Marshall Memo 1048

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

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Quotes of the Week

"I was nine years old when I first saw a book featuring a character that looked like me."
Grace Choi (see item #8)

"Do children with better reading competence read more, or do avid readers increase their reading competence?"
Felix Bittmann (see item #5)

"We tend to try to protect youth from tough topics like death because we do not think that children and adolescents are ready for these difficult conversations, or we think they will simply not understand. In actuality, children are curious about death and understand more than we think they do."
Lisa Parker, Kennedy Wittman, and William Blintz (see item #7)

"Interrupting someone is inherently rude, regardless of your intention."
Lolly Daskal (see item #6)

"Never let the fear of striking out get in your way."
Babe Ruth

"Push yourself again and again. Don't give an inch until the final buzzer sounds."
Larry Bird

"The most important measure of how good a game I played was how much better I'd made my teammates play."
Bill Russell

1. Where Should Students Sit in a Classroom?

In this *Edutopia* article, Jay Schauer says there are literally trillions of possible student seating combinations in a classroom. What is the best way for teachers to decide where kids sit? After decades of teaching high-school science and math and mentoring colleagues, Schauer sees problems with two commonly used approaches:

• *Letting students choose where to sit* – "Of course, their social priorities did not match my educational priorities," he says. "Students with the most status, or bullies, or those who are early, or those whose friends got there and saved them a space, might get to sit where they want, and the rest end up sitting someplace they may never have chosen in the first place." Established on the first day, this less-than-ideal setup continues. If the teacher needs to break up problematic groupings, other groups that happen to be more productive are disrupted.

• *Random seating assignments* – Using high- or low-tech methods to randomize seating solves the problem of social sorting, but Schauer has found that although randomization usually produces some compatible, well-mixed groups, there are always one or two "stronger" and "weaker" groups, which causes problems down the road. He sees the logic of Peter Liljedahl's system of daily randomization of three-student groups for stand-up whiteboard work on challenging problems (see Memos 976, 992, and 1013), but for long-term seating, Schauer has found that random seating creates more problems than it solves.

So what is the alternative? He recommends using relevant student achievement and IEP data to form heterogeneous groups, and assigning students to those groups from day one. Figuring out these groups takes time up front, but it's well worth it over the long haul, says Schauer, and sets a baseline from which other groupings can be improvised: "From these strategic seating arrangements," he says, "I could orchestrate a variety of ways to quickly shuffle groups for sharing information, teaming for quizzes, tackling new tasks, or building classroom community."

"A Strategic Approach to Seating Arrangements in High School" by Jay Schauer in *Edutopia*, July 26, 2024

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2. When Students Don't Do Assigned Reading, What Should Teachers Do?

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Kerry O'Grady (Columbia Business School) channels the frustration of many college instructors (also high-school teachers) that so many students aren't doing the reading for class. When students aren't prepared, it's difficult to

have good discussions – and the time spent choosing good readings feels wasted. Why are students not doing assigned reading? O'Grady suggests some possible explanations:

• *Not enough practice K-12* – Many students arrive in college without learning "to read actively, think critically about the material, and formulate questions and critiques," she says – insufficient practice at reading comprehension, outlining, note-taking, analysis, and building flexibility and agility with texts.

• *Digital distractions* – The average household has 17 screens (computers, tablets, phones, TVs) and few students are reading for pleasure – or for school. They're constantly distracted and haven't formed the reading habit.

• *The pandemic hangover* – Schools and colleges relaxed academic requirements and homework during Covid-19, and it's been an uphill battle to return to "normal." Many students regard class readings as optional.

• *AI* – Savvy students are using ChatGPT and other large language models to cut corners, prompting chatbots to generate summaries of required readings.

What can teachers do? O'Grady suggests the following ways to reshape reading assignments, improve pedagogy, and increase students' intrinsic motivation:

- At the beginning of the year, model the reading skills students will need, including active reading, note-taking, annotation, outlining, argumentation, and analysis.
- Break reading assignments into manageable chunks and think about length, accessibility, cultural inclusiveness, and relevance to students' lives.
- Make sure readings are easily accessible via links, PDFs, or hard copy.
- Be explicit with students about why you chose each assigned reading and why it's important for their current and future learning.
- Hold students accountable for doing the reading (see Memo 1043 #3).
- Don't assign reading on days when students are completing major papers or projects.
- Give students options with readings, and perhaps offer an occasional "Genius Hour" when students can pursue their own passions within the syllabus.
- During class discussions, challenge students to make connections among the readings.
- Ask students to formulate open-ended questions about the readings and pursue those that are the most thought-provoking and relevant to their lives.
- Have students take turns leading class discussions about the readings, inviting dissent and debate and probing for the underlying big ideas and connections.
- Assign students to book clubs and orchestrate regular meetings to discuss their texts.
- When possible, invite authors of readings to visit the class, virtually or in person.
- Encourage students to use AI to complement and enhance the readings – for example, defining unfamiliar terms, dissecting difficult passages, and suggesting real-world applications. Be explicit on which AI uses are unacceptable.
- Have students analyze AI output – for example, critique a ChatGPT summary of a reading, or prompt it to answer a question like an author – *What would Shakespeare say about this?*

