Marshall Memo 853

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 14, 2020

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"The spring of 2020 will forever be known as the season when tens of millions of American families took a crash course in homeschooling."

Michael Petrilli (see item #3)

"In ordinary times, teaching is a never-ending struggle to decide what to say and what not to say, when to push and when to back off, when to continue a lesson and when to move on. But how, in our present world, does one make such judgments? How does one read the body language, facial expressions, and social cues of children wearing masks and sitting six feet apart, or peering through laptop computers? There's no guidebook for teaching in a pandemic. This will be a year of dizzying uncertainties, and teachers will need all the resources and supports we can give them."

Rafael Heller in "How Will Teachers Manage to Teach This Year?" in *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2020 (Vol. 102, #1, p. 4)

"Building a politics around the idea that a college degree is a precondition for dignified work and social esteem has a corrosive effect on democratic life. It devalues the contributions of those without a diploma, fuels prejudice against less-educated members of society, effectively excludes most working people from elective government, and provokes political backlash."

Michael Sandel in "The Consequences of the Diploma Divide" in *The New York Times*, September 6, 2020

"Having white privilege doesn't make your life easy, but understanding it can make you realize why some people's lives are harder than they should be."

John Amaechi (see item #9)

1. More on Understanding the Pandemic

In this article in *The Atlantic*, Ed Yong explains nine vulnerabilities in the U.S. that he believes explain our ineffective response to the coronavirus so far. "These conceptual errors," he says, "were not egregious lies or conspiracy theories, but they were still dangerous…They prevented citizens from grasping the scope of the crisis and pushed leaders toward bad policies." The challenge going forward is countering these "errors of intuition" and doing the right things to meet the problem.

• *Magic bullets, one after another* – We've had stay-at-home orders, hand washing, testing, contact tracing, mask-wearing, social distancing, improved ventilation, and more. No single solution is perfect, and none has been fully implemented, but the biggest error has been not realizing that we need to implement a number of not-perfect interventions *together*. A successful response, said one expert, "is never going to be one thing done perfectly. It'll be a lot of different things, done well enough."

• *False dichotomies* – Throughout the pandemic, there have been misleading either-or polarities:

- People either have mild symptoms or get seriously ill and may die.
- We either save lives or open the economy.
- We either do another lockdown or let the virus run free.
- Before a vaccine things are bad, post-vaccine the problem is solved.

With each of these, the reality is somewhere in between: some infected people develop long-term problems; the economy can't open fully until the virus is brought under control; selective closures (e.g., bars, gyms, and large gatherings), combined with other measures, can be more effective than a full lockdown; and after vaccines are introduced, things will still be messy because they will take a while to be distributed and won't prevent every infection.

• *The comfort of theatricality* – "Showiness is often mistaken for effectiveness," says Yong. That can breed complacency "because solutions that can be seen are not always the best." There's been "hygiene theater" (scrubbing and bleaching), porous and inefficient travel bans, and temperature checks (which are not highly accurate).

• *Personal blame over systemic causes* – There are a number of systemic reasons for the inequitable spread of Covid-19: understaffing in nursing homes and prisons; overstretched hospitals and public-health departments; people of color financially and geographically disconnected from health care; a lack of paid sick leave for many essential workers, and more. "But tattered safety nets are less visible than crowded bars," says Yong. "Pushing for universal health care is harder than shaming an unmasked stranger." Colleges forced to close down after

an outbreak blame students for irresponsible behavior, ignoring the fact that opening the way many did was a setup for failure.

• *The normality trap* – People crave a return to the way things were before, but, says Yong, "The powerful desire to recreate an old world can obscure the trade-offs necessary for surviving the new one… A world with Covid-19 is fundamentally different from one without it, and the former simply cannot include all the trappings of the latter." If opening schools really is the priority, that must take precedence over opening bars, casinos, and tattoo parlors.

• *Magical thinking* – This has included the notion that hot summer weather would cause the virus to wither, despite the fact that it raged in tropical countries. Then there's the idea that some people are naturally resistant and that we're approaching herd immunity. These ideas and others have been convenient excuses for inaction.

