Marshall Memo 852

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 7, 2020

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Caste is insidious and therefore powerful because it is not hatred; it is not necessarily personal. It is the worn grooves of comforting routines and unthinking expectations, patterns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things."

Isabel Wilkerson in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Random House, 2020), a new book making the case that caste is a decisive factor in U.S. intergroup relations

"Some amazing things happened to educators during this remarkable period. First, all teachers and administrators suddenly became novices."

Fayge Safran Novogroder and Nina Bruder in "Lessons Learned" in JNTP, August 18, 2020

"Understanding must be earned."

Grant Wiggins (quoted in item #2)

"Quiz more, grade less."

Bryan Goodwin and Kris Rouleau in "Grading to Encourage Re-Learning" in *Educational Leadership*, September 2020 (Vol. 78, #1, pp. 84-85); Goodwin can be reached at bgoodwin@mcrrel.org.

"Do no harm, and never pressure an individual or a particular group to talk about something they don't want to share."

(A suggested discussion-group norm, quoted in item #6)

"Reading is not simple; just because you can reduce it to an algebra equation doesn't mean you should."

Paul Thomas (see item #10)

1. Gloria Ladson-Billings on Teaching About Racial Justice

In this Q&A with the National Education Policy Center, Gloria Ladson-Billings (University of Wisconsin/Madison) says K-12 educators must be careful not to approach conversations about the summer's tumultuous events with "their agenda." One way to launch a discussion might be the question, "During your time away from school, what things most concerned you?" This might surface issues of food insecurity, family members losing jobs, and police misconduct. Another approach is to ask, "If you could change anything about what is happening in our city/state/country right now, what would it be?" If these open-ended questions get into the summer's protests, it's important to connect with curriculum standards – for example, writing a persuasive essay or editorial, studying protests and movements in U.S. history, the 14th Amendment, the right of peaceful assembly, and the concept of fairness.

In discussions about the pandemic, Ladson-Billings suggests asking questions like, "What is coronavirus and what do we know about it?" to establish a baseline of knowledge, and then explore the subject in different subject areas – ELA, social studies, math, and science. Depending on the grade and subject, discussions can range from the efficacy of wearing masks and washing hands (with younger students) to the timing of opening the economy and the reasons for racial disparities in Covid-19 infections and deaths (with older students).

Addressing the paucity of helpful content in textbooks, Ladson-Billings believes we have "a grand opportunity to introduce information from recent periodicals and make arguments from a variety of perspectives." One example: the Op Ed by Congressman John Lewis that was published the day of his funeral. Older students might do a close reading and consider what Lewis is asking of them. Middle-grade students could write an essay about what they want people to do to improve society. Alternatively, students might write a letter to someone of another race or ethnicity asking what that person would want someone different from them to know about their thoughts and feelings.

Ladson-Billings says most teachers cover race in the U.S. by telling the story of slavery and making villains of ignorant, racist people like the Ku Klux Klan, skinheads, and white nationalists. "They do not look at the systemic way some groups of people have no opportunity to get ahead," she says, "and the role of governments, laws, and longstanding practices in making this so. I think that teachers do not address it because many of them do not understand it." She suggests that teachers (if they haven't already done so) view films like *Twelve Years a Slave*, *Selma*, and *When They See Us*. For younger students, books like *Stamped* by Jayson Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi are helpful. Older students should read *Stamped from the Beginning* by Kendi and comparative analyses of apartheid in South Africa and racism in

Brazil. All students can benefit from biographies of black Americans who fought against racism – Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Bayard Rustin, and John Lewis's graphic novel series (*March I, II, and III*).

"Practical Advice on Addressing Racial Justice in K-12 Schools: A Q&A with Gloria Ladson-Billings" from the National Education Policy Center from the National Education Policy Center, August 13, 2020; Ladson-Billings can be reached at gjladson@facstaff.wisc.edu.

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2. Orchestrating Deeper Learning

(Originally titled "Instructional Shifts to Support Deep Learning")

"All educators want their students to learn deeply and well," say author/consultants Jay McTighe and Harvey Silver in this article in *Educational Leadership*. "And yet the evidence shows that such learning is rare in many schools." McTighe and Silver believe students have learned deeply when they "come to understand and make sense of important ideas and processes and are able to transfer those understandings to new content and contexts."

