Marshall Memo 845

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 13, 2020

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"The Covid-19 pandemic is giving us a hard lesson in the importance of science for all Americans, not just those preparing to become scientists."

Robert Slavin in "When Scientific Literacy Is a Matter of Life and Death" on Slavin's website, July 9, 2020; Slavin can be reached at rslavin@successforall.org.

"I have taken good online classes and bad online classes. What determines their quality has little to do with the format itself and everything to do with the teacher's pedagogy, their grasp of the technology, and their ability to design a course around that."

Shalon van Tine (University of Maryland) in "The Bias Against Online Teaching" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 10, 2020 (Vol. 66, #33, p. 14)

"There's a limit to how good a lesson can be when you're trying to interact with your students through a keyhole in the door."

Doug Lemov, quoted in "The Worst Is Yet to Come" by Robert Pondiscio in *Education Week*, June 10, 2020

"It can be difficult when praise for your intelligence is because you're actually intelligent or they're surprised by the level of your intelligence."

Aingkhu Ashemu, Howard University student, in "What Needs to Change?" in *School Library Journal*, July 2020 (Vol. 66, #7, p. 10)

"I became more mindful of how much I was actually picking up my phone without a purpose, just to be able to do something."

A high-school student after a program aimed at reducing screen time (see item #6)

1. Cheerleading Won't Help Someone Fearful of Covid-19

In this *New York Times* article, Anna Goldfarb says that trying to cheer up people who have serious worries about the pandemic is well-intentioned but unproductive. Some examples:

- *Everything is going to be okay.*
- *At least you didn't lose your job.*
- *Think happy thoughts!*
- *Be grateful you can use this time to explore a new hobby.*
- *This won't last forever, and you're resourceful; you'll come out on top.*

Statements like these often make the other person feel "unheard, frustrated, unsupported, and alone," says psychotherapist Nicolle Osequeda. Goldfarb summarizes advice from several experts on how to short-circuit this all-too-common tendency:

• *Don't minimize*. Citing reassuring statistics or saying the vast majority of people make a complete recovery from the virus doesn't help someone manage very real fears.

• *Avoid problem-solving*. Statements that begin, *You just need to…* or *All you need to do is…* come across as dismissing fears about finances, safety, and health. Similarly, it's a good idea to avoid the word "should" – for example, *You should just practice self-care*.

• *Don't give unsolicited advice*. "Most likely, people are just looking for an ear," says clinician Ayanna Abrams. "They're looking for a heart, somebody who can meet them in the experience and then they can better figure it out on their own."

• *Reflect, validate, and ask*. "The antidote to dismissive positivity is just to really listen to what someone is experiencing," says Abrams: mirror the emotion; affirm that it's real; and show curiosity about how the person is doing:

- *I can't imagine how this must feel for you, and I'm here to listen.*
- *Ugh, that sounds really hard.*
- *Having to work full throttle amid all of this is really challenging.*
- *It is hard to not know what's next.*
- *Tell me more about what's going on.*
- *What aspect of the coronavirus worries you the most?*

The important thing is for a fearful person to feel normal about being afraid – that their emotions are valid.

• *If you mess up, you can have a do-over*. Having slipped into dismissive positivity, it's possible to try again – for example: "Hey, I noticed when we were talking earlier, it didn't seem like you were connecting with what I was saying. I realize I slipped into cheerleader mode too quickly. Can we try again?"

• *Ask directly what will be helpful*. "Recruit them as an ally so you can face the issue together," concludes Goldfarb.

"People Fearful About Coronavirus Don't Need Cheering Up" by Anna Goldfarb in *The New York Times*, July 6, 2020

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2. How Cognitive Biases Affect the Way We Assess Risk

In this *New York Times* article, A.C. Shilton says that as Covid-19 lockdowns are eased, people are figuring out how bold and how cautious to be. The problem, say social psychologists, is that we're not very good at assessing risk – especially our own. Here's why:

• *Optimism bias* – People tend to believe their own risk is less than that of others. We eat bacon knowing there's a correlation between processed meats and colon cancer, but believe it won't happen to us. This bias is strongest in individualistic societies like the U.S.

