Marshall Memo 922

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 7, 2022

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"You don't have to become something you're not to be better than you were."
Sidney Poitier, the Oscar-winning actor, who died last month at 94

"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."
Maya Angelou (quoted in item #3)

"Trust is gained in teaspoons and lost in buckets."
A saying in the military, according to psychologist Peter Hancock (University of Central Florida), quoted in "Flying Aces" by Sue Halpern in *The New Yorker*, January 24, 2022

"While we understand that it's important for teachers to set clear personal and professional boundaries, we've seen again and again how much it matters to students to know that their teachers care about them as individuals."
Tiffini Pruitt-Britton, Anne Garrison Wilhelm, and Jonee Wilson (see item #2)

"If you've ever been asked to give people feedback on their writing, then I'm sure you understand how delicate and uncertain this work can be – delicate because most writers feel deeply invested in and sensitive about their writing; uncertain because no two writers are sensitive in the same way. Some crave feedback and others dread it. Some want friendly encouragement and others prefer firm guidance. In short, there's no single best way to interact with writers. You have to build a different relationship with each one, trying your best to gauge their sensitivities, gain their trust, and find a good way to work together."
Rafael Heller, *Phi Delta Kappan* editor, in his editor's note in the February 2022 issue (Vol. 103, #5, p. 4)

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1. Thoughtful Classroom Observation

In this keynote address at the National SAM Conference last month, consultant/author Mike Rutherford proposed the following logic model: (a) skillful teaching is the most important variable in students' school learning; (b) teaching becomes more skillful with feedback and practice; and (c) observation can be a key factor in feedback. Rutherford suggests eleven principles for getting the most out of classroom visits:

• *Practice intellectual humility*. There's a lot that observers don't know and see when they walk into a classroom: what happened just beforehand, the mood of certain students, where in a curriculum unit they are, what's in the back of the teacher's mind, and much more. It's a myth, says Rutherford, that supervisors can achieve "inter-rater reliability" by watching and scoring classroom videos.

• *Have a language about instruction*. The more observers know about good teaching, the more conceptual hooks they have to help them notice, appreciate, and understand what's going on. Rutherford tells the story of a high-school principal he worked with as an AP who was brilliant at spotting where trouble was about to break out in a basketball crowd. That came from years of "pattern recognition" in countless home games.

• *Develop positive expectancy*. Rutherford advises giving yourself a pep talk before entering a classroom so you focus on what the teacher might do that's effective. This is to counter any less-than-positive expectations you might have based on previous visits – or perhaps your mood at that moment.

• *Stay on your feet*. When observers are seated, their field of vision is limited and there's a tendency to write feverishly rather than watching and listening. Moving around a classroom, the observer can look over students' shoulders, look at their work, ask them questions, read what's on the walls, and get different perspectives on the teachers' actions.

• *Don't worry about interrupting*. "You've already done that," says Rutherford; no matter how unobtrusive, an adult walking into a classroom will be noticed by the teacher and students, affecting them in ways large and small. (The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle describes the effect of an instrument of measurement on what's being measured.) The only question is whether the feedback given to the teacher will be valuable enough to "pay them back" for the interruption.

• *Enter as a visitor, not an owner*. A classroom is a teacher's "home," their sacred ground; it's where they spend more waking hours than almost anywhere else. Above all,

Rutherford advises, avoid hanging out near the teacher's desk – that's their personal zone. And for heaven's sake, don't sit in their chair!

• *Maintain focus and intensity*. Every 20 seconds, says Rutherford, teachers check out what the visitor is doing. They want to see someone who is engrossed, attentive, upbeat.

• *Delay zeroing in on details*. The first priority walking in is to get the big picture, take in the climate, the overall tone of the room.

• *Alternate between zooming in and zooming out*. Spend five minutes observing the big picture, then focus intently on a particular student, a piece of student work, an anchor chart, what's on the board, or some other detail for five minutes, then spend the rest of the time observing more generally. That should be the shape of a 15-minute visit.

• *Look ahead of and behind the action*. For example, what are students doing just before the teacher arrives at their group? What do they do after the teacher has talked to them and moved on?