Why is there so little of this going on in schools? Covering too many standards and non-academic demands, passive students, low-level activities and worksheets lead to superficial and disconnected learning. How can this be changed? McTighe and Silver suggest two major shifts:

• *Work on "uncovering" a few well-chosen, conceptually larger, transferable ideas*. This frees up time for active learning and performance tasks that get students applying their learning in authentic and meaningful ways. Instead of teachers doing most of the work, students are the ones doing it. In the words of the late Grant Wiggins, "Understanding must be earned."

"To be clear," McTighe and Silver continue, "when we talk about framing instruction around big ideas, we're not suggesting that educators avoid teaching important facts and basic skills. The aim is simply to identify the core ideas that will serve as a conceptual lens for connecting discrete facts and skills and helping students make sense of them."

One way to keep instruction focused on big ideas is to anchor curriculum units in a few open-ended, thought-provoking "essential questions" that challenge students to make sense of the big ideas – for example:

- Geography – *How does where we live influence how we live?*
- Government – *How do we balance the rights of individuals with the common good?*
- History – *Whose "story" is this?*
- Literature – *To what extent can fiction reveal "truth"?*
- Mathematics – *When is the "correct" answer not the best solution?*
- Science – *How are science and common sense related?*
- Writing – *How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?*
- Visual and performing arts – *How does art reflect, as well as shape, culture?*

Another way to keep the focus on big ideas is framing units as studies within larger concepts and themes, for example:

- The four seasons – *A study in change*
- Our community – *A study in cooperation*
- Equations – *A study in balance*
- The water cycle – *A study in renewal*
- Hamlet – *A study in indecision*
- Nutrition – *A study in personal responsibility*
- World War I – *A study in unintended consequences*

Each suggests a "conceptual Velcro" that helps students connect details to coherent patterns that are meaningful and transferable.

• *Focus less on didactic instruction and more on active meaning making by students*.

Students should be "earning" understanding of critical content by actively, independently processing new material using these higher-order skills.

- Conceptualizing abstract ideas;
- Note-taking and summarizing;
- Comparing;
- Reading beyond the literal meaning;
- Predicting and hypothesizing;
- Visualizing, graphic representation;
- Empathizing and perspective-taking.

For this to happen, teachers need to re-tool instruction so students build a repertoire of thinking skills they can apply in multiple areas. Here's an example from a close reading of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address:

What evidence supports or refutes each statement?

- *The primary goal of the speech was to honor the soldiers who had fought and died.*
- *Lincoln believed the United States was at a crossroads.*
- *Lincoln believed that the outcome of the war had implications only for the U.S.*
- *Lincoln takes the reader on a journey through time.*
- *Lincoln would agree that actions speak louder than words.*

"Instructional Shifts to Support Deep Learning" by Jay McTighe and Harvey Silver in *Educational Leadership*, September 2020 (Vol. 78, #1); McTighe can be reached at jmctigh@aol.com.

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3. A Silver Lining to the Year's Disruptions?

In this *Education Week* article, Sarah Sparks reports on ideas for moving beyond the current crisis and innovating for long-term improvement and equity. She quotes Linda Darling-Hammond (Stanford University), who believes that today's massive disruption in K-12 schools could create something of an education renaissance. "We're in a moment in our country right now where the most important modus operandi is inventing and sharing," she says. "You know people have to invent ways to do things they haven't done before, and then they need to share

those things with others and they need to be able to access what others are sharing about their inventions." Some avenues for long-term improvement:

- Close the digital divide.
- Strengthen distance and blended learning.
- Address homelessness, housing instability, and food insecurity.
- Leverage more-adequate and equitable school funding.
- Establish community schools and wraparound supports.
- Provide expanded learning time.
- Redesign schools for stronger relationships.
- Assess students' academic and social-emotional needs.
- Ensure supports for social and emotional learning, including mental health needs.
- Emphasize authentic, culturally responsive learning.
- Prepare educators for reinventing school.

"What Do Schools Need to Be Better After Coronavirus?" by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, September 2, 2020

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4. Thomas Guskey on Reducing Cheating in Online Classes

In this *Education Week* article, Thomas Guskey (University of Kentucky) addresses students cheating on assessments, which seems easier during remote instruction. Why do students cheat in any class? Guskey believes it's not because they're lazy or unmotivated; cheating happens mostly because students are uncertain about their level of proficiency and worried about what will happen if they don't do well. "In many instances," he says, "cheating actually requires more effort than determined preparation."

