Marshall Memo 925

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 28, 2022

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"I am not going to let any of these laws deter me from the things that I think work best for students. But I also enjoy working with students and having a roof over my head."

> Eric Parker, an African-American teacher of history in Oklahoma City, quoted in "Teaching Black History Month, Under New Limits" by Jacey Fortin and Giulia Heyward in *The New York Times*, February 13, 2022

"When high-school dropout is viewed as a problem rooted in the struggles of individual children, it is an impossible problem to solve. When viewed as a problem of the design of schools as systems, it becomes solvable – if time and resources available for intervention are commensurate with the level of need across schools. Multiple systems for monitoring and intervention together potentially could dramatically reduce dropout and increase rates of high-school graduation."

> Elaine Allensworth, quoted in *Districts That Succeed* by Karin Chenoweth (p. 42), describing the thinking behind Chicago Public Schools' successful effort to measure high-school students' attendance and course grades and intervene early

"What I'd like for leaders is not to proclaim 'no regrets' as this sign of courage, but actually to show courage by staring their own regrets in the eye and doing something about them, and having honest, authentic conversations with their team. There's evidence showing that confronting your regrets can make you a better negotiator, a better strategist, and a better problem solver. There's even evidence that disclosing regrets and mistakes strengthens your standing and builds affinity rather than the reverse."

> Daniel Pink in an interview with Belinda Luscombe about his new book, *The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward*, in *Time*, February 28/March 7, 2022 (Vol. 199, #7-8, p. 30)

"We're using the front, back, and margins of all our lined sheets of paper, my friends."

> Thomas Courtney, a San Diego teacher, on his meager supplies budget (see item #7)

1. Teachers of Color: Measuring and Understanding their Impact

In this Annenberg/Brown University EdWorking Paper, David Blazar (University of Maryland/College Park) describes his study of the impact of teachers and teaching practices in fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms in several school districts on the east coast of the U.S. The study included surveys, interviews, and classroom observations of 321 teachers from 2010 to 2013, with follow-up data on students six years later.

Blazar found that teachers of color got better social-emotional, academic, and behavioral outcomes with their students than their white colleagues – specifically, student self-efficacy, engagement, self-regulation, math and ELA test scores, absences, and suspensions. These gains persisted when students were in high school. When students of color were randomly assigned to same-race/ethnicity teachers, those students did better than when they were assigned to white teachers.

What were the underlying mechanisms? By looking at a rich dataset on students and their teachers, randomizing the assignment of some teachers to classes, and comparing the beliefs and classroom practices of different teachers, Blazar identified four factors that accounted for better student outcomes for teachers of color:

• *Mindset* – Viewing student intelligence and talent as malleable – the belief that knowledge and skill are not fixed but can be developed regardless of students' backgrounds.

• *Relationships* – Teachers' interactions with students and families, including the amount of time spent talking to family members about students' learning and behavior.

• *Differentiation* – Spending more time gathering and using formative assessment data, gearing lessons to students' needs, and scaffolding instruction.

• *Classroom management* – Leading well-organized classrooms in which student behavior and misbehavior were addressed without creating a negative climate.

Blazar says there were undoubtedly other factors at work in teachers of color having a more-positive impact on same-race/ethnicity students, including serving as role models, more easily understanding students' experiences outside school, higher expectations, and teaching critical consciousness. But these factors were more difficult to pinpoint and were not addressed in the study.

What are the implications of these findings? Given that teachers of color are "wildly underrepresented in the teacher workforce," Blazar advocates for more-effective recruitment and retention of African-American, Latino, and Asian-American teachers. He also suggests that the key success factors identified in the study – mindset, relationships, differentiation, and

classroom management – should be made core elements in professional development for the mostly white teaching workforce.

