Marshall Memo 988

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
May 29, 2023

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Quotes of the Week

"Decoding is the on-ramp for word recognition."
Reid Lyon (see item #2)

"There is decades of evidence that boys, white students, and high attainers talk more in the classroom. If we're not actively working against that to make classroom participation fairer, we're accepting it instead."
Harry Fletcher-Wood (see item #3)

"The dirty little secret of being a department chair is that no one tells you what to do or, conversely, what *not* to do,"
Lisa Jasinski (see item #7)

"Today, after a pandemic and years of assaults on the dignity of the teaching profession, unfilled absences are a daily reality in many schools."
Justin Baeder in "Mental Health Days for Educators," *Principal Center*, May 22, 2023

"A movie lets you watch; a book invites you in. A much-loved one might even fall open to your favorite page. A book will find you when you need it most and show you what you want to know at the exact pace you're able to absorb the words. It has a strong spine and a sturdy binding, just like Margaret herself."
Elizabeth Egan in "We Are All Margarets" in *The New York Times*, May 2, 2023

"Historians politely remind nation to check what's happened in the past before making any big decisions."
A satirical headline from *The Onion* (quoted in item #4)

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1. The Wisdom of Tina Turner

Here are a few sayings from the Queen of Rock ’n Roll, who died last week at 83:

“I didn’t have anybody, really, no foundation in life, so I had to make my own way. Always, from the start. I had to go out in the world and become strong, to discover my mission in life.”

“You take your problems to a god, but what you really need is for the god to take you to the inside of you.”

“I believe that if you’ll just stand up and go, life will open up for you.”

“I’m not wise, but the beginning of wisdom is there. It’s like relaxing into – and an acceptance of – things.”

“I regret not having had more time with my kids when they were growing up.”

“There are certain birthdays that make you revalue your life.”

“My legacy is that I stayed on course… from the beginning to the end, because I believed in something inside of me.”

“Happiness is the greatest beauty secret.”

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2. Ten Keys to Good Early Literacy Instruction

In this article in *Reading Universe*, literacy expert Reid Lyon summarizes current research from neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, speech pathology, and other fields on teaching children to read. “The research behind the maxims,” says Lyon, “addresses a wide range of individual differences in reading development, reading difficulties, and reading instruction… The overarching message is that learning to read is a complex process involving multiple abilities, skills, and knowledge. Each is essential but none is sufficient on its own.” Here are Lyon’s precepts:

• Almost all children learn to speak naturally; reading and writing, on the other hand, must be systematically taught.

• Literacy begins at birth and is rooted in early social interactions and experiences including regular exposure to spoken language and print.

• Decoding, which depends on a child's ability to identify individual speech sounds, is the on-ramp for word recognition. Decoding should be taught until children can accurately and independently read new words.

• Reading fluency both requires and supports comprehension. Fluent readers read with expression, and at an appropriate rate for their age, because they can instantly and accurately recognize most words in a text.

• Comprehension is the goal of reading and draws on multiple skills and strengths, including a solid foundation of vocabulary and background knowledge.

• There isn't a single correct way to teach children to read. Data from each child should be used to differentiate instruction.

• Direct, systematic instruction helps students develop the skills they need to become strong readers. Guessing words is chancy and inefficient.

• English learners often need extra support to bolster their oral language as they learn to read and write in a new language.

• We need to honor home dialects that differ from "standard" English and give those students the support they need to become bidialectical.

• To grow into proficient readers and writers, students need to integrate many different skills over years of literacy experiences inside and outside of school.

"Ten Maxims: What We've Learned So Far About How Children Learn to Read" by Reid Lyon in *Reading Universe*, May 2023

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3. Time-Honored but Suboptimal Ways to Check for Understanding

In this *Improving Teaching* article, U.K. educator Harry Fletcher-Wood lists five less-than-effective ways to ask students to retrieve something they've been taught and should remember:

• *Asking for hands up* – for example, *Who can remember the name for the part of the ear that vibrates when it gets hit by a soundwave?* This way of calling on students is a deeply ingrained feature of classroom teaching, says Fletcher-Wood, but it's problematic for several reasons:

- Asking for volunteers means relying on the most confident and interested students, which means those who are already proficient are more engaged and learn more.
- Students who are less confident and motivated know they won't be called on, don't need to think about the response, and are less intellectually engaged.
- This creates a two-tier classroom: those who are participating directly and those who aren't.
- If no students raise their hands, the teacher usually says the answer, meaning there's no retrieval effect in students' brains.