The most common approaches to discouraging cheating are strict supervision during testing (which is more challenging remotely) and/or escalating the consequences for dishonesty (public embarrassment, extra work, a zero). Guskey suggests a different approach: distinguishing the grade book from the report card and making classroom tests more about feedback and learning than accountability. If this is done right, it takes away the reasons for cheating. To make the shift, teachers need to take the following steps:

- Disable the electronic gradebook function that calculates grades, so formative tests don't automatically determine report card grades.
- Change the gradebook function so it doesn't average students' assessment results over a grading period.
- Keep parents informed about formative assessment results so they can monitor progress and provide support, with a clear understanding that these do not determine report card grades.
- The teacher gives summative grades based on the best evidence available when the grading period has ended.

This approach, says Guskey, "allows students to make mistakes along the way and not worry about irreparable consequences. It also gives students the chance to experiment, be creative, try

new ideas and new approaches. If something doesn't work, they have opportunities to fix things, to recover, and to improve."

The teacher's role is also changed with lower-stakes assessments during the semester: "Instead of being an assessment constable, concerned with the sanctity of the assessment process, teachers can become learning facilitators, focused on helping students master important learning goals. Instead of worrying about how to detect cheating and how to prevent students from cheating, teachers can concentrate on helping students use assessment results to improve their learning and reach higher levels of achievement."

"What to Do About Cheating on Assessments in Virtual Learning?" by Thomas Guskey in *Education Week*, August 30, 2020; Guskey can be reached at guskey@uky.edu.

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5. Keys to Effective Remote Math Instruction

"Shifting to online teaching can feel overwhelming," says Pennsylvania teacher/ learning design coach Adam Lavallee in this Global Online Academy article. He suggests six ways of changing teaching to make the best use of the remote environment. (The full article, linked below, has lots of detailed examples for math instruction.)

• *Identify the essentials*. A tough-minded assessment of the curriculum is essential, he says, and that means doing triage: What do students need to master, explore, or just be exposed to? Lavallee uses an Algebra 2 textbook that he admires as an example: there's a section he would skip because it's not essential to precalculus, another section he'd have students cover briefly and move on, and a section (functions) to which he would devote considerable time (time saved by cutting back on other sections).

• *Make strategic use of asynchronous and synchronous instruction*. Lavallee suggests using asynchronous videos to deliver content that students can't necessarily discover on their own, with ways for them to ask questions and check for understanding. Synchronous time is best for working on example problems and misconceptions (in small groups if possible). "The key strategy," he says, "is a structure where students know the objectives, and they have the ability to check for their own understanding along the way."

• *Reframe homework*. "Students need practice," says Lavallee. "We need to incentivize authentic practice, so students take that work seriously… Assess students not on their first draft of homework or their final product, but on their revisions and reflections." Online discussion boards can be part of this process.

• *Make feedback immediate, metacognitive, and collaborative*. Lavallee suggests using automation to give students "instantaneous" affirmation or correction, and requiring students to self-assess using a discussion board. Get students supporting each other.

• *Organize strategic check-ins*. "On a video call," says Lavallee, "it's much harder for a student to ask a question or lean to a classmate to make sure they are on the right track. It's much harder for a teacher to 'walk by' and connect with students doing individual practice. Teachers need to intentionally design for interaction in online formats and create structures that empower student voices in online and hybrid classrooms…" An example: Students are given a

focus problem each week and create a video explaining the problem to a peer who didn't understand it.

• *Innovate with assessment*. Lavallee suggests a three-fold approach to summative assessment in math:

- Automate some assessments – well-planned multiple-choice questions can assess students' conceptual understanding. A test can be programmed to give each student a random set of 10 problems from a set of 20, making each student's test unique.
- Use student oral exams – students walk through the solution to a multi-step problem for 5-10 minutes, getting probes and support from the teacher.
- Use capstone projects – students explore an authentic application that they choose.

"Six Shifts for Math Teachers Moving Online" by Adam Lavallee in Global Online Academy, July 17, 2020

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6. Online Teen-Led Conversations

"This year, many educators face the challenge of building relationships with new students virtually," says Molly Josephs (*This Teenage Life*) in *Edutopia*. "How can they foster a sense of community without the camaraderie and spontaneity of in-person, classroom interactions?" Especially for teens and tweens, Josephs suggests having informal conversations around kids' interests and concerns. Some suggestions:

• *Agree on trust-building norms up front*. A variation on the Hippocratic Oath is helpful: "Do no harm, and never pressure an individual or a particular group to talk about something they don't want to share."

