Marshall Memo 1007

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 16, 2023

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"If the Department of Defense schools were a state, we would be traveling there to figure out what's going on."

Martin West (quoted in item #1)

"A common challenge to the effective realization of creativity is knowing too little about it, but it may be even worse when we assume to know but are wrong."

Mathias Benedek et al. (see item #6)

"The advantages of getting up from one's desk – standing, walking around, going outside, taking 15-minute breaks – are well known to adults, especially for people who spend much of their days on screens. Yet we don't extend the same courtesy to schoolchildren."

Pamela Paul in "To Prepare Kids for the Future, Bring Back Shop" in *The New York Times*, October 13, 2023

"For those in marginalized groups, diversity often yields a hypervisibility that means they are judged more harshly for perceived failures or deviations from the norm. Being an 'only' – the only woman, the only person of Asian descent – in a room, on a team, or in an organization puts a person under increased scrutiny. This spotlight leaves individuals feeling vulnerable and exposed, with psychological ramifications such as perfectionism, reduced agency, higher disengagement, and obstructed career advancement."

Laura Morgan Roberts (see item #2)

"Trigger warnings foster a forbidden-fruit effect in which warnings actually increase rather than decrease attraction to potentially negative material."

Victoria Bridgland, Payton Jones, and Benjamin Bellet (see item #3)

1. What Are U.S. Department of Defense Schools Doing Right?

In this *New York Times* article, Sarah Mervosh reports that among all U.S. jurisdictions, students in schools run by the Defense Department have the highest NAEP scores in reading and math. What's more, these schools, which serve 66,000 children of U.S. military members and civilian employees, have made steady progress since 2013 and largely avoided Covid-related losses (see the graphics in the article linked below). "If the Department of Defense schools were a state," says Harvard education professor Martin West, "we would be traveling there to figure out what's going on."

So what is going on? Mervosh lists some general characteristics of DoD schools (there are about 50 in the U.S. and more than 100 abroad, from Belgium to Bahrain):

- Students frequently move from school to school as their parents are assigned from one base to another.
- Black and Latin students' test scores, on average, lag behind their white counterparts, although not by as much as in other public schools.
- The Pentagon has faced scrutiny of its handling of student misconduct, including reports of sexual assault.

The article goes on to list some positive characteristics of Defense Department schools that might point the way for policymakers:

- All military families have access to housing and health care.
- In all families, at least one parent has a job.
- Students are racially integrated – 42 percent white, 24 percent Latin, 10 percent African-American, 9 percent Asian-American, and 15 percent multi-racial.
- Students are economically diverse, with the children of lower-rank and lower-paid parents in classrooms with children of high-ranking officers.
- The schools are well funded, spending about $25,000 per student, with a predictable budget each year.
- Schools are well supplied so teachers have less need to spend their own money on basics.
- Teachers are well paid and generally have a decade or more of experience.
- All Defense Department schools are run by a headquarters in the Pentagon.
- A curriculum revision starting in 2015 phased in Common Core-aligned expectations to all schools, including higher expectations and more emphasis on non-fiction reading.

- The curriculum reforms were phased in one subject at a time over a six-year period, accompanied by teacher training.
- Students in DoD schools are using similar curriculum materials at each grade level across all the schools.
- Collaboration among teachers is required, with team meetings built into the schedule.
- Teachers receive detailed feedback from instructional coaches and administrators.
- DoD schools are philosophically committed to raising the floor of teaching effectiveness for all classrooms, compared to a "pockets of excellence" approach implicitly embraced by many other schools.

"Who Runs the Best U.S. Schools? It May Be the Defense Department" by Sarah Mervosh in *The New York Times*, October 12, 2023

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2. Four Freedoms That Allow Everyone to Flourish At Work

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Laura Morgan Roberts (University of Virginia Darden School of Business) says diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts that surged in the summer of 2020 have recently slowed down due to backlash and other priorities. Roberts believes DEI advocates and critics should get past this adversarial dynamic and work together to create workplace conditions where everyone can flourish.

