Marshall Memo 1082

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
April 7, 2025

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Students who read ample amounts of grade-level, knowledge-rich text will – inexorably – develop powerful vocabularies and become fluent, competent readers."

Mike Schmoker in "If Literacy Is a Priority, Why Do We Cling to the Wrong Practices?" in *Education Week*, March 25, 2025

"The first rule of SEL for older students? Don't be boring."

Alyson Klein in an eponymous article in *Education Week*, March 28, 2025

"Educators sometimes speak derogatorily about 'rote' memorization or 'drill and kill.' No one talks like that in sports or the arts, even though, in those fields, it's obvious that deliberate practice leads to improvement. Within education, kids need to master their times tables before they can handle more-advanced math, and they need to spend plenty of time immersed in books to build up their vocabulary and reading stamina."

Chad Aldeman in "12 Guiding Principles for the Future of American Education" in *Education Gadfly*, April 3, 2025

"Poems operate through compression. They're the product of heightened language compacted into a small space, even when they're long. They need to say a lot with a little."

Andrew Atherton (see item #5)

"This is hard, but it's hard for a reason."

Geoff Cohen (Stanford University), quoted in "The Science of Student Motivation" by Youki Terada in *Edutopia*, March 21, 2025

"Soft skills like showing up every day are huge parts of life; they make schools work – and they make life after school work."

Nat Malkus in "Back to School: Supporting and Engaging Students to Reduce Chronic Absence" in *American Educator*, Spring 2025 (Vol. 45, #1, pp. 28-34)

"What do my students need *me* to learn?"
Steve Barkley in "High-Impact Teacher Collaboration Begins with Leaders," *Educational Leadership*, April 2025 (Vol. 82, #7, pp. 38-45)

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1. Must Grammar Be the Skunk at the ELA Garden Party?

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Matthew Johnson describes how discouraged he was as a newbie high-school English teacher. Far from students adoring him as a Robin Williams-type classroom star, they were bored to tears with his by-the-book grammar instruction. Attending a summer session of the National Writing Project after his fourth year, Johnson learned it wasn't just him: across the nation, grammar was "the skunk at the garden party of the language arts," widely reviled and having little or no impact on the quality of student writing.

Johnson did more research and zeroed in on three insights that have helped him teach grammar in a completely different way:

• *Seeing the big picture* – At the beginning of the year, he gives students cards with the words *the, cats, large, three,* and *blue* and asks them to arrange them in order. All students quickly sort them into the identical sequence: *the three large blue cats*. Asked to say which part of speech each word is and the logic behind their sequence, a lot of students have no idea – and yet they intuitively knew the relationship of the words in conventional English: determiner first, then quantity, then size, then color.

"This begins a conversation we have all year," says Johnson, "about the purpose of grammar and language instruction when we already bring so much intuitive knowledge to the table." Students learn how they acquired that knowledge, why it's still important to learn some grammar terminology, and the role of dialects, students' unique idiolect, code-switching, and code-meshing. His classes also look at Apple's Apple Intelligence, Grammarly's Words That Work, and Google's Dear Sydney commercials and the messages tech companies are sending. Students' takeaway: it's good to know about grammar and language and that knowledge makes them stand out from robotic AI voices.

• *Teaching grammar in context* – Students can ace a grammar worksheet, but what they've "mastered" rarely transfers to their writing. The solution to this perennial problem is teaching grammar with students' actual writing. Rather than teaching a unit on punctuation, for example, Johnson teaches a unit on tools for adding emphasis and expression to one's writing, which includes the effective use of colons (semicolons come in a later unit on sentence structure and voice). Once this grammatical concept is introduced in context (along with other

ways to add emphasis, including what students do on their smartphones), students practice what they've learned a minimum of five times in their writing.

• *Overcoming the fear of feeling incompetent* – "While we may talk a lot these days about the importance of struggle and being okay with mistakes," says Johnson, "(both good things to discuss), it doesn't mean struggle and mistakes aren't still uncomfortable and embarrassing at times… And with all of its Latin terminology and endless layers of exceptions and footnotes, it is very easy to feel incompetent concerning grammar." Grammar is hard.

