Marshall Memo 887

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
May 17, 2021

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Because I was wrestling with so much, I immediately thought, 'I am the dumbest person here, so I'm going to shut up, observe, and listen.'"

A college student who was the first in her immediate family to attend college, quoted by Ian Wilhelm in the editor's note, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 14, 2021

"For a long time, we have expected teachers to handle the mental health issues of students in their class in addition to teaching… At the most basic level, the best teacher in the world cannot effectively reach a student who is having a mental health crisis."

Sarah Broome in "How Schools Can Fund and Implement Strong Mental Health Supports After the Pandemic" at The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, May 6, 2021

"A letter grade will never help a student grow the way specific, timely feedback will."

Jennifer Gonzalez (see item #1)

"Making participation an ungraded classroom norm might be one of the most inclusive practices we could undertake as teachers. It can help students find their lost voices, empower those who feel deprived of agency in other parts of their lives, and prevent discussions from being dominated by students who talk over their peers and crowd out other voices."

James Lang (see item #5)

"Practitioners solve problems, while researchers answer questions. Further, the problems practitioners solve are thorny and complex, often rooted in specific educational, historical, cultural, and social dynamics, and rarely ones that a single piece of research will reveal how to

solve. Meanwhile, researchers structure their work to answer specific questions – the simpler and narrower, the better."

Nora Gordon and Carrie Conaway in "Asking the Right Research Questions" in *Educational Leadership*, May 2021 (Vol. 78, #8, pp. 38-43)

---

1. Jennifer Gonzalez on Revitalizing Classrooms After the Pandemic

"As humans, we're wired to go for the easy button," says Jennifer Gonzalez in this *Cult of Pedagogy* article. At home it might be eating fast food and watching Netflix rather than cooking a nutritious meal and reading a book. In classrooms, it might be using multiple-choice tests or only getting to know the students who demand the most attention. As in-person schooling resumes, there's an understandable desire to return to normal. "But normal didn't work for a lot of kids," says Gonzalez. "It also didn't work for a lot of teachers. Too many systems and structures were set up for automation, to make things as efficient and convenient as possible for the people in charge."

As schools reopen, she suggests that we resolve, "No more easy button." That doesn't mean putting in more hours – just using them *differently*. Here are her ideas:

Lesson Design:

- Fewer "busysheets" and more activities that take less time but are "densely packed with learning."
- More active, hands-on, project-based learning, and venturing out of the classroom more frequently.
- Increasing the amount of collaboration among students, and teaching the important life skills of working harmoniously and productively with others.
- More pre-recorded videos that students watch on their own time (as many times as necessary), freeing up class time for more interactive learning.

Assessment:

- More feedback, fewer grades – "A letter grade will never help a student grow the way specific, timely feedback will," says Gonzalez.
- Multiple opportunities to improve through an iterative, mastery-based process that allows students to re-do work and gradually hone their products.
- Flexible deadlines – "We can carry the grace we gave each other during the pandemic into the next phase," she says, "setting up assignments so that they have more fluid deadlines or, if the assignments are larger, incremental check-ins so that we know

students are making progress and can provide feedback and troubleshooting to keep them going."

- A new kind of test – With remote learning, students discovered that it was much easier to "cheat." Rather than returning to cheating detection, what about open-book, open-note, open-resource assessments that require a real demonstration of understanding?

Inclusivity:

- Universally designed learning experiences – This means teachers presenting material in written, video, and audio formats and allowing students to demonstrate learning in different ways.
- Introvert-friendly options for participation – Remote learning revealed new ways for quieter students to participate; we can carry those practices forward, giving those students greater voice in the classroom.
- Remote and hybrid pathways – Even when schools are fully back to normal, there should be options for certain students to participate from home.
- More-representative classroom materials – Students should see their culture, history, and circumstances in all parts of the curriculum.

Relationships:

- Building connections – It's been harder to get to know kids teaching through the Zoom keyhole, says Gonzalez; "As we regain the privilege of being in the same room together, let's not waste it."
- More restorative practices – Done right, dealing with disciplinary infractions this way deals with root causes and gets better results.
- More anti-bias work on ourselves – "The starting point for improving relationships with all students and creating an environment in our schools that feels safe and welcoming for everyone," says Gonzalez, "is to study our own biases." She cites a number of resources (see the link below).
- More fun – Make time for joy and laughter, every day.