• *The complacency of inexperience* – Countries that have experienced pandemics in the past were much quicker to respond aggressively to Covid-19. The U.S., which has dodged the bullet more than once, couldn't imagine what was about to happen and didn't make (or maintain) adequate preparations.

• *A reactive rut* – Having fallen behind from the outset, we have constantly played catch-up. Exponential growth is counterintuitive, says Yong, and we don't understand that things seem fine just before they're not. In addition, this coronavirus has an insidious way of spreading quickly but being slow to reveal itself; there can be months between initial infection and a spike in hospitalizations and deaths. "Pandemic data are like the light of distant stars," says Yong, "recording past events instead of present ones. This lag separates actions from their consequences by enough time to break our intuition for cause and effect… This reactive rut also precludes long-term planning."

• *The habituation of horror* – There's evidence that many people are becoming numb to the situation, have stopped watching the news, and regard close to 200,000 deaths as acceptable. "The desire for normality might render the unthinkable normal," says Yong. "Like poverty and racism, school shootings and police brutality, mass incarceration and sexual harassment, widespread extinctions and changing climate, Covid-19 might become yet another unacceptable thing that America comes to accept."

"America Is Trapped in a Pandemic Spiral" by Ed Yong in *The Atlantic*, September 9, 2020
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2. Humanizing Online Instruction

In this article in *Edutopia*, Youki Terada reports some ways that teachers can reduce the psychological and emotional distance with their students during remote instruction:

• *Use several approaches to establish a strong teaching presence*. In real classrooms, teachers employ facial expressions and voice inflection to hook and hold students. In remote lessons, additional tools are necessary, including e-mails, announcements, assignments, protocols, and the overall organization of lessons. "The digital tools that you use become extensions of your teaching," says Terada, "…blurring the line between your physical and

virtual personae." Students appreciate a quick way to reach their teachers if they have a burning question, and a reasonably quick response time means a lot.

• *Be organized*. "Struggling to find files, links, or browser tabs can cause your stress level to rise, which students will feel and mirror," says Vermont educator Annie O'Shaughnessy. "Close any programs that you won't be using, and print out your agenda so that you don't need to frantically search for it on your screen." Doing a dry run helps smooth things out.

• *Be clear*. It's more than clarity of verbal communication; students need to know how to navigate the learning management system (it helps to have a central hub where resources are gathered), where to submit assignments and ask questions, and how to use the class's suite of tools.

• *Regularly collect student feedback*. Students need to know teachers are listening and that students' opinions matter. Some possible survey questions:

- *From 1 to 5, how comfortable are you with the technology in our virtual classroom?*
- *Can you easily find what you need?*
- *Have you encountered any technical issues, e.g., Internet connection, audibility?*
- *On a 1-to-5 scale, how well-organized are my lessons?*
- *On a 1-to-5 scale, how clear are my assignments?*
- *Do you feel your voice is heard?*
- *What can I do to improve our online classroom?*

The teacher's humble posture is important, communicating that you're on a learning curve.

• *Focus on surfacing connections and building relationships*. Beyond academic connections, students want to feel the teacher is personally interested and invested in them. This can be done in a synchronous check-in (for example, students share an appreciation, apology, or aha! moment), or using a platform like Seesaw to record and share video greetings, with students responding on their own time.

"5 Research-Backed Tips to Improve Your Online Teaching Presence" by Youki Terada in *Edutopia*, September 4, 2020

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3. Assessing Schools' Academic Quality by What Students Actually Do

"The spring of 2020 will forever be known as the season when tens of millions of American families took a crash course in homeschooling," says Michael Petrilli (Thomas B. Fordham Institute) in this article in *Education Next*. Petrilli's sons attend third and sixth grade in local schools, and during the pandemic, he's been able to look over their shoulders in the living room and get a much better sense of the work their teachers are assigning. With remote instruction, says Petrilli, he and other parents can ask: are our kids "being asked to read high-quality literature and engaging nonfiction, instead of the drivel that often passes for 'reading passages' in so many ELA curricula? What kinds of essays, research papers, and other writing assignments are students… asked to complete? How challenging are the problem sets in math? What kinds of interdisciplinary projects must they tackle?"

