Marshall Memo 991

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 19, 2023

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Clearly, students need feedback and scaffolded skill-building in order to make recess a socially productive period that does not devolve into problem behavior."

Carolyn Mak and Natasha (see item #1)

"In early childhood, play abounds. Children's play is natural and precious. Early childhood educators enter children's play with the unique perspective and awesome responsibility of being teachers."

Kateri Thunder, John Hattie, John Almarode, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Alisha Demchak (see item #2)

"We can position each child as competent, valuable, and critical members of our learning community. And we can share authority with each child so they become active decision-makers and owners of their own learning."

Kateri Thunder et al. (*ibid*.)

"You know, you spin straw into gold, right? And I'm always interested in taking the straw of my life and spinning it into gold, so that some young person understands the straw of their lives can be gold as well. You feel me?"

Jason Reynolds (see item #4)

"Young people, be kind to your parents and the adults in your lives, they're doing their best. Old people, be kind to the young people in your lives, they're doing their best. If we can remember that, we'll all do a little better."

Jason Reynolds (*ibid*.)

"We need to do better if our children are to become highly literate. And they simply must. They *must* become lifelong readers, writers, inquirers, critical thinkers, and empathetic souls. Without high levels of literacy, they become prey to misinformation and economic

manipulation. They may not fully understand or enact their rights and freedoms. They may not be able to communicate their ideas well. If not highly literate, they will earn lower wages and have a greater risk of being incarcerated. They also risk living a life devoid of the beauty and power of literature. There are so many reasons that literacy is perhaps the most pressing civil rights issue of our time."

Angela Peery in "Does Your School Need a Literacy Check-up?" in *Cult of Pedagogy*, June 14, 2021; Peery can be reached at drangelapeery@gmail.com.

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1. How to Make Recess a Positive Experience for Everyone

In this *Theory Into Practice* article, Carolyn Mak and Natasha Koustova (Branksome Hall, Canada) quote from a tongue-in-cheek article on recess: "The most frivolous part of the school day is in fact the only true remedy to the inherent tedium of a day spent in school." In fact, free unstructured play at recess has the potential to promote elementary children's social-emotional development. But recess time can also include conflict, exclusion, and bullying.

Mak and Koustova did an extensive study of recess, which they say is "poorly understood and rapidly disappearing." Some U.S. schools are abolishing or cutting back on outdoor play to maximize instructional time; meanwhile, elementary students in Shanghai spend up to 40 percent of the school day at recess and physical activity – and still have some of the world's best academic achievement. It's common for U.S. children to denied recess as a punishment or to finish their work, even in districts where protecting fun outdoor time is an explicit policy. Some other research findings:

- Children worldwide appreciate recess for the freedom, outdoor air, chatting with friends and staff, playing games, playing with toys, and escaping schoolwork.
- Researchers report that recess is important to building social-emotional skills, developing friendships, building social networks, adjusting to school, trying on different social roles, developing empathy and perspective-taking, and learning how to control aggression.
- Some children prefer organized games at recess; others appreciate the opportunity to socialize with friends.
- Many children enjoy play that's risky, exciting, challenging, uncertain, and slightly dangerous: great heights, high speed, chasing, rough-and-tumble, disappearing and getting lost.
- Risky play helps children learn about their physical limits, their assessment of risk, and risk tolerance, but educators and parents have strong concerns and try to prevent that kind of play.

- There are boy-girl differences, with boys typically engaging in competitive games (often excluding girls), girls preferring games that are more inclusive, interpersonal, and focused on communication – or just socializing and forming close friendships.
- Recess is a time when students develop status and reputation within their peer group; those who have many positive interactions and play cooperatively gain acceptance and popularity, while those who are aggressive or behave inappropriately are excluded or overlooked.
- Researchers categorize students as key players (organizers and leaders), central players (vocally active), team players (responding to others), hoverers (standing back from or not persisting in group activities), and solitary players (not involved in group activities).

