

Marshall Memo 875

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 22, 2021

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Quotes of the Week

Last week we lost Richard Elmore, a powerful thinker and doer who had a major impact on K-12 education. You can find summaries of some of his writing in Memos 13, 89, 101, 159, 183, 208, 220, 317, and 388. Here are a few quotes that capture his wise and iconoclastic spirit:

“If you walk into a classroom and sit down next to a student, ask him what he is doing and why, and you don’t get a clear answer, it is highly unlikely that any powerful learning is taking place.”

“Not surprisingly, schools and school systems that do well under external accountability systems are those that have consensus on norms of instructional practice, strong internal assessments of student learning, and sturdy processes for monitoring instructional practice and for providing feedback to students, teachers, and administrators about the quality of their work. Internal coherence around instructional practice is a prerequisite for strong performance, whatever the requirements of the external accountability system.”

“Improving schools pay attention to who knows what and how that knowledge can strengthen the organization.”

“Successful leaders have an explicit theory of what good instructional practice looks like. They model their own learning and theories of learning in their work, work publicly on the improvement of their own practice, and engage others in powerful discourse about good instruction. These leaders understand that improving school performance requires transforming a fundamentally weak instructional core, and the culture that surrounds it, into a strong, explicit body of knowledge about powerful teaching and learning that is accessible to those who are willing to learn it.”

“Most politically alert citizens, of whatever ideological stripe, work in organizations that have already internalized performance-based accountability. They find the complaints of educators about accountability to be out of touch and whiny.”

“I have to work hard not to show my active discomfort when graduate students come to me and say, ‘I have worked in schools for a few years, and now I am ready to start to shape policy.’ Every fiber of my being wants to say, ‘Use your time in graduate school to become a better practitioner and get back into schools as quickly as possible. You will have a much more profound effect on the education sector working in schools than you will ever have as a policy actor.’”

“I now care much less about what people say they believe, and much more about what I observe them to be doing and their willingness to engage in practices that are deeply unfamiliar to them.”

1. Why Are Many Students Feeling Overwhelmed by School Assignments?

In this article from the Center for the Advancement of Teaching (Wake Forest University), Betsy Barre says that in surveys conducted around the U.S. during the pandemic, college students say they are overwhelmed and that their academic work has grown exponentially and is unmanageable. Instructors believe they’re assigning reasonable amounts of work, so what’s going on? Barre considers several hypotheses:

- Hypothesis #1: Without meaning to, instructors have assigned more work than they did in the past. “I doubt we are increasing work just to make sure our students take our classes seriously,” says Barre, “but I wouldn’t be surprised if we were doing so to assuage our fears that students at a distance would not remain engaged.” Teachers may also have over-prepared for the new learning environment and been too eager to try all the new approaches they’ve picked up.

- Hypothesis #2: Instructors aren’t assigning more work, but they haven’t been clear about what’s expected. For example, responding to another student’s comment on a discussion board, or completing a formative writing assignment online, can take much longer than they would during an in-person lesson – unless the instructor sets clear time limits.

- Hypothesis #3: Some students are overestimating their workload because they’re unhappy with remote learning. “They may feel like online assignments are dragging on,” says Barre, “because they are mindful of what else they could be doing if things were different.”

• Hypothesis #4: Before the pandemic, many students could get good grades while skipping some of the work. Specifically, students could get by if they didn't do all the reading and weren't always prepared for classes. What's different in an online course is that the instructor can see all the work (annotating the reading, taking a quiz, contributing to a discussion board), and students know they're being held accountable for it. If this is true in several courses, students' workload might indeed have doubled.

• Hypothesis #5: The shift to online coursework has increased students' cognitive load. Students have had to teach themselves new skills for online classes – using different tools, figuring out how to complete unfamiliar assignments, getting used to a “new rhythm of work.” In addition, many instructors have broken assignments into smaller chunks – a good idea, but Barre says it can add “invisible labor to the time they spend completing the work.”

• Hypothesis #6: The pandemic has decreased students' capacity to work. “Before they even show up in our classes,” says Barre, “our students are likely struggling with isolation, loneliness, and collective or personal trauma... As many of us know all too well, these conditions can decrease our motivation and capacity to work, leading us to spend far more time on tasks than we have in the past.”

