

# Marshall Memo 979

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education  
March 27, 2023

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## Quotes of the Week

“The inescapable truth about education in America is that there is no foreseeable scenario under which traditional public schools will not educate the majority of the nation’s future entrepreneurs, engineers, doctors, soldiers, and citizens for generations to come.”

Robert Pondiscio in [“Conservatives’ Blunder: Making Enemies of Public School Teachers”](#) in *Education Gadfly*, March 23, 2023

“Coaches are not only building principals’ technical skills; they are working actively to create *reflective* individuals who are developing as people.”

Joe Lein (see item #4)

“Avoiding slurs, calling attention to inadvertent insults, and speaking to people with dignity are essential things in any decent society. It’s polite to address people as they request, and context always matters.”

George Packer (see item #7)

“Good writing – vivid imagery, strong statements – will hurt, because it’s bound to convey painful truths... Moral language comes from the struggle of an individual mind to absorb and convey the truth as faithfully as possible.”

George Packer (*ibid.*)

“For the students we educate, it is not enough to show them the horrors of the Holocaust. We need to go further and teach them that in times of instability, Jews become the target of blame, hatred, and oppression. We need to increase awareness of the lies that people tell and of the tropes that have no basis in truth. Otherwise, schools are not doing their jobs.”

Miriam Plotinsky in [“Fighting the Rise of Antisemitism: Advice for Teachers”](#) in *Education Week*, March 15, 2023 (Vol. 42, #26, p. 20)

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## 1. The Impact of Homogeneous Grouping on Achievement and Equity

In this *Review of Educational Research* article, Éder Terrin and Moris Triventi (University of Trento, Italy) say that almost all students in industrialized nations start school in heterogeneous groups and are taught the same curriculum. But at some point, many students are sorted into different groups based on achievement, interests, and attitudes. This has a significant impact on students' school performance, educational pathways, access to higher education, and the kinds of work they do after school.

Terrin and Triventi did a meta-analysis of research on this sorting process (a.k.a. streaming, tracking, ability grouping) in secondary schools to see what studies have found about its *effectiveness* – does it produce better overall student achievement? – and its impact on *equity* – does it change the relationship between family background and students' school and life trajectories?

A number of arguments have been made for homogeneous grouping of students, including:

- Teachers can tailor their instructional strategies to students' abilities and interests.
- This specialization allows teachers to work more efficiently and effectively.
- All students can maximize their potential and learn more.
- The learning process is more effective, producing higher overall levels of student achievement.
- If the achievement of lower-group students increases more than that of their higher-group peers, inequality will decrease.
- Grouping students by their achievement, attitudes, and interests encourages students to take an educational and career pathway that suits them best – academic or vocational.
- This can lead to greater student and adult satisfaction and lower dropout rates.

Conversely, arguments have been made for heterogeneous grouping of students:

- Students tend to be sorted according to family background, with more-advantaged children in the higher-achieving groups and less-advantaged children in lower groups.
- Groups with higher-achieving students have more-rigorous instruction and curriculum than the lower groups.
- There's a peer-group effect; learning with higher-achieving students provides mutual advantages – and the opposite is true in lower-achieving groups, where lower self-esteem and negative attitudes toward schooling can create a less-favorable climate for teaching and learning.
- There's also teacher sorting, with more-experienced teachers opting to teach the higher-achieving groups and novice teachers working with the lower groups.

- There's evidence that per-pupil expenditures, the demands of the curriculum on students, and teachers' expectations differ by curriculum level, within and between schools.
- The earlier student sorting occurs, the more likely it is that decisions are influenced by cultural and other biases, consigning some students to less demanding instruction.
- Homogeneous grouping therefore intensifies the inequalities with which students enter school and unfairly skews educational and life outcomes along social-class lines.

In their meta-analysis, Terrin and Triventi examined the trade-offs between efficiency and equity – between the purported benefits of homogeneous grouping on overall student achievement and the possible negative impact on how achievement is distributed. What did this analysis reveal?

First, the impact of homogeneous grouping on student achievement “is nul” – in other words, the supposed efficiency of grouping secondary students by achievement, attitudes, and interests does not produce a higher overall level of student achievement, nor does it result in lower overall achievement. There's no measurable difference.

Second, the meta-analysis found that homogeneous grouping has a negative impact on equity. The research evidence, say Terrin and Triventi, “provides no support for the existence of an ‘equality-efficiency trade-off’ – that is, the need to sacrifice equality to improve the overall performance of the educational system. Instead, this finding suggests that the stream of literature that emphasizes the role of tracking in enhancing both student achievement dispersion and inequality of opportunity relies on more solid empirical evidence than the theoretical arguments suggesting that tracking increases efficiency.”

The authors acknowledge that teaching students in heterogeneous groups at the secondary level is pedagogically challenging and educators need to be nimble and innovative to help all students learn at high levels. [See Memo 924 for an article addressing this issue.]

