Marshall Memo 972

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 6, 2023

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"If we knew there was one thing that would substantially – even swiftly – narrow achievement gaps and increase overall achievement, would we implement it?"

Mike Schmoker (see item #1)

"School improvement is most surely and thoroughly achieved when teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practice."

Judith Warren Little, 1990

"Encoding and decoding go hand in hand; they're like two sides of a coin. Our hands have been heavier on the decoding side, so we have some weak spellers, weak writers."

Crystal Whitman, North Carolina instructional coach, quoted in "'Encoding' Explained: What It is and Why It's Essential to Literacy" by Elizabeth Heubeck in *Education Week*, January 25, 2023 (Vol. 42, #19, pp. 8-9)

"Decades of studies have shown that children can understand text better if they have some background knowledge about the topic… It's likely easier to read a text about paleontologists, for example, if you already know the words 'fossil' and 'extinction' and you know that animal species that used to exist have since died out."

Sarah Schwartz in "What Is Background Knowledge, and How Does It Fit Into the Science of Reading?" in *Education Week*, January 30, 2023

"Four things you can't control in an outdoor athletic event: field conditions, the referee, the weather, the attitude of the other team."

Mike McCallister, 2006

"It's very simple. You just need to be a completely different person."

Michael Fung, then principal of Charlestown High School in Boston, to a second-year teacher who was still struggling with classroom discipline. Fung, who also served as principal of Taft Middle School and as a central office leader, passed away last month.

1. Mike Schmoker on What to Teach and When

(Originally titled "We Need Coherent, Teacher-Built Curriculum – NOW!")

"If we knew there was one thing that would substantially – even swiftly – narrow achievement gaps and increase overall achievement, would we implement it?" asks author/consultant Mike Schmoker in this *Educational Leadership* article. Actually, we know that one thing, he says: "implementing a consistent, high-quality curriculum throughout a school" – which he defines as "a clear, organized schedule of *what to teach and when*, amply infused with reading, discussion, and writing."

Schmoker presents research on what happens when a high-quality, robust curriculum is consistently implemented:

- Students are taught essential content and skills regardless of which teacher they have.
- This prevents wide variation in content and expectations among classrooms.
- There's a much better chance that students will be reading and writing every day.
- A solid curriculum can make any teacher "vastly more effective."
- It reduces teacher anxiety and lightens their workload.
- It's an essential ingredient in collaboration in same-grade/same-subject teacher teams.
- It can compensate for learning gaps among entering kindergarteners and other students.

What's tragic, Schmoker continues, is that this game-changing element is not present in most schools. Without it, he says, teachers are often working with "a self-selected jumble of topics, texts, and writing assignments" put together "on the fly, from worksheets and activities they find on Google and Pinterest."

But Schmoker is not a fan of most commercial curriculum products. He agrees with the late Rick DuFour, who strongly recommended that educators create their own curriculum – guided by standards, "selecting and organizing core content, texts, and writing assignments into an easy-to-follow schedule, setting aside time in the schedule for teachers to supplement the core with their own topics and perspectives." Schmoker describes dramatic gains in three schools; in one of them, Brockton High School in Massachusetts, the principal said a key element was that she and her team "monitored like crazy" to ensure that their homegrown curriculum (emphasizing reading, writing, speaking, and listening) was taught across the board.

Schmoker describes what this process might look like, avoiding overcomplicating the work or succumbing to "analysis paralysis." For English language arts, course-alike teams make preliminary decisions on which major works students should read each grading period, with some room for teachers to add their own favorite texts. For each, teachers decide on one

guiding question, and these serve as the primary basis for "near-daily, in-class analytic reading, discussion and informal writing that are the true core of English language arts instruction." Teachers decide on the number and length of formal papers – for example, two 2-3-page papers each grading period, with writing skills and mechanics taught as students write.

For other core areas, Schmoker recommends deciding on essential topics and materials, "doing the math" on how long each unit will take, and filling out the year's calendar, with space for teachers to pursue preferred topics. "These processes should embody the democratic principles of civil exchange," he says, "and an appreciation for compromise that we should impart to students. Such an ethos is vital as we navigate current controversies around curriculum content."

"We Need Coherent, Teacher-Built Curriculum – NOW!" by Mike Schmoker in *Educational Leadership*, February 2023 (Vol. 80, #5, pp. 62-67); Schmoker can be reached at schmoker@futureone.com.

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2. Curriculum as Narrative (Versus Coverage)

(Originally titled "Storyboarding Your Curriculum")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, consultant/authors Heidi Hayes Jacobs and Allison Zmuda say people's natural love of stories can be used to make a curriculum more compelling, framing it as a 30,000-foot narrative. That's the idea behind *storyboards*, which they say evoke "a sense of play, intrigue, and excitement" as they pull students and their families along on "a journey through a progression of related concepts."