All of these possible reasons have an element of truth, she says, and suggests several ways instructors can make the work more manageable for students:

- Accurately estimate how much time each assignment will take students to complete.
- Regularly check in with students to see if your estimates are accurate.
- Don't assume that adding more work will increase student engagement.
- If you want to add a cool new assignment idea, take something else off the table.
- Tell students the maximum amount of time you expect them to spend on discussion board responses and in-class writing responses.
- Limit the use of new tools and technologies and novel assignment formats.
- Ask yourself if all your small assignments are actually necessary, or should count for grades.
- Make assignments part of a predictable weekly schedule.
- Hold your students accountable for the same amount of work as in the past.

“More controversially,” adds Barre, “you might also consider *decreasing* the amount of work you assign to your students this semester. While it is true that time on task is one of the most important predictors of students' learning, that relationship may not matter if students are not equipped to actually spend that time, or spend that time productively... In this moment when our students are so clearly struggling, their well-being is my top priority.”

[“The Workload Dilemma”](#) by Betsy Barre in Center for the Advancement of Teaching, January 22, 2021; Barre can be reached at barreea@wfu.edu.

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2. Four Ways Some Schools Are Doing Well with Online Learning

In this *Kappan* article, Mark Elgart reports the results of three surveys conducted by his education nonprofit, Cognia, in the U.S. and 22 other countries. Tapping the opinions of tens of

thousands of teachers, parents, and K-12 students in the spring of 2020, the surveys explored the academic, emotional, and personal impact of the sudden shift to remote learning. Some of the findings:

- 80% of students reported having more work in a remote setting than in regular school.
- 67% of students, 60% of parents, and 94% of teachers said the assignments given during remote instruction were either “new and easy” or “something already learned.”
- However, 40% of students reported that assignments were difficult to complete.
- 68% of students reported being absent from school most (26%) or some (42%) days.
- 44% of parents reported that for their children, key routines (such as teachers greeting students at the beginning of class, setting clear expectations, rehearsing group learning practices) were inconsistent from class to class, or not established at all.
- 70% of teachers said preparing and teaching took significantly more time than before.
- Most teachers said they spent more time communicating with students and parents, leaving little time to learn new teaching approaches and share ideas with colleagues.
- 57% of parents and 61% of students worried about being prepared for the next grade. There were more worries about this at the middle- and high-school level.
- 71% of students and 80% of parents reported that students felt lonely most days or some days.
- 42% of teachers said remote teaching was harder than they expected.
- 99% of teachers said they missed their school life, and 90% felt disconnected from colleagues.

In the months since conducting the surveys, Cognia staff talked with numerous school leaders and found strong consensus on four key areas of focus – rigor, routines, relationships, and resources – for the remainder of the pandemic:

- *Rigor* – Several factors have conspired to reduce academic demand: the unfamiliarity of tech connections for teachers and students; the impossibility of being synchronous for the same number of hours per day as in-person time pre-pandemic; teachers’ challenges monitoring students’ engagement and gauging their readiness to take on new ideas and skills; students distracted by their home environment; problems with bandwidth and access to the right devices; availability of supplies and manipulatives for all students; and educators’ difficulty checking in with all students academically and personally.

How can students get advanced and interesting work, including independent assignments, group inquiry, and project-based learning? Elgart says that in schools that have weathered the crisis with the greatest success, leaders orchestrate professional learning that addresses each of the challenges listed above, expose teachers to models of effective online instruction, customize learning to each teacher’s needs, and schedule frequent collaboration among teachers.

- *Routines* – Learning the new procedures and expectations of online schooling has been particularly difficult for elementary and middle-school children: arriving on time for lessons, how to participate in class, interacting with peers, when to study, and more. The schools that have been most successful with remote learning have worked closely with families

on setting up routines with their children: getting out of bed at the same time every day, dressing in school clothes, eating on the same schedule, and behaving as consistently during the online school day as they did with in-person schooling.

- *Relationships* – This was the area in which educators got the highest marks in the Cognia surveys: 92% of parents said they had more appreciation for teachers’ expertise, 93% said teachers checked in regularly to make sure students had everything they needed, 96% said teachers showed genuine concern for their children’s learning, and 97% said teachers and administrators made themselves available at families’ convenience. This means the message for educators in this area is, *Keep up the good work*.

- *Resources* – There are still gaps with Internet access, laptops and tablets, and other key resources, not to mention PD for teachers to take full advantage of the resources they have – and many schools face budget challenges.