Petrilli takes this a step further: could samples of the actual work students are doing day by day be another way for external evaluators to get a handle on school quality? Surveys and test scores have their limitations, and adding student assignments to the mix could add day-to-day realism to accountability – and encourage teachers to assign high-quality work on a consistent basis. [And for principals, the ready online availability of assigned work allows regular feedback to teachers on the rigor and quality of the work their students are asked to do.]

"The New Accountability Assignment" by Michael Petrilli in *Education Next*, Fall 2020 (Vol. 20, #4, pp. 78-79); Petrilli can be reached at mpetrilli@edexcellence.net.

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4. Ian Rowe on Nurturing Agency and Opportunity for Vulnerable Youth

In this American Enterprise Institute paper, New York City educator Ian Rowe cites the sobering statistics on the economic status of African Americans: on average, black households have between one-tenth and one-fourteenth the net wealth of white households. This is the legacy of slavery, racism, Jim Crow, forced migration, redlining, subpar schooling, mass incarceration, ongoing discrimination, and family structure. The civil rights movement, federal programs, and other initiatives have not closed the gap, so a different set of remedies is now under discussion, among them universal basic income, baby bonds, and cash reparations to the descendants of slavery.

Some people believe nothing will change until we address the root causes of inequality. As *New York Times* reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones wrote recently, "None of the actions we are told black people must take if they want to 'lift themselves' out of poverty and gain financial stability – not marrying, not getting educated, not saving more, not owning a home – can mitigate 400 years of racialized plundering." Similarly, William Darity, Jr. and coauthors wrote, "There are no actions that black Americans can take unilaterally that will have much of an effect on reducing the racial wealth gap."

Rowe believes that at the individual, family, and school level, this is a discouraging and misleading message: "Imagine you are a 12-year-old black boy living in the South Bronx, with aspirations to work hard to achieve the American dream. Yet you are repeatedly told there is nothing you can do individually to achieve that goal… Rather than helping that young man develop personal agency and an understanding of the behaviors most likely to propel him into success, this message will only teach what psychologists term 'learned helplessness.'"

Rowe concedes that macro strategies are necessary to close the wealth gap at the national level, but he insists there are "hyper-local" actions within the control of African-American youth "that increase their likelihood to improve their economic outcomes within a single generation and thus their ability to transfer wealth across generations." Studies have shown that this occurs when young people take three steps, in this sequence:

- Earning at least a high-school degree;
- Working full-time;
- Waiting until marriage to have children, if they choose to do so.

Researchers have found that following this "success sequence" results in 91 percent of African Americans avoiding poverty when they reach their young-adult years. "As educators," says Rowe, "we have a moral imperative to help our students develop a sense of hope and agency in their lives – teaching them that they do have the power to be masters of their own destiny, even when they face structural barriers."

Family composition is a key factor across racial lines. One study found that black households headed by two married parents have twice the median net worth as white, single-parent households. But young people are not hearing this message. Even as births to teens have fallen in recent decades, 91 percent of babies born to African-American women under 25 were outside of marriage. That's true of 61 percent of babies born to white women. (These 2018 statistics are up from a nationwide average of 5 percent in the 1960s.) Single parenthood among young adults is one of the top predictors of children experiencing poverty, school suspensions, low educational attainment, and incarceration. For young single mothers, there are high levels of partnership instability and "family complexity," both of which are associated with poorer child well-being.

"If we really want to help young people break the intergenerational cycle of poverty," says Rowe, "we need a serious effort to reframe the decisions governing passage into young adulthood." He suggests three specific actions:

• *Curriculum* – Schools should implement evidence-based programs that speak frankly and convincingly about the steps that will help young people find their footing on the economic ladder, including the success sequence.

• *Opportunities for earned success* – Harlem Capital Partners and the New Voices Fund are examples of investing in and empowering young entrepreneurs of color, teaching them the value of income generated through hard work.

• *A national campaign* – Rowe believes it will take a concerted social media and mass media push to normalize "honest conversations about the timing of family formation." A large-scale marketing campaign "would not deny the existence of discrimination along racial lines and other barriers to animating the steps in the success sequence," he says, "but rather would describe what is possible for children even in the face of structural barriers."