"Teachers of Color, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Student Outcomes: Experimental Evidence from the Random Assignment of Teachers to Classes" by David Blazar, Annenberg/ Brown University EdWorking Paper, December 2021 (pp. 1-56); Blazar can be reached at dblazar@umd.edu (paper spotted in an *Education Week* summary by Madeline Will, February 23, 2022)

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2. How Mastery Learning Can Improve Learning *and* Teaching

In this *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* article, Thomas Guskey (University of Kentucky) and Laura Link (University of North Dakota) say the big idea of mastery learning is usually seen as using low-stakes interim assessments to give students feedback on what they've learned well (at an 80% level) and help them focus on errors and misconceptions. Teachers follow up with "corrective" activities aimed at improving students' performance on a second, parallel assessment with slightly different problems or questions. These follow-up assessments give students a second chance to show mastery (which motivates their efforts) and provide teachers with feedback on how well their supplementary instruction worked.

"The 'just-in-time' correction," say Guskey and Link, "prevents minor learning difficulties from accumulating and becoming major learning problems. It also gives teachers a practical means to vary and differentiate their instruction in order to better meet students' individual learning needs." (Students who show mastery on the initial assessment take on enrichment or extension activities such as projects, reports, digital academic games, or engaging problem-solving.)

"An equally important but often neglected use of formative assessments," say Guskey and Link, "is the feedback they offer teachers." The mistakes students make reflect directly on the instruction teachers just conducted. This article reports on a study of K-12 teachers in a suburban midwestern district who were implementing mastery learning. Teachers were asked which of three kinds of assessment reports was most helpful in improving their own teaching (click the article link below and go to pages 14 and 15 for graphics of each type):

- An item-by-item error analysis of a formative assessment, with special attention to items that 1/3 or more of the class got wrong;
- Mastery charts of class progress on initial and follow-up formative assessments across multiple units;
- Summative assessments comparing current students with previous years' classes taught the same content without mastery learning.

With the first data report, teachers could zero in on items that more than 1/3 of students got wrong, asking whether it was a poorly-worded test item or instructional practices that failed to reach a significant number of students. With the second data report (mastery charts), teachers could look for a jump in student mastery from the first to the second formative assessment, with students' scores on initial assessments steadily improving. With the third data report

(comparing summative scores), assessments allowed teachers to see if the mastery learning approach was getting better results than the way they had taught the previous year.

Guskey and Link solicited teachers' opinions on the three types of data presentation in a survey asking:

- Were the results surprising or pretty much what you expected?
- How informative were the data in providing insights on your teaching?
- How useful were the results in planning how to teach more effectively?

There were also open-ended questions asking teachers for their suggestions on adaptations they would recommend and what other types of information would be helpful for improving instruction.

What did teachers say? Across grade levels, teachers said they found the item analysis of formative assessments the most useful for improving instruction. "With these data," comment Guskey and Link, "teachers could determine precisely which concepts and skills had been taught and learned well, and which required a different approach." The second and third data reports looked at students' performance at a more general level, which was interesting feedback on how the mastery learning process was working but not as important to improving teaching in real time. Elementary teachers seemed to be better at predicting how well their students' would do on formative assessments – probably because teachers in self-contained classes knew their students better than departmentalized middle- and high-school teachers.

In the open-response questions, teachers shared two additional insights that are important to schools implementing mastery learning:

• Teachers said they needed more time for team meetings to develop common assessments with grade-level colleagues – both to improve the quality of assessment questions and to tap their colleagues' ideas on crafting better corrective activities.

• Teachers said their principals needed to play a more active role in getting teachers to routinely establish mastery-level criteria for formative assessments and more consistently implement mastery learning across the school.

"Feedback for Teachers: What Evidence Do Teachers Find Most Useful?" by Thomas Guskey and Laura Link in *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, Winter 2022 (Vol. 18, #4, pp. 9-20); the authors can be reached at guskey@uky.edu and laura.link@UND.edu.