This will happen, she believes, when organizations support four freedoms that allow people to bring their full humanity to work and feel safe, validated, and encouraged. The freedoms are often unevenly distributed in a workplace – many take them for granted, but others do not, including people of color, women, those with physical disabilities or experiencing mental health challenges, and gender-nonconforming people. Roberts believes that working to expand the freedoms is not a zero-sum game: "granting freedoms to one group does not inherently take them away from another. The collective pursuit of the four freedoms thus benefits everyone." Here they are:

• *The freedom to be our authentic selves at work* – Suppressing one's personal identity – pets, passions, a regional accent, a family challenge – exacts a cost in comfort, creativity, and doing one's best work. "Research on code-switching and other forms of identity suppression," says Roberts, "has revealed the negative cognitive, health, and performance effects of maintaining a façade of conformity, as well as the feelings of inauthenticity it engenders." Organization-wide policies affirming this freedom will make a difference, she says, as do small gestures by colleagues – making an effort to pronounce a name correctly, building friendships outside one's comfort level, speaking up about insensitive or disrespectful words and actions.

• *The freedom to become our best selves* – Almost all people want to get better at what they do, and opportunities for growth and development on the job are an important part of being happy and fulfilled. Studies have found inequities in this area – and in the amount of criticism and praise given to different groups, says Roberts. Employers need to "create development programs that play to everyone's strengths and make feedback processes more

objective… Mentorship and sponsorship programs also provide valuable ways to help all employees live into their potential – provided they are offered in an equitable way."

• *The freedom to occasionally fade into the background* – "For those in marginalized groups," says Roberts, "diversity often yields a hypervisibility that means they are judged more harshly for perceived failures or deviations from the norm. Being an 'only' – the only woman, the only person of Asian descent – in a room, on a team, or in an organization puts a person under increased scrutiny. This spotlight leaves individuals feeling vulnerable and exposed, with psychological ramifications such as perfectionism, reduced agency, higher disengagement, and obstructed career advancement." The ability to take a break from performance pressure – without becoming completely invisible or assimilated – can make a big difference, says Roberts. The more diverse the organization and flexible its work requirements, the easier this becomes.

• *The freedom to fail and grow* – This is the most important of the four freedoms, Roberts believes, because exercising the other three involves taking risks. "When people know they'll be given chances to recover if they fail," she says, "it can help everyone embrace those freedoms with greater confidence." Psychological safety is the key: a belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up, asking questions, sharing concerns, or making mistakes. Organizations need to reduce the stigma of failure with a culture that supports taking smart risks for the greater good, says Roberts, and "replacing shame and blame with curiosity, vulnerability, and personal growth."

"Where Does DEI Go From Here?" by Laura Morgan Roberts in *Harvard Business Review*, September 14, 2023; Roberts can be reached at RobertsL@darden.virginia.edu.

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3. Are Trigger Warnings Effective?

In this article in *Clinical Psychological Science,* Victoria Bridgland, Payton Jones, and Benjamin Bellet (Flinders University, Australia) report on their meta-analysis of recent studies of trigger warnings. The idea of such warnings is to alert students to upcoming content that may be distressing because of memories of negative experiences, helping them to emotionally prepare for (or completely avoid) the content.

Trigger warnings first showed up on feminist message forums in the early days of the Internet to help women prepare for or sidestep content that was likely to remind them of past trauma. Over time, content warnings spread to university and other classrooms, museums, news media, and social media, and expanded to include a variety of potentially unsettling content, including microaggressions. An example: *This article contains details that some readers may find distressing*.

Trigger warnings have sparked a lively debate in universities. Some argue that content warnings are necessary to show sensitivity to historically marginalized groups and those who are psychologically vulnerable. Others have challenged trigger warnings as a hindrance to academic inquiry and questioned their efficacy, even arguing that warnings may make things worse for sensitive people. Bridgland, Jones, and Bellet explored these and other arguments by

doing a meta-analysis of studies of university students and adults, all from WEIRD societies (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic).

What did the analysis reveal? Here's what Bridgland, Jones, and Bellet found in four key areas:

• *Emotional reactions* – The studies in the meta-analysis almost unanimously showed that trigger warnings did not mitigate students' and adults' distress about the identified material. Why would trigger warnings have so little impact? The authors suggest that most people are not skilled at emotional preparation – that is, "reappraising emotional content or using coping strategies." Trigger warnings alert people to what's coming but don't give them ways to deal with their reactions when they hit.