[“The Effect of School Tracking on Student Achievement and Inequality: A Meta-Analysis”](#) by Éder Terrin and Moris Triventi in *Review of Educational Research*, April 2023 (Vol. 93, #2, pp. 236-274); the authors can be reached at [eder.terrin@unitn.it](mailto:eder.terrin@unitn.it) and [moris.triventi@unitn.it](mailto:moris.triventi@unitn.it).  
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## **2. Improving Students' Real-Time Comprehension Strategies**

In this *Review of Educational Research* article, Chunliang Yang, Wenbo Zhao, and Liang Luo (Beijing Normal University), Bo Yuan (Ningbo University), and David Shanks (University College London) say that students around the world are “strikingly poor” at *metacomprehension* – monitoring their understanding as they read texts and predicting what they will remember. This is a big problem for teachers, because if students are overconfident about comprehension as they read, they won't go back and re-read or ask questions to fill gaps and figure out what they don't understand. The result: disappointing student achievement.

Yang and his colleagues did a meta-analysis to see what improves students' metacomprehension as they read several texts. The analysis identified several instructional

approaches that significantly improve how well students monitor their own reading comprehension. Here are the strategies, listed in order of estimated effectiveness:

- Students write a summary after reading several texts (not after reading each one);
- Students sketch a concept map, diagram, and mind map as they read, or afterward;
- Students generate keywords capturing the gist of the texts after reading several;
- Students explain to themselves the new information contained in the texts;
- Students take practice tests and see what they thought they understood but didn't;
- Students read texts with some letters deleted, forcing them to focus more on meaning;
- Students take a comprehension test that aligns with what they expected to be tested on;
- Students re-read the texts after a short delay.

There are two common factors in these strategies: (a) students actively engaging in metacognitive activities as they read, and (b) students checking for understanding after a strategic delay (after they'd read all the texts). "In addition," say the authors, "combining different interventions tends to produce additive benefits."

This meta-analysis also found that certain interventions were *less* effective at improving metacomprehension:

- Students writing a summary of each text immediately after reading it;
- Student generating keywords immediately after reading each text;
- Students generating questions on the texts as they read each one, or after reading;
- Students reading texts that provided distracting analogies.

["Mind the Gap Between Comprehension and Metacomprehension: Meta-Analysis of Metacomprehension Accuracy and Intervention Effectiveness"](#) by Chunliang Yang, Wenbo Zhao, Liang Luo, Bo Yuan, and David Shanks in *Review of Educational Research*, April 2023 (Vol. 93, #2, pp. 143-194); Yang can be reached at [chunliang.yang@bnu.edu.cn](mailto:chunliang.yang@bnu.edu.cn).

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### **3. Using the Closing Minutes of Class to Consolidate Learning**

In this *Edutopia* article, author/educator Andrew Boryga describes ten ways to check for student understanding and wrap up learning at the end of a lesson (click the article link below for the names of teachers who contributed ideas):

- *A two-dollar summary* – Each word is worth ten cents, so the challenge is for students to sum up what they just learned in just 20 words – perhaps including certain words.

Alternatively, students are asked to explain key concepts as they would to a first grader.

- *Six-word headlines* – Pairs of students summarize the most important idea or concept they learned in six-word newspaper-like banner headlines. Alternatively, each student writes their own headlines and then they work on combining them, or the whole class collaborates to formulate a single headline.

- *Making your classroom a beach* – On a large plastic beach ball, the teacher writes several reflective questions (for example, *What was challenging about today's lesson? What was the most important thing you learned?*). As the ball bounces around the room, on a signal, the student whose thumb is closest to a question answers it.

- *Quiz the next class* – Students use Kahoot! to generate multiple-choice questions for other classes studying the same material.

- *Rock, paper, scissors* – In this variation on the familiar game, students identify *rocks* – the hardest parts of the lesson – *paper* – distilling the main idea – and *scissors* – less-important material they believe could be trimmed and discarded.

- *Clear and cloudy* – In an exit ticket, students write what was clear about the lesson and what they’re having trouble understanding.

- *Traffic light* – Students use three sticky notes to write one thing they learned in the lesson, one thing they’re still mulling over, and one thing they’re struggling to understand, and on their way out, they put the notes (respectively) on the green, yellow, and red parts of a large picture of a traffic light.

- *One-word closure* – Students stand in a circle and take turns responding to a prompt like, *What’s one word to describe how you’re feeling about the day?* or *What’s one word that stands out to you from our lesson?*

- *Appreciation, apology, Aha!* – Students gather in a circle at day’s end and share what they appreciated that day, an apology they’d like to deliver, and an epiphany.

- *Video journals* – At the end of a curriculum unit, students create short, light-hearted video summaries of important learnings using a free app like ChatterPix.

