Marshall Memo 885

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
May 3, 2021

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Quotes of the Week

"Many school leaders turn away from conflict and never realize its potential for promoting growth rather than disorder."

Robert Feirsen and Seth Weitzman (see item #3)

"The problem of education reform is not a lack of good ideas, but a lack of good ideas sensibly implemented."

Robert Slavin in "Reading by Third Grade – or Else" August 15, 2014

"Teenagers' social media worlds promise connection yet frequently inspire anxiety and isolation."

Andrew Simmons in "Using Literature to Help Teens Develop Healthy Relationships" in *Edutopia*, April 26, 2021

"Returning to my classroom, some students have forgotten how to carry on a face-to-face conversation. They're rusty. And now they're relearning how to treat friends, belong to a community that's been ephemeral, and, yes, court each other. They are probably more aware of their bodies now, and more insecure, having spent a year considering what their cameras capture in daily Zooms."

Andrew Simmons (*ibid.*)

"Helping students emerge as better social citizens should feel as pressing as any academic standard, for the benefit of students, their loved ones, their communities, and the troubled world they'll inherit. The almost-adults who act bravely, kindly, and with self-awareness in love and friendship are more likely to do so elsewhere. It's hardly referenced in school mission statements, but American institutions need them badly."

Andrew Simmons (*ibid.*)

1. Robert Pondiscio on What It Means to Be an Antiracist Educator

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Robert Pondiscio remembers the reasons he began teaching in high-poverty New York City classrooms almost 20 years ago – the "manifest unfairness" of educational opportunities for children of color – and lists the criteria for effective teaching to which he aspired: "holding every pupil to high standards and expectations for academics and classroom conduct; offering a rich and rigorous curriculum, taught as engagingly as possible; and fostering a school culture and climate that valorizes student achievement." He believes that "children do not fail; rather, adults fail children when schools do not deliver any or all of these ingredients."

Pondiscio says that in recent years, he's become increasingly uncomfortable with the messages that some antiracist activists and trainers are conveying in schools. Here are his points of disagreement:

• *Aspiring to move beyond race* – Dr. King's dream that his children should be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character "resonates as both a calling and a statement of the highest American aspirations," says Pondiscio. "If I define 'equity' as working toward an America where race no longer describes or limits us; if I reject the idea… that to be white is to be inherently racist and a beneficiary of unearned privileges; if I hold to a definition of racism that is manifested in behavior, not an immutable characteristic of my race over which I have no control, am I no longer fit to teach black and brown children?"

• *Addressing academic achievement gaps* – Pondiscio takes exception to Ibram X. Kendi's contention that talking about achievement gaps is inherently racist. There are flaws in standardized tests, says Pondiscio, but he believes test data have spotlighted shameful variations in the quality of education and brought "vast amounts of resources and moral authority" to improving school outcomes for those who were being shortchanged. "Discrediting any reference to a racial achievement gap is counterproductive to the interests of students of color," he says, and cites a statement in which the NAACP, National Urban League, La Raza, and nine other civil rights groups said that test data "are critical for understanding whether and where there is equal opportunity."

• *Discomfort but not shame* – Effective teaching sometimes confronts students with ideas and information that make them uncomfortable, even upset, says Pondiscio, and he believes that's a good thing. But teaching should never upset students "because of who they are or what they look like," he continues. "No element of ethical classroom practice should allow inflicting intentional harm or emotional distress on students – rich or poor, black or white – or seek to make a virtue of it… Neither should we encourage in children a sense of

insurmountable oppression, victimhood, or grievance – the very opposite of the uplifting formation of mind and character that education should aspire to."

