Marshall Memo 579

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 23, 2015

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"It is utopian to think that most American children will master the Common Core standards immediately. It's defeatist to think that schools can't do anything to help their students make progress toward that lofty objective. And it's disingenuous to take either of these extreme positions in this debate."

> Michael Petrilli in "Eva et al. Flunk the Fairness Test" in *The Education Gadfly*, March 18, 2015 (Vol. 15, #11), http://edexcellence.net/articles/eva-et-al-flunk-the-fairness-test

"If a leader checks in less often than once a week, the team member's priorities may become vague and aspirational, and the leader can't be helpful – and the conversation will shift from coaching for near-term work to giving feedback about past performance."

> Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall (see item #2)

"Test scores should never be a surprise. You don't need to be a mind reader. You just need a formative assessment toolbox, and you need to use it every day."

> Vicki Davis (see item #5)

"Children know what they know. They bring what they bring. Our job is not to wish that students knew more or knew differently. Our job is to turn students' individual knowledge – and the collective range of knowledge the whole class brings – into a curricular strength, rather than to regard it as an instructional inconvenience. We can do that only if we hold high expectations for all students, convey great respect for the knowledge, language, and culture each brings to the classroom, and offer support in helping each student achieve those high expectations."

> Eric Cooper (National Urban Alliance for Effective Education) and David Pearson (University of California/Berkeley) in a letter to *Education Week,* March 18, 2015, responding to a letter in a previous issue on the impact of poverty www.edweek.org

1. David Brooks on Key Skills for the 21st Century

"As the economy changes, the skills required to thrive in it change, too," says David Brooks in this *New York Times* column, "and it takes a while before these new skills are defined and acknowledged." He gives several examples:

• *Herding cats* – Doug Lemov has catalogued the "micro-gestures" of especially effective teachers in his book, *Teach Like a Champion 2.0* (Jossey-Bass, 2015). "The master of cat herding," says Brooks, "senses when attention is about to wander, knows how fast to move a diverse group, senses the rhythm between lecturing and class participation, varies the emotional tone. This is a performance skill that surely is relevant beyond education."

• *Social courage* – In today's loosely networked world, this has particular value – the ability to go to a conference, meet a variety of people, invite six of them to lunch afterward, and form long-term friendships with four of them. "People with social courage are extroverted in issuing invitations but introverted in conversation – willing to listen 70 percent of the time," says Brooks. "They build not just contacts but actual friendships by engaging people on multiple levels."

• *Capturing amorphous trends with a clarifying label* – People with this skill can "look at a complex situation, grasp the gist and clarify it by *naming what is going on*," says Brooks. He quotes Oswald Chambers: "The author who benefits you most is not the one who tells you something you did not know before, but the one who gives expression to the truth that has been dumbly struggling in you for utterance."

• *Making nonhuman things intuitive to humans* – This is what Steve Jobs did so well.

• *Purpose provision* – "Many people go through life overwhelmed by options, afraid of closing off opportunities," says Brooks. But a few have fully cultivated moral passions that can help others choose the one thing they should dedicate themselves to."

• *The ability to simultaneously hold two opposed ideas in mind* – "For some reason," says Brooks, "I am continually running across people who believe this is the ability their employees and bosses need right now."

• *Cross-class expertise* – "In a world divided along class, ethnic, and economic grounds," says Brooks, "some people are culturally multilingual. They can operate in an insular social niche while seeing it from the vantage point of an outsider."