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3. The Key Role of Alphabet Knowledge As Students Enter Kindergarten

In this *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk* article, Shayne Piasta, Jessica Logan, Tara Strang, and Laura Justice (Ohio State University) and Kristin Farley (Wittenberg University) report on their study of alphabet knowledge in school readiness. Children who enter kindergarten with low letter and letter-sound knowledge, say the authors, are at a significant disadvantage, tending to fall behind higher-knowledge peers in spelling, reading, vocabulary, and comprehension as they progress through the primary grades.

By studying 998 preschoolers over 14 months on how well they learned letter names and letter sounds, the researchers found that children fell into three categories (click the article link below to see graphs in Figure 1):

- High knowledge – These children knew most letters and sounds at the beginning of preschool and needed to learn only a few more to reach mastery. They tended to be older and have higher family incomes and greater levels of maternal education, less family risk for reading difficulties, and better home literacy environments (e.g., being read to from an early age).
- Delayed knowledge – These children entered preschool knowing few letters and sounds and made very little progress that year, entering kindergarten with big knowledge gaps; they tended to have fewer of the advantages of the high-knowledge group.
- Growing knowledge – These children started preschool with low levels of letter and letter-sound knowledge but learned most letters and sounds that year, almost catching up with the high-knowledge group. The researchers didn't find a clear explanation for these children's acceleration, although the home literacy environment seemed to be a factor.

"These findings," conclude the authors, "underscore the importance of considering children's alphabet knowledge development over time rather than simply initial or end levels, and imply that both level and growth rate should be considered in risk assessment." It's especially important, they say, to use data from preschool teachers to distinguish between growing- and delayed-knowledge children and implement effective diagnosis and instructional support for the latter in kindergarten and subsequent grades.

"Profiles and Predictors of Children's Growth in Alphabet Knowledge" by Shayne Piasta, Jessica Logan, Kristin Farley, Tara Strang, and Laura Justice in *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk* (JESPAR), January-March 2022 (Vol. 27, #1, pp. 1-26); Piasta can be reached at piasta.1@osu.edu.

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4. The Limitations of Grade-Point Averages

"Exploring and acknowledging the inherent shortcomings of grades and the GPA model should be a primary concern for those trying to achieve equitable solutions to student assessment," says Luke Green (St. Cloud Technical and Community College) in this *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* article. Green traces the origins of grading back to the 19th century, when narrative evaluations of students – cumbersome and subjective – were replaced by A-B-C-D-F and 4-3-2-1-0 scales – simpler and seemingly more universal. Grades summed up each student's attainment, ranging from 4 or A (highly desirable) to 0 or F (not at all desirable). GPAs were the next logical step, averaging grades over time – and, says Green, obliterating nuance.

But GPAs have a major impact on students' trajectories, as do grades throughout the K-12 progression – a fact that students are made well aware of when grades open (or close) access to gifted and advanced programs. "Increased emphasis on letter grades," says Green,

"perpetuates motivation to 'play the game of school' and encourages students to select a path of least resistance academically, as the reward for positive marks can supersede whether or not one was challenged or learned everything they could during their time in school."

At the elementary level, grades provide feedback to parents: *Your son is doing well in reading but needs to spend more time on math.* At the secondary level, grades can be a lever for compliance under the guise of preparing students for higher levels of study: *Your content is great, but you will get a bad grade for not following formatting rules*. At the college level, grades can be a definitive measure of academic potential, telling students whether they should continue to pursue a particular discipline.

In many classrooms, what it takes to get an A depends on the teacher, often factoring in non-academic factors like being a "good" student. Final tests can count for 40 percent of a final grade in one class, 5 percent in another, and there are wide variations in the importance of timeliness, behavior, grammar, and formatting. A 2011 study compared how 73 different English teachers evaluated the same student essay. The piece earned every grade from A to F, with a range of 46 percentage points. "The lack of agreement among instructors compounds as more pieces are added," says Green. "Despite this imprecision, and the inequitable grading criteria, there is little or no hesitation sending grades into a stream that flows into the river of GPA. Once there, the GPA enters the ocean of institutional transfer where all GPAs are assumed equal, and a 0.01 deviation in GPA can make or break a student being admitted to a receiving institution."