"How to Get Your Students to Read" by Kerry O'Grady in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 2, 2024 (Vol. 70, #24, pp. 36-37); O'Grady can be reached at ko2557@gsb.columbia.edu.

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3. High-School Activities That Boost Students' Interest in College

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Teniell Trolian (SUNY/Albany) says that a student's intention to attend college crystalizes between 8th and 11th grade, influenced by a variety of factors, including family, peers, access to information about college, academic achievement, and school experiences. Trolian used data from a national sample of 944 high schools to report on which out-of-class school experiences seemed to have the most influence on aspirations to earn a bachelor's degree, and for which students (she controlled for family and peer influence, academic achievement, outside preparation, school type and culture, and educator expectations). Here's the list, in descending order of influence:

- Getting college information from an online search
- Taking a college class, or sitting in on one
- Participating in science-related school programs
- Participating in extracurricular activities and programs
- Getting college support from a high-school counselor
- Going on a college tour
- Participating in math-related school programs
- Getting college support from a high-school plan
- Getting college support from a hired counselor
- Participating in a college readiness programs

Trolian found that the more of these experiences students had, the greater their likelihood of aspiring to college; there was a cumulative impact. The findings were consistent across student demographics, including race, ethnicity, and SES.

"Out-of-Class High-School Experiences and Students' College Aspirations" by Teniell Trolian in *Educational Researcher*, June/July 2024 (Vol. 53, #5, p. 326-328); Trolian can be reached at ttrolian@albany.edu.

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4. Decoding Graphics As a Vital Part of Reading Comprehension

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) says that when students are learning to read, pictures, drawings, and photos can distract them from focusing on the letters and building their decoding skills. Relying too much on illustrations can let some students "slip through the cracks," he says, "allowing them to answer comprehension questions without any grasp of the words."

But once students know how to decode, informational-text illustrations (especially in science) can provide motivation, clarify the meaning of words, and extend textual information. In fact, science writers rely on words, graphics, and mathematical symbols to describe natural

concepts, relationships, and processes. "They are all imperfect representations, of course," says Shanahan, "but together they provide the most complete and accurate rendition of the information."

Students who don't know how to make sense of these kinds of illustrations "are at a real reading comprehension disadvantage," says Shanahan. He's found that many students "have no idea how to read graphics," and believes that teaching "graphicacy" is very much part of literacy teachers' work. He describes five different types of illustrations that students need to be skilled at decoding:

- *Spatial graphics* showing the relationship of objects to each other – for example, a photo or drawing of a galaxy showing the location of our solar system.
- *Sequential graphics* showing processes or cycles that unfold over time – for example, the water cycle: precipitation, subsurface outflow, evaporation, condensation…
- *Variable relationship graphics* showing similarities and differences in phenomena or processes – for example, a graph showing long-term trends in the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide.
- *Classification/hierarchical graphics* showing taxonomic or rank relationships or arrangements among objects or processes – for example, the evolution of primates over the millennia.
- *Causal graphics* showing conditions or actions that lead to outcomes – for example, a series of diagrams showing the transformation of water from ice to liquid to steam as temperature rises.

"Teaching students to recognize the range of purposes of graphics and how they work," says Shanahan, "will go a long way towards building greater reading comprehension. You'll be amazed at the discussions that ensue and how much richer the rest of the reading can be."

"Should We Teach Graphicacy?" by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, August 3, 2024; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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5. The Link Between Reading Skill and the Amount of Reading Students Do

In this *Reading Research Quarterly* article, Felix Bittmann (Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories, Germany) reports on his study of the causal relationship between students' reading proficiency and the number of kilometers on their reading odometers. "Do children with better reading competence read more," he asks, "or do avid readers increase their reading competence?" Logic would seem to suggest that spending more time reading would improve reading skills. "It is well known that muscles that work harder grow more," says Bittmann. "Does the same principle apply to reading competence? Or is the opposite true, meaning that highly-skilled readers read more because it is easier for them and they enjoy it more?" Or is the relationship bi-directional, with time-on-task and reading skills reinforcing each other in a virtuous cycle – the Matthew Effect for young readers? And are there boy/girl differences in the competence/mileage relationship?

