Marshall Memo 888

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
May 24, 2021

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"I'm still waiting on Zoom to create a 'dot-dot-dot-so-and-so-is-typing' feature. I never know if a student is typing or asleep, or their Wi-Fi cut out, or my Wi-Fi cut out, or they're straight up ignoring me."

Massachusetts high-school teacher Olivia Phillips in "What I Learned from Teaching Algebra on TikTok" in *Ed. Magazine*, Spring 2021 (#168, pp. 44-45)

"In this two-dimensional world, we realized that the back of your hair didn't matter anymore and that we could show up to class barefoot."

Kelsea Turner (quoted in item #1)

"When we limit independent reading to a small range of topics, genres, and reading levels, and routinely assign rote accountability tasks like daily reading logs, we inadvertently send a signal that reading isn't meant to be a joyful, inspiring, and even revelatory activity."

Hoa Nguyen in "How to Provide Less Structure for Independent Reading" in *Edutopia*, May 17, 2021

"Without follow-up observation and feedback, the fruits of training are susceptible to drift and entropy."

Mike Schmoker (see item #4)

"We can no longer get away with telling students that the ancient Greeks invented mathematics, that Columbus discovered America, that the Declaration of Independence was truly democratic, that European and American literature and history are essentially the only humanities worth knowing, or that it is somehow understandable that historical heroes and leaders in the history books have been almost entirely white men… Decolonizing the curriculum is about being more accurate, more inclusive, and more interculturally responsive. It's not about forcing one ideological perspective on students; it's about telling both sides of the story."

Conrad Hughes in "Decolonizing the Curriculum" in *CIS Perspectives*, May 3, 2021

1. Continuing Effective Covid-Time Practices in the "New Normal"

In this article in *Ed. Magazine*, Lory Hough compiles suggestions from educators on practices implemented during the pandemic that should continue when schools return to fully in-person instruction. Some excerpts:

• *Cultivate trust*. "The pandemic has reminded me just how important it is to listen, care for one another, seek perspectives, solve problems together, stay true to core values, and follow through," says Jennifer Perry Cheatham (Public Education Leadership Project). She hopes "active trust-building emerges as a necessity in education – a foundational tenet through which we perform all our work."

• *Rethink grading*. "We must realize that our century-old inherited grading practices have *always* disproportionately punished students with weaker support nets and fewer resources, students of color, from poor families, with special needs, and English learners," says Joe Feldman (author, former teacher and administrator). During the pandemic, it became apparent that problems with grading affected many more students, waking up educators to the need to more accurately and fairly measure student learning.

• *Truly include parents*. "For all their pieties," says Frederick Hess (American Enterprise Institute), "schools have seemingly gotten into a habit of treating parents as a nuisance… [giving] the gentle brush-off to parents concerned about discipline, special education, or testing." With remote learning, parents have had a front-row seat on their children's curriculum content, how teachers teach, and how school time is used. Reactions have ranged from positive (*I had no idea teachers were so organized*) to helpful (*Now I see why my daughter is confused about parts of speech*), to negative (*I never knew how little learning occurs during my kids' school day*). "There's great power in all this," says Hess. "This kind of openness can strengthen school communities, enable valuable oversight for what schools are doing, and provide students more of the support they need. Here's hoping that we find a way to keep it, long after the kids are out of the kitchen and back in the classroom."

• *Learn from the positive anomalies*. Some students, perhaps one in 20, have actually performed better on schoolwork during the pandemic, observes author/former principal Tracey Benson. Perhaps this happened, he says, because of "the truncated direct instruction time, the streamlined curriculum, or the absence of the social stimuli of being constantly surrounded by other students." We can learn a lot from these positive outliers: "What is it about the distance learning environment that has helped them turn the corner, and how can we preserve these strategies as we return to traditional in-person instruction?"

• *Stop teaching by telling*. Teacher lectures and plodding through textbook chapters have been even less effective via Zoom than they were beforehand, says Chris Dede (Harvard Graduate School of Education). Seeing students tuning out, many teachers shifted to problem-based and project-based activities, teaching science, technology, engineering, and math with materials found in students' homes and communities and using family members as mentors and co-teachers. "Let's not give up the powerful, novel models of learning and motivation that are a silver lining in the dark cloud of this human tragedy," says Dede.