"Incentivize Individual Agency to Achieve Upward Mobility" by Ian Rowe, American Enterprise Institute, September 1, 2020; Rowe can be reached at Ian.Rowe@AEI.org.

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5. David Brooks on the Fall and Rise of the Extended Family

In this article in *The Atlantic*, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks describes the sprawling families of old: lots of interconnections among generations and blood relatives, lots of children socialized by a variety of relatives, vulnerable members cared for. But this kind of family had its disadvantages: it could be stifling and exhausting, limit privacy and individual choice, put people in intimate contact with others they didn't choose, and seriously limit the opportunities of girls and women.

As the industrial revolution swept American cities, intergenerational families began to

morph into something quite different, and the trend accelerated in the 20th century. “This is the story of our times,” says Brooks, “– the story of the family, once a dense cluster of many siblings and extended kin, fragmenting into ever smaller and more fragile forms.” Between 1950 and 1965, the nuclear family seemed to be working well; divorce rates went down and two-parent families with 2.5 kids were considered the ideal. Before TV and air conditioning, people lived in each other’s kitchens and backyards, and neighbors provided a kind of extended family. “We take it as the norm,” says Brooks, “even though his wasn’t the way most humans lived during the tens of thousands of years before 1950, and it isn’t the way most humans have lived during the 55 years since 1965.”

Today, a relatively small number of Americans live in traditional two-parent families. “That 1950-65 window was not normal,” says Brooks. “It was a freakish historical moment when all of society conspired, wittingly or not, to obscure the essential fragility of the nuclear family.” Yes, the dissolution of the traditional extended family provided individuals with more freedom and has worked well for a privileged minority, but the nuclear family of the fifties subjugated most women and was intensely vulnerable when divorce, illness, death, and other setbacks occurred.

As the nuclear unit imploded, fewer and fewer people lived in that family structure. Life became less stable, especially for children, and there was a stark social-class divide, with the less-well-off seeing a marked deterioration of family life. “When you put everything together,” says Brooks, “we’re likely living through the most rapid change in family structure in human history. The causes are economic, cultural, and institutional all at once.” And that change, he says, “has created an epidemic of trauma – millions have been set adrift because what should have been the most loving and secure relationship in their life broke.” The social-class divide is stark: the decline of the nuclear family “liberates the rich and ravages the working-class and the poor.”

“We all know stable and loving single-parent families,” Brooks continues. “But on average, children of single parents or unmarried cohabiting parents tend to have worse health outcomes, worse mental-health outcomes, less academic success, more behavioral problems, and higher truancy rates than do children living with their two married biological parents.” Single men are also disproportionately harmed by the lack of stable family structure, and there are stresses on women, still doing most of the childrearing and housework, and the elderly, often disconnected from their kin. African Americans have also been disproportionately affected: nearly half of black families are led by an unmarried single woman, compared to less than one-sixth of white families.

The nuclear family of the fifties isn’t coming back, so what will happen? “Our culture is oddly stuck,” says Brooks. “We want stability and rootedness, but also mobility, dynamic capitalism, and the liberty to adopt the lifestyle we choose. We want close families, but not the legal, cultural, and sociological constraints that made them possible.” He believes a way forward is emerging.

Starting around 2012, and accelerating after the 2008 recession, Americans have been pushed toward greater reliance on family. Intergenerational families are increasing, more

children and seniors are living near or with each other, and some communal units are extending beyond kinship lines. Interestingly, positive dynamics in families of color may not be visible to some professionals. "The white researcher/social worker/whatever sees a child moving between their mother's house, their grandparents' house, and their uncle's house and sees that as 'instability,' says Brooks. "But what's actually happening is the family (extended and chosen) is leveraging all of its resources to raise that child."