By analyzing achievement data and surveys of students' personal reading habits from over 5,000 fifth, seventh, and ninth-grade students in 234 German schools, from 2010 to 2015, Bittman came to these conclusions:

- Girls read more than boys, and girls' reading proficiency was better, but that didn't affect the causal relationship between reading proficiency and time reading.
- For both girls and boys, being a more-proficient reader led to spending more time reading, and that causal chain became stronger as students moved from fifth to ninth grade.
- Causation didn't work the other way around: spending more time reading did not seem to improve reading skills.

"This finding," Bittmann concludes, "indicates that simply providing plenty of reading material to kids will not automatically result in better reading performance. Access alone is potentially a requirement, yet not sufficient to boost reading performance. Other aspects, such as continuously providing support and guidance, potentially through parents and teachers, is necessary for advancing reading competence in children."

"Reading Begets Reading? Disentangling the Dynamic Interplay Between Reading Competence and Reading Exposure with a Special Focus on Gender Differences" by Felix Bittmann in *Reading Research Quarterly*, July/August/September 2024 (Vol. 59, #3, pp. 1-48); Bittmann can be reached at felix.bittmann@lifbi.de.

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6. Alternatives to Using Four Unintentionally Rude Phrases

In this online article, author/consultant Lolly Daskal says there are four commonly used phrases that often come across as rude. She describes each one and suggests what to say instead:

• *No offense, but…* Despite the disclaimer, what follows often does give offense. Instead, Daskal suggests saying, "I noticed a few areas where you could enhance your presentation skills. Would you be open to some feedback?"

• *I don't mean to interrupt, but…* "Interrupting someone is inherently rude, regardless of your intention," says Daskal. She suggests waiting for a natural pause in the discussion and then saying, "I apologize for interrupting, but I wanted to add a crucial point to the discussion."

• *You should have…* The 's-word' is an immediate trigger for many people, freighted with criticism and judgment. Instead, Daskal suggests something like, "In the future, what strategies can we use to ensure we have all the necessary information before a meeting?"

• *That's not my job (or problem)*. This comes across as "dismissive and unhelpful," says Daskal. An alternative: "Although this isn't within my scope of work, I'd be happy to point you in the right direction or connect you with someone who can help."

"Effective communication is about delivering your message with clarity, kindness, and respect through carefully chosen words," Daskal concludes. "By being mindful of these rude

phrases and choosing alternative expressions, you can communicate more effectively and build stronger, more positive relationships."

"4 Phrases That Unintentionally Convey Rudeness, and What to Say Instead" by Lolly Daskal, August 2024

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7. Using Picture Books to Introduce the Subject of Death

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Lisa Parker (Penn State Erie), Kennedy Wittman (Iroquois School District), and William Blintz (Kent State University) describe how Parker's seven-year-old son sobbed uncontrollably as he finished *Charlotte's Web*. "Charlotte *diiieeeddd*!" he cried out. As a mother and a teacher, Parker had been avoiding the subject of death, so her son was devastated when he read about the demise of a beloved spider in the book he'd brought home from school. She realized that her classroom and home libraries didn't have any books on this fraught topic.

"We tend to try to protect youth from tough topics like death because we do not think that children and adolescents are ready for these difficult conversations," say Parker, Wittman, and Blintz, "or we think they will simply not understand. In actuality, children are curious about death and understand more than we think they do. The claim that children are not ready has much more to do with teachers and adults feeling underprepared, ill-equipped, and simply not ready to engage and interact with difficult topics."

"However," the authors continue, "by not being open to engage in conversation, we run the risk of withholding the truth with the consequence of individuals feeling isolated." It's important for young people to be invited into conversations about death and not be blindsided the first time they (inevitably) encounter it with their pets, in their families and communities, or through the media.

Parker, Wittman, and Blintz believe picture books can be a helpful format for addressing emotionally challenging topics like death. Here's why:

- Although picture books are short (usually around 32 pages), they can be deep and engage readers of all ages in complex thinking.
- Picture books often contain multiple meanings and encourage readers with different life experiences to consider different perspectives.
- The narrative structure of picture books encourages readers to relate to the characters and synthesize several layers of meaning as they read and reread.
- When picture books are read aloud, they can create a community of learners and help its members feel valued and respected.
- A teacher or parent can read several picture books on the same theme with children and discuss the links between them.

For these reasons, well-chosen picture books can be an effective way to initiate conversations about death, allowing children to engage with the narrative, empathize with fictional characters, and think about strategies for coping with loss in a supportive setting.