The grades given during the Covid-19 disruption – when many educators decided to "hold students harmless" – have a different meaning than those given in more normal times. "These calls for benevolence," says Green, "reaffirm an unspoken reality: grades can be used to harm students… Unfortunately, when equally life-altering disruptions happen on an individual level, the willingness of our policies to acknowledge hardship are often less kind and less equitable."

Ask any student for an example of unfair grades, he continues, and you'll hear troubling stories, but educators often brush aside these complaints – *Of course you would say that, you're a student*. Social class is at work, says Green: "Students who need to work to support their families, care for younger siblings, and lack parent support, are likely more apt to struggle with academic due dates, grammar expectations, and completing assignments on a rigid schedule. These salient variables are often not going to be considered or valued when looking at a transcript. A letter grade, in its current form, cannot begin to explain the performance of students in an equitable and meaningful way."

Green asks us to consider three students making their way through high school, each with a different trajectory:

- Student A enters ninth grade struggling academically and needs a great deal of effort and support to earn a C average for the year. Building on that foundation, he earns a B as a sophomore, and as a junior and senior, he takes challenging electives and earns an A average for each year.

- Student B enters ninth grade not very interested in the school experience, not eager to go above and beyond, but is well mannered and compliant and earns a B average for each year of high school.
- Student C enters from a middle-school gifted program and coasts to straight As in ninth and tenth grade. As a junior, she enrolls in easy electives, doesn't work very hard, and has a B+ average. Senior year is rough for a number of reasons, but she still gets a diploma despite a D+ average.

The astonishing thing is that all three students graduated with an identical cumulative GPA of 3.25.

"Individual course grades are messy," says Green, "but the longitudinal nature of GPA has laundered the different trajectories of the students, making it difficult to know the true story without poring over entire transcripts." Student A is a "poster child for the transformative power of what is possible when effective policy, committed educators, and students unite." Student B demonstrates that the school maintained and cultivated what it took to earn an above-average GPA. Student C spotlights failed opportunities for intervention.

"We are very quick to take a victory lap when simplistic statistics make us look good," Green concludes, "but we cannot be lulled into a false sense of confidence… From an education leader standpoint, any goal measured only by GPA without consideration of the deeper context misses the chance to best understand, and therefore serve, one's schools and one's students… Ideally, assessments are structured to yield helpful and nuanced data that provide schools insight on when and how to respond in order to advance our institutional missions. GPA does not provide this… Being mindful of the shortcomings encourages development of metrics and measures that are more finely tuned to yield nuanced results."

"[GPA] In, [GPA] Out: Uncovering Inequity and Flaws In Grading Policies" by Luke Green in *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, Winter 2022 (Vol. 18, #4, pp. 40-49); Green can be reached at LGreen@sctcc.edu.

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5. Assessing the Long-Term Value of Online Credit-Recovery Courses

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Jeff Murray says that remote credit-recovery courses have become increasingly popular, especially during the pandemic. The question is whether they are an accurate measure of students' academic achievement and translate into future school and job success. Murray summarizes a study of high-school graduates from 2010 to 2018 who had failed at least one course in a large urban school district in the Midwest. The study compared students who made up their failed courses with traditional in-person classes or a remote credit-recovery course.

After graduation, students in the two groups performed at comparable levels – students who made up credits with online courses had earnings on a par with students who took in-person classes. But four years after leaving high school, students who recovered credits online were earning an average of $3,000 less than those who took traditional courses. This gap seems to have been the result of lower wages or a slower rate of increase in wages over time.

This fits with labor market research, the researchers concluded. A high-school diploma tells employers about a person's work potential, but doesn't go into detail; an individual's ability is gradually revealed over time. The conclusion: online credit-recovery courses are weaker preparation for work than traditional make-up courses. "While we do not know how or why students sorted into the two credit-recovery pathways," says Murray, "the researchers do caution that the continued expansion of online credit recovery could lead to a devaluation of all high-school diplomas if its time-honored signal of work readiness is drawn into question in this manner."

