

Marshall Memo 1020

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 22, 2024

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Quotes of the Week

“The most basic form of compassion is not assuaging distress but acknowledging it. When we can't make people feel better, we can still make a difference by making them feel seen.”

Adam Grant (see item #1)

“It's the job of education leaders to make good decisions by seeing through what *feels* right and adopting things with real evidence behind them that can be executed consistently in local contexts.”

Tim Daly (see item #6)

“If I had one hour to solve a problem, I would spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about the solution.”

Albert Einstein (quoted in item #3)

“If we expect certain behaviors from [students], we treat them differently, and that treatment is likely to affect their behavior... The same factors operate with bosses and their employees, therapists and their clients, or parents and children.”

Robert Rosenthal, Harvard social psychologist, who died last week at 90. Rosenthal was co-author, with Lenore Jacobson, of *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, a 1968 study describing how, when teachers were told that randomly chosen students would flourish in the year ahead, those students gained an average of 27 I.Q. points, while the control group did worse. Subsequent research confirmed the power of teacher expectations.

“Realize that only a fraction of what you teach is actively being processed.”

Javier Arguello and Natalie Young (see item #4)

“Do we speak of the tests in terms that communicate that they are a routine part of school, or are we unconsciously telling students they're the most important thing that will happen to them

that year? Do we focus on increasing scores or decreasing stress? Do we lift the burdens students carry around the tests or do we add to them?"

Jennifer Borgioli Binis (see item #2)

"The worst part of my job is being the cellphone police."

Mark McLaughlin, an Oregon high-school math teacher, quoted in ["What Happens When a School Bans Smartphones? A Complete Transformation"](#) by Tik Root in *The Guardian*, January 17, 2024

1. Adam Grant on the Difference Between Empathy and Compassion

In this *New York Times* article, Adam Grant (University of Pennsylvania) says that, paradoxically, empathy can bring us to a standstill. Psychologists call it empathic distress – feeling others' pain but unable to help. Grant himself has felt this way watching the violence in the Middle East and its repercussions on his campus: "Helpless as a teacher, unsure of how to protect my students from hostility and hate. Useless as a psychologist and writer, finding words too empty to offer any hope. Powerless as a parent, searching for ways to reassure my kids that the world is a safe place and most people are good."

Empathic distress explains why many people have stopped following the news and don't want to talk about troubling events. *What can I do?* "Caring itself is not costly," says Grant. "What drains people is not merely witnessing others' pain but feeling incapable of alleviating it. In times of sustained anguish, empathy is a recipe for more distress, and in some cases even depression."

There's a distinction between empathy and compassion, he believes, and therein lies a way out of our distress:

- Empathy absorbs others' emotions as our own: *I'm hurting for you*. It can be seen in brain scans – neural networks lighting up. When we can't help, we escape the pain by withdrawing, appearing not to care.
- Compassion focuses on action: *I see that you're hurting and I'm here for you*. This lights up a different neural network, one associated with affiliation and social connection, and instead of feeling overloaded and withdrawing, we're motivated to reach out and help.

The key is to respond with compassion rather than empathy, says Grant, "focusing not on sharing others' pain but on noticing their feelings and offering comfort."

He felt this recently when he got this e-mail from a friend: *Nothing more to say really than I just wanted to send along a big big hug. And just a reminder that I love you and your*

family so very much. If I can ever be an ear to talk to, I am all in. “The most basic form of compassion,” says Grant, “is not assuaging distress but acknowledging it. When we can’t make people feel better, we can still make a difference by making them feel seen.”

[“There’s a Reason You Feel Overwhelmed and Immobilized”](#) by Adam Grant in *The New York Times*, January 6, 2024; Grant can be reached at grantad@wharton.upenn.edu.

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2. A Harm-Reduction Approach to Standardized Testing

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Borgioli Binis suggests an alternative to fighting or opting out of the glut of standardized tests to which American students are subjected:

- *Accept that they’re not going away.* Concerned educators and parents need to let go of the idea that we need to, or should, get rid of standardized tests, says Binis. Tests are so deeply embedded in schools because they serve two important functions. One is synchronization – helping schools in our very decentralized, locally controlled K-12 system have some common connections about all children’s right to a quality education. Tests also play a key role in special education services, instructional decisions, reporting and grades, student placement, and more. “We can negotiate how they’re used in each of these contexts,” says Binis, “but getting rid of them isn’t possible.”