"Skills in Flux" by David Brooks in *The New York Times*, March 17, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/17/opinion/skills-in-flux.html?_r=0

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2. A Company Rethinks Performance Evaluation

In this *Harvard Business Review* article with possible relevance to K-12 schools, author/consultant Marcus Buckingham and Deloitte Services PD director Ashley Goodall describe how Deloitte radically revamped its performance management process. Here's what drove the changes:

- A survey of executives showed that 58 percent believed the old system didn't foster employee engagement or improve performance.
- Having employees set goals once a year was too "batched" for real-time monitoring.
- Holding evaluation conversations only once a year meant that people weren't getting timely feedback on current projects.
- Ratings of employees had a significant element of subjectivity. According to one study, "ratings reveal more about the rater than they do about the ratee."
- The evaluation process didn't seem to be building on the strengths of high-performing teams, including these beliefs: "I have the chance to use my strengths every day," "My coworkers are committed to doing quality work," and "The mission of our company inspires me."
- The process of completing forms, holding meetings, and creating annual ratings consumed close to 2 million hours a year (in a company of 65,000 employees).

"As we studied how those hours were spent," say Buckingham and Goodall. "…we wondered if we could somehow shift our investment of time from talking to ourselves about ratings to talking to our people about their performance and careers – from a focus on the past to a focus on the future."

The first step was articulating the purpose of improved performance evaluation process. As Buckingham and Goodall saw it, the goals were:

- To accurately *see* each individual's performance;
- To *continuously improve* performance;
- To *reward* good work.

Deloitte decided to pursue the first goal by taking much more frequent "performance snapshots" at the completion of projects and, for long-range work, every quarter. To reduce the element of subjectivity, the company shifted from asking managers that they *thought* about each employee to a specific *action* they might or might not take. Here are the questions managers answered in each performance snapshot:

- Given what I know of this person's performance, and if it were my money, would I award this person the highest possible compensation increase and bonus?
- Given what I know of this person's performance, would I always want him or her on my team?
- Is this person at risk for low performance?
- Is this person ready for a promotion today?

"When we aggregate these data points over a year," say Buckingham and Goodall, "weighting each according to the duration of a given project, we produce a rich stream of information for leaders' discussion of what they, in turn, will do… In this aggregation of simple but powerful

data points, we see the possibility of shifting our 2-million-hour annual investment from talking about the ratings to talking about our people – from ascertaining the facts of performance to considering what we should do in response to those facts."

On the second goal (continuously improving performance), Buckingham and Goodall decided that weekly check-in meetings by a team leader close to each person's work were essential. "For us, these check-ins are not *in addition* to the work of a team leader," they say; "they *are* the work of a team leader… These brief conversations allow leaders to set expectations for the upcoming week, review priorities, comment on recent work, and provide course correction, coaching, or important new information. The conversations provide clarity regarding what is expected of each team member and why, what great work looks like, and how each can do his or her best work in the upcoming days – in other words, exactly the trinity of purpose, expectations, and strengths that characterize our best teams… If a leader checks in less often than once a week, the team member's priorities may become vague and aspirational, and the leader can't be helpful – and the conversation will shift from coaching for near-term work to giving feedback about past performance… If you want people to talk about how to do their best work in the near future, they need to talk often."

To accomplish the three goals – *seeing, improving,* and *rewarding* performance – Deloitte put in place three interlocking rituals:

- The per-project or quarterly performance snapshot;
- The weekly check-in;
- The annual evaluation and compensation decision.

Deloitte hasn't resolved one important issue: will employees be able to see their performance snapshot ratings? Deloitte's initial thought was to keep those confidential. Why? Because experience had shown that when evaluations are shared, they tend to be sugarcoated. But don't employees have a right to know how they are doing? ask Buckingham and Goodall. As the company has wrestled with this question, leaders wonder whether the simplified data points are a problem. "Our question now," conclude Buckingham and Goodall, "is not *What is the simplest view of you?* but *What is the richest?*

"Reinventing Performance Management" by Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall in *Harvard Business Review*, April 2015 (Vol. 93, #4, p. 40-50), https://hbr.org/2015/04/reinventing-performance-management

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3. Rebutting Spurious Arguments Against the Common Core

In this *Education Gadfly* article, literacy guru Tim Shanahan (University of Illinois/ Chicago) advises candidates running for the U.S. presidency to steer clear of the following arguments being made by some opponents of the Common Core:

• *Previous educational standards were better*. Not true, says Shanahan: "Parents who are paying for remedial college classes or employers who are struggling to hire high-school graduates with basic skills may become particularly testy over this argument."