• *A false sense of control* – We feel safer at the wheel of a car than sitting passively in an airplane – even though driving is far riskier than flying. During the pandemic, we feel good about washing our hands and wearing a mask, but just as important is social distancing, which is trickier to control.

• *Mixed cues* – Unlike the dangers of smoking, about which there are almost unanimous cultural messages from all sides, cautionary information about Covid-19 has been far less clear.

• *Confirmation bias* – The answer we get if we Google *Is it safe to dine outdoors during the pandemic?* will produce information confirming the tilt of the question. To get the full range of opinion, we should also Google *Dangers of dining outdoors during the pandemic*.

• *Exposure therapy* – Living with coronavirus month after month wears down our anxiety and can make us overconfident. "What is also playing into our psychology," says Shilton, "is simply our deep desire to have a sliver of normalcy back in our lives." This can lead us to take risks that we wouldn't have taken back in March, even though the risks could be greater now.

"Humans Fail the Math of Risk Assessment" by A.C. Shilton in *The New York Times*, July 6, 2020

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3. Encouraging Kindergarten Play During Remote Learning

In this *Edutopia* article, California teacher Madeleine Rogin says she really misses watching her kindergarten students play. "Play provides opportunities for self-discovery and social connections," she says, "and it allows kids to try out ideas and use what they are learning in their academic subjects in a less-pressured environment… Play is a time when mistakes can be deeply explored, because children are intrinsically motivated to repair a friendship or rebuild a structure." Rogin especially misses hearing statements like, "If you say it without yelling, I can hear you better."

How can young children's play be incorporated in remote learning? Rogin has the

following suggestions:

• Tell families that you care as much about unstructured play as academics. Block out time for such activities, just as you do for reading and science. Ask families to share photos of their children playing fantasy games or showing off forts and inventions.

• Schedule one-on-one time with each student and get details about their play activities. "Think about how what this child is saying teaches you something new about them that you could incorporate into a lesson later," says Rogin.

• During synchronous class meetings, enthuse about play and foster a growth mindset. You might ask, "What's one thing you've built at home that you are proud of?" or "What was something you kept trying to do even though it was hard?"

• Incorporate games into online teaching. Rogin has used freeze dance, I Spy, scavenger hunts, and a game where each person tries to make another person smile.

• Share strategies for working through frustrations involving peers and family members. Prime topics for discussion are specific ways of developing emotional regulation: taking a break, running around in circles, or talking it out. Students might have a place to record their difficult moments. All this tells students that even though they're not together in the classroom, they are still part of a community that solves problems together.

"Someday, we will return to our classrooms," Rogin concludes, "and when we do, I hope our students come back having played, taken risks, tried new things, dreamed, and discovered more about themselves and each other."

"Emphasizing the Importance of Play During Distance Learning" by Madeleine Rogin in *Edutopia*, July 6, 2020

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4. Discussing Racism with Elementary Students

In this article in *Education Week*, veteran elementary teacher Malcolm Gillard, distraught about the killing of George Floyd, remembered the question a 10-year-old white student asked him in class after the death of Philando Castile in 2016. Was Gillard, as an African-American man, afraid he might get shot by a police officer? "Fighting back my emotions," he says, "I managed to explain that my worst fear was not dying at the hands of a police officer, but rather having my mother experience the incredible pain that many mothers have over the deaths of their black sons." A discussion ensued and the class seemed to appreciate hearing honest answers to their questions. One student said it was a topic that adults, including their parents, were avoiding.

The next day, Gillard's principal pulled him aside and said that a white parent had complained about the discussion, saying, "I don't understand why he would be afraid of the police unless he is doing something illegal." The principal listened to Gillard's description of the previous day's discussion and was fully supportive of the teacher.

"It struck me," says Gillard, "that white people often just don't get it; they will never understand the experiences of a person of color. Their view of our society is transparently different. For me, this only increases the urgency of having all our students understand the

struggle that black communities face each and every day." Here are the steps he believes every school needs to take:

- All staff having authentic discussions of their personal experiences with racism;
- Professional learning on systemic inequity, bias, racism in all its forms, and the history of civil rights;
- Joining in a commitment to self-reflection, empathy, and compassion;
- The goal: students and staff demonstrating respect toward all racial groups, and a school climate free of bias.