“The pandemic has shined a bright light on systemic inequities in K-12 education and on the urgent need to provide stronger professional support to teachers,” concludes Elgart. He sees hope in the way some schools have adapted to the crisis: “Their practices could even lead to an instructional renaissance, pointing the way toward new kinds of technology-mediated and student-directed learning, enabling us to open up our classrooms, change teachers’ work for the better, and allow students to learn anywhere, anytime, and anyplace. Educators need to ask themselves whether specific classroom practices are vestigial remnants of an old way of doing business, or whether they truly support equitable and engaging instruction, paying special attention to the learning challenges young people face every day.”

[“Learning Upended: How Americans Experienced the Shift to Remote Instruction”](#) by Mark Elgart in *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2021 (Vol. 102, #5, pp. 48-51); Elgart can be reached at mark.elgart@cognia.org.

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3. Using Videos to Improve Classroom Math Discourse

In this *Journal of the Learning Sciences* article, Gaowei Chen, Carol Chan, and Kennedy Chan (University of Hong Kong), Sherice Clarke (University of California/San Diego), and Lauren Resnick (University of Pittsburgh) report on their study of 54 middle-school math teachers in Shanghai. Teachers made videos of their classes every 1-2 months and took part in five PD sessions in which they studied ways of increasing the amount of “academically productive talk.” Among the suggested strategies:

- Asking students to expand on their ideas – e.g., *Can you say more about that? Can you give an example?*
- Revoicing students’ reasoning and providing opportunities for them to verify it – e.g., *So, let me see if I’ve got what you’re saying. Are you saying...?*
- Asking students to explain their reasoning – e.g., *Why do you think that? What’s your evidence?*
- Challenging students or giving a counter-example – e.g., *Does it always work that way?*

- Asking students to repeat or rephrase others' ideas – e.g., *Who can rephrase or repeat what --- just said, or put it into their own words?*
- Asking students to apply their reasoning to another's reasoning – e.g., *Do you agree/disagree? Why?*
- Prompting students to extend others' ideas – e.g., *Who can add to that idea?*
- Asking students to explain what someone else means – e.g., *Why do you think he said that?*

The researchers used a Classroom Discourse Analyzer to gain insights on the quality and quantity of teacher-student and student-student interactions during classes. (A comparison group learned about improving discourse but did not use videos of their teaching.) Over time, intervention group members monitored changes in their own teaching in their videos.

What were the results? First, teachers in the intervention group significantly increased their use of productive discourse strategies over the course of a school year (the least-used strategy was getting students to listen better to each other). Second, the intervention group's students' got significantly higher math test scores than those of the control group. "The students showed changes in their classroom engagement as a result of changes in teacher talk," say Chen et al., "with a wider range of students participating in whole-class talk and a proportional increase in student talk relative to teacher talk. The PD intervention focusing on productive talk moves likely helped students to engage more deeply in learning mathematics (e.g., collaboratively co-constructing solutions), thereby helping to improve their mathematics understanding and achievement."

Seeing themselves on video in the company of colleagues was a key factor in changing teachers' classroom practice. A couple of quotes from different meetings:

- "Look at what you said. You just repeated every statement your students said."
- "It seems that I need to pay more attention to that. My words need to be trimmed and simplified."

["Efficacy of Video-Based Teacher Professional Development for Increasing Classroom Discourse and Student Learning"](#) by Gaowei Chen, Carol Chan, Kennedy Chan, Sherice Clarke, and Lauren Resnick in *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, September-December 2020 (Vol. 29, #4-5 pp. 642-680); Chen can be reached at gwchen@hku.hk, Clarke at snclarke@ucsd.edu, and Resnick at resnick@pitt.edu.

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4. How Canonical Texts Can Drive Equity Discussions

(Originally titled "Seeing the Curriculum with Fresh Eyes")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Philadelphia teacher Matthew Kay says his sophomores open the year reading *Lord of the Flies*, which seems like a pretty monochromatic book: a white author writing about white boys "steeped in Eurocentric, Hobbesian philosophy." And yet, he says, some of the richest conversations about race are sparked by the book. Students note that boys stranded on an island "lose their humanity" and "become more savage." They boast, "We're English, and the English are best at everything." They paint their

faces, do rain dances, hunt, walk around partially clad, becoming less “white” as they become more evil, eventually killing Piggy. “My students have an absolute *field day* with this,” says Kay. “Just who does William Golding think he is?... C’mon!” Students conduct a similar analysis of *The Odyssey*, noticing that the heroes put down the Cyclops as “lawless brutes,” but Homer doesn’t note the Greeks’ barbaric behavior returning from Troy.