Asked what they don't like about recess, students mention verbal and physical bullying; being left out or isolated; social conflict; small, dirty, or boring playgrounds; and when one group takes over the play space. Studies of recess identify several other problems: teasing and harassment; social cliques; students not able to initiate or sustain games and activities; crowded playgrounds; inadequate equipment and not enough activity options; ineffective supervision; and too many restrictions due to concerns about safety. Studies show that recess is particularly difficult for students who don't have friends and those with mental health issues. The latter may develop maladaptive behaviors that exacerbate their isolation and stress.

"Clearly," say Mak and Koustova, "students need feedback and scaffolded skill-building in order to make recess a socially productive period that does not devolve into problem behavior." But when adults introduce too much structure at recess, that detracts from its potential to develop students' agency and social skills and may push bullying to other parts of the school day (or after dismissal). "Children need clear strategies for dealing with social conflict and bullying," say the authors, "as well as adult support to do so." They summarize five ways to improve the recess experience for students and adults:

• *Environment and equipment* – This includes a space that's not too crowded, has a play structure and other engaging activities, not too many students in the space at one time, and engaged adults. Mak and Koustova note that it's often students of color and those experiencing poverty who don't have these key ingredients.

• *Adult training and supervision* – "Recess supervisors are typically untrained and commonly see the responsibility as a burden rather than an opportunity to facilitate the development of children's social skills," say the authors. "Recess supervisors approach their duties from the point of view of safety, risk aversion, and the prevention of 'mess,' and typically focus on creating and enforcing rules that restrict children's agency and freedom in play." Recess supervisors may limit play, remove equipment, ban games, punish students by taking away recess – but also fail to intervene with bullying and cliquish behavior.

The answer to these problems is having specially trained recess supervisors who understand the positive potential of recess. Training needs to include a "risk tolerance framework," worked out with adults and students, geared to preventing injuries while building students' skills in supporting and looking out for one another and treating peers and adults with respect.

• *Structured activities* – The sweet spot here is orchestrating games and interactions that increase the enjoyment of recess and decrease sedentary or aggressive behavior – without taking away freedom and agency and opportunities to develop social skills. The Recess Project is one initiative that creates more options for play and more scaffolded opportunities for socialization.

• *Behavioral reinforcements* – These might include using tokens or praise from recess supervisors or "peer praisers" for positive activity during recess. Schools that have tried this approach report a decrease in inappropriate behavior and students sent to the office, but when the reinforcements were paused, misbehavior went back to where it was before – reflecting the limits of extrinsic rewards. Also, researchers found that behavioral reinforcements worked better (short term) with younger students, while older kids simply misbehaved in parts of the recess area where adults couldn't see them and exchanged the tokens among themselves for favors. Schools need to find ways to extend classroom behavioral support interventions to recess so students internalize behavioral expectations and communication and conflict resolution skills and apply them to all parts of the school day.

Mak and Koustova conclude with these recommendations for schools that want to foster the most positive recess experience:

- Don't diminish or withhold recess as a punitive measure.
- Provide adult recess supervisors with specific training.
- Use older students to assist at recess – leading games, managing equipment, soliciting ideas from students, modeling good behavior, and demonstrating student leadership.
- Equip students with social skills, including conflict resolution.
- Convene a committee to evaluate the physical, social, and academic impact of recess and develop goals for recess.
- Be conscious of equity in imposing consequences for recess misbehavior.

"Recess Time: Help or Hindrance to the Social-Emotional Development of Young Children?" by Carolyn Mak and Natasha Koustova in *Theory Into Practice*, Spring 2023 (Vol. 62, #2, pp. 127-140); Mak can be reached at cmak@branksome.on.ca.

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2. What Research Says About Play in Early-Childhood Classrooms

"In early childhood, play abounds," say Kateri Thunder (Math+Literacy LLC), John Hattie (University of Melbourne), John Almarode (James Madison University), Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (San Diego State University), and Alisha Demchak (Math+Literacy LLC) in this article in *Theory Into Practice*. "Children's play is natural and precious. Early childhood educators enter children's play with the unique perspective and awesome responsibility of being teachers."