• *Break the ice with something light, funny, and easy*. Initial topics should encourage sharing without making members feel vulnerable – for example, what teens miss about childhood, silly superstitions, and surreal, recurring dreams. "As trust builds," says Josephs, "the group can delve into heavier topics that are more connected to who they are, what they care about, and who they want to be."

• *Follow the energy*. Help students generate a list of topics, prompting them with examples: times they've been scared, times they've gotten in trouble, things they believed as a child but don't anymore, stories about people they admire. Well-chosen topics "create a conversation with momentum where young people are enthusiastically sharing and listening," says Josephs. Oddball topics sometimes work; snacks and breakfast was a hit with one of her groups – nothing deep, but kids laughed and learned about each other. Unexpected tangents can lead to especially good conversations; in another group, a teen asked, "Have you ever realized that your parents are people too?" and sparked an entirely new line of discussion.

• *Step back*. Josephs suggests not grading students on participation and allowing them to drive the conversation. "By choosing to listen," she says, "adults can give more space for young people to surface their own ideas and share their stories." Some of the conversations might take place in breakout rooms, with the teacher monitoring unobtrusively, watching for

active listening and follow-up questions and noticing students who participate by doodling and other creative means.

• *Reflect and follow up*. Josephs suggests reserving the last few minutes to reflect on how the conversation went, whether they followed the norms, what worked and what didn't, and how discussions can improve. If sensitive topics came up, the teacher should steer students to helpful resources.

"Building Community with Student-Driven Conversations" by Molly Josephs in *Edutopia*, August 26, 2020; Josephs can be reached at molly.josephs@gmail.com.

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7. Online Book Clubs

In this *Edutopia* article, Laura Milligan describes the way she's run virtual book clubs over the last few months.

• *Structure* – Groups of 6-8 students usually meet for two weeks, chatting online every two or three days for 30 minutes at the elementary and middle-school levels, just under an hour for older students.

• *Getting students ready*. A few days before a club launches, Milligan sends a reading guide with the schedule for reading assigned pages and a video message (using BombBomb, a free app that allows her to see how many kids have viewed it) to introduce herself and share some expectations – for example, having the book and pencil and paper handy during chats.

• *Get acquainted*. Learning each other's names helps create an online community, as does sharing some not-too-personal information (perhaps a favorite book or board game).

• *Let students take the lead*. "The less the teacher chimes in, the better," says Milligan, but with a shy group she might have students jot answers to a question and then open the discussion.

• *Get everyone involved.* This might be asking shy students to read a line they liked, show their annotations of a section, or display a drawing or character chart they've done.

• *Ask text-to-self questions to encourage self-reflection.* Milligan has used these with success:

- Which character do you think you might be friends with?
- Which character do you think you're most like?
- Would you like to live in the story's setting? Why or why not?
- What are you learning from this story?

"How to Set Up a Virtual Book Club for Students" by Laura Milligan in *Edutopia*, July 10, 2020

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8. Getting Students Writing During the Pandemic

In this *Edutopia* article, literacy specialist/instructional coach Shveta Miller suggests writing assignments that encourage students to express their feelings and observations about

what's happening in the world:

- Interviews with seniors in the community – This can be through handwritten letters, phone calls, or video chats
- Creating a "folding story" – Each student writes a sentence or two and sends it to the teacher, who forwards only the last word or phrase to another student, and so on, and the composite story is shared with the whole class.
- Dialogue journals – Student and teacher write back and forth to each other, perhaps on a weekly basis.
- Student-to-student letters – Prompts are given to one-on-one or small-group pen pal groups.
- Writing to authors – A number of authors are available to correspond with students.
- Adapting a text to reflect current conditions – Students are assigned to rewrite a scene from a pre-pandemic story, show, or movie.
- Letters to the editor – Students can be guided through the art of composing a well-crafted letter reacting to a news story.
- Student-created blogs – A starting point is showing strong examples of student journalism as mentor texts.
- "Slow-looking" documentation – This is writing done after prolonged observation of a setting.
- Covid-19 comics – Creating comics can be a good way for students to explore troubling experiences.
- Pandemic journals – Students document their experiences and process their feelings for future generations.