Storyboards originated in the 1930s when Walt Disney Studios began mapping the narrative flow of animated films. Teachers have an advantage over filmmakers, say Jacobs and Zmuda: they know their audience and can keep it in mind when designing units and courses. The importance of curriculum storytelling became clear to the authors with remote instruction during the pandemic, revealing a problem that had always existed: how to engage students and families and make learning relevant.

Jacobs and Zmuda show a sample storyboard of a fifth-grade science curriculum (see the article link below) with units on force, motion, and energy; matter; electricity; sound and light; and the earth's structures. The essential questions: *How can energy be transformed? How can energy cause matter to transform?* They suggest four steps for crafting a storyboard for a year's units:

• *Course overview* – Develop a student-friendly explanation of the course and compelling questions that students will pursue through the course – for example, in an algebra course: *How can I use these models to make predictions about the future?*

• *Unit titles and timing* – Make the title of each unit strong, engaging, and clear – for example, for ninth grade Health/PE, *It Does a Body Good: Exploring body mechanics with a variety of physical activity* – and tell how long each unit will last.

• *Image cues* – Choose vivid photos that tell the story and capture authentic situations students will explore. If students can imagine or see themselves in the images, so much the better.

• *Story focus* – Describe the journey to students and their families, including connections between the units, with vocabulary that is clear and accessible – for example, Grade 2 Reading: *Next, we deepen our understanding by drawing conclusions to help us determine the story's theme. Then, we apply our knowledge of all of our reading strategies to comprehend a variety of texts.*

"Storyboarding Your Curriculum" by Heidi Hayes Jacobs and Allison Zmuda in *Educational Leadership*, February 2023 (Vol. 80, #5, pp. 22-27); the authors can be reached at heidi@curriculum21.com and allison@allisonzmuda.com.

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3. Quality Control for Online Materials

(Originally titled "Are Your Teachers Using Subpar Curriculum Materials?"

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Amber Northern (Thomas B. Fordham Institute) and Morgan Polikoff (University of Southern California) list the reasons teachers look online to supplement core curriculum materials:

- Filling instructional gaps in their regular materials;
- Boosting student engagement;
- Meeting students' diverse needs;
- Saving time.

"With a few clicks of the keyboard," say Northern and Polikoff, "a teacher can find for students a worksheet to practice addition and subtraction, a frog dissection kit for a biology lab, and quizzes and answer keys for all five acts of *Romeo and Juliet*."

Virtually all teachers download material from the Internet, and 55 percent of ELA teachers say they use Teachers Pay Teachers at least once a week. But there's no *Consumer Reports*-type information on the quality of online curriculum materials. That's why Northern and Polikoff conducted a 2019 study of 300 online ELA materials from Teachers Pay Teachers, ReadWriteThink, and Share My Lesson. They looked at alignment with standards, rigor, usability, supports for diverse learners, and more.

What did they find? Most of the lessons on poetry, informational text, and fiction were well-designed and free of errors, and students were often asked to provide textual evidence. But digging deeper, reviewers found shortcomings in overall quality, saying that most materials were "mediocre" or "probably not worth using." Why? Insufficient multicultural content, not enough support for teaching diverse learners, inadequate differentiation, unclear or nonexistent guidance for teachers, low-level Depth of Knowledge, and poor alignment with state standards (for example, a unit on *The Diary of Anne Frank* from Teachers Pay Teachers claimed to be aligned with 22 different Common Core standards).

Northern and Polikoff shared their findings with online curriculum platforms and some took steps to improve – for example, Share My Lesson now has a feature allowing teachers to

leave reviews of materials they've used, as well as a *Lesson Attributes* search filter that helps identify lessons available in Spanish (for example) and those targeted to gifted students. But the researchers believe that in most cases, their 2019 findings are still accurate.

"School and district leaders should think seriously about how they want to handle this issue," they say. Some suggestions:

• Monitor the enacted curriculum. Given the popularity of the online marketplace with teachers, supplementary materials can become a *de facto* part of the core curriculum. Principals, instructional coaches, department heads, and other instructional leaders should be looking over students' shoulders to see what they're working on, train teachers in selecting well, and discourage the use of low-quality online materials.

• Encourage curation. "It is incredibly difficult to navigate the plethora of supplementary materials, astutely evaluate what is out there, and ultimately make informed decisions about what to use," say Northern and Polikoff. And yet it's vital to separate the wheat from the chaff. Committees of educators should curate materials in different fields and distribute lists to guide teachers when they search (and save them time).

• Identify online materials that include assessments, definitions of mastery, support for diverse learners, diverse authors, differentiation, and teacher guidance.

"Are Your Teachers Using Subpar Curriculum Materials?" by Amber Northern and Morgan Polikoff in *Educational Leadership*, February 2023 (Vol. 80, #5, pp. 14-21); the authors can be reached at anorthern@fordhaminstitute.org and morgan.polikoff@gmail.com.