As an antidote to the fear of failure, he suggests employing curiosity and, when possible, joy. He's found this approach can increase motivation, improve student work and understanding, and decrease stress. Students need to be reminded of how much they already know intuitively, and that grammar isn't just about fixing errors – it's learning to express themselves fully and clearly.

Take capitalization. Johnson starts off by telling his students that many languages, including Arabic, Japanese, and Hebrew, don't have capital letters. Since English does, it's interesting to note the conventions that have emerged over time – the letter I by itself, the beginning of sentences, proper nouns, etc. – and the exceptions that have emerged, including ALL CAPS and sentences with no capitals, such as McDonalds "i'm lovin' it." Students then study how capitals are used in their families and neighborhoods and their own use of capitals in and out of school.

"In the end," says Johnson, "this curiosity-driven, joy-filled exploration of capitals helps students learn the rules far better than they ever did when we did capitalization worksheets or I circled capitalization issues in papers, and no one feels judged for how they used capitals; on the contrary, they understand how the capitalization approach they already bring to texts and school exists in and interacts with the larger tapestry of human communication, and they learn how they can use capitalization to better express their voices."

"Why Grammar Instruction Stinks, and How We Can Change That" by Matthew Johnson in *Cult of Pedagogy*, March 30, 2025; Johnson's book is *Good Grammar: Joyful and Affirming Language Lessons That Work for More Students* (Corwin 2024)

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2. Spicing Up Classroom Discussions

In this *Edutopia* article, Philadelphia high-school teacher Matthew Kay suggests five axioms for good discussions, whether they are in a classroom, a boardroom, or a barber shop:

• *Discussions are all about inquiry*. People are engaged in questioning, trying to figure out the answer to a compelling question. Worthwhile discussions are not just sharing information and opinions; those are steppingstones to answering big questions.

• *Discussions strengthen relationships*. "We must help students who have already grown close to each other leave our class discussions knowing each other even more authentically," says Kay.

• *Discussions should include joy*. There's not enough fun in secondary education, says Kay. "Discussions are a way to show students that something is funny, scary, or exciting when otherwise they might not see it. Frankly, these revelations keep teachers necessary in this AI era of schooling." He is delighted when parents say their children love a particular book and thoroughly enjoyed talking about it in class.

• *Routines are important*. Teachers try a variety of discussion formats but may not give them enough time to work properly. Kay likens the result to what happens every year when people sign up for gym memberships, try a random assortment of workout routines, and then quit a month or two latter (as many as 80 percent of January *New Year, New Me* memberships are cancelled by May). Teachers need to follow the lead of savvy gyms like Planet Fitness and establish scripted routines; with discussions, those might include whole-class interactive readalouds, fishbowls and Socratic seminars, and (Kay's favorite) conducting make-believe interviews with characters from books. "Our students deserve the chance to *get good at* a discussion activity through repetition and reflection," he says. "And so do we!"

• *Surprises are also good*. Kay has a lot of regular routines with his students: kicking off Monday classes sharing good news, launching discussions by reading a passage aloud, sustained silent reading at the beginning of Friday classes, and predictable catch phrases like, "Don't marry that idea, date it for a while." But he occasionally surprises students with something different: gamifying debates by assigning points, putting a student in charge of a discussion while he sits in the class, guest visits by authors, or going outside on a beautiful day. "These moments aren't the everyday meat and potatoes," says Kay. "They are the dessert: not offered after every meal but on the menu regardless just in case the sweet tooth calls."

"5 Axioms to Promote Deeper Discussions" by Matthew Kay in *Edutopia*, April 1, 2025; Kay can be reached at mrkay@notlight.com; his new book is *Prompting Deeper Discussions: A Teacher's Guide to Crafting Great Questions* (ASCD 2024)

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3. How Well Do Elementary Students Explain Scientific Phenomena?