The authors suggest five big ideas for early childhood educators who want their programs to have a lasting positive impact as children move into the elementary grades:

• *Intentionally assume the roles of conversational partner and language facilitator*. Conversational partners participate in children's play, join in their chatter, ask questions,

engage in back-and-forth exchanges, and create a "just right" level of cognitive challenge. Language facilitators narrate actions, model think-alouds, and explicitly support new vocabulary, language structures, and ideas as children play.

• *Promote equity and inclusion*. Early childhood educators should intentionally build children's positive identity, agency, initiative, self-regulation, and problem-solving ability. "We can position each child as competent, valuable, and critical members of our learning community," say the authors. "And we can share authority with each child so they become active decision-makers and owners of their own learning."

• *Maximize effective language interactions*. "Noticing, listening, and observing are important parts of our learning about young children," say the authors. "This active observing enables us to notice children's rich funds of knowledge and harness their creativity. But we cannot remain silent… We must intentionally talk *with* children and engage them in talking *with* us and their peers as they play in order to move learning and development forward."

• *Leverage playful learning*. The authors suggest that early childhood educators ask themselves how well they are encouraging and harnessing children's creativity, unique perspectives, surprising interests, curiosities, and sense of humor to expand and deepen the possibilities of play. "We should leverage children's engagement in playful learning," they say, "to empower them as knowers, learners, evaluators of their learning, doers, collaborators, and teachers of themselves and others. And we should genuinely share in children's inquisitiveness, joy, laughter, and excitement."

• *Use guided play to create optimal learning experiences*. The authors describe a continuum with free play at one end (children direct the play with adults as observers) and direct instruction at the other end (adults orchestrate the play – for example, teaching a game or way to manipulate a toy – with children following their lead). In the middle of the continuum is guided play, where adults facilitate or co-play and children are active decision-makers. "Guided play capitalizes on the aspects of play that motivate, engage, and inspire," say the authors, "while also intentionally creating an optimal learning experience for each child." Three key elements:

- The teacher has a clear learning goal and sets up the playful activity with that objective in mind.
- Children can make choices and share their unique voice.
- The adult engages intentionally and responsively with children and maintains a "just right" level of cognitive challenge.

"By creating optimal playful learning experiences," say the authors, "we ensure that every child learns through play and that we know what each child learned so that we can plan for our next playful interactions."

The common factor across the five big ideas, say the authors, is developing language. "We should spend our time and energy planning, implementing, and building our expertise around our talk *with* children," they conclude. "Language is the linchpin of learning in early childhood education."

"What Really Matters in Play?" by Kateri Thunder, John Hattie, John Almarode, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Alisha Demchak in *Theory Into Practice*, Spring 2023 (Vol. 62, #2, pp. 115-126); Thunder can be reached at katerithunder@gmail.com.

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3. Texas Teachers Grapple with Preparing Students for High-Stakes Tests

In this article in *Urban Education*, Michiko Hikida (Ohio State University) and Laura Taylor (Rhodes College) describe their two-year study of a fourth-grade and fifth-grade teacher in an urban Texas elementary school that was under pressure to improve test scores. Hikida and Taylor closely observed how the teachers prepared their students for the high-stakes reading test – and the "administrative gaze" the teachers felt as they and their students became increasingly anxious about the tests.

The district gave benchmark tests three times each year, simulating testing conditions to get students ready for the four-hour ordeal of "the real test." Scores from the benchmark tests were used to identify students below standard for pullout classes and after-school tutoring. Teachers were also required to implement a test preparation program in grammar, one of the lowest-scoring areas in the past, and administrators checked to be sure it was being implemented faithfully.

Despite these mandates and the accompanying surveillance by school leaders, Hikida and Taylor observed two ways the teachers went off script as they prepared their students for state tests:

• *Outright resistance* – At one point in the spring, one of the teachers didn't administer a mandated practice test. Her class was highly engaged in a lesson on the Holocaust, and she continued with the discussion. "I'm going rogue," she said *soto voce* to Taylor, who was observing the class. "I'm not doing test prep today." The discussion was lively, rigorous, and content-rich, says Taylor: "In other words, this self-described 'rogue' activity was not one that ignored students' literacy development but instead built their comprehension of complex texts – an objective ostensibly at the core of the administration's mandated test preparation." The teacher knew she would be in trouble if an administrator made an unannounced visit, but she went ahead anyway.