"No More Easy Button: A Suggested Approach to Post-Pandemic Teaching" by Jennifer Gonzalez in *Cult of Pedagogy*, May 16, 2021

Back to page one

2. Douglas Reeves on What Research Really Says

(Originally titled "What Is Research, Anyway?")

"In schools, a lot of what passes as 'research' really isn't," says author/consultant Douglas Reeves in this article in *Educational Leadership*. "When someone claims they have looked at the research, they might mean anything from a comprehensive literature review to scanning a few posts on Facebook or similar sources." Reeves describes five ways that people might claim a school practice is sound, only two of which hold water:

• *I believe it.* Some educators have strong views on the value of corporal punishment, or using grades to shame students into better performance, or teachers' right to close their

classroom doors and work in isolation. Even though numerous studies have shown that each of these practices is ineffective, that doesn't stop people from sticking to them.

• *It works for me.* Good teaching might be taking place – or it might be confirmation bias. The fact that a class is being polite and compliant during a 30-minute teacher lecture doesn't necessarily mean learning is taking place.

• *The whole third-grade team agrees.* There might be a good practice here, or it might be groupthink. "Some of the greatest gains I've seen in student achievement," says Reeves, "happened not when a department was in agreement on practices to use, but when a few brave teachers broke out of the mold and tried something new."

• *We used action research.* When several teachers identify a common learning problem, try the same intervention, and get positive results, that's really informative, says Reeves. He likes the "science fair" approach, where teachers display these three phases on cardboard trifolds and discuss results with peers and school leaders. Of course, things don't always work out so neatly. "The acid test of any research," he says, "is whether we can find, and are open to, data that contradict our expectations."

• *The preponderance of the evidence shows it works.* "Every research method has strengths and weaknesses," says Reeves, and maddeningly, some findings are contradictory. But when different studies, using different methods, converge on the same conclusion (for example, the key role of teacher efficacy in student achievement), we can be confident it's true.

"What Is Research, Anyway?" by Douglas Reeves in *Educational Leadership*, May 2021 (Vol. 78, #8, pp 50-52); Reeves can be reached at douglas.reeves@creativeleadership.net.

Back to page one

3. Figuring Out an Integrated Approach to Literacy Instruction

(Originally titled "The Sciences of Reading Instruction")

"When it comes to reading instruction, an 'all or nothing' approach is actually unscientific," says Rachael Gabriel (University of Connecticut) in this article in *Educational Leadership*. Seeking a middle ground, Gabriel suggests these non-negotiables for effective reading instruction:

- Students get developmentally appropriate, explicit instruction in every strand: letter patterns, vocabulary, usage, and comprehension.
- There's clear modeling, plenty of practice, and specific feedback.
- Students do lots of reading and writing.
- There's code-focused (phonics) instruction: letter sounds, patterns, and word structures.
- There's meaning-focused instruction: vocabulary, text structure, discourse, genre, and communication patterns.
- Most important, there's an effective *integration* of code-focused and meaning-focused instruction.

The reading wars between phonics and meaning have been going on for decades, says Gabriel; the pendulum swings back and forth. In the latest iteration, "science of reading" phonics

proponents say the disappointing achievement of U.S. students is totally explained by inadequate phonics instruction.

But it's not that simple. The 2019 NAEP results showed that 66 percent of fourth graders were reading at the "basic" level – accurate word recognition and literal comprehension – and only 35 percent were "proficient" or "advanced" – skilled at inference, judgment, and constructing an argument about ideas in a text. "This pattern," says Gabriel, "suggests that meaning-focused comprehension instruction is neither absent nor adequate."

In her graduate literacy education classes, Gabriel uses a biological analogy to describe the mindsets of different literacy educators. She likens phonics proponents to *soil scientists* because they talk about the key elements that nurture healthy growth. "Using my tree metaphor," she says, "building basic skills is like focusing on the right nutrients and balance within the soil to support the proliferation of skills (roots) that can fuel initial growth…" Educators who focus on meaning and comprehension are like *botanists*, interested in how the tree is nurtured as it grows. Gabriel says this includes "sunlight (language exposure) and water (compelling reasons for reading and exposure to a wide range of text types)." As a tree grows, it sprouts branches and leaves that "provide increased surface area for capturing nutrients from the environment, until the *leaves* become the main source of nutrients for the tree and its roots."