• *Teachers weren't involved in writing the Common Core*. Actually, many teachers worked on the standards, says Shanahan. The real issue is their quality, which be believes is sound.

• *They promote theories of evolution and global warming*. No, he says, since the new standards don't cover science, history, or current events.

• *The Common Core isn't research-based*. Standards are aspirational goals, says Shanahan. "Standards aren't teaching methods; they aren't approaches to instruction. When the critics say that some states should have tried these out first to find out if they're any good, it's like saying that some states should aim for 4 percent unemployment and others for 8 percent – so that we can know whether we want people to find jobs."

• *They require too much testing*. State standards and testing have been in place for the last 20 years, he says, and Common Core doesn't represent a major change.

• *They are the reason for all the test prep*. "Test prep, though unsavory, has nothing to do with Common Core," says Shanahan. Reducing test prep is a separate issue – and an important one.

• *Publishers are making money from them*. There's no question that government programs lead to the purchase of goods and services, he says – that's true of the U.S. armed forces, Medicare, and Social Security. The issue is the quality of those goods and services.

• *The U.S. Constitution bans national curricula*. True, the Constitution leaves education to the states. The Common Core is voluntary and there's no constitutional barrier to the federal government creating incentives for states to choose standards and hold schools accountable.

• *Common Core violates states' rights*. "The states, being sovereign entities, have the authority to coordinate with each other as much as they choose," says Shanahan. And they have the right to adopt or take a pass on Common Core.

• *These are President Obama's standards*. Although candidate Obama supported higher standards and accountability testing in 2008 and his Department of Education has created incentives to adopt Common Core and funded test-development efforts, the standards themselves were developed without federal support or involvement.

"Ten Arguments Against Common Core Presidential Hopefuls Should Avoid" by Tim Shanahan in *The Education Gadfly*, March 18, 2015 (Vol. 15, #11), http://bit.ly/19fhf8J

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4. Text Complexity Versus Lexile Levels

"When do we need to read text closely?" asks author/consultant Stephanie Harvey in this article in *Reading Today*. When it's *complex*. "To comprehend complex text," she says, "readers need to slow down, consider what they know, ask questions, annotate, synthesize, think inferentially, and reread for clarification." But Harvey cautions against using Lexile levels as the main criterion and forcing students to read too-difficult texts that aren't conducive to good comprehension instruction. She cites several telling examples:

- J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* has the almost same Lexile Level as Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Why? Rowling uses long sentences, multisyllabic words, and made-up names while Hemingway's prose is minimalist and requires us to stop, think, and infer what's not said.
- *Henry and Mudge* is a beloved book among first and second graders, and its 460 Lexile rating compares to *Sarah Plain and Tall's* 430 because of the repeated use of the word Mudge.
- *Tikki Tikki Tembo* is a simple text with a Lexile level of 1090, and one of the most complex sentences in the English language, "To be or not to be, that is the question," has a very low Lexile level.
- An article in *United Hemisphere's Magazine* with an upper-elementary Lexile level says that humans kill about 73 million sharks a year. A fisherman in Palau makes $108 for catching a shark to make shark soup, whereas a shark left to live freely in a sanctuary adds nearly $2 million to that island's tourist economy – which would seem to be a straightforward argument for not killing sharks. But the text becomes more complex – and more appropriate to close reading – when students learn that the average annual income of a fisherman in Palau is less than $1,000.

"It's not merely the Lexile level," says Harvey. "Complexity is borne from ideas, not words… If we want kids to be prepared for college, careers, and life, we need to engage them with true complexity. We need to help them distinguish between complex problems and simple ones, to look at the multifaceted nature of an issue and view it through different lenses. So let's resist the urge to dumb down complexity to a Lexile level. Let's excite kids with significant ideas and issues that permeate today's world – and then give them the strategies they need to dig in and figure it out."

