there's the risk of "producing relativists who tolerate all views and critique and interrogate none."

Gold decided that not hearing his opinions hindered students' moral development, and "cultivating morality is uniquely essential to the project of teaching history. Studying the past offers a venue for reflecting on the human condition and developing a sense of right and wrong. We study who we were so that we can figure out who we *want to be*." Gold decided to begin sharing his views with students, but with four important conditions:

- He would not proselytize. His goal is for students to learn *how* he thinks, not necessarily *what* he thinks.
- There is always room for dissent and debate among students, with him acting as a referee and ensuring psychological safety.
- Students are assessed on the clarity of their thinking, the soundness of their arguments, and the quality of the evidence they use, not just parroting his ideas. "The key," he says, "is to own and acknowledge my bias as I assess and evaluate effective historical thinking."
- Gold would judge what types of comments to call out as unacceptable. For example, he believes it's okay for students to debate whether the Industrial Revolution improved women's lives or opened them to exploitation and marginalization – but he drew the line on an assertion that women should remain outside the workforce. Similarly, it isn't

acceptable in his classes for a student to argue that the South "needed" slaves to work plantations. "Instead," he says, "we connect racist ideology to the motive to maximize profits."

"It is my hope," he concludes, "that – through this approach – I can increasingly rely on students to handle the dissention, interrogation, and rigorous analysis necessary for good historical work and effective moral development."

"Shifting Out of Neutral" by Jonathan Gold in *Teaching Tolerance*, Spring 2016

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5. A Field Guide to Lying and Cheating

In this *New York Times* article, Benedict Carey says children learn how to keep a secret when they are six or seven years old. "Learning the requisite skills of deception is a part of typical development," he says, "the beginnings of a psychological identity." What about lying? Carey reports new research showing there are three profiles of dishonesty among adults, from garden-variety corner-cutting to behavior that qualifies as a deep personality problem.

A study in Spain asked people to flip coins (electronically); those who flipped heads were given five dollars, those who flipped tails got nothing. Unbeknownst to the participants, researchers were able to monitor the tosses and see who was playing straight. About 20 percent reported their tosses accurately. Some got lucky and flipped heads on the first try. The remainder cheated, but in these different ways:

- Some rolled repeatedly until they got heads and reported that result, earning the reward. The researchers called them "cheating nonliars" – they went ahead and cheated, but honestly reported the last roll, perhaps in an effort to maintain their self-concept as mostly honest people.
- Some flat-out lied, saying they got heads when they rolled tails, and collected five dollars.
- Some didn't bother to roll; they just said they'd rolled heads and collected the money. the researchers dubbed this "radical dishonesty."

The mentality behind the cheating non-liars has been identified in many other studies – ways in which people morally disengage and rationalize cutting corners and breaking rules. "It's a process of preserving self-respect by justifying cheating or worse," says Carey, "with thoughts such as, 'Everyone cheats, why should I be shortchanged?' or 'The larger mission is more important than some small infraction.'"

Carey says dishonesty of varying types starts in childhood, pointing to the need for adults to address it early to prevent more serious issues later. The cheating-nonliars might be the most interesting type to discuss.

"Believe Me: Not All Liars Are Created Equal" by Benedict Carey in *The New York Times*, September 15, 2020

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6. "Readalikes" – Books That Go with Three Popular Shows

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Abby Johnson recommends books that students might read along with these streaming shows:

• *The Baby Sitters Club* (with a more-diverse cast than the books):
- *President of the Whole Fifth Grade* by Sherri Winston (Little, Brown, 2010)
- *All's Faire in Middle School* by Victoria Jamieson (Dial, 2017)
- *Best Babysitters Ever* by Caroline Cala (HMH, 2019)

• *Wonder Woman 1984*:
- *Renegades* by Marissa Meyer (Feiwel & Friends, 2017)
- *Faith: Hollywood and the Vine* by Jody Houser, illustrated by Francis Portella and Marguerite Sauvage (Valiant, 2016)

• *Mismatched* (a film adaptation of the YA novel *When Dimple Met Rishi*):
- *My So-Called Bollywood Life* by Nisha Sharma (Crown, 2018)
- *Tell Me How You Really Feel* by Aminah Mae Safi (Feiwel & Friends, 2019)
- *The Geek's Guide to Unrequited Love* by Sarvenaz Tash (S&S, 2016)

"Have a Book with that Show: Read-Alikes for What's Streaming" by Abby Johnson in *School Library Journal*, September 2020 (Vol. 66, #9, pp. 50-51)

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7. Student Agency and Activism: Recommended K-8 Children's Books

In this *Language Arts* column, Grace Enriquez (Lesley University), Katie Egan Cunningham (Manhattanville College), and Gilberto Lara (University of Texas/San Antonio) recommend books that spark students' belief that they can make a positive difference:
- *Let the Children March* by Monica Clark-Robinson, illustrated by Frank Morrison (Harcourt Mifflin Harcourt, 2018)
- *Dictionary for a Better World: Poems, Quotes, and Anecdotes from A to Z* by Irene Latham and Charles Waters, illustrated by Mehrdokht Amini (Carolrhoda, 2020)
- *Muslim Girls Rise: Inspirational Champions of Our Time* by Saira Mir, illustrated by Aaliya Jaleel (Salaam Reads, 2019)
- *The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family* by Ibtihaj Muhammad with S.K. Ali, illustrated by Hatem Aly (Little, Brown, 2019)
- *Our Future: How Kids Are Taking Action* by Janet Wilson (Second Story, 2019)
- *Shaking Things Up: 14 Young Women Who Changed the World* by Susan Hood with a group of illustrators (Harper, 2018)
- *Our House Is on Fire: Greta Thunberg's Call to Save the Planet* by Jeanette Winter (Beach Lane, 2019)
- *Jimena Pérez Puede Volar/Jimena Pérez Can Fly* by Jorge Argueta, translated by Elizabeth Bell, illustrated by Fabricio Vanden Broeck (Piñata/Arte Publico, 2019)
- *Ban This Book* by Alan Gratz (Starscape/Tom Doherty Associates, 2017)
- *Count Me In* by Varsha Bajaj (Nancy Paulsen, 2019)
- *The Unsung Hero of Birdsong, USA* by Brenda Woods (Nancy Paulsen, 2019)

- *Activist: A Story of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Shooting* by Lauren Elizabeth Hogg, illustrated by Donald Hudson (Zuiker, 2019)
- *Nowhere Boy* by Katherine Marsh (Roaring Books, 2018)
- *Efrén Divided* by Ernesto Cisneros (HarperCollins, 2020)
- *Enough Is Enough: How Students Can Join the Fight for Gun Safety* by Michelle Roehm McCann (Beyond Words/Simon Pulse, 2019)

"For a Better World: Children's Books About Student Agency and Activism" by Grace Enriquez, Katie Egan Cunningham, and Gilberto Lara in *Language Arts*, September 2020 (Vol. 98, #1, pp. 36-45); Enriquez can be reached at genrique@lesley.edu.

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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 50 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 HTML version as well.

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- The current issue (in Word and 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
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
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)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Education Gadfly
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 Magazine