"11 Meaningful Writing Assignments Connected to the Pandemic" by Shveta Miller in *Edutopia*, May 8, 2020

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9. A Homemade Lightboard for Remote Teaching

In this *NewsUSC* article, Eric Lindberg describes how Emily Nix (University of Southern California) is improving her online teaching this fall. She mounted a sheet of plexiglass in a wooden frame and rigged up LED lighting around the outside – think of it as a glass chalkboard infused with light. When she conducts her classes (synchronous or asynchronous), Nix stands with the plexiglass between her and her laptop, with the image software-mirrored. When she writes words and draws diagrams on the plexiglass, they are clearly visible to students. There's the added advantage that she is facing "the class" as she writes on the "board" – something that isn't possible in a physical classroom.

Nix shared a Twitter video (see the link below) and has had an enthusiastic response from tens of thousands of educators. "I will say I'm much more enthusiastic about the online experience now than I was before I invested in this and figured out, hopefully, to do it well," says Nix. "We can't change the fact that the pandemic is here. But we can help you enjoy and

learn the material as well as you could in person." This whole setup cost her just $60 at the hardware store, compared to around $8,000 for a professional lightboard.

"USC Professor's DIY Online Teaching Hack to Engage Students Goes Viral" by Eric Lindberg in *NewsUSC*, August 17, 2020; Nix can be reached at enix@marshall.usc.edu.

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10. More on Phonics and the "Science of Reading"

In this article in *Medium*, Paul Thomas (Furman University/Greenville) says that he entered first grade already able to read independently. He excelled in literacy, testing in the 99th percentile. Thomas's mother had helped him learn by taping index cards with the names of objects around the house, and his school used a Dick and Jane basal with the whole-word approach. "I became a highly literate person with no direct phonics instruction," he says. "That's a neat little story about my life, but it doesn't prove a damn thing about anyone else."

Years later, Thomas taught high-school English in rural South Carolina and one of his students scored a perfect 800 on the verbal section of the SAT. For many in the community, the student's success was proof that Thomas was an amazing teacher. Like the story of his success in first grade, says Thomas, this story demonstrates "the problem of *proximity* and *time* in making causal claims about who and what contribute to student learning and growth. Real-world teaching and learning are incredibly messy and always cumulative; any student's measurable achievement has a mind-numbingly complex history behind that achievement that is not fairly attributed to any singular cause."

Thomas believes this is the problem with the "science of reading" argument that systematic teaching of phonics is the key to reading proficiency. Proponents of this view, he says, are using a simplified view of reading and a narrow view of science: "Reading comprehension and critical literacy are not a simple formula, and learning to read is a complex and even haphazard process that occurs over many years (if not our entire lives) and depends on a wide assortment of interworking elements such as decoding, content and life knowledge, comprehension, and critical awareness… Reading is not simple; just because you can reduce it to an algebra equation doesn't mean you should." Studies that claim to prove the efficacy of phonics don't take into account poverty, racism, and sexism in students' lives, which can have more impact than a specific teaching method.

At the heart of the "science of reading" argument is an invidious comparison of phonics with balanced literacy. But balanced literacy is a philosophy of literacy, not a program, says Thomas, and it includes phonics. "The balanced literacy movement sought to give some philosophical structure to the recognition that learning to read is complex and haphazard," he says. "Additionally, balanced literacy was an effort to forefront the professional autonomy of the teacher."

That was the aspiration, but balanced literacy hasn't hit its stride in many schools because the accountability movement has increased high-stakes tests, boosted the adoption of commercial reading programs, and reduced teacher autonomy. The result, says Thomas, is that

"more teachers are being compelled to teach reading in ways that seek to *raise test scores*… and not to foster eager and independent critical readers."

Thomas's conclusion: "This round of the Reading War is weaponizing the term 'science' in ways that are guaranteed to distract us yet again from the complicated and politically unpopular work of addressing inequity in the lives and schooling of children."

"The Problems with 'Show Me the Research' in Teaching Reading" by Paul Thomas in *Medium*, August 17, 2020; Thomas can be reached at paul.thomas@furman.edu.

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If you have feedback or suggestions,
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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 50 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
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Essential Teacher
Exceptional Children
Go Teach
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
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Education Gadfly
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 Magazine