- *Don’t exaggerate.* It’s true, as New York Congressman Jamaal Bowman wrote in his proposed More Teaching Less Testing Act, that a typical American student takes about 112 mandated standardized tests from kindergarten through high school. But only about 16 of those are federally required; the rest are state or local tests. “Striving for precise language moves us from generalities to specifics,” says Binis, “from abstract to concrete.” It also focuses on the aims and quality of different assessments, from ELA tests with a heavy emphasis on writing to assessments like DIBELS that focus on specific phonics skills.

- *Redirect time and energy at the classroom level.* For superintendents, principals and teachers, this means how we prepare for tests, how they’re administered, how we talk to students and parents about them, and how the data are used. Binis suggests:

- Stop doing test prep throughout the year and don’t spend money on test prep materials.
- Dial back on treating every classroom assessment as “practice” for state tests.
- Shift to learner-centered test prep – helping students think about who they are as test takers, the nature of the test, and what purpose it serves.
- Be aware of the language, tone, and vocabulary that students hear about tests. “Do we speak of the tests in terms that communicate that they are a routine part of school,” asks Binis, “or are we unconsciously telling students they’re the most important thing that will happen to them that year? Do we focus on increasing scores or decreasing stress? Do we lift the burdens students carry around the tests or do we add to them?”

Binis quotes Goodhart’s Law: “When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.”

- *Take care in how test scores are used.* This of course means not using a single test score as the sole determinant of important instructional and placement decisions, and working to counteract the long history of bias around standardized testing – for example, acting as barriers for students of color gaining access to certain courses and experiences. It also means finding ways to lower the temperature around tests and help students understand their purpose – perhaps in student-led conferences when sharing results with parents. There also needs to be training and monitoring of teacher- and school-developed tests to improve quality and reduce assessment bias.

- *Ensure that state tests measure what matters.* Some large-scale, federally mandated reading assessments have created two unintended consequences, says Binis. The emphasis on content-agnostic skills has led to skill-focused instruction without students being exposed to a common base of background knowledge. Second, tests’ use of short passages has wagged the dog of classroom content, moving English classes away from longer texts – and in the process sapping students’ reading stamina. We can’t lose sight of the larger goal, says Binis: “A healthier system and more positive school experiences for students and teachers.”

She closes the article by citing a number of initiatives to improve the quality of assessments and how they are used.

[“Standardized Tests Aren’t Going Anywhere. So What Do We Do?”](#) by Jennifer Borgioli Binis in *Cult of Pedagogy*, January 21, 2024

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3. With Complex Problems, Don’t Leap to Solutions

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Julia Binder (Center for Sustainable and Inclusive Business, IMD) and Michael Watkins (IMD, Genesis Advisers) quote Albert Einstein: “If I had one hour to solve a problem, I would spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about the solution.” Binder and Watkins believe that when confronted with complex challenges, especially those that are unfamiliar, leaders need to follow Einstein’s advice. “By jumping immediately into problem-solving,” they say, “teams limit their ability to design innovative and durable solutions.”

Here’s their *E5* process for thoughtfully and successfully solving complex problems: Expand, Examine, Empathize, Elevate, and Envision:

- *Expand.* Prior to brainstorming, it’s important to lead a diverse team in putting aside preconceptions, opening their minds, and engaging in a comprehensive exploration of the problem’s facets and nuances. “Frame-storming helps teams identify assumptions and blind spots, mitigating the risk of pursuing inadequate or biased solutions,” say Binder and Watkins. “The primary objective is to generate many alternative problem frames, allowing for a more holistic understanding of the issue.” Questions like *What if...* and *How might we...* are helpful.