"Online Credit Recovery and Long-Term Earnings Potential" by Jeff Murray in *Education Gadfly*, February 24, 2022

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6. Trauma-Informed Training Opens a Window Into Students' Lives

In this *JESPAR* article, Kim Anderson, Jasmine Haynes, Itunu Ilesanmi, and Norma Conner (University of Central Florida) say some teachers assume that acting-out behavior in their classrooms happens because students are intentionally defiant or aren't motivated to learn. Anderson et al. describe a professional development program that provided teachers in an urban K-8 school with insights on trauma-informed care, lesson plans, in-class support, and feedback on journal entries – all in partnership with a nonprofit organization, a health care provider, and a local university.

Students attending the school came from very low-income homes and neighborhoods with a high crime rate. "As participants came to understand the stress students endured in navigating their young lives," report the researchers, "their teaching practices and beliefs about learning changed… Participants came to understand how most of their students live in a constant state of mild to moderate anxiety. Thus, they often react to everyday events in the same way many individuals react under severe stress… They learned how not to personalize students' behaviors by understanding how such manifestations are an indirect expression of children's unmet social-emotional needs."

Many teachers also connected the PD to their own lives, which helped them deal with personal as well as professional stresses. Significantly, the level of burnout teachers said they experienced went down slightly, despite the challenges of remote school during the pandemic.

The researchers recommended using the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL, available free at https://proqol.org/proqol-measure) to measure educators' level of stress and identify those who are managing it well and could be a resource to their colleagues.

"Teacher Professional Development on Trauma-Informed Care: Tapping into Students' Inner Emotional Worlds" by Kim Anderson, Jasmine Haynes, Itunu Ilesanmi, and Norma Conner in *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk* (JESPAR), January-March 2022 (Vol. 27, #1, pp. 59-79); Anderson can be reached at kim.anderson@ucf.edu.

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7. A Teacher Imagines How He Would Spend $3,000

In this article in *Education Week*, San Diego teacher Thomas Courtney says he receives only $350 from the district for pencils, paper, student notebooks, printer ink, and other supplies. "We're using the front, back, and margins of all our lined sheets of paper, my friends," he says. Budget allocations like this are why the average U.S. teacher spends $750 out of pocket for classroom materials and supplies.

Courtney imagines getting $3,000, perhaps from pandemic relief funds, to spend on his fifth-grade classroom. Here's his wish list:

- High-quality, motivating, engaging books requested by students - $600
- Classroom supplies, including paper and markers - $600
- Equipment for physical and social interactions, including shared equipment for tetherball, basketball, soccer, four square, and a school garden - $600
- Curriculum materials, science supplies, and costumes for readers' theater - $600
- A budget for events hosting parents and community members for student presentations, including prizes like telescopes, and food for end-of-year celebrations - $600

"Imagine a classroom filled to the brim with the raw materials you want your children to have," says Courtney. "Imagine a class where the teacher and the students get what they need because your tax dollars finally go to the person best suited to purchase it for them. That's the kind of learning environment I want for my students."

"What Having Money for My Classroom Would Mean to Me" by Thomas Courtney in *Education Week*, February 23, 2022 (Vol. 41, #23, p. 23); click here for an article I wrote in 1974 describing how Roland Barth, as principal of a Massachusetts elementary principal, gave teachers control over their instructional materials budgets.

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8. Short Item:

Comparing the size of countries – This website allows us to compare a country's actual square-mile area with that of other countries, correcting distorted sizes on flat-map projections. For example, Ukraine is larger than France, and Greenland is dramatically smaller than it appears.

"The True Size" website by James Talmage and Damon Maneice, 2022

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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 52 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 150 articles each week, and selects 8-10 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.

Subscriptions:

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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 Express
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
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
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
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