In this *Journal of the Learning Sciences* article, Yael Shtechman and Michal Haskel-Ittah (Weizmann Institute of Science) and Marida Ergazaki (University of Patras) report on their study of how Israeli elementary students (grade 2-6) explained four biological phenomena. In 30-minute online interviews (the study was conducted during the pandemic), students were asked for their explanations of each of these:

- A puffer fish expanding its size when confronted with danger;
- A plant's roots growing toward a source of water;
- A plant always growing toward the sunlight;
- Our hand immediately pulling away when it touches something hot.

The researchers categorized students' explanations in four ways: circular, dealing only with what happened (*It gets scared, so it puffs up*); teleological or non-mechanistic (*The roots are growing toward the water so that the plant can receive the water it needs for growth and*

survival); mechanistic/active (*There is something inside the plant's leaves that can sense light, and it sends something to the stem that makes it grow in that direction*); and mechanistic/passive (*It is not that we move our hand; the heat energy from the fire moves to our muscles, and it makes them move the hand away*).

In their initial responses, most students chose mechanistic explanations, attempting to explain *how* the phenomena occurred. The researchers then offered suggestions for what might have caused the phenomena, asked students if their thinking changed, and posed follow-up questions about *why* things happened the way they did. Here's one response on the plant scenarios: *Because every plant, if it doesn't get enough water and doesn't receive light, cannot survive. So if the plant doesn't draw water to itself, then it won't be able to survive*.

Students seemed to rely mainly on the explanatory power of what was happening, say the researchers: "This suggests that children can be sensitive to the causal structure of mechanistic explanations in biology. Although they do not explicitly refer to the structure itself, they sense that these explanations fulfill their purpose and generate a sense of understanding that explains how phenomena occur." But this didn't always happen, and there were some students who, even when the mechanisms were explained, still stuck with their circular and illogical explanations.

What are the implications of this study for elementary science teaching? The authors suggest that students' incorrect and circular explanations should not be ignored because they can guide discussions toward causal relationships – *how* things are happening. And teleological explanations, even when incomplete, can guide discussions "toward understanding the function of that relationship in the survival of the organism or species (i.e., the *why*). The two are thus related and inform each other. Our results show that children already had the basis for such a distinction in elementary school. We suggest that educational programs can build on this intuitive basis of distinguishing between the 'hows' and 'whys' and emphasize their complementary relationship."

The authors close with this thought: students' ability to explain phenomena and think about causation and ultimate purpose can be developed through the grades "and certainly do not reflect fixed abilities. An explicit discussion about these epistemic criteria in school science may boost the development of these criteria and thus promote mechanistic reasoning."

"Mechanistic Reasoning in Biology Among Elementary School Children: Epistemic Criteria for Evaluation and Construction" by Yael Shtechman, Marida Ergazaki, and Michal Haskel-Ittah in *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, January-March 2025 (Vol. 34, #1, pp. 33-70); Haskel-Ittah can be reached at michal.haskel@weizmann.ac.il.

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4. An Upper-Elementary Unit on the Invention of the Electric Light

In this article in *Social Studies for the Young Learner*, Daniel Krutka (University of North Texas) says that inventors like Thomas Edison tend to be lionized as solo geniuses in history textbooks, and technological breakthroughs like electricity are presented as inevitable

and producing a positive impact. Krutka believes students need to develop a *technoskeptical* approach to inventions, understand that it's not one person working alone who makes things happen, and explore the role of race in technological development.

To illustrate how this might look in an upper-elementary classroom, Krutka describes a curriculum unit on African-American inventor and entrepreneur Lewis Latimer, focusing on three questions (click the article link below for resources and videos):

• *Who deserves credit for inventing the electric light?* "Inventions tend to be developed by communities of people who work – together and separately – to tinker toward technological advancements," says Krutka. Students look at the electric light patents secured by Thomas Edison and Lewis Latimer, read about the role of other inventors and entrepreneurs, explore the factors that made electric lights commercially viable, and look at the effect of racial bias on Latimer's contributions.