"Do White People Get It? Racism Through the Eyes of a Black Male Teacher" by Malcolm Gillard in *Education Week Teacher*, July 7, 2020

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5. Listening 101

In this *New York Times* article, author Kate Murphy asks about positive experiences with listening, when a conversational partner "was so attentive to what you were saying and whose response was so spot on that you felt truly understood." All too often, good listening is not happening: the listener is interrupting, glancing at a phone, responding in a way that's all about them, or simply tuning out behind earbuds. This is a shame, says Murphy, because listening "is fundamental to any successful relationship – personal, professional, and political… It is only by listening that we engage, understand, empathize, cooperate, and develop as human beings… We are, each of us, the sum of what we attend to in life."

Preparing to write a book about listening, Murphy studied neuroscience, psychology, and sociology and interviewed, among others, a bartender, a priest, a radio producer, a CIA agent, a focus group moderator, and a furniture salesperson. "I discovered that listening goes beyond simply hearing what people say," she reports. "It also involves paying attention to how they say it and what they do while they are saying it, in what context, and how what they say resonates with you." Although some people have better natural ability than others, listening is a skill that most of us need to practice and develop.

A vital part of listening is actively responding, asking questions, helping other people express themselves completely. "Anyone can be interesting if you ask the right questions," says Murphy. And the right questions are not the usual ones about birthplace, college, job, marital status, and children. "Instead," says Murphy, "ask about people's interests. Try to find out what excites or aggravates them – their daily pleasures or what keeps them up at night. Ask them about the last movie they saw or for the story behind a piece of jewelry they're wearing." Pose expansive, creativity-provoking questions like, *If you could spend a month anywhere in the world, where would you go?*

Taking mental off-ramps is a perennial challenge when listening, and this is especially problematic when listeners have high I.Q.s, says Murphy, because they tend to be more neurotic and self-conscious and keep thinking about other stuff. She suggests using meditation

techniques, acknowledging that there are these distracting thoughts and returning to the focus – in this case, the other person.

Listening well is its own reward, Murphy concludes, because it brings out the best in others, and often makes them listen better when we talk.

"Talk Less. Listen More. Here's How" by Kate Murphy in *The New York Times*, January 9, 2020; Murphy's recent book is *You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters* (Celadon Books, 2020)

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6. Helping High-School Students Cut Down Their Technology Use

In this *English Journal* article, Julie Harding describes what she's observed in her English students in recent years: increasing stress associated with grades and standardized testing. Harding and her colleagues attended workshops on mindfulness and social-emotional learning, but she wasn't convinced that having students meditate would alleviate their anxiety. She became increasingly convinced that students' cellphones were the most important vector for stress, and decided to conduct a small experiment.

In May 2019, Harding launched a Technology Reflection Project with a group of 25 honors sophomores. On the first day, students were given Google Forms and asked to keep track of exactly how they were using their devices throughout the day. Parents were asked to use the same template to report their observations of their children's technology use. Harding then showed students how to gather data from their phones – screen time, pickups, apps used, and more. The kids eagerly perused their data and compared themselves to national averages.

The next step was having students set personal goals and come up with strategies for accomplishing them – for example, turning off the phone two hours before bedtime, or giving the phone to a parent while studying. Students were surprised when their teacher told them that she was doing the same data-gathering and reflection. Harding's big goals: spending less time on Facebook and being more available to her husband and son (they had a word for her when she was immersed in her device: "phone-blivion"). "After I shared this information with my students," says Harding, "they looked at me with new respect. *You're right*, their eyes said. We do use our phones too much, and maybe this can help us solve some of the problems we've been complaining about."

Each day there were check-ins and students got enthusiastic praise for progress – a high-five for a girl who went from 100 pickups a day to 50 ("You have no idea how hard that was for me," she said). Harding pushed them to set specific goals and gave them suggestions:

- Go somewhere with your friends or family leaving your phone at home.
- Delete at least one social media app.
- Reduce the number of pickups by 10 percent.
- Don't take your phone out during lunch, study hall, or on the bus.
- Say hello and strike up a conversation with someone in the school you don't know.
- Avoid all social media during school hours.