• *Continue creative assessing*. While there's definitely a role for standardized testing, says New York City social studies teacher Tyler Tarnowicz, being liberated from high-stakes testing for two years has led to some creative ways to assess student learning and growth in real time, involve students in the process, and hold educators accountable. As standardized tests return, Tarnowicz urges us to keep them in perspective and continue to get valuable insights from lower-key classroom practices.

• *Keep opening doors to higher education*. During the pandemic, several changes have been implemented to level the playing field for college admissions, says Brennan Barnard (Making Caring Common):

- Wider access to college counseling;
- High-quality virtual visits to colleges;
- Test-optional policies;
- Better understanding of applicants' family responsibilities and other circumstances that affect their educational opportunities;
- Admissions officers having more insight about who is being left behind.

Barnard hopes these practices will continue in the years ahead.

• *Rethink attendance policies*. Thousands of students have "gone missing" during school closures, says Bree Dusseault (Center on Reinventing Pubic Education), often students who were already struggling. This has led many educators to implement strategies like these:

- Collaborating with families to reengage missing students and bridge technology gaps;
- Ensuring that every student has at least one consistent relationship with a caring adult;
- Providing options like evening classes, flexible schedules, and independent study;
- Focusing on content mastery versus seat time.

"The solution to chronic absenteeism does not revolve around truancy boards or court dates," says Dusseault. "We need to incentivize schools to use wellness-centered approaches that hold students to high expectations but avoid punishments that only set them back."

• *Expand learning time*. Many students lost months of learning during the pandemic, says Karen Hawley Miles (Education Resource Strategies), in some cases a full year. As schools return to regular schedules, she points to schools that have reorganized staff, time, and technology to help those students catch up. Among the options: extended learning time, high-dosage tutoring, and after-school learning opportunities.

• *Change teacher-student ratios*. During remote learning, some high schools shifted from seven-period days to a quarter system with students taking no more than three subjects at a time, says Jal Mehta (Harvard Graduate School of Education). This frees teachers to focus on

80 students at a time, versus 160, making it much easier to build relationships and rapport. This is a practice that should continue, says Mehta.

• *Ask what matters*. "It was a wild ride," says graduate student Kelsea Turner. "We were teleported into breakout rooms where we found ourselves taking solace in a familiar face or marking time in a silent standoff, waiting for someone to initiate the conversation. In this two-dimensional world, we realized that the back of your hair didn't matter anymore and that we could show up to class barefoot. We learned that 'I had an unstable Internet connection' was the new 'my dog ate my homework,' and that the effort required to click 'unmute' somehow made us feel like whatever we said had better be worth it – most of us, anyway. We discovered that vibes transmit through Wi-Fi and we can feel them without ever knowing how a person moves through the world…

"So many variables demanded radical flexibility, forcing us to try what we would have resisted before, to fail, then to try something else. We learned how to learn again in this bizarre here and now. And to both our chagrin and delight, this year inspired us to ask and really mean it: What matters now in education? As we prepare to depart Zoomland to return to classrooms or embark on new endeavors, may we remember to never stop asking this question, and to mute ourselves to listen for the answers. And if we are lucky enough to work with students, let's not forget the tenderness we felt when someone greeted us warmly by name when we arrived in class – and how sometimes it was the only proof we had that we were actually there, in person or not."

"For Keeps" by Lory Hough in *Ed. Magazine*, Spring 2021 (#168, pp. 26-35); Hough can be reached at lory_hough@gse.harvard.edu.

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2. Maintaining High Expectations in the Face of Unfinished Learning

In this *Newsweek* article, Paul Bambrick-Santoyo and Stephen Chiger (Uncommon Schools) say the best way to address the "massive instructional loss" resulting from school closings is not to lower expectations, which seems to be the argument made by some who are concerned about the emotional fragility of students as they emerge from the pandemic. Rather, say Bambrick-Santoyo and Chiger, we need to get an accurate assessment of where students are in the fall and challenge them to engage in "productive struggle."