• *Practice shorter, more-frequent observations*. These mini-observations don't need to be evaluative; they're geared to getting a sense of everyday practice and following up with focused coaching conversations. They are likely to have much more impact on teaching and learning than traditional evaluations, which, says Rutherford, have "a very low effect size."

"Developing Sharper Vision for Classroom Observations" by Mike Rutherford, a keynote address at the National SAM Innovation Project Conference, January 28, 2022; Rutherford can be reached at mike@rutherfordlg.com.

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2. How Successful Teachers Create a Nurturing Classroom Culture

In this *Phi Delta Kappan* article, Tiffini Pruitt-Britton and Anne Garrison Wilhelm (Southern Methodist University) and Jonee Wilson (North Carolina State University/Raleigh) say that creating a safe and accepting instructional environment is key to student engagement, participation, behavior, and learning. The authors believe a positive classroom culture is particularly beneficial for students of color – especially when the teacher is white. "Such relationships," say the authors, "can provide windows into students' lives outside of school, enabling teachers to better support them and their learning."

To test this hypothesis, Pruitt-Britton, Wilhelm, and Wilson studied teachers implementing a high-quality standards-based math curriculum, and whose African-American students were showing significant improvement on state standardized tests. What were these teachers doing above and beyond good math instruction? They noticed four teacher "moves" that built positive relationships and fostered high achievement – not just for black students but for other students of color and English learners:

• *Using humor* – In the most successful classrooms, teachers found ways to get students smiling or laughing as they introduced potentially difficult material, managed transitions, and dealt with moments when things were dragging. An example: "Can I have your attention please? We will begin in a moment… Okay, the moment is now." Teachers didn't need to be

comedians, and every joke wasn't a knee-slapper, but judicious use of humor was a way to let students know that their teachers were "approachable, relatable, fallible beings," say the authors. "Nothing does more to create a sense of trust and camaraderie."

• *Seeking and sharing personal information* – "While we understand that it's important for teachers to set clear personal and professional boundaries," say Pruitt-Britton, Wilhelm, and Wilson, "we've seen again and again how much it matters to students to know that their teachers care about them as individuals. Simply by remembering what students have shared about themselves, and by showing concern and interest over time, they can nurture the sort of positive, trusting relationship that encourages students to stay engaged and motivated in class." This kind of information can be gathered in surveys, casual conversations, and showing up at community events. It might be a shared hobby, the number of pets a student has, or a flavor of ice cream the teacher also loves.

• *Admitting mistakes* – "When teachers are transparent about things that do not go as planned," say the authors, "or about the errors they make in class, they appear more human and relatable, while serving as a model for how students can learn from their own errors." The authors observed a teacher at the board getting lost in the middle of a long division problem. "You know what," she said, "I think I'm confused, and I think I'm confusing you all. Let's go back, and I'll retrace my steps. If at any point, anyone sees where I went wrong, shout it out."

• *Explaining decisions* – This is especially important with everyday routines (why are we doing it this way?) and unpopular decisions – like spending an additional week on fractions. Taking the time to spell out the rationale shows respect for students' intelligence, their time, and their investment in learning, versus coming across as a dictator. "It demands very little from teachers to give such explanations," say the authors, "but the effects on classroom relationships can be powerful, showing students that their teacher is alert to problems in the classrooms, looks for solutions, and wants them to understand what's going on, rather than making them anxious and uncertain."

"Nurturing Students Through Social Interactions" by Tiffini Pruitt-Britton, Anne Garrison Wilhelm, and Jonee Wilson in *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2022 (Vol. 103, #5, pp. 18-23); the authors can be reached at tpruittbritton@smu.edu, awilhelm@smu.edu, and jwilson9@ncsu.edu.

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3. A Predominantly White School Focuses on Social Justice

In this article in *Principal Leadership*, Massachusetts principal Ted McCarthy says that growing up in an Irish Catholic working-class family in the 1970s and 80s, he never thought of himself as privileged. His father was a mechanic, his mother a homemaker, and McCarthy would overhear them fretting about paying bills and making ends meet. "We had enough to survive, but there wasn't any money for extras," he says. "What advantage did my family have over another?"