• *Why does Lewis Latimer's story matter?* Latimer's family escaped from slavery and made it to Boston. He served in the Union army during the Civil War and then worked with Alexander Graham Bell, Hiram Maxim, and Thomas Edison. Latimer won the respect of colleagues through his talent and work and was reportedly not outspoken on racial issues. Despite Latimer securing a key patent, it was Maxim, not Latimer, who profited from it. All this serves as a counterstory to the myth of the solo inventor and sheds light on Latimer's contributions despite the obstacles he faced.

• *What do we give up for the benefits of electric lighting?* Students explore the downsides of electricity, imagine what they would do without it, and what might have been better before its invention. They read a fictional story about the impact of a blackout on a tech-dependent family. A key takeaway: technology changes people's lives in complex ways.

The overall essential question for the unit: *What story should we tell about electric lights?*

"What Story Should We Tell About Electric Lights? A Critical Inquiry into Lewis Latimer and the Nature of Invention" by Daniel Krutka in *Social Studies for the Young Learner*, January/ February 2025 (Vol. 37, #3, pp. 5-10); Krutka can be reached at dankrutka@gmail.com.

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5. Strategies for Students Reading a Poem for the First Time

"Tackling unseen poetry is simultaneously one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences of the English language arts classroom," says Andrew Atherton in *Edutopia*. "It's rewarding because students get the chance to read the poem entirely on their own terms, largely unmediated by teacher guidance, and it's challenging for exactly the same reason." Atherton suggests three strategies students can use to get their heads into a poem they haven't seen before:

• *Use form to make inferences*. Before reading a poem, students should look at its visual appearance – not just the rhyme scheme or whether it's a sonnet, but its shape and the jagged

pattern of the lines. Click the link below to see this treatment of Marianne Moore's poem "The Fish."

• *Look for the tension or conflict in the opening lines.* "Poems operate through compression," says Atherton. "They're the product of heightened language compacted into a small space, even when they're long. They need to say a lot with a little." This tension is often contained right up front – for example, the first line of Lawrence Dunbar's poem, *Sympathy*: "I know what the caged bird feels."

• *Find the neon lines*. The British poet Simon Armitage once said that every poem has one line "that seems to be flashing on and off." Students should look for a line with vivid images, words, or phrases that pulse with energy. Once it's found, the poem is illuminated and becomes more accessible.

"3 Habits That Help Students Understand Poetry" by Andrew Atherton in *Edutopia*, April 1, 2025

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6. Questions to Get Students Thinking Before and After a Test

In this online article, high-school teacher Dave Stuart Jr. describes a pre- and post-test routine he's using with his ninth graders. Just before students begin a history test, he has them write down:

- The specific actions they took to prepare for this test;
- Their target score for the test.

When students get the corrected test back, Stuart has them get out what they wrote before and answer these questions:

- How did you do compared to your target score?
- Why do you think you got this result?
- What changes would you like to make during the next unit?
- Beyond test scores, how is this class giving you a chance to grow stronger, more knowledgeable, and more capable?

Click the link below to see several students' handwritten responses and Stuart's comments.

"A Simple Pre- and Post-Test Exercise (Unpack Outcomes Example)" by Dave Stuart Jr., April 3, 2025; Stuart can be reached at dave@davestuartjr.com.

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7. The Impact of a Kindergarten and Grade One Literacy Program

In this *Reading Research Quarterly* article, Matthew Burns, Holly Lane, and Valentina Contesse (University of Florida/Gainesville) and Nicholas Gage (WestEd) report on their study of the implementation of the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) Foundations early reading program in racially and economically diverse, 80 percent free-and-reduced-price lunch Florida kindergarten and first grade classes, comparing their DIBELS-measured reading

proficiency with that of a control group. The UFLI program includes phonemic awareness, how the mouth looks and feels when producing specific sounds, systematic phonics instruction in decoding and encoding, and building confidence and proficiency reading connected text. Coupled with frequent progress monitoring, UFLI was taught for 30 minutes a day through the school year as part of a comprehensive early literacy program.