Like trees, no two students are the same, says Gabriel, so in reading instruction "there's a time for a focus on the 'soil' and a time to focus on nutrients in the environment (texts, talk, and teaching that's explicitly about meaning making). A scientific approach to teaching reading would acknowledge that, like a sapling, every student has within them the natural ability to develop literacy. It would acknowledge that each unique student will require different kinds and degrees of support for component skills and the many processes of literacy… It's more appropriate to talk about the *sciences* of reading. A myopic focus on just one field leads to deficiencies in one area or another – for teachers and students."

This raises the issue of teachers' mastery of such a broad repertoire. Some are stronger at phonics, others at meaning – and there's a demographic pattern. The code-focused approach, says Gabriel, has been most common in under-resourced schools dealing with a revolving door of inexperienced teachers who can be quickly trained in a scripted literacy program. The meaning-focused, unscripted approach is more common "in better-resourced schools with experienced teachers who were trusted to make their own instructional decisions."

Lack of good phonics instruction "is surely a social justice issue," says Gabriel. A foundation in those skills is essential to achievement in the upper grades. "Yet teaching students to recognize words without also teaching them to integrate, interpret, apply, judge, critique, and construct arguments about or with them is an example of systematic oppression. If literacy is to liberate, its components must fully integrate."

How can a school know if it's providing enough phonics? Gabriel suggests the following criteria:

- At the end of first grade, 80 percent of all students, including those getting special education, can read simple texts independently.

- At the end of third grade, 80 percent of all students can read complex texts with understanding.
- Those who require additional support show progress with interventions lasting 3-4 months.
- If more than 20 percent of students need interventions, and for most students the interventions take longer than a few months, the phonics program has missed the mark.

"The Sciences of Reading Instruction" by Rachael Gabriel in *Educational Leadership*, May 2021 (Vol. 78, #8, pp. 58-64); Gabriel can be reached at rachael.gabriel@uconn.edu.

Back to page one

4. An Analysis of Success for All

In this *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* article, Alan Cheung and Tengteng Zhuang (Chinese University of Hong Kong), Chen Xie (East China Normal University), and Amanda Neitzel and the late Robert Slavin (Johns Hopkins University) report on their synthesis of research on Success for All, an elementary literacy program. Analyzing 17 studies that met rigorous standards, the researchers concluded that SFA had a mean effect size of +0.24, with the most positive impact on students with low achievement.

Developed at Johns Hopkins University in collaboration with the Baltimore City Schools and first implemented in 1987, Success for All has been modified over time and now has these key components. (There are about 500 schools in the U.S. using the full program, another 500 using some of the components.)

- All students in grades 1-5 have a daily 90-minute literacy period.
- For most of the school day, students are taught in heterogeneous homerooms.
- For the literacy block, students in grades 1-5 are regrouped by reading level (for example, a grade 3/first semester group might have above-level second graders, on-level third graders, and below-level fourth graders).
- Literacy classes are smaller than homerooms because tutors, librarians, and other certified staff are all teaching reading in this block.
- Students are frequently assessed and may be reassigned so that the reading level of each group remains similar.
- During the literacy block, teachers use whole-class instruction and SFA curriculum materials.
- Students who are not succeeding get small-group or individual tutoring.
- Primary-grade students (particularly first graders) may have a daily, 30-minute computer-assisted tutoring class, usually in groups of four, to help them keep up.
- When students are reading at the 2-1 level, they no longer have tutoring.
- Grade 3-5 classes focus on cooperative learning, comprehension, metacognitive skills, and writing.
- According to need, students get additional support with attendance, social-emotional development, and parent involvement.

- Each SFA school has a full-time facilitator who manages professional development and in-class coaching for teachers, parent involvement, and supportive services.
- SFA schools have a half-day prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten classes focusing on pre-reading skills, phonemic awareness, art, hands-on experiences, and social-emotional development.

Success for All's theory of action is that these components will produce reading success in grades K-2, and continuing the supports will produce success in grades 3-5, building a foundation that will ensure success in subsequent grades.

"Beyond the program itself," the authors conclude, "the research on Success for All, as applied to low-achieving students, illustrates that the educational problems of low-achieving students are fundamentally solvable. Perhaps someday there will be many approaches like Success for All, each of which is capable of improving student achievement on a substantial scale. Research on Success for All suggests that disadvantaged students and struggling readers could be learning to read at significantly higher levels than they do today, and that substantial improvement can be brought about at scale."