Forty years later, McCarthy looks back with a different perspective: "As a straight, white, able-bodied man, I've never wondered if I was pulled over because of the color of my skin, never worried that I was getting paid less because of my gender, and never questioned my choice to marry any person I loved." As the principal of a high school in a small town an hour west of Boston, the challenge has been bringing that perspective to a school with very few students or staff of color. Phrases like *social justice* and *privilege* caused discomfort, and McCarthy knew it would take an "intentional and consistent effort" to examine biases and find a way forward.

When he first started as principal eight years ago, it seemed that students of color were doing fine academically and socially. When racist, homophobic, or sexist incidents occurred, they seemed isolated, not part of a pattern, and people didn't think of them as manifestations of larger social problems. But two incidents raised McCarthy's consciousness. At a National Honor Society induction ceremony, his son asked why there were no students of color among the honorees. And a popular African-American student had a pointed question for the principal: What should he do when his white "friends" called him the N-word and their "boy"? "At that moment," says McCarthy, "I knew we were failing him and every other student in our school."

After one more racial incident, he led an open discussion with the whole faculty and there was pushback – these biases and attitudes weren't going to change, said several colleagues. McCarthy disagreed and promised to follow up. As he planned next steps, a James Baldwin quote resonated: "The paradox of education is precisely this: that as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated." Staff and students needed to be challenged to take a more-critical look at their social milieu.

The first step was partnering with the Anti-Defamation League and arranging for 25 students and six educators to be trained in the World of Difference Institute program. Over a period of five years, ADL staffers returned and worked with an expanding group, which in turn conducted workshops for students and staff. The initiative was dubbed *Connections* in hopes that the ideas would create a more-inclusive school community. Each February, the Connections team runs a six-week, six-hour workshop series with ninth graders, delving into implicit and explicit bias, microaggressions, race-based advantage and disadvantage, and being "upstanders." Bi-annual student surveys have consistently found that these workshops are among the most powerful learning experiences students have.

In 2019, the school organized a conference to share ideas, and 500 students and staff came to hear a keynote speech on social justice by Bettina Love from the University of Georgia. In 2020, the conference was cancelled because of the pandemic, but in 2021 an online version attracted 700 educators and students from around New England.

Meanwhile, discussions and training continued at McCarthy's school, including a meeting run by four students, which he says was "the best faculty meeting that I've attended in my time as a principal." The kids orchestrated activities that got teachers thinking about how to create classrooms that were psychologically safe for all students, how to pick up on remarks

and slights that didn't seem like a big deal but really were, and the whole concept of privilege. There have also been workshops by the Massachusetts Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ students and Facing History and Ourselves on genocide in history.

And the school has taken a critical look at curriculum offerings, introducing more-diverse books in ELA classes and working to make social studies content more inclusive. Many of these conversations have been hard and painful, says McCarthy. "I feel a bit uncertain as a white guy talking about social justice. I know that my world view is small, and that I still have more to learn from those who have been doing this work for a lot longer, and whose lived experiences put them much closer to the center of these issues. But I also know that this is not a 'them' problem – it's an 'us' problem." He closes with a quote from Maya Angelou: "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

"Difficult Conversations: Social Justice Learning in a Predominantly White School" by Ted McCarthy in *Principal Leadership*, February 2022 (Vol. 22, #6, pp. 28-33); McCarthy can be reached at mccarthyt@suttonschools.net. Here's a link to the school's Connections Program: http://suttonhsconnections.weebly.com.

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4. What is Project-Based Learning – and Does It Work?

In this *Phi Delta Kappan* article, Kristin De Vivo (Lucas Education Foundation) says three concerns have prevented project-based learning from being adopted more widely: confusion about what exactly it involves; the perception that it works only for advantaged students; and the belief that it's too labor-intensive and challenging for many teachers to implement. De Vivo reports that several "gold standard" studies released in 2021 have good news on all three fronts:

• *Definition* – Some educators believe that a shoebox diorama, an experiment, or a poster consolidating learning at the end of a curriculum unit is project-based learning. Some believe it's synonymous with any type of active, student-centered learning. Others insist that students must drive their learning 100 percent of the time for it to be truly project-based. In the studies De Vivo cites, project-based learning was defined as having the following characteristics:

- Project-based units involve rigorous content standards and deepen students' knowledge of core subjects and disciplinary practices – often across more than one subject area.
- Lessons are rooted in purposeful and authentic experiences generated by students asking relevant questions.
- Driving questions that lend themselves to exploration (and others stemming from them) are used to anchor projects, with students exploring issues beyond the four walls of the classroom.