What did the study find? Compared to the control group, students in the UFLI program made significant gains (more than 1.0 standard deviation), boosting many of them out of the At-Risk category. "The current data support UFLI Foundations," conclude Burns, Lane, Contesse, and Gage, "and more generally, explicit phonics instruction that includes instruction on grapheme-phoneme correspondence, decoding and encoding, and reading connected text, as an evidence-based practice for students in kindergarten and first grade." The researchers also found that student results were better with teachers who implemented the UFLI program with greater fidelity.

"Effect of an Instructional Program in Foundational Reading Skills on Early Literacy Development of Students in Kindergarten and First Grade" by Matthew Burns, Holly Lane, Valentina Contesse, and Nicholas Gage in *Reading Research Quarterly*, January/February 2025 (Vol. 60, #1, pp. 1-44); the authors can be reached at hlane@ufl.edu, contesse@coe.ufl.edu, ngage@wested.org, and burnsm1@ufl.edu.

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8. Looking Outside One's School for Personal Professional Learning

In *English Journal*, Peaches Hash (Appalachian State University) says that after sitting through years of unhelpful PD sessions, she decided to look outside her high school and found a wealth of free resources that greatly enriched her teaching. "Suddenly," she says, "my ninth graders were groaning when it was time to end class because they wanted to see what came next in *Romeo and Juliet*, rather than groaning that were studying it." Here are some resources she recommends:

- Fulbright Teacher Exchanges https://fulbrightteacherexchanges.org
- Library of Congress Professional Development https://www.loc.gov/programs/teachers/professional-development
- National Endowment for the Humanities Institutes and Landmarks of American History and Culture workshops https://www.neh.gov/divisions/education/summer-programs
- Workshops and conferences curated by Zinn Education Project https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/conferences
- Folger Shakespeare Library Professional Development https://www.folger.edu/teach/professional-development
- Facing History & Ourselves https://www.facinghistory.org/learning-events?f%5tBO%SD=event_type%3AProfessional%20Learning
- Learning for Justice webinars https://www.learningforjustice.org/professional-development/webinars

"Just Apply Seeking Professional Development Beyond Your School" by Peaches Hash in *English Journal*, January 2025 (Vol. 114, #3, pp. 14-16); Hash is at hashpe@appstate.edu.

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9. Recommended Verse Novels

School Library Journal recommends these middle grade and young adult novels in verse:

- *It's All or Nothing, Vale* by Andrea Beatriz Arango, grade 5 and up
- *Deer Run Home* by Ann Clare LeZotte, grade 4-9
- *Safe Harbor* by Padma Venkatraman, grade 9 and up
- *Unsinkable Cayenne* by Jessica Vitalis, grade 4-8
- *All the Blues in the Sky* by Renée Watson, grade 5 and up
- *Bridge Across the Sky* by Freeman Ng, grade 9 and up
- *Light Enough to Float* by Lauren Seal, grade 7 and up
- *A Second Chance* on Earth by Juan Vidal, grade 7 and up
- *(S)kin* by Ibi Zoboi, grade 7 and up

"Lyrical Lives: A Curated List of Exemplary Novels in Verse" in *School Library Journal*, April 2025 (Vol. 71, #4, pp. 28-29)

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10. Short Items:

a. Political Diversity in Colleges – In this article in *Education Gadfly*, Michael Petrilli lists colleges with more and less political diversity in their student bodies, based on extensive surveys of students.

"The Best Colleges for Political Diversity" by Michael Petrilli in *Education Gadfly*, April 3, 2025

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b. Cross-Age Peer Tutoring in Literacy – This article in *Teaching Exceptional Children* by Emily Mauer and Elizabeth Swanson (University of Texas/Austin) has a number of print and online resources for cross-age peer tutoring in elementary literacy skills.

"Cross-Age Peer Tutoring to Improve Literacy Outcomes for Students with Disabilities" by Emily Mauer and Elizabeth Swanson in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, March/April 2025 (Vol. 57, #4, pp. 286-293); Mauer can be reached at emauer@utexas.edu.

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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 early Tuesday (there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTMI version. Artificial intelligence is not used.

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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
Ed Magazine
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Language Magazine
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