• *Avoidance* – The meta-analysis shows that trigger warnings did not lead most people to avoid the warned-about material. One study found that only 6 percent of people actually took the option of not viewing what had been flagged as potentially upsetting. It appears, say Bridgland, Jones, and Bellet, "that trigger warnings foster a forbidden-fruit effect in which warnings actually increase rather than decrease attraction to potentially negative material." This has also been called the Pandora or teasing effect, and studies have shown that these effects are stronger among those who are most vulnerable.

• *Anxiety* – Trigger warnings "reliably increased anticipatory anxiety about upcoming content," say the researchers. "In theory, this anticipatory period could indicate that forewarned individuals are bracing themselves for a negative emotional experience. However… whatever bracing might occur during this anticipatory period is apparently completely ineffective. In other words, according to the current literature, this small increase in negative emotions induced by trigger warnings serves no productive purpose."

• *Educational impact* – The analysis found that trigger warnings had little or no effect on students' and adults' comprehension of the warned-about material. "Advocates claim that warnings in the classroom help to foster a safe environment for trauma survivors," say the authors, "allowing them to prepare for distressing material and therefore enhancing their learning outcomes. However, we found that, at best, warnings have no effect on comprehension of material. At worst… trigger warnings have the potential to increase apprehension and anxiousness about attending class."

The bottom line, say Bridgland, Jones, and Bellet, is that trigger warnings are "fruitless," have the added disadvantage of inducing "a period of uncomfortable anticipation," and "should not be used as a mental health tool."

"A Meta-analysis of the Efficacy of Trigger Warnings, Content Warnings, and Content Notes" by Victoria Bridgland, Payton Jones, and Benjamin Bellet in *Clinical Psychological Science*, August 18, 2023 (Vol. 11, #5); Bridgland can be reached at victoria.bridgland@flinders.edu.au.

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4. Middle-School Students Discuss a Hot Topic

In this *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* article, Shireen Al-Adeimi and Jennie Baumann (Michigan State University) say the IRE pattern of classroom discussions – initiate, respond, evaluate – is ubiquitous in K-12 classrooms:

- The teacher initiates by asking a question.
- A student responds.
- The teacher evaluates the response.

This dynamic, say Al-Adeimi and Baumann, tends to elicit factual knowledge and "leaves little room for elaborated discussion or student input."

The authors studied videos of several seventh- and eighth-grade classrooms in which the teachers stepped back from the traditional role and facilitated "dialogic" talk (a.k.a. *accountable* or *academically productive*), where the teacher-student power dynamic was more equal and students engaged in critical thinking, perspective-taking, text comprehension, and argumentative reasoning, built on each other's ideas, and engaged in collective thinking and understanding.

The classes were discussing whether a D.C.-area football team, then called the Washington Redskins, should change its name because of what many considered its derogatory connotations. (A few years after these discussions, the team changed its name to the Washington Commanders.) Al-Adeimi and Baumann analyzed transcripts of the classroom dialogues and considered whether the class time spent was academically productive. Here's what they found.

The classes were using the interdisciplinary Word Generation curriculum, and discussions spanned social studies, science, math, and language arts lessons over several school days, culminating in students arguing their positions supported by evidence and reasoning. The academic focus words for the unit were *derogatory, stereotype, connotation, slur,* and *stigmatize*.

During discussions, students' participation fell into four categories as the floor was held by successive speakers, facilitated by the teacher (who took up about half of the air time):

- Primary – often initiated and sustained discussions, talked frequently, with or without evidence to support their claims – 12 percent of class time;
- Secondary – their contributions aligned with, elaborated on, and supported those of the primary participants – 12.5 percent of the time;
- Tertiary – engaged in playful quips, surface-level contributions, or sarcasm, sometimes eliciting laughter – 7 percent of the time;
- Peripheral – few claims, little substantiation, not well reasoned – 10 percent of time.

Students took on different roles depending on their personalities, engagement with the topic, and personal investment and knowledge on the topic. Some students shifted from one role to another and power and control of the discussion were very much in play as students expressed their views, debated points, and sometimes interrupted.

Al-Adeimi and Bauman say students were eager to engage and the discussions were lively, with broad student participation and listening to other perspectives. But the classes

didn't arrive at consensus, and it appears that few students changed their initial positions. This was not a failure because the object was for students to "think for themselves with others," explore a high-interest topic, express and hear different viewpoints, and develop thinking, speaking, and listening skills.