There might be some direct and text-based instruction in a unit, but students working on their project remains central throughout.

• *Equity* – There's a widespread belief that students with learning problems, language deficits, and other disadvantages can't handle complex projects and need basic content and traditional instruction. The studies De Vito describes found that when project-based learning was implemented well, it produced impressive academic and social-emotional gains for all students, regardless of reading level, socio-economic status, and learning difficulties. In fact, those students did better when they learned with project-based instruction than with conventional pedagogy.

• *Implementation* – The studies showcased by De Vivo revealed that the key variable was teacher learning opportunities linked to high-quality curriculum materials and effective pedagogy. "These practices," she says, "include providing feedback to students in a strategic and timely manner, creating opportunities for students to reflect on and revise their own work, and empowering students to share their learning with others through the presentation of products they create and public performances."

"A New Research Base for Rigorous Project-Based Learning" by Kristin De Vivo in *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2022 (Vol. 103, #5, pp. 36-41); De Vivo can be reached at kristin.devivo@glef.org.

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5. Why Retrieval Practice Works So Well

In this Learning Agency Lab article, Ulrich Boser summarizes the research on retrieving information from our brains by quizzes or self-testing:

• Actively trying to remember something improves long-term memory better than just reading it and other conventional study methods. This is true from preschool through adult learning. Numerous studies have shown that the brain is like a muscle; exertion improves recollection. Another parallel with muscles: the more difficult it is to retrieve a memory, the more effectively the brain works to embed information in long-term memory.

• Retrieval provides immediate feedback on whether we've forgotten something we thought we knew – a quick check on overconfidence.

• Retrieval practice also encourages higher-order learning by challenging our memories and deepening understanding. "Encouraging yourself to overcome difficult obstacles or dissect complex issues," says Boser, "helps the brain retain more information in the long run. This is because practicing your ability to solve problems teaches you to apply the knowledge already in your brain that is waiting to be put to use, thus aiding in its permanence."

• Retrieval practice is active and keeps us focused. If we're re-reading a textbook, our mind tends to wander, but checking on a memory keeps us focused on the task at hand. Retrieval "is more effective when it occurs in short spurts," says Ulrich, "versus one long study session."

• Repeated retrieval practice spaced over time, with pauses in between, is more than twice as effective as simple retrieval, which itself is orders of magnitude more effective than simply studying information.

• The best way to incorporate retrieval practice is through low-stakes tests or quizzes – always understanding that it's not testing in the typical high-stakes context; these assessments are part of the learning process. Other ways to use retrieval practice:

- Brain dumps – Learners write down everything they can think of on a topic.
- Concept maps – Learners fill out a diagram with information on a topic, relating the big picture to the details.
- Flashcards – The best technique is to answer each problem verbally before turning the card over to check, and keeping cards in the deck until they have been answered correctly three times.
- Repeat-backs – When we're given directions, immediately saying them back in our own words to check for accuracy and completeness.
- Think-pair-share – Learners think about a topic, write down what they've learned, and share it with a partner, each thinking independently.

"Retrieval Practice" by Ulrich Boser, The Learning Agency Lab, February 3, 2022

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6. "Managing Up" When Things Aren't Being Handled Quite Right

In this *Edutopia* article, Jenn David-Lang (The Main Idea) and consultant/author Donna Spangler say that educators often want to suggest to their principal, AP, superintendent, or instructional coach that certain changes would benefit everyone – for example, the way substitutes are being allocated, how a disciplinary situation was handled, or a variety of counterproductive traits: micromanaging; indecisiveness; being distracted, hands-off, naïve, or a know-it-all. David-Lang and Spangler say that "managing up" in such situations is important to the health of any organization – and it takes courage and skill. Their suggestions:

• *Ask* –A first step is politely posing clarifying questions, which may reveal that there's more to the situation than you realized and sheds light on your boss's perspective. Asking questions can also create a shared understanding of the issue and build openness and trust.