"Success for All: A Quantitative Synthesis of U.S. Evaluations" by Alan Cheung, Chen Xie, Tengteng Zhuang, Amanda Neitzel, and Robert Slavin in *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, January-March 2021 (Vol. 14, #1, pp. 90-115); Xie can be reached at delxie1985@163.com, Neitzel at ainns1@jhu.edu.

Back to page one

5. Should Class Participation Be Graded?

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, James Lang (Assumption College) says that as a new English professor, he tried to keep track of each student's class participation, using the data to boost a grade (for example, a B to a B+) but not to penalize students. After more than a decade, Lang soured on this system. For one thing, he was uncomfortable with a few voluble, self-confident students dominating discussions. More important, he realized that grading class participation is subject to all kinds of biases. There's a tendency to give more points to students who seem sympatico and whose opinions the instructor agrees with – or docking a student who resembles someone the instructor dislikes.

There's also a lot of variation in the quality of student input during discussions. "How do I measure the difference between an introvert who makes one comment that changes the way we all think of the material," asks Lang, "and an extrovert who makes 10 comments that are all the equivalent of 'I agree with that'?" Finally, there's the impossible challenge of accurately recording the quantity and quality of students' participation while actively conducting a class.

While those are good reasons for not grading class participation, Lang says that students' level of involvement in class discussions is an important factor in learning, because: (a) students who participate are active rather than passive; (b) they're more likely to get feedback on their thinking; and (c) they have opportunities to practice speaking and thinking

on their feet. So how can instructors increase participation without using an incentive-based grading system? Here's the approach Lang developed:

• He makes clear up front that participation is a key component in the course and every student will be active – in small groups, in whole-class discussions, and in written work. "You can't be a full member of our community without participating in class," he says.

• Lang frequently gets students working in pairs or small groups – for example, annotating a poem or evaluating the most important qualities in a piece of writing. "Over the course of a semester," he says, "all students will have participated in enough of these groups that they will have spoken multiple times in the classroom."

• In whole-class discussions, Lang cold-calls students ("invitational participation," he calls it). "I'm not challenging them to a duel," he says. "I'm inviting them to share their views because I value what they think." Knowing that being called on in class is scary for some students, Lang builds in three modifications:

- Before every whole-class discussion, students talk in groups about the focus question, or write a one-paragraph response.
- Lang works hard to create a safe and inclusive environment, and expresses gratitude at what students have said, sometimes after class or in written comments.
- When he calls on a student, he frames it as an invitation, for example, "Kiara, you've been quiet for a while, but you look thoughtful. Do you have something you want to add, or do you want to just keep thinking?" or "David, I remember you wrote something about this in your essay – do you want to throw that into the mix now?"
- Students can pass without being docked, and Lang respects accommodations that specify certain students should not be cold-called.

"Making participation an ungraded classroom norm might be one of the most inclusive practices we could undertake as teachers," Lang concludes. "It can help students find their lost voices, empower those who feel deprived of agency in other parts of their lives, and prevent discussions from being dominated by students who talk over their peers and crowd out other voices."

"Stop Grading Class Participation" by James Lang in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 14, 2021 (Vol. 67, #18, pp. 48-49); Lang can be reached at lang@assumption.edu.

Back to page one

6. Project-Based Learning in Action

In this article in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Candace Mulcahy and Jeanette Wertz (Binghamton University) describe a 3-4-week project-based learning unit – the Car Project – designed in collaboration with a high-school business math teacher. With students' interest piqued by a tour of an automobile dealership, the teacher rolled out the unit, containing all the key elements of good project-based learning:

• *Sustained inquiry* – The teacher's original 2-3-day project was expanded into a 3-5-week unit to allow sufficient time for in-depth research, collaboration, and development.

• *A challenging problem or question* – Here were the challenges students were

presented: What do you need to know to buy a car? How do you balance wants and needs? How much money do you need to buy a car? How much money do you need to budget to keep your car running? What lifestyle choices do you need to consider when you own a car?

• *Key skills, knowledge, and understandings* – Students had to master a wide range: budgeting and calculating interest, total cost, and loan terms; thinking through lifestyle choices; reading, interpreting, and constructing tables; analyzing data; completing applications; public speaking; persuasive essay writing and presentation; collaboration; critical thinking; research; data collection; organization; making decisions.

• *Authentically constructing knowledge and collaborating with peers* – Students conducted a group activity on thinking through a dream car versus a realistic choice, and created an elevator speech on attaining a dream car.