The other teacher also occasionally departed from mandated test prep. "I'm not technically supposed to do this," he said to Hikida as he diverged from the test-centric curriculum to follow students' interests, including a two-week unit on World War II. He said his preferred literacy activities were "normal reading things" that he considered a better way to support his students' academic development.

• *A different approach to preparing for the test* – Both teachers were not fans of high-stakes testing (one entered the profession with the intent of ignoring the Texas tests), and didn't believe the tests accurately measured reading proficiency. But when they realized that their students felt they were failures if they didn't pass the tests, the teachers focused on how to help their students do well. They handled this by teaching a number of specific test-taking strategies and mnemonics to commit the strategies to memory. One test-taking skill was for students to read a passage and the comprehension question, cover the multiple-choice answer

choices, write their own best answer, and then see which of the test's answers was the best match.

Another strategy was to ask students to analyze the testmakers' intentions. In a class discussion about a particular answer on a practice test, a student said that one of the questions was designed to lead students to an incorrect answer. The teacher said the testmaker was thinking, "Oh, 4th graders, they're not gonna read all the way through to the end of the sentence… So, you have to be smarter than them, right?" The test writers (one teacher asked students to picture one of them as an old lady, smoking a cigarette, with a cat) were seen not as truly assessing students' knowledge and skills but as believing students would be careless and trying to "trick" them. The teachers sometimes drew attention to formatting errors in practice tests and talked to students about the testmakers themselves being careless.

Using these two approaches, say Hikida and Taylor, the teachers were giving students "access to structures and discourses of power" and helping them develop the savvy to outsmart the testmakers and score well on the test. But the teachers were also departing from their professed beliefs about effective literacy instruction. They knew they were "agents of the state" who had to administer the high-stakes tests and report any irregularities. One teacher told students that his job depended on following the test administration rules to a T. But at the same time, both teachers were self-professed student allies "expressing their solidarity and support as they prepared students to complete the test" – doing their best to help students do their best.

These teachers' actions, say Hikida and Taylor, "illustrated how educators might maintain idealism in the face of non-ideal conditions… Rather than approaching test preparation as simply a mandate to be completed, these teachers resourcefully used test preparation as an opportunity to develop students' critical analysis of the system, thus locating resources amid the constraints of testing. In supporting students to analyze test questions and critically reflect on their authors' purposes, [the teachers] helped students name the individuals behind the system… This allowed students to develop strategies for test-taking and for literacy more broadly (e.g., author's purpose) while also supporting them in beginning to analyze the test's purpose and fallibility."

"'As the Test Collapses In': Teaching and Learning Amid High-Stakes Testing in Two Urban Elementary Classrooms" by Michiko Hikida and Laura Taylor in *Urban Education*, July 2023 (Vol. 58, #6, pp. 1032-1060); Hikida can be reached at hikida.3@osu.edu.

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4. Jason Reynolds on Stories, Creativity, and Book Bans

Here are a few excerpts from a live Instagram interview in *School Library Journal* with author Jason Reynolds (*When I Was the Greatest, The Boy in the Black Suit, All American Boys* (with Brendan Kiely)*, Long Way Down*):

"I believe that every bit of our lives, every person that we see, every moment, every animal and insect, to me everything has a narrative, everything has a narrative attached to it, whether we think about it or not, whether we consider it or not. I just think about stories being everywhere, stories sort of being these things that are swirling all around us all the time in the

ether. And we just have to figure out how to reach up and snatch one down, or take this one and this one and put them together to make a new one. That's the thing about stories, I think they already exist everywhere around us. We just can't see them because we're not looking for them. And I am looking for them. I'm wide open. My receptors, my antennae, are up."

"I think that as much stock as we put in our machines, and our algorithms, and this that and the third, they cannot replace human connection. I think that we think they can, but they can't. And I think the time when we realized that they really cannot was in 2020 during the pandemic. We were all locked in the house and all we had were our machines, and the only thing we wanted to do was be around people. So I believe that no matter what, the human spirit will always be the thing that draws us toward art."