A better option, says Fletcher-Wood, is saying, *Can we all think back… ,* pausing, then*, I'm going to call on someone to tell me…*, pausing, and cold calling a student. This gets everyone thinking when a question is asked and increases the amount of mental sweat classwide.

• *Mostly calling on boys* – "There is decades of evidence that boys, white students, and high attainers talk more in the classroom," says Fletcher-Wood. "If we're not actively working against that to make classroom participation fairer, we're accepting it instead." Boys are especially likely to be called on right after another student has given an incorrect answer. A better option is using popsicle sticks or another random-selection method, or preselecting students to answer prepared questions, striving for equity.

• *Immediately moving on to another student* – When students give wrong answers or say they don't know, teachers often say, *Can anyone help Carlos?* or *Carlos, would you like to phone a friend?* or *Okay, let's ask Mina instead.* The teacher wants to get the class to the right answer, says Fletcher-Wood, while minimizing embarrassment for the student who got it wrong. But quickly moving on doesn't push that student to think harder or improve on the initial answer, and it sets a norm that giving half-baked answers or opting out is okay. A better approach is pushing the student or offering a hint: *What could it be, Carlos? What can you remember about this question? The part of the ear that vibrates shares its name with a musical instrument…*

• *Rounding up a wrong answer to a correct one* – The teacher might say, *Good answer, can anyone add to that…* or *That's nearly right, we just need to also mention…* or *So, if we stick that together with what you said, we've got the right answer*. With all these responses, says Fletcher-Wood, the teacher is trying to be nice, conveying that students' imperfect or incomplete answers are good enough. "There's a tension between protecting students' egos and getting to the right answer," he says. "But making students feel good about themselves is only part of a teacher's job. And we can make them feel good about themselves far better if we do so based on students' genuine achievement."

Some better options that protect egos while being clear about a first-rate answer – and praising only truly effective responses: *That's not quite right. I'm sure you can do it, have another think…* or *Thanks, Mina, that's helpful; can you add to that, mentioning…* and finally, *Good answer, well done!*

• *Filling the awkward silence* – Here's the transcript of a teacher in a classroom simulation: *What is the name for the part of the ear that vibrates when it gets hit by a soundwave?* [no response] *So I'm looking for the part of the ear – it's a part of the ear – that vibrates when it gets hit by a soundwave. A part of the ear. What do you think? Does anyone want to have a go? I'll call on… Jayla*. The teacher was trying to be helpful, says Fletcher-Wood, but was in fact talking too much. "If the goal is to promote retrieval, to promote individual, effortful thinking, we need to let students actually do that thinking." A better option is to say the question clearly and slowly the first time, pause for three seconds (which can seem like an eternity), then repeat the question if necessary, and then cold-call a student to respond, repeating the question if they don't understand.

"This is hard," Fletcher-Wood concludes. It goes against teachers' innate desire to avoid making students feel bad – a decent impulse reinforced throughout teachers' apprenticeship as K-12 students, because most teachers ask for hands up, call more on boys, quickly move on when a student falters, settle for inadequate responses, and fill silences to avoid discomfort and social awkwardness. "A teacher who makes their children feel bad will struggle to teach them anything," he says. "But the job of a teacher is to push students beyond what they think they can do… To teach effectively we may have to suppress our instinctive reactions, and our preferences."

"Questioning for Retrieval: Five Mistakes to Avoid" by Harry Fletcher-Wood in *Improving Teaching*, April 23, 2023

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4. Four Questions to Ask in History and Civics Classes

In this *4QM Teaching* article, teacher/author Jonathan Bassett says civics education is "of crucial importance to a functioning democracy." The best way to provide students with the information and practice they need to fulfill their responsibilities as citizens in a democracy, he believes, is building curriculum units around four questions:

• *What happened?* The story always comes first, says Bassett. In civics, that means learning some key events about past human societies. In the words of a satirical article from *The Onion*, "Historians politely remind nation to check what's happened in the past before making any big decisions."