Consider the analogy of weightlifting, they say, where strength is built by working at the edge of one's current ability, lifting increasingly heavier weights over time. "We should not be hoping to avoid challenge this fall," they argue. "Rather, we should embrace it, in classrooms that validate students for who they are and inspire them to take intellectual risks."

That's the essence of equity in schools, conclude Bambrick-Santoyo and Chiger: "that all students, regardless of their race, gender, class, or anything else, have the support they need to ensure they can learn. What equity does *not* mean is lowering the bar to where students happen to be currently. Embracing equity means building a challenging curriculum, not because being difficult is inherently virtuous, but because it's good for kids." In short, we don't

have to choose between wellness and intellect.

"After the Pandemic, Schools Can't Hide from 'Learning Loss.' We Need to Embrace It" by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo and Stephen Chiger in *Newsweek*, May 7, 2021; the authors can be reached at pbambrick@uncommonschools.org and schiger@uncommonschools.org.

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3. Elena Aguilar Reflects on the Year

(Originally titled "Emerging Stronger")

"Although this school year has been exceptionally hard, and although I've experienced a great deal of insecurity about my skills, I've learned a whole lot," says Elena Aguilar (Bright Morning Consulting) in this *Educational Leadership* article. As the school year ends, she is encouraging educators to reflect on what they've been through by answering these questions:

- What did you learn about yourself as a person this year? As a teacher, coach, leader?
- What did you learn about creating the conditions for learning?
- What did you learn about your students and colleagues?
- What did you learn about your emotions? Your resilience? What you need in order to thrive?

Three possible activities:

- Draw a simply illustrated timeline of the year with significant highs, lows, and learning moments.
- Capture on a storyboard or in dialogue boxes a few conversations that were particularly helpful and insightful.
- Describe this school year in a body movement.

"Emerging Stronger" by Elena Aguilar in *Educational Leadership*, May 2021 (Vol. 78, #8, pp. 82-83); Aguilar can be reached at elena@brightmorningteam.com.

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4. Mike Schmoker on Four Keys to Better Professional Learning

(Originally titled "The Obvious Path to Better Professional Development")

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, writer/consultant Mike Schmoker says that in spite of millions of dollars and countless hours spent on K-12 professional development, "Many students are still subjected to an incoherent, knowledge-poor, worksheet-driven curriculum." What's more, he says, poor and historically marginalized students are most often the victims of this kind of instruction.

Schmoker describes the very different PD he received as a brand-new middle-school teacher several decades ago. When the principal made her first drop-in visit early in the year, she noticed he called only on students who raised their hands, explained several things before having students process and apply, didn't circulate to monitor progress between chunks of instruction, and failed to reteach when students seemed confused. The principal had Schmoker work with a PD trainer on how to execute the key elements of instruction – and practice until

he got it. The principal continued to make brief classroom visits and give targeted feedback until Schmoker's students were getting skillful teaching on a regular basis.

He believes this story highlights some simple, obvious principles that should guide PD in all schools:

• *Follow the evidence*. The research is clear about what boosts learning, especially for struggling students:

- Coherent, content-rich lessons;
- Explicit modeling followed by lots of practice;
- Frequent checks for understanding;
- Targeted reteaching of what hasn't been mastered;
- An abundance of purposeful reading, discussion, and writing.

Alas, says Schmoker, too many PD leaders are driven by "whims, fads, opportunism, and ideology," and principals allow way too much "aimless group work," low-level "busysheets," and in elementary schools, the "Crayola curriculum."

• *Focus*. With the best intentions, many schools have adopted a bunch of initiatives at once, says Schmoker: "As a result, none of them received the sustained attention – the 'depth and intensity' necessary for success." Less is more, sticking to one or two major initiatives until they bear fruit. There are few better PD initiatives, he says, than ensuring that every teacher is "fully, deeply trained" in the elements of effective instruction.

• *Actually train*. Exposing teachers to a key practice – leading a good discussion, analyzing a text – however engaging and entertaining, is not the same as training. That involves explanation, demonstration, modeling, role-playing, practice with coaching and correction – and actual mastery. Schmoker points to the Uncommon Schools charter network as an exemplar of this kind of training.