• *Teaching essential knowledge and skills* – Every child in U.S. schools should see their history, heritage, and culture reflected in classroom content and the books they are assigned to read, says Pondiscio. But he believes the push to "decolonize" the curriculum has gone too far and will end up holding back children of color. "A clear-eyed view of language proficiency obligates us to expose children to the full range of taken-for-granted knowledge that their fellow citizens possess," he says. "At present, that requires familiarity with a substantial (if perhaps declining) amount of Western thought, literature, history, science, and art. To pretend otherwise is to risk cementing disadvantage in place, or to embrace a separatist impulse." Close reasoning, the written word, and objectivity are not "white" practices being imposed on black and brown children, he contends; they are essential to opportunity and success in America.

• *The role of white teachers* – Recruiting and supporting educators of color "is an unambiguous benefit" and a top priority, says Pondiscio. But can't "committed teachers of all races work together to advance educational opportunity? If the answer is no, something has gone very wrong." He tells the story of an effective, experienced white teacher ("not a naïve young recruit with a savior complex") who feels she's being pushed out of her New York City school by its "aggressive diversity, equity, and inclusion agenda… Nothing about her teaching or relationship with students has changed, but she has gone from being a valued colleague to a figure of suspicion merely because of her race."

• *Making a difference* – "What if I believe that fixing institutions that routinely fail black and brown children is just as important as changing racial attitudes?" Pondiscio asks. "If I do not believe that white supremacy is the primary stumbling block to educational progress, if I think that literacy – not antiracism – is the last word in educational equity, if I'm unwilling to accept uncritically the new antiracism orthodoxy, am I still welcome in classrooms where all or most of the students are not white?" He says he became a teacher not to be a social engineer dedicated to dismantling systemic racism but to improve the life chances of his students.

• *Parents' perspective* – "What are the non-negotiable beliefs that a teacher must have to stand in front of a classroom where all or most of the students are black or brown?" Pondiscio asks. "What beliefs are disqualifying? Let's ask parents of color. In the view of many teachers, effective education for all children means high standards and expectations, both academically and behaviorally. That meets my test for antiracist education. But does it meet yours? Would you feel comfortable with me as your child's teacher?"

"I Believe 'Antiracism' Is Misguided. Can I Still Teach Black Children?" by Robert Pondiscio in *Education Gadfly*, April 29, 2021

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2. Substantive Actions and Words on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Kim Brettschneider (WittKieffer) and Dallas Grundy (University of Akron) say that nowadays it's common for job applicants to be

asked the "DEI question." One version: *How have you advanced your values of diversity, equity, and inclusion?* "Answering in a meaningful way is not a matter of mastering the most up-to-date lingo or checking the right boxes," say Brettschneider and Grundy. What thoughtful employers want is "candidates who have clearly defined DEI values and who are living up to them in real and significant ways."

"How you answer this question has the potential to do much more than just help or hurt your interview," continue the authors. "By thinking critically about, and engaging earnestly with, the DEI question, you are helping advance an important conversation that may create better, healthier institutions for everyone." Speaking from their experience observing hundreds of job interviews, Brettschneider and Grundy suggest three steps to answer the question well:

• *Write down your personal definition of DEI*. This should speak to your experience and values – why this matters and what you've done – and mention mentors and role models who have influenced you. After running the statement by critical friends, it's a good idea to include it with your application, even if it's not specifically requested.

• *Be specific*. Brettschneider and Grundy suggest thinking backwards from the ultimate goal – creating an environment where diverse professional talent can thrive for the benefit of all – and listing actions you've taken, or would take, to make that happen – including hiring, budget allocations, mentoring, coaching, inviting "productive disagreement" and "uncomfortable conversations," and disrupting entrenched inequalities.

• *Map out an authentic theory of change*. A well-reasoned, detailed *if-then* statement demonstrates that you've thought through a strategy that goes beyond rhetoric and good intentions. Brettschneider and Grundy suggest including examples you've observed outside your field, and stumbles you've made along the way. "Brave leaders model how to take responsibility for failures and disclose their own shortcomings," they say. "You might inspire others to look inward."