"You know, you spin straw into gold, right? And I'm always interested in taking the straw of my life and spinning it into gold, so that some young person understands the straw of their lives can be gold as well. You feel me?"

"The first thing I tell students is to always be interested in and question why people are afraid of things. Like, usually the things that everybody's afraid of are things that we probably need the most, you know, when it comes to information, when it comes to books being banned, censored, and challenged. Don't let the fear and insecurity of adults get in the way of your edification."

"On the flip side, though, I just want to say, we focus so much on the few people who hate the things that we make or are banning or are afraid of the thing that we make. And I think we should be focusing on the librarians and these teachers who are pressing forward regardless, all of the people on the front lines who have shown love and who sacrifice and put their jobs on the line every single day to make sure that our young people get a fair swing at open and honest, not just information, but art."

"Young people, be kind to your parents and the adults in your lives, they're doing their best. Old people, be kind to the young people in your lives, they're doing their best. If we can remember that, we'll all do a little better."

"Jason Reynolds Is Just Getting Started": An Instagram interview with *School Library Journal*, June 2023 (Vol. 69, #6, pp. 24-27)

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5. Books That Middle-School Students Love to Read

In this *Edutopia* article, North Carolina teacher Kasey Short says many students who were passionate about reading in the elementary grades fall out of love with books in middle school. The key to turning that around is finding the right books for young adolescents. Well-chosen books can:

- Show kids they're not alone in their feelings and circumstances;
- Provide positive examples for how they can speak up for themselves and others;
- Help them understand people who are different;
- Provide insight into real-world situations;

- Serve as a mental health break and an escape from the real world.

Here are ten authors (with one or more books by each) that Short has found to be consistent favorites for her middle-school students, inspiring them to read more of that writer's work and dive into similar books (click article link below for commentary on each author):

- Jerry Craft – *New Kid* graphic novel trilogy
- Barbara Dee – *Maybe He Just Likes You*
- Jason Reynolds – *Long Way Down*
- Kelly Yang – *Front Desk* series, *Finally Seen*
- Jasmine Warga – *A Rover's Story*
- Alan Gratz – *Ground Zero, Refugee,* and *Captain America: The Ghost Army*
- Raina Telgemeier – *Ghosts, Guts*, graphic novel versions of *Baby-Sitters Club* books
- Jewell Parker Rhodes – *Ghost Boys* and *Towers Falling*
- Stuart Gibbs – *Spy School* series
- Nicole Melleby – *The Science of Being Angry* and *How to Become a Planet*

"10 Favorite Writers for Middle-School Students" by Kasey Short in *Edutopia*, June 13, 2023

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6. Short Items:

a. Refreshing the Literary Canon – *School Library Journal*, in collaboration with the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE), suggests ways to extend "classic" works of literature with contemporary books and other forms of expression. The 2022 edition includes *To Kill A Mockingbird, Shakespeare's works, The Great Gatsby, Hatchet, Catcher in the Rye, The Outsiders, Lord of the Flies, The Grapes of Wrath, Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer, Jane Eyre, Great Expectations, Little Women, Pride and Prejudice, Island of the Blue Dolphins, Of Mice and Men,* and *Anthem*. The 2023 edition includes *1984, Romeo and Juliet, How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, The Bluest Eye, The Joy Luck Club, The Outsiders, Black Boy, The House on Mango Street, The Watsons Go to Birmingham, A Single Shard,* and *The People Could Fly*.

"New Ideas for 'Classic' Texts" in *School Library Journal*, June 2023 (Vol. 69, #6, pp. 17-18)

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b. Explaining Retrieval Practice – In this SXSW talk, cognitive scientist Pooja Agarwal (Berklee College of Music) vividly describes this well-researched strategy for helping students remember what's important.

"Powerful Teaching: Unleash the Science of Learning" by Pooja Agarwal at SXSW 2022

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c. Dealing with Workplace Gossip – In this TEDx talk, consultant/author Joe Mull deconstructs workplace gossip and suggests how to squash it.

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 48 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