Parker, Wittman, and Blintz reached out to teachers and librarians for suggestions on picture books about death and then analyzed 100 of them, asking:

- Who is the narrator, what is the perspective, and who died?
- Is the tone superficial and trivial, happily-ever-after, detached and informational, or serious and respectful?
- Does the book beat around the bush or address the topic of death head on?
- Do the authors "write up" rather than condescend to young readers?
- Does the book take the reader through the grief cycle or portray death as a "one day" event?

Wrapping up this analysis, Parker, Wittman, and Blintz produced lists of exemplary books in three categories, in each describing one book in detail. Click the article link below for the full lists and these synopses.

• *Books that take the reader through the grief cycle – Ida, Always* by Caron Levis, illustrated by Charles Santoso (2016), is about the friendship of two polar bears in the Central Park Zoo and how one of them dies.

• *Books that are respectful and not condescending – The Shared Room* by Kao Kalia Yang, illustrated by Xee Reiter (2020), is about a family grieving the loss of a child who drowned.

• *Books that show there is more than one way to react to death and to grieve – Michael Rosen's Sad Book* by Michael Rosen, illustrated by Quentin Blake (2005), is about the tragic death of the author's 18-year-old son.

"Quality literature opens doors for conversations that will make our students feel respected, valued, and understood," conclude Parker, Wittman, and Blintz. "Sometimes educators do not know how to open conversations about these difficult topics with their students. We believe that picture books are an excellent tool to begin conversations and engage students in experiencing situations like the characters in the books."

"Yes, Charlotte Died: Using Picturebooks to Talk About, Not Avoid, the Topic of Death" by Lisa Parker, Kennedy Wittman, and William Blintz in *The Reading Teacher*, July/August 2024 (Vol. 78, #1, pp. 1-26); the authors can be reached at lmc61@psu.edu, kwittman@iroquois.iu5.org, and wpbintz@gmail.com.

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8. Children's Books on the Asian-American Experience

"I was nine years old when I first saw a book featuring a character that looked like me," says Virginia educator Grace Choi in this article in *Language Arts*. That experience was powerful for her because at that time, books featuring Asian-American girls were rare. Interestingly, Choi didn't particularly like the book – *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* by Betty Bao Lord – because it didn't speak to her situation as a second-generation Korean American. "I wanted a story about someone like me," she says. Other books she found

weren't mirrors either, she says. "They were, at best, a hazy, mirror-like surface, reflecting small parts of myself, but not a full picture."

Since then, more books have been published that are closer to the mark, but Choi says they often lack authenticity, feature one-dimensional characters, and tend to focus on two themes: immigration and being different. "Sadly," she says, "both of these widely written themes only sustain the myth of Asians as perpetual foreigners and, while numerous in title, they are limited in showcasing the beauty, diversity, and everyday lives of Asian Americans."

Thankfully, she says, the gap is now being filled. She invites teachers and librarians to replace some of their old favorites with high-quality books portraying the Asian-American experience (click the article link for more suggestions):

If you like *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak…

Try *Juna's Jar* by Jane Bahk

If you like *Are You Ready to Play Outside?* by Mo Willems…

Try *Puddle* by Hyewon Yum

If you like *Julius, the Baby of the World* by Kevin Henkes…

Try *Big Red Lollipop* by Rukhsana Khan

If you like *Nana in the City* by Lauren Castillo…

Try *Drawn Together* by Minh Lê and *When Lola Visits* by Michelle Sterling

If you like *Strictly No Elephants* by Lisa Mantchev…

Try *The Many Colors of Harpreet Singh* by Spriya Kelkar

If you like *Owen* by Kevin Henkes…

Try *The Twins' Blanket* by Hyewon Yum

If you like the Junie B. Jones series by Barbara Park…

Try the Mindy Kim series by Lyla Lee

If you like the Judy Moody series by Megan McDonald…

Try the Jasmine Toguchi series by Debbi Michiko Florence

If you like *Holes* by Louis Sachar…

Try *Hello, Universe* by Erin Entrada Kelly

If you like *The City of Ember* by Jeanne DuPrau…

Try *A Wish in the Dark* by Christina Soontornvat

If you like *Miles Morales Spider-Man* by Jason Reynolds…

Try *Green Lantern Legacy* by Minh Lê

If you like *Ms. Bixby's Last Day* by John David Anderson…

Try *The Boys in the Back Row* by Mike Jung

"Asian-American Stories Are for Everyone: Highlighting the Universal Themes in Asian American Children's Literature" by Grace Choi in *Language Arts*, May 2024 (Vol. 101, #35, pp. 347-349)

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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 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 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
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Educational Researcher
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Harvard Business Review
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Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
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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