"Roles of Engagement: Analyzing Adolescent Students' Talk During Controversial Discussions" by Shireen Al-Adeimi and Jennie Baumann in *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, September/October 2023 (Vol. 67, #2, pp. 42-52); the authors can be reached at aladeimi@msu.edu and povenmir@msu.edu.

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5. Should Homework Be Individualized?

In this *Hechinger Report* article, Jill Barshay says technology can be used to personalize lessons for each student, depending on their level of achievement and specific interests and needs. But the free ASSISTments program takes the opposite approach with middle-school homework assignments, giving the same items to a whole class. The teacher puts together a one-size-fits-all assignment, drawing on a bank of 200,000 items. ASSISTments, first developed in 2003 by Neil and Cristina Heffernan at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts, has stood up well in studies and received a "without reservations" endorsement from the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse.

"How is it that this rather simple piece of software is succeeding," asks Barshay, "while more-sophisticated ed tech has often shown mixed results and failed to gain traction?" The good results are especially puzzling since students in the studies were doing only about 18 minutes of ASSISTments homework a week, split between two or three sessions.

The answer seems to be that students get instant feedback, versus waiting for the teacher's feedback the next day – or later. ASSISTments is a robo grader, marking each problem immediately: students get a green check if they get it right the first time, an orange check for succeeding on the second and subsequent attempts (students can try as often as they want).

A second advantage of one-size-fits-all homework is that students can work together, "something that motivates many extroverted tweens and teens to do their homework," says Barshay. It can also spark in-class discussions with students explaining different ways they solved problems that everyone has wrestled with.

A third feature is that teachers get a simple data report on the problems students got right and wrong, which is helpful for knowing where instruction is successful and where students need more help. Teachers can also project anonymized results on a screen and go over items that more students missed.

"Proof Points: The Value of One-Size-Fits-All Math Homework" by Jill Barshay in *The Hechinger Report*, September 11, 2023

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6. Debunking Myths About Creativity and the Brain

"A common challenge to the effective realization of creativity is knowing too little about it," say Mathias Benedek (University of Graz, Austria) and 11 colleagues in this article in *Personality and Individual Differences*, "but it may be even worse when we assume to know but are wrong." Demystifying creativity really matters, say the authors, because it's actually the "extraordinary result of ordinary processes." As long as educators and families cling to common misconceptions, fostering creativity will be stymied.

Benedek et al. conducted an online survey of 1,261 adults in six countries (Austria, China, Georgia, Germany, Poland, and the U.S.) to identify widely held myths about creativity that span continents and cultures. The researchers found that the myths were most often held by people with a lower level of education who relied on undependable sources and were willing to accept questionable notions based on the opinions of others.

Here are the myths about creativity that emerged from the study, believed on average by 50 percent of the survey respondents, followed by neuromyths – misconceptions about the human brain. The researchers then present evidence-based facts about creativity and the brain. (All these are quoted verbatim.)

- Myth #1 - Creativity cannot be measured.
- Myth #2 – Creativity is essentially the same as art.
- Myth #3 – Creative ideas are naturally a good thing.
- Myth #4 – Most people would not be able to distinguish abstract art from abstract children's drawings.
- Myth #5 – Creative accomplishments are usually the result of sudden inspiration.
- Myth #6 – Creative thinking mostly happens in the right hemisphere of the brain.
- Myth #7 – Creativity tends to be a solitary activity.
- Myth #8 – Creativity is a rare gift.
- Myth #9 – People have a certain amount of creativity and cannot do much to change it (this was the least widely-held misconception, held by only 20 percent of respondents).
- Myth #10 – Children are more creative than adults.
- Myth #11 – Exceptional creativity is usually accompanied by mental health disorders.
- Myth #12 – People get more creative ideas under the influence of alcohol or marijuana.
- Myth #13 – Long-term schooling has a negative impact on the creativity of children.
- Myth #13 – Brainstorming in a group generates more ideas than if people were thinking by themselves (this was the most widely-held misconception at 80 percent of respondents).
- Myth #15 – One is most creative with total freedom in one's actions.

<u>Neuromyths:</u>

- Individuals learn better when they receive information in their preferred learning style (e.g., auditory, visual, kinesthetic).
- Short bouts of coordination exercises can improve integration of left- and right-hemispheric brain functions.
- Children are less attentive after sugary drinks and snacks.

- Differences in hemispheric dominance (left brain or right brain) can help to explain individual differences among learners.
- We mostly use only 10% of our brain.