• *Monitor like crazy*. "Without follow-up observation and feedback," he says, "the fruits of training are susceptible to drift and entropy. Sustained, consistent performance depends upon our willingness to observe, guide, and celebrate effective implementation of evidence-based practices." The primary vehicle is frequent classroom visits by administrators and instructional coaches with informal, individual feedback and follow-up training where necessary. Schmoker also endorses brief, all-faculty refresher sessions on targeted practices so individual teachers don't feel singled out but get the message. But school leaders must be willing and able to "confront and correct ineffective practice in individual classrooms." He spotlights the work of former principal Sue Szachowicz and her colleagues in orchestrating the dramatic turnaround of Brockton High School in Massachusetts starting in 1999 – a success story that also featured a relentless schoolwide focus on reading, writing, thinking, and reasoning.

"The Obvious Path to Better Professional Development" by Mike Schmoker in *Educational Leadership*, May 2021 (Vol. 78, #8, pp. 65-69); Schmoker can be reached at schmoker@futureone.com.

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5. Using Peer Feedback in High-School Writing Classes

In this *American Educational Research Journal* article, Yong Wu and Christian Schunn (University of Pittsburgh) describe their study of peer feedback in high-school AP English composition classes. Here's the procedure they used:

- Students wrote an initial draft of a writing task and turned it in using an online platform.
- Students' drafts were randomly distributed to peers across AP English classrooms.
- Each student was required to review four peers' essays.
- Students used a detailed rubric adapted from the one used by AP scorers.
- Before scoring began, teachers trained students using two sample essays, as follows:
    - Students read the first essay and were shown comments that were unhelpful (e.g., vague) and then comments that were specific and constructive, and discussed the difference.
    - Teachers encouraged students to focus most of their attention on higher-level comments (e.g., quality of explanations and arguments) versus lower-level comments (e.g., spelling and grammar)
    - Students read the second sample essay and worked with a partner to complete a review.
    - The whole class discussed possible comments and what an appropriate rubric rating for the essay would be.
- Students then had one week to comment on and rate the four essays assigned to them.
- All students got their first drafts back with comments and ratings.
- Students made revisions and submitted their second drafts online.
- Students were then asked to write a second essay on a different prompt.
- Those were scored by the research team and compared to the initial draft of the first essay.

Based on a careful analysis of the students' essays, Wu and Schunn concluded that: (a) with the first essay, there was a marked improvement from students' first to second drafts; and (b) with the second essay (submitted after the first essay was written, revised, and submitted), the initial draft was significantly better than the initial draft of the first essay. In other words, getting and producing peer review not only improved an existing draft, but helped students be better writers going forward.

"Overall," say the authors, "the results indicated that both providing and receiving feedback predicted performance and learning… By receiving and providing high-level feedback targeting similar problems, students develop a better understanding of their weaknesses and are motivated to review to narrow the gap between their current and desired performance."

Interestingly, the process of critiquing their peers' essays helped students notice and correct problems in their own writing that were not identified by those who reviewed their essays. This seemed to happen because putting on a "reviewer hat" helped students see their own writing through the eyes of a reader, as well as taking on the active role of a teacher.

"The Effects of Providing and Receiving Peer Feedback on Writing Performance and Learning of Secondary-School Students" by Yong Wu and Christian Schunn in *American Educational Research Journal*, June 2021 (Vol. 58, #3, pp. 492-526); the authors can be reached at yongwu@pitt.edu and schunn@pitt.edu.

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6. The Difference Between Handwritten and Computer Note-taking

(Originally titled "The Duel Between the Pen and Keyboard Continues")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Montana teachers Dana Haring and Tom Kelner report on action research they conducted to test whether it's better for students to take notes by hand or on a laptop. They were intrigued by a study conducted at the university level that found handwritten notes resulted in better student understanding [see Memo 698 for a summary]. As an English/social studies team collaborating on teaching students to write research essays, Haring and Kelner were especially interested in this debate because their seventh graders had a tendency to copy and paste chunks of texts they were researching and not engage in close reading and paraphrasing. The teachers' research question: *What difference will there be in the content scores between students who take longhand notes and students who type notes using Google Docs?*

In January of the 2019-20 school year, students had written at least three research essays, and Haring and Kelner launched the experiment. They divided 85 students randomly into two groups and explained what was about to happen. At the end of the unit, both groups would type their final essays, but one would take online research notes by hand, using a printed graphic organizer, while the other typed notes on a computer, using the same organizer shared via Google Classroom. The question was whether there would be a difference in the essays depending on the notetaking method.