Kay wants more texts aligned with his students’ experiences (<https://disrupttexts.org>), but a lot can be mined from canonical texts. “We must think of race not as a *subject* that begins and ends with any particular course of study,” he says, “but as one of the most important *lenses* that can be applied to *any* unit of study... A book doesn’t need to *try* to be a race book to *be* a race book... Teachers who respect race as a lens don’t have to hit equity-talk home runs. We unleash a barrage of singles over the course of the entire school year.”

[“Seeing the Curriculum with Fresh Eyes”](#) by Matthew Kay in *Educational Leadership*, February 2021 (Vol. 78, #5, pp. 78-79); Kay can be reached at mrkay@notlight.com.

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5. What Parent Involvement Might Look Like in an Urban School

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, James Huguley, Lori Delale-O’Connor, Ming-Te Wang, and Alyssa Parr (University of Pittsburgh) present a variation on the traditional model for parent involvement in their children’s education. The researchers’ concept for home-based, school-based, and academic socialization draws on interviews with African-American parents whose children attend underresourced urban public middle schools. A comprehensive summary:

- *School-based involvement*

- Proactively building relationships with teachers and leaders;
- Working with principals and staff on school improvement efforts;
- Taking on formal roles in the school;
- Leveraging presence in the school to closely monitor children;
- Leveraging relationships to resolve social challenges;
- Identifying and directing youth toward promising opportunities;
- Intensive volunteering and involvement to help families navigate the school;
- Advocating in response to problems with unfair discipline incidents, racialized experiences in the classroom, and ineffective instruction by individual teachers;
- Challenging systemic issues, including lack of rigor, lower expectations, lack of racial representation in the curriculum, and petitioning governing bodies about access and racial justice issues.

- *Home-based involvement:*

- Using online academic materials that have grade-appropriate rigor;
- Procuring workbooks and hardcopy academic resources to fill curriculum gaps;
- Steering children toward out-of-school academic programs;
- Providing intellectually stimulating, race-focused books, movies, and documentaries;
- Exposing children to same-race cultural programs with explicit racial content;

- Engaging with same-race spiritual communities;
- Taking children to museums and cultural events related to positive and resilient racial histories.
- *Academic socialization:*
 - Portraying achievement as an African-American educational value;
 - Highlighting same-race academic high achievers in history;
 - Leveraging positive racial history for academic motivation and empowerment;
 - Having conversations and using materials on positive and resilient racial histories in the face of challenges;
 - Teaching strategies for responding to educational discrimination;
 - Encouraging children in the face of educational discrimination;
 - Framing high achievement as a way to overcome systemic oppression.

[“African-American Parents’ Educational Involvement in Urban Schools: Contextualized Strategies for Student Success in Adolescence”](#) by James Huguley, Lori Delale-O’Connor, Ming-Te Wang, and Alyssa Parr in *Educational Researcher*, January/February 2021 (Vol. 50, #1, pp. 17-29); the authors can be reached at huguley@pitt.edu, loridoc@pitt.edu, mtwang@pitt.edu, and akp41@pitt.edu.

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6. Professional Development *for Learning*

(Originally titled “What’s the Key to Sticky PD?”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Fred Ende (Northern Westchester BOCES) says professional development will *stick* – have a lasting impact on teaching and learning – only if we “think beyond the event itself.” The goal is to ensure that each PD experience is:

- Meaningful – closely connected to the experiences and passions of participants and students;
- Engaging for participants in a way that’s aligned with successful outcomes for students;
- Participatory – there’s voice, choice, and opportunity for participants to reflect;
- Enough time for preparation, for a quality experience, and for impact to be evaluated.

For PD to have those elements, Ende suggests planning, implementing, and following up with a parallel thought process – thinking, acting, and reviewing – at every stage:

- *Planning* – Too much PD is planned at the last moment, he says. Leaders need to think well in advance about the purpose of the learning experience, involve key stakeholders, decide on key data to gather, and reflect and fine-tune as the event approaches.

- *Implementation* – Facilitators must consider the details of the learning space, how to be a leader and learner during the event, real-time data to gather, and on-the-spot adjustments that might be needed.