- *Examine.* The object here is to identify the part of the iceberg that’s below the surface – the “underlying drivers and systemic contributors,” hidden assumptions and blind spots. As with the first phase, say Binder and Watkins, “open discussions and collaborative research are crucial for achieving a comprehensive analysis.”

- *Empathize*. In this phase, the team looks at the problem through the eyes of key stakeholders, trying to understand how they perceive the issue. Through interviews or surveys, the team gathers information in four sections – *What do stakeholders think? What do they feel? What do they say? What do they do?* – and looks for pain points, patterns, and inconsistencies.

- *Elevate*. In this phase, the team explores how the problem connects to broader organizational issues. “This bird’s-eye view reveals interconnected issues and their implications,” say Binder and Watkins. “It’s like zooming out on a map to understand where a city lies in relation to the whole country or continent.” Things to analyze: reporting relationships, workflow, HR policies, power dynamics, rules, systems, cultural symbols, rituals, and stories.

- *Envision*. In the final phase, say the authors, the team engages in “backcasting” – moving from framing the problem “to actively imagining and designing solutions.” This involves defining the desired goal and reverse engineering the path to achieving that goal, including key milestones – for each one pinpointing specific interventions, strategies, and initiatives. “Synthesize the activities into a sequenced, chronological, prioritized road map or action plan,” say the authors, “and allocate the resources, including time, budget, and personnel, necessary to implement your plan.” Finally, monitor progress and make necessary mid-course corrections – because the unexpected will happen.

[“To Solve a Tough Problem, Reframe It”](#) by Julia Binder and Michael Watkins in *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2024 (Vol. 102, #1, pp. 80-89)

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4. Insights on Teaching and Learning from Brain Science

In this *Edutopia* article, Javier Arguello and Natalie Young (COGx) say many insights from cognitive scientists remain “trapped within academia.” They identify six research findings that are being used in the most effective K-12 classrooms:

- *Prime students’ brains for learning*. Giving low-stakes quizzes before introducing new material improves learning by alerting students’ brains to what’s coming.

- *Activate learners’ attentional filter*. “Realize that only a fraction of what you teach is actively being processed,” say Arguello and Young. If students aren’t tuned in, nothing will make it into working memory, let alone long-term memory. Effective teachers capture students’ attention with prediction, purposeful novelty, and signaling what’s important.

- *Pre-teach new vocabulary*. This helps avoid cognitive overload when terms are separated from meaning. “Consider using flash cards at the start of a unit instead of waiting until the end,” say the authors.

- *Use spaced retrieval*. “We begin forgetting what we’ve learned shortly after we learn it,” say Arguello and Young. Having students frequently pull information and skills from memory solidifies learning, and spacing out retrieval questions gives an extra boost.

- *Interleave retrieval*. Occasionally mini-testing information and skills from several subject areas makes students’ brains work harder and further solidifies learning.

- *Prompt students to actively generate information.* “Create opportunities for students to make connections between different ideas and concepts and consider what makes them similar or different,” say Arguello and Young. This connects prior knowledge and is more active than just answering questions on what was in the textbook.

[“6 Evidence-Based Instructional Practices Drawn from Cognitive Science”](#) by Javier Arguello and Natalie Young in *Edutopia*, January 16, 2024

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5. Timothy Shanahan on Literacy Priorities in Middle School

“Making explicit, systematic phonics part of a comprehensive reading and writing program for beginning readers is a no-brainer,” says Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) in this online article. But what about phonics in middle school? He searched for studies and found a paucity of research evidence on the efficacy of phonics in those grades. “I think it’s fair to say that we don’t know much about how best to teach decoding in grades 2-12,” Shanahan concludes.

Pulling together what we do know, and drawing on his own experience as a teacher, researcher, and director of literacy in the Chicago schools, he has these observations and recommendations:

- A significant number of students in middle and high school are reading at the third or fourth grade level and still lag in decoding skills.

- For secondary students, there’s a threshold of decoding proficiency; those above it can improve their reading skill with a wide range of instructional interventions; students below it won’t improve with regular interventions; they need targeted help, including phonics.

- In ELA secondary classrooms, 25 percent of Tier I classroom time should be devoted to explicit study of words: how they work, vocabulary, morphology, spelling, and occasionally phonics.