Students did their research in the school library's computer lab, with the teachers circulating and providing support throughout the week. After students had typed their essays, a group of college students who were enrolled in a writing methods course scored them using an analytical rubric. The scorers were not told students' names, which essays came from which group, or the nature of the experiment. Students' essays were scored on evidence and analysis: the information they'd gathered, and their explanations of how it connected to their thesis statements.

What was the result? In both evidence and analysis, students who typed their notes did better – 11 percentage points higher on evidence and 19 percentage points higher on analysis. However, say Haring and Kelner, "both groups of students were found to have recorded a large swath of their notes verbatim from their sources… Our hope was that handwriting notes would lessen, if not eliminate, this tendency. *It did not*." While the teachers planned to work on getting their students to improve on paraphrasing and citing sources, their firm conclusion was that students should be allowed to use computers for note-taking.

Shortly after this, the pandemic shut down schools, so it was fortuitous that keyboarding was, in the teachers' minds, a validated method of notetaking.

"The Duel Between the Pen and Keyboard Continues" by Dana Haring and Tom Kelner in *Educational Leadership*, May 2021 (Vol. 78, #8); the authors can be reached at dkharing@gmail.com and tkelner22@gmail.com.

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7. What Is the Purpose of Mathematics?

In this article in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, Lucy Watson (Belmont University) and Christopher Bonnesen and Jeremy Strayer (Middle Tennessee State University) describe a common dilemma for math teachers: what do you say when students ask, *Why do I need to know that?* Some teachers point to practical, real-life applications in science, technology, engineering, and math education. Others extoll the beauty and wonder of mathematics. What teachers say might reveal one of three views of the nature of mathematics:

- It's a set of facts, rules, and tools that need to be memorized;
- It's a static body of knowledge bound by discovered truths that never change;
- It's a dynamic, problem-driven discipline defined by creativity, inquiry, and openness to revision.

Students taught by a teacher holding each view will learn mathematics quite differently, and will likely be exposed to distinct teaching methods, from rote lectures to discussions and hands-on projects.

Watson, Bonnesen, and Strayer believe there hasn't been enough guidance for math teachers on exactly what the nature of mathematics is, leaving the field wide open to a variety of rationales – and probably some pretty dull teaching. Drawing on several guiding documents in the field, the authors suggest this five-point view of the nature of mathematics:

• Mathematics is a product of the exploration of structure and patterns.

• Mathematics uses multiple strategies and multiple representations to make claims.

• Mathematics is critiqued and verified by people within particular cultures through justification or proof that is communicated to oneself and others.

• Mathematics is refined over time as cultures interact and change.

• Mathematics is worthwhile, beautiful, often useful, and can be produced by each and every person.

The authors believe that as students grapple with high-quality math problems, teachers should get them thinking about this broader view of the nature of mathematics, asking students about purpose before, during, and after solving the problems. Watson, Bonnesen, and Strayer suggest repeating this meaning-seeking activity at intervals through the grades – perhaps with a unit on counting in kindergarten, equivalent fractions in third grade, area relationships in middle school, and absolute value in high school. If this occurs, say the authors, teachers will less frequently hear the question, *Why do I need to know that?*

"The Nature of Mathematics: Let's Talk About It" by Lucy Watson, Christopher Bonnesen, and Jeremy Strayer in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, May 2021 (Vol. 114, #5, pp. 552-561); the authors can be reached at Lucy.watson@belmont.edu, ctb4d@mtmail.mtsu.edu, and jeremy.strayer@mtsu.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 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
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
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
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
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
Teaching Tolerance
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