"Digging Deeper: At Its Core, Close Reading Is Strategic Reading" by Stephanie Harvey in *Reading Today*, March/April 2015 (Vol. 32, #5, p. 30-31), www.ila.com; Harvey can be reached at contact@stephanieharvey.com.

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5. Effective Use of On-the-Spot (a.k.a. Formative) Assessments

In this *Edutopia* article, Vicki Davis describes a telling moment as she taught binary numbers to her students (adding ones and zeroes like a computer). This topic looks harder than it is, says Davis, and she's found that if she teaches students to count by binary numbers, they usually get it. After a few minutes of this, two students piped up, "We've got this, it's easy. Can we move on?" Davis checked with the rest of the class: "Do you have this?" They all vigorously nodded their heads in assent.

"My teacher instinct said that everyone knew it," says Davis, "but I decided to experiment. So I wrote a problem on the board. Students were already logged into Socrative, and a box opened on their screens. Each student typed in his or her answer to the problem. They clicked enter, and all their answers appeared on my screen beside the name of each student." Davis was shocked to see that only two students had the correct answer – the two

students who had impatiently asked her to move on. Not one of the students who confidently nodded that they understood was able to answer the problem correctly.

Davis retaught the concept, had students try another problem in Socrative, and the results improved a little. She worked another slightly different problem and checked in, and more students got it. Ten minutes later, the entire class had mastered binary numbers.

Is this checking-for-understanding and reteaching process too time-consuming to be a realistic option, given the pressure to cover the curriculum? Not at all, says Davis: "It didn't take me longer to teach binary numbers. You see, I don't move past binary numbers until all of my students are scoring 90 percent or higher. And as a result of this experience, *I taught binary numbers and all of the accompanying standards in three days instead of my usual five, and no one had to come for after-school tutoring*."

The key, she says, is an anonymous all-class assessment system that allows the teacher to see what's really going on in students' minds without "the embarrassment of public hand-raising." She recommends the following real-time checking-for-understanding systems:

- Socrative – It can be used on the fly, for quick quizzes, or for tests that count, and also works with competitive games like Space Race: http://www.socrative.com
- Kahoot – This program allows teachers to create quizzes, flashcards, and review games, with students using computers, cell phones, or other devices: https://getkahoot.com
- Zaption – This tool can embed questions within a flipped video, not allowing students to continue till they've answered each one correctly: https://www.zaption.com
- Backchannel chat tools – These are live chats that accompany class discussions and allow teachers to create exit ticket activities. One example: http://www.chatzy.com
- Plickers – Each student holds up a unique QR card, with its orientation signaling their response to a 4-choice question, and the teacher's smartphone reads and instantly tabulates individual and all-class responses: https://www.plickers.com.

"Test scores should never be a surprise," concludes Davis. "You don't need to be a mind reader. You just need a formative assessment toolbox, and you need to use it every day."

"5 Fantastic, Fast, Formative Assessment Tools" by Vicki Davis in *Edutopia*, January 15, 2015, http://bit.ly/1xUUm0J

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6. Shifting the Way Fractions Are Taught in Fourth Grade

In this article in *Teaching Children Mathematics*, Daniel Freeman (RTI coordinator in Arlington ISD, Texas) and Theresa Jorgensen (University of Texas/Arlington) say that teaching fractions as part/whole relationships in pizzas, brownies, or other area models is fine in the lower-elementary grades, but in upper elementary, students need to transition to a more-sophisticated understanding – that fractions are numbers in and of themselves, not a composition of two distinct whole numbers. Indeed, Common Core expectations are that by the time students leave fourth grade, they need to understand fractions as measures – "that is," say Freeman and Jorgensen, "understanding both the relative size of fractions (e.g., ¾ is a bigger number than ½) and understanding how fractions measure specific intervals (e.g., an eraser is

¾ inch wide)." The number line turns out to be the best way to help students move to this understanding of fractions.