• *Student voice and choice* – Students did research on dream car versus realistic car choices and took roles in small-group activities, field trips, and gallery walks.

• *Scaffolding* – The teacher supported students' research and discussions with mini-lessons on calculating loans, filling out applications, constructing an expense report, and interpreting graphs and tables. This was especially helpful for students with disabilities.

• *Critique, revision, and reflection* – Prior to their final presentations, students worked with peers to review, discuss, and get feedback so what they presented met the criteria.

• *A public product* – Students answered the initial essential and target questions in presentations on car-buying considerations and in elevator speeches on getting their dream car. These were assessed on a rubric and through peer evaluations.

"Using Project-Based Learning to Build College and Career Readiness Among Diverse Learners" by Candace Mulcahy and Jeanette Wertz in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, May-June 2021 (Vol. 53, #5, pp. 341-349); Mulcahy can be reached at cmulcahy@binghamton.edu.

Back to page one

7. A Study of Homophobic Bullying in a Middle School

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Salvatore Ioverno (Ghent University, Belgium) and Dawn DeLay, Carol Lynn Martin, and Laura Hanish (Arizona State University) report on their study of homophobic bullying among a diverse group of sixth graders at a school in the southeastern U.S. Here's are their major takeaways:

- Boys who emphasize their masculinity are more likely to harass gender-nonconforming peers.
- These boys seem to have a goal of distancing themselves from gender-nonconforming behaviors.
- Boys and girls who are themselves targets of homophobic name-calling are more likely to harass gender-nonconforming peers.
- Being targeted could trigger adolescents' desire to prove their conformity to heterosexual gender norms by bullying gender-nonconforming peers.

The authors believe their findings could be useful in school-based anti-bullying efforts, giving students greater insight into the dynamics of gender conformity, social hierarchies, and homophobic name-calling.

"Who Engages in Gender Bullying? The Role of Homophobic Name-Calling, Gender Pressure, and Gender Conformity" by Salvatore Ioverno, Dawn DeLay, Carol Lynn Martin, and Laura Hanish in *Educational Researcher*, May 2021 (Vol. 50, #4, pp. 215-224); Ioverno can be reached at salvatore.ioverno@ugent.be, Delay at Dawn.Delay@asu.edu.

Back to page one

8. Better Meetings 101

In this *Leadership Freak* article, Dan Rockwell suggests seven ways to make meetings more productive:

- If you're a talker, talk less.
- If you seldom talk, contribute more.
- Look at people when they talk; take notes.
- Stay on topic!
- Make a diagram of the people around the table if some of them are unfamiliar to you and use their names.
- Focus on getting things done.
- Clarify responsibilities.

And at the end of meetings you run, ask, "What's one thing we could do to make our next meeting more efficient?"

"How to Not Be a Complete Idiot in Your Next Meeting" by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, May 13, 2021; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

Back to page one

9. Books to Read with *WandaVision*

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Indiana librarian Abby Johnson recommends books students might read if they're enjoying the Disney+ feature *WandaVision*:

- *Amari and the Night Brothers* by B.B. Alston, grade 3-7
- *We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart, grade 7 and up
- *These Witches Don't Burn* by Isabel Sterling, grade 8-11
- *Feed* by M.T. Anderson, grade 8 and up

"Read-Alikes" by Abby Johnson in *School Library Journal*, May 2021 (Vol. 67, #5, p. 18)

Back to page one

10. Short Item:

a. Audiobooks on Asian-American Topics – This *School Library Journal* feature by Terry Hong lists recent middle-grade, YA, and adult crossover audiobooks on the AAIP experience. (This entire issue of *School Library Journal* is free, after registration.)

"Asian-American: OwnVoices" by Terry Hong in *School Library Journal*, May 2021 (Vol. 67, #5, p. 125-278)

Back to page one

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 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.

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for a year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and how to pay by check, credit card, or purchase order.

Website:

If you go to http://www.marshallmemo.com you will find detailed information on:

- How to subscribe or renew
- A detailed rationale for the Marshall Memo
- Publications (with a count of articles from each)
- Article selection criteria
- Topics (with a running count of articles)
- Headlines for all issues
- Reader opinions
- About Kim Marshall (bio, writings, consulting)
- A free sample issue

Subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in Word and PDF)
- All back issues (Word and PDF) and podcasts
- An easily searchable archive of all articles so far
- The "classic" articles from all 16+ years

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