[“10 Powerful Ways to End Your Lessons”](#) by Andrew Boryga in *Edutopia*, March 17, 2023

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#### **4. Pointers on Coaching a School Leader**

(Originally titled “How Principal Coaching Differs from Teacher Coaching”)

In this online ASCD article, Jo Lein (Johns Hopkins University and the Oklahoma Teaching and Leading Initiative) has five suggestions for those who coach school leaders:

- *Articulate a shared understanding of effective school leadership.* What are the key attributes and behaviors that need to be affirmed and developed? What are the most important actions for our principals to take? How do we see their role evolving in the years ahead? The answers to these questions guide the work of principal coaches, as well as shaping PD, hiring, and evaluation.

- *Collect evidence.* Coaching conversations with each principal are guided by what is observed in classrooms and meetings and gleaned from planning materials and student and staff data.

- *Decide on action steps that are instructive and practical.* Coaches should give principals advice that directly affects teaching and learning, can be acquired within a week, is grounded in school-level evidence, and is transferable beyond one specific area.

- *Encourage and monitor application.* Every coaching conversation should encourage the principal to apply the action steps in classroom visits, follow-up debriefs with teachers, PD sessions, and all-staff and teacher team meetings. The coach observes and provides feedback.

- *Follow up in ways that result in lasting improvement.* “Coaches are not only building principals’ technical skills,” says Lein; “they are working actively to create *reflective* individuals who are developing as people. Follow-up should allow individuals to acknowledge their progress and reflect on what they have learned about themselves in the process.”

[“How Principal Coaching Differs from Teacher Coaching”](#) by Jo Lein in ASCD, March 13, 2023; Lein can be reached at [Jo.mabee@gmail.com](mailto:Jo.mabee@gmail.com).

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## 5. Ideas for an Effective Staff Newsletter

In this *Read by Example* article, Wisconsin principal Matt Renwick says that when he first started publishing a staff newsletter, it was “basically a long e-mail in print format” – a list of upcoming events that wasn’t inspiring or visually appealing. Sensing that it was being read by only a few colleagues, Renwick made several improvements:

- *Making it visually appealing and accessible* – Renwick sends the newsletter as an e-mail (one click), uses white space and formatting for easy readability, and keeps reading time to an absolute minimum.

- *Starting with an image that captures the school’s purpose and spirit* – He often uses a photo he’s taken in a classroom or activity (after getting permission from students and staff involved) – something funny, charming, or affirming of good instructional practices. He keeps track of who is recognized in the newsletter to make sure everyone is celebrated at some point.

- *Leading with an anecdote or story* – Renwick describes an experience that showed him in a learning-curve moment – for example, how a conversation with a teacher clarified an inaccurate assumption he’d made while visiting a classroom. “When I position myself as a learner and mistake-maker,” he says, “it gives everyone permission to do the same... When I am vulnerable as a leader, I am perceived as more approachable, which helps me build trust with faculty.”

- *Providing a brief list of staff updates* – The middle part of each newsletter is a bullet-point list of school activities, events, and projects. Colleagues read this section because they know that important information about meetings, PD, calendar items, and deadlines will be in one place.

- *Highlighting professional reading, listening, and viewing* – Renwick suggests articles, books, podcasts, or videos that he believes will be worthwhile for colleagues to check out, condensing longer articles to a few key takeaways.

[From my years writing a newsletter as principal of the Mather School in Boston, some additional ideas: noting student and staff birthdays; a calendar event from Chase’s Calendar of Events (for example, March 27th is the birthday of Mariah Carey and the birth anniversary of Sarah Vaughan); floating an idea for staff reactions; a cartoon; and raffling a desirable item (we occasionally had four Red Sox tickets from our corporate partner). K.M.]

[“How to Write a Weekly Staff Newsletter That At Least 80% of Teachers Will Read”](#) by Matt Renwick in *Read by Example*, March 25, 2023; Renwick can be reached at [renwickme@gmail.com](mailto:renwickme@gmail.com).

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## 6. Making the Best Use of Classroom Volunteers

In this *Edutopia* article, veteran fifth-grade teacher Thomas Courtney suggests seven ways an elementary classroom can benefit from volunteers (parents, student teachers, undergraduates, community members) without adding to the teacher’s stress and workload:

- Provide a space where volunteers can park their stuff – coat, laptop, etc.
- Give them a one-page set of expectations and norms around appropriate behavior, language, dress, and, yes, gum chewing.
- Make an initial introduction that’s fun and makes the volunteer feel welcome – for example, *Two Truths and a Lie*.
- Before putting them to work, give them time to observe, circulate, and get to know the kids.
- Ask what each volunteer will be most comfortable contributing to the class and go with their preferences. It might be leading a literature circle, creating bulletin boards, filing papers, or helping students prepare for a talent show.
- Give volunteers tools and general direction but not micromanagement. In Courtney’s classroom, he provides a space, a whiteboard, dry-erase markers, and the volunteer then pulls small groups of students to support their learning, always in synch with what the class is covering.
- Let volunteers follow a schedule that works for them.