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4. More Analysis, Collaboration, & Engagement in Small-Group Discussions

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, veteran ELA teacher Jessica Cannata (EB Academics) describes how she transformed her students' small-group discussions from "surface-level talks that seemed like a waste of a class period into engaged, high-level analysis and collaboration."

Before, Cannata followed the common practice of assigning roles within each group – discussion director, literary luminary, symbol sleuth, etc. But she increasingly found these roles limited students to "shallow, perfunctory conversation;" as she walked around the classroom, it pained her to listen to students "repeatedly review the main plot points without really analyzing the author's craft or making deep connections with the text." To make matters worse, other teachers told Cannata that her students were not demonstrating analytical skills and deeper understanding in *their* classes. How could she get students to take more ownership and engage in "more natural, fruitful talk"?

Finally, Cannata hit on the idea of Real Talk Discussion. After a class read a short story, an article, or a chapter of a novel, she had students focus on *talking points* that students wrote themselves, then had students plan and engage in a natural conversation. Here are her suggested steps:

• *Practice* – To introduce the new process, Cannata recommends orchestrating a one-time discussion on a topic that has nothing to do with the text the class is reading so they can practice the key skills:

- Sharing ideas;
- Building on each other's thinking;
- Considering multiple points of view;
- Coming to a greater understanding of the topic;
- Accepting that the discussions don't have to end in complete agreement.

Cannata suggests having students discuss topics like: *What is one thing that's popular right now but future generations will think is silly? What is the worst piece of advice a person can give? If we ever find evidence of intelligent beings beyond Earth, should we try to contact them?* Students discuss the assigned question, sharing opinions and backing them up with reasoning and examples that clarify their position. The teacher provides talk stems like these to encourage listening, empathy, and respectful disagreement.

• *Generating talking points* – Students read a chapter of a novel, a textbook chapter, a short story, or an article, and then each student is asked to write on a single sheet of paper six talking points about the text that they want to discuss with their group. These can be questions, observations, interesting quotes, connections, vocabulary, or a stylistic choice made by the author. Why ask for *talking points*? Cannata found that this prompt "often led to more organic discussion than sticking to questions."

• *Grouping and sequencing them* – Next, each student chooses their four strongest talking points and jots each on a sticky note. Members of each group look at their collective sticky notes, group similar ones together, and decide on a logical order to discuss them. "The possibilities are endless," says Cannata, "and there is no one right way to do it, but the process helps the group to be thoughtful about the discussion's focus, organization, and direction."

• *Discussion* – Students then talk about each chosen point, urged by the teacher to keep focused on the text and not rush or worry if they don't get to all the sticky notes (sometimes the entire discussion is about the first talking point). "This is way different from what they may have been used to with lit circle roles or other small-group discussions," says Cannata, "where they may feel panicked to fit everybody's notes into the conversation. With this 'discuss, don't rush' strategy, the conversation feels much more natural and relaxed." She's found that students are more fully engaged in group discussions when they're not constrained by one role.

• *Assessment* – Up front, students see a rubric describing the characteristics of an effective group discussion (what it looks and sounds like) and how they will be graded. The teacher listens in on discussions, scores each group, and collects the sticky notes to get a sense of the kinds of questions students are asking. When small-group discussions are finished, students write a reflection on their favorite talking point, rate their discussion, and assess their own contributions.

• *Whole-class reflection* – This pulls the strands together and allows students to reflect on the talking points they spent the most time discussing and go deeper on their collective analysis and appreciation of the text.

"Authentic Group Discussions with the Real Talk Strategy" by Jessica Cannata in *Cult of Pedagogy*, February 5, 2023

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5. Using YA Novels to Discuss Harassment and Unwanted Touching

In this *Middle School Journal* article, Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko (SUNY Brockport), Brittany Adams (SUNY Cortland), Shelby Boehm (University of Florida), and Henry "Cody" Miller (SUNY Brockport) suggest using well-chosen works of literature and intentional pedagogy to help middle-school students address the issue of sexual harassment and violence. This is important, say the authors, because studies show that at least one in four middle-school students report experiencing unwanted verbal or physical sexual harassment in school hallways, classrooms, locker rooms, gyms, and cafeterias, as well as outside of school.

Victim-blaming is one of the most important issues that need to be addressed – the common misconception that those affected by harassment and sexual violence made bad choices or somehow "asked for it" – as well as social norms like "boys will be boys." The goal is fostering a school environment that is safe, inviting, inclusive, and supportive of everyone's health and wellness. The authors suggest four YA books, each of which can be used to focus on a key issue:

• *Dress Coded* by Carrie Firestone: Harmful school policies – This novel describes school administrators enforcing rules that limit girls' clothing choices (visible bra straps, midriff, thighs, cleavage). The school's rationale is that girls who violate the dress code are showing disrespect for themselves and distracting boys from learning. Several girls start a podcast and stage a protest, sparking a schoolwide discussion of the issue.