• *What were they thinking?* Students need to develop the skill of "historical empathy," says Bassett, "understanding the world of historical actors as they themselves did, especially when their understanding seems different from our own." With civics education, this skill is vital to understanding the thinking of fellow citizens who think very differently from us.

• *Why then and there?* Looking at historical events, exploring this question makes students "less likely to ascribe historical outcomes solely to the virtues and vices of the individual people involved in the story," says Bassett, "and more likely to consider the context within which those people operated." In civics education, this helps students focus on the conditions that support a particular way of thinking versus the personal qualities of those with a different point of view.

• *What do we think about that?* In a history unit, students discuss whether key figures made the right decisions, did the right thing, were admirable or contemptible – and why we think so. "The question is phrased as 'we' not because we expect our students to arrive at consensus," says Bassett, "but because the question is debated and discussed in community… This is, obviously, good practice for present-day disagreements about politics and policy."

"Giving students regular practice in historical knowledge, empathy, understanding of contexts, and thoughtful judgment," Bassett concludes, "is actually great practice for present-day civics."

“Civic Education and 4QM” by Jonathan Bassett in *4QM Teaching*, May 24, 2023; Bassett can be reached at jabassett@gmail.com; his book (with Gary Shiffman) on this approach to teaching history is *From Story to Judgment* (John Catt, 2021)

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5. These Kids Speak English Now, So What’s the Problem?

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez interviews Tan Huynh and Beth Skelton on the strategies they recommend to support English learners whose English is comfortable and fluent in social situations but who aren’t succeeding academically. “With this deficit label,” say Gonzalez, Huynh, and Skelton, “many students are subjected to more and more pullout coursework to improve their English, which means missing out on electives, extracurriculars, and advanced courses.”

What’s missing for these students is *academic language* in science, social studies, math, and other content areas. “To succeed in all subjects,” says Gonzalez, “students need additional scaffolding in understanding the unique vocabulary, phrasing, and conventions of those disciplines. When teachers intentionally design instruction and assessments with academic language supports in place, they unlock those worlds for students and give them the tools they need to thrive.” Huynh and Skelton have these specific suggestions for content teachers:

• *Work backwards from the summative assessment*. Create the test that will measure what students should know and be able to do at the end of a curriculum unit and then identify the academic language necessary for success – for example, in a science test, *hypothesize, concentration of oxygen, glass cylinder*. Then provide scaffolds to help all students (not just ELs) master those words – perhaps with synonyms, word banks, sentence starters, breaking up multi-part concepts, images, and sequenced visual frameworks.

• *Use exit tickets and other checks for understanding that insist on academic language*. Gonzalez, Huynh, and Skelton give the example of a teacher who was pleased when a student answered the question, *Explain what you learned about finding the focal length* by saying, *It gets bigger when it gets closer*. Nudged to think at a more rigorous level, the teacher realized that the prompt should be, *Explain what you learned about finding the focal length using precise vocabulary from the word bank*, and students’ answers should include the terms *focal point* and *convex lens*.

• *Use explicit modeling to show students how to use unfamiliar vocabulary correctly*. “When it comes time to teach the lessons themselves,” say Gonzalez, Huynh, and Skelton, “use the daily objective as a guide to ensure that students understand the language that is being used to teach them – in other words, that the *input* is comprehensible to them – and that the students’ output is framed in the language of the field being taught.”

Huynh sums up: “Instead of lowering expectations for these students, we’re saying, we’re going to keep expectations high, but we’re going to give you different paths to get to that mountaintop.”

“Supporting Intermediate English Learners in Every Subject” by Jennifer Gonzalez, Tan Huynh, and Beth Skelton in *Cult of Pedagogy*, May 21, 2023; Huynh’s and Skelton’s book is *Long-Term Success for Experienced Multilinguals* (Corwin, 2023)

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6. Adjusting to the Brave New World of ChatGPT

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Owen Kichizo Terry (an undergraduate at Columbia University) says that with the advent of large language models, schools’ academic integrity policies have become “laughably naïve.” It’s now possible, he says, for students to use artificial intelligence “to do the lion’s share of the thinking while still submitting work that looks like your own.”