• *Differentiate* – "A big part of managing up involves adjusting to your supervisor's leadership or work style," say David-Lang and Spangler. "Some leaders prefer brevity, some want to see a detailed plan mapped out, and some want to be an active part of the solution." Tactics with different leadership types:

- Micromanager – Negotiate boundaries and agreements on who does what; explain your preferred plan and ask for the manager's approach; gain trust by sending regular updates and delivering results.
- Indecisive – Scope out the boss's reservations and worries, clarify options and obstacles, list pros and cons, and draft a proposed path forward.
- All-knowing – This type of leader needs to be heard and understood before being redirected. "Backtrack respectfully and often by saying back to them what they said,"

suggest David-Lang and Spangler. "Present your proposal indirectly using words like *maybe, perhaps,* and *I was wondering* rather than challenging them directly."

For managers who work more from the heart, share stories and feelings and state your intention. For those who are more cerebral, use data, background information, evidence, and logic.

• *Pitch in* – "Don't just dump a new proposal on your supervisor's desk," say David-Lang and Spangler. "Be sure to explain precisely how you intend to help with this task or ask how you can contribute." That should help build trust and buy-in.

"How to 'Manage Up' in a School Setting" by Jenn David-Lang and Donna Spangler in *Edutopia*, February 2, 2022; the authors can be reached at Jenn@TheMainIdea.net and dspangler@hershey.k12.pa.us.

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7. Using a Cartoon Film to Teach Elementary Social Studies

In this article in *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, Kate Van Haren (a Wisconsin grade 4-5 teacher) and Scott Roberts (Central Michigan University) describe how Van Haren's fifth-grade class viewed clips from the 1986 cartoon film *An American Tail* to learn about U.S. immigration. The film tells the story of Fievel Mousawitz, a young mouse from a Russian-Jewish immigrant family, making his way from Russia to New York at the turn of the 20th century, and his experiences with tenement living, criminal gang leaders, wealthy activists, labor organizers, and crooked politicians.

The exaggerations and caricatures of the film provided grist for classroom discussions of key groups and personalities in a rapidly industrializing nation. Students also learned about how the art of caricature can highlight personality traits and perpetuate stereotypes. To provide a broader context, Van Haren had students view a film about Teddy Roosevelt, archival photos from turn-of-the-century New York City, and other original documents. Van Haren and Roberts conclude that for upper-elementary students, a well-chosen cartoon film supplemented by other films and documents can hone students' knowledge and critical thinking skills in line with the C3 social studies standards.

"Hollywood Film and the C3 Framework: An Inquiry-Based Lesson About Immigration" by Kate Van Haren and Scott Roberts in *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, November/December 2021 (Vol. 34, #2, pp. 10-13)

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8. Fantasy Novels for Middle-School Students

In this *School Library Journal* article, Myiesha Speight recommends eight middle-school-age fantasy novels featuring African-American characters (click the link below for cover images and brief descriptions):

- *Amari and the Night Brothers* by B.B. Alston

- *Maya and the Rising Dark* by Rena Barron
- *Josephine Against the Sea* by Shakirah Bourne
- *When Life Gives You Mangoes* by Kereen Getten
- *The Magic in Changing Your Stars* by Leah Henderson
- *Tristan Strong Destroys the World* by Kwame Mbalia
- *Ikenga* by Nnedi Okorafo
- *Root Magic* by Eden Royce

"Middle Grade Fantasy Fun: Magical Novels for Black History Month and Year-Round" by Myiesha Speight in *School Library Journal*, February 2022 (Vol. 68, #2, pp. 10-11)

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9. Short Item:

Podcasts on the Critical Race Theory Controversy – In this series of seven podcasts, Karin Chenoweth and Tanji Reed Marshall of The Education Trust discuss the controversy on the teaching of race in U.S. schools.

"The Critical Race Theory Craze That's Sweeping the Nation" by Karin Chenoweth and Tanji Reed Marshall, The Education Trust, July-September 2021

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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 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.

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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
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