Freeman and Jorgensen caution against introducing standard algorithms for working with fractions (for example, invert and multiply) before students get a solid grasp of fraction concepts: "They may know what to do while simultaneously being unable to explain why they are doing it." The authors describe how fourth graders approached their teacher's request to compare 2/3 and 3/5 after several weeks of working with fractions and number lines. Most students sketched two number lines and displayed where these fractions fell compared to one half and one whole. After some sharing and discussion, one student hit upon the idea of chopping the two number lines into fifteenths (the common denominator) and showing where 2/3 fell (10/15) compared to 3/5 (9/15) – a moment that Freeman and Jorgenson describe as "thrilling."

"Moving Beyond Brownies and Pizza" by Daniel Freeman and Theresa Jorgensen in *Teaching Children Mathematics*, March 2015 (Vol. 21, #7, p. 412-420), http://bit.ly/1GMJCGU for NCTM members; the authors can be reached at dfreema1@aisd.net and jorgensen@uta.edu. [See Memo 494 for a related article on fractions teaching as key to success in algebra.]

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7. Should Students Be Able to Stand Up During Class?

In this *Edutopia* article, Canadian teacher Alana Guinane and six of her middle-school students describe how they did research on the unhealthy consequences of being sedentary for long periods of time. "Our school is set up for sitting," they say: "the benches in the cafeteria, the rows of desks and 'seating arrangements' in the classrooms, the chairs lined up in front of each computer in the lab, the couches in the library. We are expected to sit for basically every class except for gym." Students wondered how they could be more physically active in school without undermining classroom management.

After some discussion, one of Guinane's classes decided to conduct a one-month experiment in which students would be allowed to stand up during lessons, discussions, and work time. Ground rules included making reasonable decisions on where to stand and not obstructing anyone's view or distracting classmates. Students made a variety of choices: some athletes wanted to remain seated to rest up for vigorous activity later in the day. A girl with Type One diabetes stood as a way to regulate her blood sugar.

The amateur researchers collected data on how students felt physically, mentally, and emotionally. At the end of the month, many students reported that standing up improved their focus during long lessons. There was the additional benefit of being in natural light as they perched on windowsills and counters. And having a choice of sitting or standing was a definite plus, versus the routine of conforming to teachers' requests to sit down.

But perching on windowsills and counters and writing on clipboards was not conducive to the best posture, which led students to explore the idea of waist-high stand-up desks. It turned out that a parent had experience building low-cost cardboard furniture, and after getting the go-ahead from the principal, students worked with this parent and fabricated three tables,

each of which could accommodate 3-4 students and were perfect for doing stand-up work (see photos in the article link below). All of Guinane's students now have the option of standing up and report very positive results, and they have become ambassadors for the idea in other classes at their school.

"Using Stand-Up Tables in the Classroom" by Alana Guinane and Hannah, Charlotte, Zanira, Angela, Elyse, and Katharine in *Edutopia*, February 6, 2015, http://bit.ly/1DOo5jw

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8. Short Item:

a. Math resources website – In this article in *Teaching Children Mathematics*, Holly Henderson Pinter recommends the YouCubed website http://www.youcubed.org, which has a rich variety of free resources. Topics include mindset, number sense, depth not speed, and math apps.

"YouCubed: Broadening the Conversation for Supporting Success in Mathematics" by Holly Henderson Pinter in *Teaching Children Mathematics*, March 2015 (Vol. 21, #7, p. 390)

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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 others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 44 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 64 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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- A collection of "classic" articles from all 11 years

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/Public Education NewsBlast
Better: Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
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Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
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Educational Researcher
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Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle School Journal
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Wharton Leadership Digest