"How to Prepare for the DEI Question" by Kim Brettschneider and Dallas Grundy in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 30, 2021 (Vol. 67, #17, pp. 59-61)

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3. Conflict-Agile School Leaders

(Originally titled "Constructive Conflict")

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, Robert Feirsen (New York Institute of Technology) and Seth Weitzman (a retired New York principal) say that principals spend 20-40 percent of the school day on their least favorite activity – managing conflict: discipline problems, friction about feedback to teachers, philosophical differences, parent complaints about grades and consequences, duty assignments, schedules, and more.

"And yet," say Feirsen and Weitzman, "if administrators are to exercise instructional leadership and instill a shared vision, they must be prepared to deal with inevitable resistance and discord… Many school leaders turn away from conflict and never realize its potential for promoting growth rather than disorder." When they don't step up, problems fester unresolved, including mediocre and ineffective teaching, racial microaggressions, and systemic inequities.

From their experience as school leaders and a review of the research, Feirsen and Weitzman say there are three common responses to discord:

• *Avoiding* – This can sometimes be the correct approach, as in "Pick your battles," but papering over deep problems with friendliness and collegiality won't produce effective education for all students.

• *Attacking* – School leaders who respond this way – retaliating against teachers, punishing those who cause "trouble" – may drive resistance underground, but that creates a negative, us-versus-them climate that's detrimental for everyone.

• *Addressing* – Feirsen and Weitzman describe three leadership skills that "reduce strife while harnessing conflict in the service of improving educational outcomes and relationships." Each depersonalizes the conflict and respects everyone involved.

- *Avoid being defensive*. Adopting a nonjudgmental, genuinely inquisitive stance can avoid an us-versus-them, win-lose dynamic. A leader needs to cool down and slow down, taking a deep breath and looking at the big picture. One strategy is for each party to present its case while the other listens silently, then allowing only clarifying questions.
- *First things first* – "Many conflicts in schools reflect competing values," say Feirsen and Weitzman. "Heated discussions about grades mask deeper questions about the purpose of assessment and the responsibilities of teachers and students." These underlying conflicts need to be heard and talked through before policy decisions can be made. Conflict-agility skills need to be practiced and built over time, ideally becoming part of the school's way of operating in meetings and small-group situations.
- *Focus on actionable ideas*. When people disparage each other's character, ability, motives, and intelligence, nothing gets resolved. The leader's role is to "separate the problem from the people," as the *Getting to Yes* approach suggests, get the parties to focus on their genuine interests, not their positions, and brainstorm solutions that haven't yet been considered. It's helpful if leaders are conversant with common cognitive biases that prevent people from letting go of entrenched positions.

"Constructive Conflict" by Robert Feirsen and Seth Weitzman in *Educational Leadership*, April 2021 (Vol. 78, #7, pp. 26-31); the authors can be reached at rfeirsen@nyit.edu and sethweitzman@yahoo.com.

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4. Outsmarting Anxiety

In this article in *Psychology Today*, psychotherapist Linda Esposito suggests twelve "intentional acts of calm":

• *Reframe*. When you feel overwhelmed, ask yourself, *What is a different way of looking at my situation?* "Doing this, says Esposito, "is a key step toward regarding yourself as a capable problem-solver."

• *Get outside*. Take a walk. If you're walking with a wily dog, that will help you get out of your own head.

• *Hydrate*. "Water," says Esposito, "facilitates the delivery of nutrients to the brain, removes toxins and inflammatory markers, and improves cognitive functioning."

• *Do pushups*. A short burst of physical exertion releases nervous energy.

• *Visualize an admired person*. What would they do?

• *Use Pomodoro*. Work in 25-minute chunks followed by 5-minute breaks, and after four cycles, take a 15-20-minute break.

• *Insert a mindful buffer*. Between work and home, "spend a few minutes in silence to make peace with what's happened during the day," says Esposito, "then take a few cleansing breaths before switching gears with presence and intention."