[“Managing Classroom Volunteers in Your Elementary Classroom”](#) by Thomas Courtney in *Edutopia*, March 21, 2023

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## 7. Pushing Back on the Language Police

In this article in *The Atlantic*, George Packer takes issue with what he believes are the excesses of a new set of prohibitions on words we shouldn’t use. He has no problem with the Sierra Club’s Equity Language Guide when it advocates for “people-first language” affirming that “everyone is first and foremost a person, not their disability or identity.” Some worthwhile changes:

- *People living with disabilities* in place of *the disabled*;
- *Enslaved person* in place of *slave*;
- *Y’all* for *you guys*

“Avoiding slurs, calling attention to inadvertent insults, and speaking to people with dignity are essential things in any decent society,” says Packer. “It’s polite to address people as they request, and context always matters.”

But he believes the Sierra Club guide, and others like it, go too far in proscribing a number of words that have been in common use, including: *urban, vibrant, hardworking, blind, vulnerable, marginalized, waitress, field, fieldwork, paralyzed by fear, standing up for our rights, people of color, empower, battle, depressing, migrant, native New Yorker, and American*. “The rationale for equity-language guides is hard to fault,” says Packer. “They seek a world without oppression and injustice. Because achieving this goal is beyond anyone’s power, they turn to what can be controlled and try to purge language until it leaves no one out and can’t harm those who already suffer.”

But he believes this moral crusade has gone off the rails: “By the new rules, shelf upon shelf of great writing might go the way of *blind* and *urban*. Open *Light in August* or *Invisible Man* to any page and see how little would survive... The whole tendency of equity language is to blur the contours of hard, often unpleasant facts. This aversion to reality is its main appeal. Once you acquire the vocabulary, it’s actually easier to say people with *limited financial resources* than *the poor*. The first rolls off your tongue without interruption, leaves no aftertaste, arouses no emotion. The second is rudely blunt and bitter, and it might make someone angry or sad. Imprecise language is less likely to offend.”

“Good writing,” Packer continues, “– vivid imagery, strong statements – will hurt, because it’s bound to convey painful truths... Moral language comes from the struggle of an individual mind to absorb and convey the truth as faithfully as possible... Prison does not become a less brutal place by calling someone locked up in one *a person experiencing the criminal-justice system*. Obesity isn’t any healthier for people with *high weight*... Equity language doesn’t fool anyone who lives with real afflictions. It’s meant to spare only the feelings of those who use it.”

“It will be a sign of political renewal,” Packer concludes, “if Americans can say maddening things to one another in a common language that doesn’t require any guide.”

[“The Case Against Euphemism”](#) by George Packer in *The Atlantic*, April 2023 (Vol. 331, #3, pp. 9-12)

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## 8. Books About Friendship for Young Adolescents

In this *School Library Journal* article, Gail Cornwall reports on her hunt for books that help tweens unpack the “stormy, frustrating, and sometimes sad aspects of friendship.” Cornwall cites studies showing that only half of friendships survive a middle-school year, one in a hundred seventh-grade friendships are still intact by the senior year of high school, and 80 percent of students experience loneliness at school. Friendships come and go, with kids often asking themselves, *Do they like me? What have I done? Am I okay? Am I fitting in?* As for cliques, they can be loose, ephemeral, and porous, with an uneven distribution of power.

Books can help tweens explore these complexities, see beyond the “ideal best friend” myth, and learn the friendship-enhancing power of admitting fault and making amends.

Cornwall’s book recommendations:

Fiction:

- *Jennifer Chan Is Not Alone* by Tae Keller
- *Invisible* by Christina Diaz Gonzalez and Gabriela Epstein
- *Eggs* by Jerry Spinelli
- *Troublemaker* by John Chou
- *When Life Gives You Mangoes* by Kereen Getten
- *Booked* by Kwame Alexander
- *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas

Nonfiction:

- *Like Ability: The Truth About Popularity* by Lori Getz and Mitch Prinstein (age 12 and up)
- *Growing Friendships: A Kids' Guide to Making and Keeping Friends* by Eileen Kennedy-Moore and Christine McLaughlin (age 6-9)

“Between Friends” by Gail Cornwall in *School Library Journal*, March 2023 (Vol. 69, #3, pp. 48-51); here’s a related article by Cornwall: [“How Understanding Middle-School Friendships Can Help Students with Ups and Downs”](#) in KQED, November 30, 2020.

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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 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:***

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- The current issue (in Word or PDF)
- All back issues (Word and PDF) and podcasts
- An easily searchable archive of all articles so far
- The "classic" articles from all 14 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  
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