Creativity facts:

Now here are research-based creativity *facts* and neurofacts, knowledge of which varied widely among respondents, averaging 68 percent:

- To be considered creative, something has to be both novel and useful or appropriate.
- Teachers appreciate the idea of creativity but not necessarily creative pupils.
- Whether or not something is viewed as creative depends on the zeitgeist and social norms.
- Creativity is an important part of mathematical thinking.
- Creative ideas are typically based on remembered information that is combined in new ways.
- The first idea someone has is often not the best one.
- Alpha activity in the brain plays an important role in creative thought.
- Creative people are usually more open to new experiences.
- Creative people are usually more intelligent.
- Achieving a creative breakthrough in a domain (e.g., publishing a successful novel) typically requires at least 10 years of deliberate practice and work (this was the least-commonly known fact, at 37 percent among respondents).
- Men and women generally do not differ in their creativity.
- A man's creativity increases his attractiveness to potential partners.
- When stuck on a problem, it is helpful to continue working on it after taking a break (this was highest among respondents at 97 percent).
- Positive moods help people get creative ideas.
- Getting rewarded for creative performance at work increases one's creativity.

Neurofacts:

- We use our brains 24 hours a day.
- Extended cognitive training can change the shape and structure of some parts of the brain.
- The brains of boys are generally larger than those of girls.
- Learning occurs through modification of the brain's neural connections.
- Normal development of the human brain involves the birth and death of brain cells.

The findings, conclude Benedek et al., "highlight the need for better communication of evidence-based knowledge to enable more-effective support of creativity."

"Creativity Myths: Prevalence and Correlates of Misconceptions on Creativity" by Mathias Benedek, Martin Karstendiek, Simon Ceh, Roland Grabner, Georg Krammer, Isabela Lebuda, Paul Silvia, Katherine Cotter, Yangping Li, Weiping Hu, Khatuna Martskvishvili, and James Kaufman in *Personality and Individual Differences*, November 2021 (Vol. 182, pp. 1-25); Benedek can be reached at mathias.benedek@uni-graz.at.

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7. Helpful School Factors for LGBTQ Youth

In this article in *Campus Safety*, Amy Rock reports that suicide is the second most common cause of death among 15-to-24-year-olds, with nearly 20 percent of high-school students reporting having serious thoughts about suicide and 9 percent making an attempt. The numbers are higher among LGBTQ youth, according to a 2023 survey, with 46 percent of those 13-17 reporting that they had considered suicide in the past year.

The same survey of LGBTQ youth showed that high-school students with access to at least one of the following school-related protective factors had 26 percent lower odds of attempting suicide in the past year (in parentheses are the percents of U.S. high-school students who currently have access to each):

- Access to a gender-neutral bathroom (29 percent);
- Teachers who respect students' pronouns (25 percent);
- History classes that discuss LGBTQ people (14 percent);
- Sex education that includes LGBTQ information (15 percent);
- Access to a Gay-Straight Alliance (57 percent).

See the full article link for more-detailed statistics.

"5 Policies Proven to Reduce LGBTQ Student Suicide Risk and How Many Schools Actually Have Them" by Amy Rock in *Campus Safety*, September 20, 2023; Rock can be reached at amy.rock@emeraldexpo.com.

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8. Manga Books on Witches

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Brigid Alverson recommends manga books featuring witches (click the link below for cover images and short synopses):

- *Little Witch Academia* by Yoh Yoshinari, illustrated by Keisuke Sato, grade 5 and up
- *Daily Report About My Witch Senpai* by Maka Mochida, grade 7 and up
- *Burn the Witch* by Tite Kubo, grade 8 and up
- *A Witch's Printing Office* by Mochinchi, illustrated by Yasuhiro Miyama, grade 8 and up
- *Witch Hat Atelier* by Kamome Shirahama, grade 8 and up
- *Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina* by Jougi Shiraishi, illustrated by Itsuki Nanao, grade 8 and up
- *Flying Witch* by Chihiro Ishizuka, grade 9 and up

"Good Witches: Affable Characters Who Cast Gentle Spells" by Brigid Alverson in *School Library Journal*, October 2023 (Vol. 69, #10, pp. 34-36)

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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 54 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 HTMI 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
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
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 Ed (formerly Ed. Magazine)
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
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
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