• *Clear clutter*. This is especially helpful just before going to bed.

• *Read hard-copy news*. Onscreen news feeds are distracting and provoke anxiety.

• *Dump smiley-face*. "Sometimes you need to take off the rose-tinted glasses to see your smudged, cloudy challenges as they are," says Esposito.

• *Make a fun plan*. Thinking about a get-together with people who are good for your mental health creates positive anticipation.

• *Accept anxiety*. "Sometimes letting go of the need to control outcomes leads to greater acceptance of your circumstances," Esposito concludes.

"12 Ways to Curb Anxiety" by Linda Esposito in *Psychology Today*, May/June 2021 (Vol. 54, #3, p. 41)

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5. A Tool for Measuring School Climate

In this article in *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, Keith Zullig (West Virginia University School of Public Health), Molly Matthews-Ewald (Creative Research Solutions), and Scott Huebner (University of South Carolina) describe – and provide free access to – their School Climate Measure. The survey is designed to measure students' subjective experience in school, which the authors describe as "the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures… including order and rules and social and emotional safety." These factors have been shown to be closely tied to students' academic achievement, meaning that improving school climate can be a rising tide that lifts all boats.

The survey has been conducted in several diverse districts around the United States. "Nationally normative data for the SCM are not yet available," say Zullig, Matthews-Ewald, and Huebner; "however, understanding student perceptions and knowing whether students agree or disagree with various statements within the domains is arguably of considerable importance." They believe the survey can be used to measure the overall climate of a school (by combining all the elements), to zero in on specific domains, and to analyze data on subgroups and individual students – then putting the insights to work guiding school

improvement. Here is the survey (lightly edited). Each response is scored on a 1-2-3-4-5 Likert scale.

Positive student-teacher relationships:

- Teachers and staff seem to take a real interest in my future.
- Teachers are available when I need to talk with them.
- It is easy to talk with teachers.
- Students get along well with teachers.
- Teachers at my school help us with our problems.
- My teachers care about me.
- My teacher makes me feel good about myself.

Order and discipline:

- Classroom rules are applied equally.
- Problems in this school are solved by students and staff.
- The rules of the school are fair.
- School rules are enforced consistently and fairly.
- My teachers make it clear to me when I have misbehaved in class.
- Discipline is fair.

Opportunities for student engagement:

- Students have the same opportunity in class to speak, and be listened to.
- Students can express feelings and thoughts about school work and life.
- Students "different" in any way are treated with respect.
- Nobody in my school is excluded from being successful.
- Females and males are treated as equals at school.
- I can participate in a lot of interesting activities at school.

School physical environment:

- The school grounds are kept clean.
- My school is neat and clean.
- My school buildings are generally pleasant and well-maintained.

Academic support:

- I usually understand my homework assignments.
- Teachers make it clear what work needs to be done to get the grade I want.
- I believe that teachers expect all students to learn.
- I feel that I can do well in this school.

Parental involvement:

- My parents talk with teachers about what is happening at home.
- My parents are involved in school activities.
- My parents are involved in discussions about what is taught at school.

School connections:

- My schoolwork is exciting.
- Students can make suggestions on courses that are offered.
- This school makes students enthusiastic about learning.

- Students are frequently rewarded or praised by faculty and staff for following school rules.

Perceived exclusion/privilege:

- At my school, the same person always gets to help the teacher.
- At my school, the same students get chosen every time to take part in after-school or special activities.
- The same students always get to use things, like a computer, a ball, or piano.

School social environment:

- I am happy, in general, with the other students who go to my school.

Academic satisfaction:

- I am happy about the number of tests I have.
- I am happy about the amount of homework I have.

"An Introduction to the School Climate Measure" by Keith Zullig, Molly Matthews-Ewald, and Scott Huebner in *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, Spring 2021 (Vol. 18, #1, pp. 49-60); the authors can be reached at kzullig@hsc.wvu.edu, mmatthewsewald@gmail.com, and huebner@mailbox.sc.edu.