- *Follow-up* – “A well-facilitated professional learning session is never truly ‘done,’” says Ende. The ultimate after-event question is whether it truly improves what happens in classrooms. We must “give data its due” by asking the right questions of participants, acting on

the feedback (perhaps tweaking how future PD will be presented), and looking at what happened in classrooms as a result of the professional learning event.

[“What’s the Key to Sticky PD?”](#) by Fred Ende in *Educational Leadership*, February 2021 (Vol. 78, #5, pp. 38-43); Ende can be reached at fende@pnwboces.org.

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7. The Limits of Observation Checklists

In this article from *The Principal Center*, Justin Baeder says that classroom observation checklists can be useful if the item is amenable to a binary True/False rating. Some samples:

- The teacher takes attendance.
- Classroom rules are posted.
- The lesson objective is written on the board.
- All students are able to see the screen or board.
- The teacher is using the assigned curriculum.

Getting feedback on things like this can help teachers remember something they might forget, and can generate data on building-wide issues.

The limitation with checklists, says Baeder, is that “with binary expectations, *quality doesn’t matter*. As long as the teacher meets the literal expectation, there’s no reason to talk about *how well* or *how poorly*.”

Principals may want to visit classrooms and collect data on expectations like these, but “this barely counts as instructional leadership,” he says. “It’s exceedingly boring, and doesn’t really address teacher practice at all. Think of it as basic building management. It can catch problems, but it’s not going to result in excellence. Why? Because when it comes to professional practice, quality always matters! So a checklist won’t be of much use.”

Even a checklist with more depth is problematic – for example, these look-fors on the important issue of high expectations for student learning:

- Has high expectations linked to standard(s).
- Communicates high expectations to students.
- Has high expectations for ALL students.
- Expectations are rigorous.
- Big projects/units are broken into milestones.
- Scaffolding is provided to help students reach high expectations.

The problem with checking boxes on a list like this is that on each item, quality matters, and the distinction between poor and excellent performance is the key. Each item is “nuanced, and frankly, not very observable,” says Baeder, especially not in a short classroom visit, where the principal sees only the tip of the iceberg.

“Teaching practice is deep and complex,” he says. To do justice to it, principals need frequent classroom visits, face-to-face conversations, and an instructional framework or rubric that gives teachers a “roadmap for their growth” – whereas with a checklist, “you’ve just given them more to worry about.”

[“This Barely Counts as Instructional Leadership’ – When to Use a Walkthrough Checklist”](#) by Justin Baeder in *The Principal Center*, February 22, 2021; Baeder can be reached at justin@principalcenter.com.

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8. Juggling the Urgent and the Important

“The busier you feel, the more likely you are to neglect important work,” says Dan Rockwell in this *Leadership Freak* article. “Leaders who do important things end up doing fewer urgent things. For example, if you do the important work of training, you deal with fewer emergencies.”

The problem is that urgent matters feel *urgent* and important matters rarely demand immediate attention. As a result, the urgent gets done and the important is often put off. One more thing: busy leaders tend to do the urgent themselves rather than building someone else’s capacity to do it, leaving the boss more time for what’s really important. Rockwell reminds us of Stephen Covey’s well-known graphic:

Quadrant 1: Important and urgent – These need to be **done**.

- Pressing deadlines
- Requests from key stakeholder
- Answering “important” questions
- Crisis situations

Quadrant 2: Important but not urgent – These need to be **scheduled**.

- Planning and strategizing
- Relationship building
- Coaching and training others
- Personal professional reading and development
- Rest and recreation, exercise, medical checkups

Quadrant 3: Urgent but not important – These need to be **delegated**.

- Disruptions, answering questions
- Recurring issues that others should handle
- Some meetings
- Some e-mails
- Scheduling
- Decisions that should be pressed down the chain of command

Quadrant 4: Neither urgent nor important – These need to be **deleted**.

- Surfing the Internet
- Office drama
- Getting unnecessary e-mail CCs

[“The Urgency Illusion: Are You Running Around with Your Hair on Fire? Here’s Why!”](#) by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, February 16, 2021; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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9. Short Item:

The Full Story of Rosa Parks – In this *New York Times* article, Jeanne Theoharis tells the deeper story behind the myth: “A simple seamstress changes the course of history with a single act, decent people did the right thing, and the nation inexorably moved toward justice.” The article is drawn from Theoharis’s book, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Beacon Press, 2021).

[“Rosa Parks’s Real Story”](#) by Jeanne Theoharis in *The New York Times*, February 7, 2021
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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 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 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
Urban Education