The two-parent family won't disappear, Brooks concludes. "For many people, especially those with financial and social resources, it is a great way to live and raise children. But a new and more communal ethos is emerging, one that is consistent with 21st-century reality and 21st-century values… Americans are hungering to live in extended and forged families, in ways that are new and ancient at the same time. This is a significant opportunity, a chance to thicken and broaden family relationships, a chance to allow more adults and children to live and grow under the loving gaze of a dozen pairs of eyes, and be caught, when they fall, by a dozen pairs of arms. For decades we have been eating at smaller and smaller tables, with fewer and fewer kin. It's time to find ways to bring back the big tables."

"The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake" by David Brooks in *The Atlantic*, March 2020

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6. Using Historical Exemplars of Collaboration in Social Studies

In this article in *Middle School Journal*, Bethany Scullin (University of West Georgia) describes a detailed lesson in which pairs of students study and report on pairs of historical figures who exemplified cooperation (she suggests an illustrated book for each):

- John Adams and Thomas Jefferson – *Those Rebels, John and Tom* by Barbara Kerley, illustrated by Edwin Fotheringham (Scholastic, 2012)
- Alice Burke and Nell Richardson – *Around America to Win the Vote: Two Suffragists, a Kitten, and 10,000 Miles* by Mara Rockliff, illustrated by Hadley Hooper (Candlewick, 2016)
- Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass – *Friends for Freedom: The Story of Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass* by Suzanne Slade, illustrated by Nicole Tadgell (Charlesbridge, 2014)
- Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt – *Franklin and Winston: A Christmas That Changed the World* by Douglas Wood, illustrated by Barry Moser (Candlewick, 2011)
- John "Dizzy" Gillespie and Charlie "Bird" Parker – *Bird and Diz* by Barry Golio (Candlewick, 2015)
- Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr. – *As Good As Anybody* by Richard Michelson, illustrated by Raul Colón (Dragonfly Books, 2008)

"It Takes Two: Teaching Essential Social Skills by Examining History's Dynamic Duos" by Bethany Scullin in *Middle School Journal*, September 2020 (Vol. 51, #4, pp. 26-39); Scullin can be reached at bscullin@westga.edu.

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7. U.S. History Podcasts for Students

In *School Library Journal*, Anne Bensfield and Pamela Rogers recommend seven Kidcasts podcasts that bring U.S. history and civics to life. For links to these and a larger collection (free, preceded by ads), click here.

- But Why: "Who Makes the Laws?" age 5-12
- The Past and the Curious: "Museum Tales!" age 5-12
- USA and UK Politics: "Constitutions" age 5-12
- This Day in History Class: "Last Year's Lesson: Boston Tea Party December 16, 1773" age 8-12
- Young Ben Franklin: "A Declaration of Independence" age 8-12
- After the Fact: "The Birthplace of America" age 9 and up
- Constitutional: "Episode 1: Frames" age 9 and up

"Audio Lessons Bring the Past to Life" by Anne Bensfield and Pamela Rogers in *School Library Journal*, September 2020 (Vol. 66, #9, p. 28)

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8. Children's Books About Indigenous Americans

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Kara Stewart recommends books on Native Americans, emphasizing that they're not just for social studies or cultural education lessons:

Picture books:

- *Birdsong* by Julie Flett (Greystone Kids, 2019)
- *Bowwow Powwow* by Brenda Child (Minnesota Historical Society, 2018)
- *"Fall in Line, Holden!"* by Daniel Vandever (Salina Bookshelf, 2017)

Middle grades:

- *In the Footsteps of Crazy Horse* by Joseph Marshall III (Abrams, 2015)

Young adult:

- *Apple in the Middle* by Dawn Quigley (North Dakota State University, 2018)
- *Give Me Some Truth* by Eric Gansworth (Scholastic/Arthur Levine Books, 2018)
- *Hearts Unbroken* by Cynthia Leitich Smith (Candlewick, 2018)

"Teaching Native-Centered Books" by Kara Stewart in *School Library Journal*, September 2020 (Vol. 66, #9, p. 16)

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9. Short Item:

A Brief Video on White Privilege – This BBC video by psychologist/author (former NBA player) John Amaechi unpacks the concept of hidden advantages enjoyed by whites. An excerpt: "Having white privilege doesn't make your life easy, but understanding it can make you realize why some people's lives are harder than they should be."

If you have feedback or suggestions,
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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 50 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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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