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6. Three Cautionary Notes as Regular School Resumes

In this *Education Gadfly* article, consultant Dale Chu says there are three issues that could potentially "gum up the works" as the pandemic recedes:

• *Mask mandates* – Some educators and students may continue in-school mask wearing in perpetuity, and there should be no objection to that. Requiring students to wear masks can help families feel comfortable sending their children back to school, but as vaccination rates rise, mandates are already provoking strong opposition in some quarters. If schools don't find the middle ground, says Chu, "this fracas could pose a real distraction to getting schools back to any semblance of the ordinary."

• *Standardized testing* – Students, educators, and parents "have grown accustomed to the absence of a yearly academic checkup," he says, and anti-testing activists are making the argument that no harm has been done. A growing number of educators and parents are questioning the whole premise of annual testing and the important insights it generates.

• *The four-day school week* – Before the pandemic, a shortened school week was mostly limited to the intermountain West, says Chu, but the idea has since spread "as thousands of districts have used the discredited pretense of deep cleaning to dial back the amount of live instruction per week." If districts decide to make the four-day week a permanent fixture, that will mean fewer instructional hours at a point when academic learning time is more essential than ever.

"We are nothing if not creatures of habit," concludes Chu, "and in the case of keeping masks on, testing off, and four-day school weeks the new normal, these routines may prove to be stubborn habits to break… So while it's heartening to know that teachers are setting their sights on the tutoring and other programming that may soon be required – with policymakers

laying out the tools to help – we would do well to keep an eye on the abiding crisis-mongering and bad-news bias that continue to shape habits and threaten to handicap the best laid plans for reopening schools."

"Three Things to Watch for in Schools' Post-Covid Recovery" by Dale Chu in *Education Gadfly*, April 29, 2021

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7. Common Complaints About Meetings

In this *Project Manager News* article, Ben Aston compiled data from international studies of people's opinions on meetings. A few excerpts:

- The biggest gripe was meetings that weren't necessary; respondents said they attended two hours of pointless meetings each week.
- 76 percent of employees prefer face-to-face meetings to video calls.
- Preparing for meetings takes significant amounts of time.
- There's a lot of multitasking during meetings, including eating lunch, checking personal e-mails, and responding to e-mails.
- People complain publicly about meetings, but privately, they admit that meetings are sometimes productive: 59 percent rated meetings as good or excellent.

Here's a list of things that annoyed people about others' behavior during meetings:

- Sending texts and responding to phone calls;
- Failing to listen;
- Interrupting;
- Talking about nothing for extended periods;
- Arriving late or leaving early;
- Unwillingness to contribute during discussions;
- Eating;
- Taking notes on a laptop.

"11+ Meeting Statistics to Pay Attention to in 2021" by Ben Aston in *Project Manager News*, April 9, 2021

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8. Short Items:

a. Adam Grant on Confident Humility – In this TED Talk, Wharton social psychologist Adam Grant expounds on rethinking before it's too late, and punctures the myth that a frog will tolerate gradually warming water until it's cooked.

"What Frogs in Hot Water Can Teach Us About Thinking Again" a TED Talk by Adam Grant, April 2021

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b. Media Bias Chart 7.1 – The latest edition of the Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart was just released. See also the extensive resources for training adults and students in savvy analysis of the news.

"Media Bias Chart 7.1" by Vanessa Otero et al., April 28, 2021

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c. An Infographic on Figures of Speech – In this infographic/article in *Visual Capitalist*, Carmen Ang presents 40 ways to use vivid language to improve writing.

"Figures of Speech: 40 Ways to Improve Your Writing" by Carmen Ang in *Visual Capitalist*, April 30, 2021

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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.

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- The current issue (in Word and PDF)
- All back issues (Word and PDF) and podcasts
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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
Teaching Tolerance
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education