- Teachers should be on the lookout for students who are not able to decode proficiently and make sure they don’t slip through the cracks. “It doesn’t matter the source of those problems,” says Shanahan, “– inadequate primary-grade instruction, learning disabilities, transfers from other schools – they need to be identified.”

- Provide high-quality Tier 2 phonics instruction for those students – a program that is dedicated, explicit, and systematic. “Phonics is unlikely to be enough for those kids,” says Shanahan, “but without it, they won’t advance.”

[“Does the Science of Reading Include Middle School?”](#) by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, January 6, 2024; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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6. What Happened to Finland, the Poster Child of Good Pedagogy?

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Tim Daly recalls how in the early 2000s, Finland’s students had outstanding results on international assessments, leading hundreds of U.S.

educators to visit the most admired schools in the world. But in recent years, starting before the pandemic, Finland's student achievement compared to other countries has plummeted. Between 2000 and 2022, its reading average scale score dropped 56 points (to 14th place worldwide); its math average scale score dropped 79 points (taking it from first place to 20th). Finland's education minister recently called the latest results "extremely concerning."

Why has Finland lost its position as a world leader in K-12 education? Daly considers several explanations:

- Explanation #1: Finland's earlier success was an artifact of biases and glitches in the assessments. Daly finds this explanation unpersuasive: Finland's PISA scores were high in math, science, and reading over a number of years, and there's no evidence that they were anything but authentic.

- Explanation #2: Increased immigration and other demographic shifts were responsible. Although Finland is now less homogeneous than it was several decades ago, this is "pretty unlikely" to be the explanation, says Daly. In 2022, just seven percent of Finnish students were immigrants, compared to 24 percent in the U.S. Student achievement isn't being pulled down by subgroups, he says; achievement has declined across the board.

- Explanation #3: Finland's earlier success was real, but it was followed by a period of steep decline. This makes the most sense, says Daly. From the 1970s to the 1990s, teacher training was centralized at major universities and national inspectorates maintained school quality. But in recent decades, budget pressures led to a reduction in those key features. It's plausible that devolving authority to the local level, nominally to trust local educators, accounted for the decline in achievement.

Daly says there's probably more to Finland's relative decline than that. He concludes with several observations on this riches-to-rags story:

First, excellence is difficult to maintain. "It's fragile," says Daly. "Ask Bill Belichick and the New England Patriots" (although that team's winning ways lasted longer than Finland's).

Second, we should be cautious about trying to imitate success in other countries. Ideas don't always travel well, and by the time American visitors arrived, Finland's achievement was already declining.

Third, hype bubbles are too common. "It's the job of education leaders," says Daly, "to make good decisions by seeing through what *feels* right and adopting things with real evidence behind them that can be executed consistently in local contexts."

Fourth, we need better post-mortems. "Where did Finland go wrong?" asks Daly, "Where's *that* book of Finnish lessons? If we don't excavate that stuff, we will just circle around the same fads every few generations, making the same mistakes and ending up where we started."

Finally, he says, it's sad that education is no longer a top-tier domestic issue in the U.S., the way it was in the Finland-mania days.

["The Rise and Fall of Finland Mania, Part Two: Why Did Scores Plummet?"](#) by Tim Daly in *Education Gadfly*, January 18, 2024

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7. How Helpful Are Clearinghouses That Rate K-12 Programs?

In this *Review of Educational Research* article, Mansi Wadhwa and Jingwen Zheng (George Washington University) and Thomas Cook (Northwestern University) say the number of clearinghouses providing Consumer Reports-type information on K-12 programs “has grown in topsy-turvy fashion.” The researchers examined a number of clearinghouses, eliminated 19 that didn’t meet basic standards, and zeroed in on 12 that seemed to have best methodology:

- What Works Clearinghouse
- Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development
- California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Social and Economic Welfare
- Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness
- Promising Practices Network
- Best Evidence Encyclopedia
- National Dropout Prevention Center
- Social Programs That Work
- Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness, Continuum of Evidence
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Guide (CASEL)
- Promise Neighborhoods Research Consortium
- CNCS Evidence Exchange

Wadhwa, Zheng, and Cook then analyzed these clearinghouses’ ratings of programs and, when they rated the same programs (including Open Court Reading, Success for All, Peer Assisted Learning Strategies, Quantum Opportunities Programs, and Communities in Schools), compared the ratings.