Harding assigned students to "home groups" that met every day to compare notes. If all students met their goals, they got to choose a song for the beginning of the class. Groups that met all their goals for a week got a snack from the teacher. "By making this a fun and introspective part of class," says Harding, "I communicated a central message to my students: your technology use is important enough to me, an adult in your life, that I am willing to take time in my class to address it. In response, students overwhelmingly embraced the challenge and its lessons."

Harding surveyed students at the end of the two-week experiment. Here are some comments on what changed and what kids said they were doing with their "found" time:

- I don't compulsively look at my phone every ten minutes.
- I was able to reduce my average screen time from six hours to two or three hours.
- I found time to go outside and take part in physical exercise.
- I was able to stay more productive while in school by using my time during study hall and after school at home.
- I got more sleep.
- I found more time for leisure reading. This taught me to focus on myself rather than scrolling through social media.
- I got fewer headaches.
- I became more mindful of how much I was actually picking up my phone without a purpose, just to be able to do something.
- I learned that lunch is a valuable time to do work and talk with friends.
- I accomplished not having the "guilty" feeling after using social media at home.

Fully 95 percent of students said they would continue limiting technology use in the future.

"Unearthing the Problem: Social-Emotional Learning in the High-School English Classroom" by Julie Harding in *English Journal*, May 2020 (Vol. 109, #5, pp. 73-80); Harding can be reached at jharding@bernardsboe.com.

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7. "This Is Pretty Easy" – Not the Best Thing to Say to Students

In this article in *Edutopia*, New Jersey teacher Holly Hagman remembers her high-school calculus teacher saying that a set of review problems "should be pretty easy." Hagman found the problems really hard and got increasingly frustrated. "I tried and tried," she says, "but it wasn't easy. I looked around the room, and it seemed like my classmates were blowing through the problems, so I kept my pencil in my fist and my eyes on the paper until the final bell."

The word *easy* is "literally and figuratively a four-letter word," says Hagman. It creates a standard that some students won't be able to meet and indirectly, and with the best intentions, undermines those students' confidence and performance. Casually using the word easy can also trigger negative self-talk: *Why don't I understand this? What am I doing wrong? Am I stupid?* Fearing embarrassment, the student is unlikely to reach out for help.

Hagman suggests refraining from calling work easy, instead addressing the underlying issue with alternatives like these:

• *Practice makes perfect; you are capable of doing this*. Students should understand there's no stigma in having to work on a skill on their own, at home, or in a study group.

• *Remind students of strengths*. "The essay you wrote about *A Streetcar Named Desire* was fantastic. Try to use that same energy to dissect this poem."

• *It's okay to struggle*. It's reassuring to students when teachers describe areas in which they felt challenged and made mistakes. Hagman says she frequently tells about her difficulty with calculus, fostering a growth mindset.

• *This is easy for me, but I've been doing it for a long time*. It makes sense to students that a content-area expert finds something easy. Realizing that might even inspire kids to work toward that level of mastery.

"One Word to Drop from Your Teacher Vocabulary" by Holly Hagman in *Edutopia*, June 24, 2020; Hagman can be reached at hagmanholly@gmail.com.

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8. One Way to Change a Toxic Colleague

In this article on his website, high-school teacher Dave Stuart shares a story sent to him by James, a teacher in Australia. James (a pseudonym) said that in his school, a "very gifted and wonderful teacher" constantly made cynical, negative comments in the staff lounge, which poisoned the school's adult culture. Perturbed by the way his own morale was being affected, James hit upon an unusual intervention. He typed up a short letter to his negative colleague offering genuine, detailed praise for classroom performance and slipped it anonymously into the person's mailbox (James did not reveal the gender of the malefactor). The next morning James passed the recipient reading the letter in the corridor, muttering, "What on earth is this…?"

Later on, teachers were abuzz with what had happened, and James listened with silent amusement. A day later the anonymous letter had been forgotten, but something else occurred. "There was an immediate cessation to all negative comments in the staff room," says James, "and this lasted right into the next year – some months later. I was able to finish the year in peace, and above all else I felt surprisingly empowered by this simple action – I could do something to change what had seemed to me to be an impossibly intractable situation."