• *The Prettiest* by Bridgit Young: Objectification – A few boys in a middle school anonymously publish a rank-ordered, online list of the 50 best-looking girls in the school, leading to unwanted attention, comments, and harassment by boys – and among girls, angry and ambivalent reactions. School administrators hear about the list and give a stern talk about sexual harassment, but it has no impact. The novel is told from the perspective of three girls; one is ranked #2 on the list, one is #1, and one is not on the list.

• *Maybe He Just Likes You* by Barbara Dee: Unwanted touching – Mila, a middle-school girl, is being harassed by several boys who want hugs and brush up against her. When she tells them to stop, they say she's making too much of it. One of Mila's girlfriends is jealous of the attention she's getting and blames Mila for what's happening. Mila reports the harassment, but a guidance counselor brushes it off, saying middle-school boys are immature and she should ignore it. Mila's anger finally comes to a head in a dramatic confrontation before a band concert.

• *That's What Friends Do* by Cathleen Barnhart: Physical and emotional boundaries – Sammie encounters unwanted touching and affection from two boys on their co-ed baseball team and struggles with how to be assertive with them. She gets no help from peers, her father, and her older sister, but when her mother finds out, she tells about her own experience with sexual violence when she was a young girl and helps Sammie set limits about touching and consent.

Colantonio-Yurko, Adams, Boehm, and Miller suggest how teachers and counselors might lead classroom discussions on these novels, starting with giving students advance notice

of the topic, explaining the rationale, establishing a safe classroom culture, and setting norms. The authors suggest several discussion techniques:

- Perspective-taking – Assigning groups of students a character and asking them to describe how they see the situation and might act;
- Enabling activity – Having students identify actions in one of the novels that normalized harmful activities;
- Socratic seminar – Using this discussion format to debate the issue of consent;
- Questioning rules – Organizing a debate on the efficacy of school conduct codes and rules about student attire;
- Unpacking gender norms – Having students analyze ads and media portrayals of stereotypes;
- Mock trial – Organizing a mock courtroom in which students try a character from one of the books;
- Social media – Leading a discussion of the role of technology in sexual harassment and bullying;
- Photo collage – Having students collect images of a variety of clothing choices and discussing their impact on school climate.

"Boundaries, Objectification, and Gender Norms: Addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment with Middle-Grade Literature" by Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko, Brittany Adams, Shelby Boehm, and Henry "Cody" Miller in *Middle School Journal*, January 2023 (Vol. 54, #1, pp. 23-31); the authors are at kyurko@brockport.edu, brittany.adams02@cortland.edu, sboehm@ufl.edu, and hmiller@brockport.edu.

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6. Individualizing Plans for English Learners

In this *JESPAR* article (*Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*), Karen Thompson (Oregon State University) and Claudia Rodriguez-Mojica (Santa Clara University) say that current policies and practices can reinforce a deficit perspective on English learners – especially if the focus is on test scores and compliance with English learner policies. Drawing on a three-year study of rural California secondary schools, the authors identify practices that can shift educators' mindsets and improve student outcomes, especially for long-term English learners:

• Focus on students' assets by using an Individualized Language Plan (ILP) process, including gathering information from students and families on students' first language literacy knowledge, their linguistic and cultural strengths, and personal likes and dislikes.

• Enhance opportunities for parents and students to have a voice in ILP meetings. "Not only could including parents and students become the default across all sites," say the authors, "but educators could also consider ways to shift the power imbalance that typically impacts meetings between families and educators." One effective practice is beginning the meeting by asking the student and family about their goals.

• Think creatively about ways to foster collaboration among all educators and school staff who work with a student. This fosters the idea that ELs' success is a shared responsibility among teachers, counselors, psychologists, custodians, bus drivers, and other school staff. "Comparing student writing samples across content areas at the secondary level," say the authors, "seems like a particularly useful practice, and one that need not be limited to ILP meetings."

"Individualized Language Plans: A Potential Tool for Collaboration to Support Multilingual Students" by Karen Thompson and Claudia Rodriguez-Mojica in *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* (*JESPAR*), January-March 2023 (Vol. 28, #1, pp. 97-121); Thompson can be reached at karen.thompson@oregonstate.edu.

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7. Short Item:

A Media Literacy Website – Project Look Sharp from Ithaca College aims to support K-12 instruction on critical thinking and civic engagement about media and the Internet. The website has free, downloadable resources organized by subject matter and grade, with more than 500 lessons on climate change, social justice, media bias, Covid-19, sustainability, and more (spotted in *Educational Leadership*, February 2023, p. 11).

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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 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
Ed. Magazine
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 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