Here’s what they found. First, of the many programs assessed by clearinghouses, only 17 percent were rated by more than one, greatly limiting the “consumer” information school and district leaders had available to them. Second, when clearinghouses did evaluate the same programs, there were often significant differences in the ratings. And third, the reason was that clearinghouses used different criteria for rating programs’ effectiveness.

These conclusions “might bewilder potential consumers of evidence-based knowledge who expect clearinghouses to generate certified knowledge about what does and does not work,” say Wadhwa, Zheng, and Cook. “‘Evidence-based’ seems to be an idea with modest construct validity despite clearinghouses being funded precisely to identify which programs are most evidence-based.”

The authors close with several questions and an appeal to a higher power: “Do we need so many clearinghouses in education? How can the number be reduced and other clearinghouses be better supported? How can we maintain or increase the heterogeneity in evaluative criteria where no scientific consensus currently exists, while reducing the heterogeneity where consensus exists?... Some official body is needed to review the informal system of clearinghouses we now have in education and to make suggestions about how the system might be improved.”

[“How Consistent Are Meanings of ‘Evidence-Based’? A Comparative Review of 12 Clearinghouses That Rate the Effectiveness of Educational Programs”](#) by Mansi Wadhwa, Jingwen Zheng, and Thomas Cook in *Review of Educational Research*, February 2024 (Vol. 94, #1, pp. 3-32); Cook can be reached at t-cook@northwestern.edu.

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8. Knowledge Gaps About the Holocaust

In this *Boston Globe* article, Brion O’Connor reports on a 2019 Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults’ and teens’ (age 13-17) knowledge of the Holocaust. Below are the percents of each group choosing the correct answer from four multiple-choice options:

- When did the Holocaust happen?
 - 69% of adults answered correctly
 - 57% of teens
- What were Nazi-created ghettos?
 - 63% of adults answered correctly
 - 53% of teens
- In total, about how many Jews were killed in the Holocaust?
 - 45% of adults answered correctly
 - 38% of teens
- Which best describes how Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany?
 - 43% of adults answered correctly
 - 33% of teens

[“Learning Lessons from the Past”](#) by Brion O’Connor in *The Boston Globe*, January 21, 2024

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9. Award-Winning Fiction Books for Children

In this *Language Arts* feature, Donna Bulatowicz, Holly Johnson, Irene Latham, Maria Leija, and JoAnne Powless showcase the winners of the 2023 Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for children:

Winner:

- *Wayward Creatures* by Dayna Lorentz

Honors:

- *Love, Violet* by Charlotte Sullivan Wild, illustrated by Charlene Chua
- *Zara’s Rules for Record-Breaking Fun* by Hene Khan, illustrated by Wastana Haikal
- *My Brother Is Away* by Sara Greenwood, illustrated by Luisa Uribe
- *The Marvellers* by Dhonielle Clayton
- *Forever Cousins* by Laurel Goodluck, illustrated by Jonathan Nelson

Recommended:

- *The Patron Thief of Bread* by Lindsay Eager
- *The Turtle of Michigan* by Naomi Shihah Nye

- *Growing Pangs* by Kathryn Ormsbee, illustrated by Molly Brooks
- *My Hands Tell a Story* by Kelly Starling Lyons, illustrated by Tonya Engel
- *The Notebook Keeper* by Stephen Briseño, illustrated by Magdalena Mora
- *Big Bear and Little Fish* by Sandra Nickel, illustrated by Il Sung Na
- *Wildoak* by C.C. Harrington
- *Gibberish* by Young Vo

[“2023 Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children”](#) by Donna Bulatowicz, Holly Johnson, Irene Latham, Maria Leija, and JoAnne Powless in *Language Arts*, November 2023 (Vol. 101, #2, pp. 147-152)

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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 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 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
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