Stuart got goosebumps reading this story and lists several reasons he believes James's strategy was so elegant:

- It came from instinct, not from a book or research report James had read.
- The intervention was spontaneous, quick, and not overthought.
- The fact that the letter was anonymous showed James's humility – no ego involvement.
- The "effort-to-impact" ratio was impressive: 10-20 minutes of writing produced months of positive culture change.

"A Beautiful, Simple Strategy for Improving Your School Culture" by Dave Stuart Jr., July 9, 2020; Stuart can be reached at dave@davestuartjr.com.

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9. Recommended Children's Books Featuring Latinx Luminaries

In this *School Library Journal* feature, New York City librarian Shelley Diaz recommends recent biographies featuring notable Latinx men and women:

• *Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré* by Anika Aldamuy Denise, illustrated by Paola Escobar (HarperCollins/Harper, 2019), grades K-3

• *Dancing Hands: When Teresa Carreño Played the Piano for President Lincoln* by Margarita Engle, illustrated by Rafael López (S&S/Atheneum, 2019), grades PreK-2

• *Digging for Words: Jose Alberto Gutierrez and the Library He Built* by Angela Burke Kunkel, illustrated by Paola Escobar (Random/Schwartz & Wade (2020), grades 1-3

• *My Shoes and I: Crossing Three Borders/Mis Zapatos y Yo: Cruzando Tres Fronteras* by René Colato Laínez, illustrated by Fabricio Vanden Broeck (Arte Publico/Piñata, 2019), grades 1-3

• *Mario and the Hole in the Sky: How a Chemist Saved Our Planet* by Elizabeth Rusch, illustrated by Teresa Martinez (Charlesbridge, 2019), grades 1-4

• *Soldier for Equality: José de la Luz Sáenz and the Great War* by Duncan Tonatiuh (Abrams, 2019), grades 1-3

• *Sharuko: El Arqueólogo Peruano Julio C. Tello/Peruvian Archaeologist Julio C. Tello* by Monica Brown, illustrated by Elisa Chavarri (Lee & Low/Children's Press, 2020), grades 2-5

• *Queen of Tejano Music: Selena* by Silvia López, illustrated by Paola Escobar (Little Bee, 2020), grades 2-5

• *Nacho's Nachos: The Story Behind the World's Favorite Snack* by Sandra Nickel, illustrated by Oliver Dominguez (Lee & Low, 2020), grades 3-6

• *Little Heroes of Color: 50 Who Made a Big Difference* by David Heredia (Scholastic/Cartwheel, 2019), grades PreK-K

• *Be Bold! Be Brave! 11 Latinas Who Made U.S. History/¡Se Audaz! /¡Se Valiente!: 11 Latinas que Hicieron Historia en Estados Unidos* by Naibe Reynoso, illustrated by Jone Leal (Con Todo Press, 2019), grades 1-3

• *Fearless Trailblazers: 11 Latinos Who Made U.S. History/Pioneros Audaces: 11 Latinos que Hicieron Historia en Estados Unidos* by Naibe Reynoso, illustrated by Jone Leal (Con Todo Press, 2019), grades 1-3

•*Había Una Vez… Mexicanas Que Hicieron Historia* by Pedro Fernandez, illustrated by various artists (Alfaguaara Infantil, 2019), grades 3-7

"Latinx Luminaries: Picture Book Biographies Featuring Latinx Superstars" by Shelley Diaz in *School Library Journal*, July 2020 (Vol. 66, #7, pp. 36-39)

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10. Short Items:

a. Suggested Antiracist Texts – Teacher/consultant Alexis Wiggins has created this comprehensive list of suggested long fiction, nonfiction/memoir, graphic novels, short stories, poems, essays, epic poetry, oral tales and songs, films, podcasts, multimedia resources, visual artists, and readings with data and graphs.

"A New Antiracist Canon – Suggested Texts" by Alexis Wiggins, July 2020; Wiggins can be reached at awiggins@ceelcenter.org.

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b. Device-Free Family Dinners – The Family Dinner Project is dedicated to improving the quality of family meals together with no technology present– which research has shown to have remarkable benefits for all involved.

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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.

Subscriptions:

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Website:

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- The current issue (in Word and PDF)
- All back issues (Word and PDF) and podcasts
- An easily searchable archive of all articles so far
- The "classic" articles from all 16+ years

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