Terry describes how he and students he knows are using ChatGPT. They prompt it with the essay topic (for example, a close reading of *The Iliad*), ask for a central claim and an outline to argue the claim, and presto! He’s got what he needs to defend the claim. “As any former student knows,” he says, “one of the main challenges of writing an essay is just thinking through the subject matter and coming up with a strong, debatable claim. With one snap of the fingers and almost zero brain activity, I suddenly have one.” Editing the bot’s output to make it sound more like he wrote it is not a heavy lift.

The implication: traditional take-home essays are “essentially useless,” says Terry. In this new environment, it is important for students to become proficient at using artificial intelligence to generate ideas and perform the tasks it does well. But to master the essential skills of critical thinking and writing, he believes instructors need to shift to “AI-proof assignments like oral exams, in-class writing, or some new style of schoolwork better suited to the world of artificial intelligence.” Right now, most teachers haven’t made the adjustment: they’re assigning traditional take-home essays, they think they can detect AI-assisted cheating, and they haven’t found how to get students doing the intellectual heavy lifting they must do to graduate as well-educated human beings.

“I’m a Student. We’re Already Using ChatGPT” by Owen Kichizo Terry in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 26, 2023 (Vol. 69, #19, pp. 38-39)

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7. Can Department Heads Be More Than Bureaucrats?

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Lisa Jasinski (University of Texas/San Antonio) describes the role of department heads at the university level (how many of these apply in secondary schools?):

- The unglamorous faculty job almost nobody wants;
- A role for which there’s scant preparation;
- Little encouragement to be a leader of meaningful change;
- Inundated by e-mails and administrative demands;
- Caught between front-line instructors and senior administrators.

Yet department heads, Jasinski believes, “may be our last, best hope to improve our institutions from the inside out.” Here are her suggestions for making the position meaningful and effective:

• *Embrace your role as an academic leader*. Department heads have positional authority to influence climate, culture, and operations, says Jasinski, acting “on a lot of small things that can lead to big changes” – for example, re-writing job descriptions, leading searches and interviews, encouraging teaching innovations, providing support to novice instructors, re-energizing mid-career colleagues, and spreading good ideas.

• *Leverage the ambiguity of leading from the middle*. “The dirty little secret of being a department chair,” says Jasinski, “is that no one tells you what to do or, conversely, what *not* to do,” which opens up some interesting possibilities, including allocating funds for colleagues to travel to conferences.

• *Raise the level of professional discourse*. “To spark higher-level thinking in faculty meetings,” she says, “you need to start asking better questions and encouraging people to get out of the weeds when things get too tactical.” Colleagues will mentally check out if department gatherings are devoted to a monologue of deadlines and announcements. If administrivia is dealt with through e-mails, meetings can be devoted to discussing students’ mental-health challenges, strategies for dealing with student attendance and late work, and sharing new teaching ideas.

• *No one said to do it all yourself or all at once*. Don’t get buried in e-mail, Jasinski urges. “Start small. Win over some hearts and minds… Do your part to engage the willing, give them the resources they need, and have their backs if others challenge their right to experiment.”

• *Turn to your fellow department heads*. These colleagues may be the best people to “help you artfully maneuver the trickiest dilemmas of midlevel leadership,” says Jasinski, “such as keeping up with e-mail, dealing with a bully, or deciding whether or not to act on a personnel matter. Your fellow chairs can broaden your view and identify options you might not have considered.”

“5 Lessons for Higher Ed’s Least Powerful” by Lisa Jasinski in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 26, 2023 (Vol. 69, #19, pp. 40-41); Jasinski can be reached at lisa.jasinski@utsa.edu.

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8. A Study of the Impact of Gifted Classmates in Switzerland

In this *Journal of Human Resources* article, Simone Balestra and Aurélien Sallin (University of St. Gallen) and Stefan Wolter (University of Bern) report on their study of the effect that gifted students have on their non-gifted classmates in Swiss schools. In Switzerland, students identified by school psychologists as gifted (about 2 percent of the student population) are not publicly labeled and are randomly assigned to classes with other students. The researchers studied whether gifted students in secondary schools had a positive, neutral, or negative impact on the achievement and future trajectories of their classmates.

Here's what the study found by analyzing ten consecutive cohorts of eighth graders in a Swiss canton:

- Attending class with gifted students had a positive effect on achievement of other students in all subject areas.
- It also increased the likelihood of classmates choosing a selective academic track and embarking on occupations in STEM fields.
- Larger positive effects were found among non-gifted male students and high achievers.
- Male students benefited significantly more than female students in math, amplifying the gender gap in that subject by 16 percent.
- For language arts, there was no gender difference.
- Female students benefited primarily from being with gifted female classmates, who seem to have served as positive role models, counteracting gender stereotyping.
- Female students were negatively affected by being with gifted classmates with behavioral, emotional, or social problems.

"In general," conclude Balestra, Sallin, and Wolter, "we find that gifted students are influential in fostering emulation and positively impacting the academic achievement and the career choices of their peers. They are therefore fundamental forces in the classroom production function that should not be ignored in designing successful educational policies, especially when considering whether gifted students should be segregated in more 'elite' schools or pull-out programs. We also show that giftedness alone is no guarantee for positive externalities: gifted students diagnosed with socioemotional problems generate null-to-negative spillovers on their peers."

"High-Ability Influencers? The Heterogeneous Effects of Gifted Classmates" by Simone Balestra, Aurélien Sallin, and Stefan Wolter in *Journal of Human Resources*, March 2023 (Vol. 58, #2, pp. 1-51); the authors can be reached at simone.balestra@unisg.ch, aurelien.sallin@unisg.ch, and stefan.wolter@vwi.unibe.ch.

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9. Recommended Children's Books About Trading Places

In this *Edutopia* feature, author/consultant Kristin Rydholm recommends eight picture books where things get switched around (click the link below for cover images and short summaries):

- *Adurable: The Great Truck Switcheroo* by Bob Shea, illustrated by Brian Won, preschool
- *Bea and Mr. Jones* by Amy Schwartz, preschool-kindergarten
- *The Bruce Swap* by Ryan Higgins, preschool-kindergarten
- *Dog Days of School* by Kelly DiPucchio, illustrated by Brian Biggs, preschool-grade 2
- *Little Cheetah's Shadow* by Marianne Dubuc, preschool-grade 2
- *Stripes the Tiger* by Jean Leroy and Bérengère Delaporte, illustrated by Delaporte, preschool-grade 2

- *Tabitha and Fritz Trade Places* by Katie Frawley, illustrated by Laurie Stansfield, preschool-grade 2
- *Vampenguin* by Lucy Ruth Cummins, preschool-grade

"8 Picture Books About Trading Places" by Kristin Rydholm in *Edutopia*, April 11, 2023

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10. Using Children's Books to Teach About Large Numbers

In this *Edutopia* feature, Kristin Rearden and Amy Broemmel (University of Tennessee) recommend picture books that help children grapple with very large numbers (click the link below for cover images, short summaries, and teaching suggestions):

- *The Hundred Penny Box* by Sharon Bell Mathis
- *Lifetime: The Amazing Numbers in Animal Lives* by Lola Shaefer
- *Many: The Diversity of Life on Earth* by Nicola Davies
- *The Mitten* by Jan Brett
- *Great Estimations* by Bruce Goldstone
- *How Much Is a Million?* by David Schwartz, illustrated by Steven Kellogg
- *Ubiquitous: Celebrating Nature's Survivors* by Joyce Sidman
- *Earth! My First 4.54 Billion Years* by Stacy McAnulty
- *One Million Oysters on Top of the Mountain* by Alex Nogués
- *Grand Canyon* by Jason Chin

"Using Picture Books to Teach Children About Large Numbers" by Kristin Rearden and Amy Broemmel in *Edutopia*, May 11, 2023

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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 48 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
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
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
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