Marshall Memo 869

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 11, 2021

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"I would suggest parents ask the child, whatever age they are, what they've heard and how they feel about it. Take some cues from them. What you're really trying to do as a parent is help the child understand the world and, to the extent possible, make them feel safe at home. So understanding the child's worries and concerns is a good place to start."

Malcolm Gay in "Honest Assessment: How to Help Kids Deal with Frightening News Out of the U.S. Capitol" in *The Boston Globe*, January 9, 2021

"There is no doubt that some children have reading disabilities, but the key to improved outcomes for the vast majority of struggling readers, including those with a reading disability, is enhanced core instruction – and that means enhanced curricula, assessments, pre-service and inservice professional development, and supports."

Allison Atteberry and Andrew McEachin (see item #8)

"It's important to look at why the kids who are thriving are thriving."

Jerome Schultz (quoted in item #1)

"It is better to over-identify children at risk for reading problems as early as possible and provide necessary instruction, than to under-identify and have large numbers of students who suffer as their problems linger without the required instructional support."

Sharon Vaughn and Jack Fletcher (see item #5)

"A true disadvantage is not knowing how to read, understand, analyze, and grapple with the cultural or political contexts of any piece of literature."

Ayanna Thompson (Arizona State University), quoted in "How to Teach the Bard" in *School Library Journal*, January 2021 (Vol. 67, #1, pp. 29-32); Thompson can be reached at Ayanna.Thompson@asu.edu.

1. Students for Whom Remote Instruction Is Working Well

In this article in *Education Week*, Alyson Klein reports on the small percentage of students who are doing better with remote instruction than they were faring in school before the pandemic. Two case studies:

• A gifted Minnesota seventh grader with ADHD was fighting with other students, getting suspended, and doing poorly academically. "The kids at my school were just mean and annoying and distracting me from doing work during class," says this student. With all-virtual classes, he reports, "I feel relieved and able to concentrate on school." Now he's on the high honor roll. What made the difference:

- He can skip ahead when the content seems easy and a teacher is going too slowly.
- With difficult material, he can take his time puzzling it through or watch a lesson video.
- He has the autonomy to work independently, at his own pace.
- He's better at dealing with distractions and keeping himself organized (an IEP goal).
- Frequent texts from teachers to his mother about disruptive behavior have stopped.

"It is a pandemic time, and I should be worried and more anxious, but I'm actually more relaxed now," says his mother. "If this hadn't happened, I would never have known that this was a better environment… I would never have tried it."

• A Texas high-school student with special needs had such challenging behavior and academic struggles before the pandemic that her veteran teacher was thinking about leaving the profession. With remote instruction, the girl is getting good grades and is on track to graduate this spring. What changed?

- It's easier for her to ask for help without feeling embarrassed.
- She feels more autonomy as she completes her assignments.
- She doesn't have to contend with what she saw as bothersome school rules.
- She's no longer worried about other students' behavior.

"I get easily triggered with certain things people tell me," she says. "It gets me in a bad mood, and then it's tough to concentrate on schoolwork."

With some students who are thriving during the pandemic, the chat room has been helpful; introverted and nerdy students feel they can express themselves more freely. Another factor is simply being good at technology, allowing previously isolated students to be of service to their classmates (and in some cases, their teachers).

From stories like this, it's clear that "normal" pre-pandemic school hasn't been working for some students, and the current crisis is helping educators think through what needs to be changed when in-person classes resume. But should these students continue with online lessons when everyone else in back in school? That might lead to their being marginalized and isolated, and wouldn't give them some social skills they'll need in the wider world. "Kids need to stretch themselves," says Ellen Braaten (Massachusetts General Hospital). "They need to get out of their comfort zone. That is just part of building resilience."

The best approach when schools begin to reopen for in-person instruction, says Jerome Schultz (Harvard Medical School), is to ask the kids:

- What are you looking forward to when you come back?
- What are you worried about?

"It's important to look at why the kids who are thriving are thriving," says Schultz. "If they are doing better in a virtual learning environment and go back to a physical environment, their skills may tank or flatline again." Some students may need an all-remote environment, but others need to get back to in-person schooling – with modifications that incorporate the factors that made remote instruction right for them.

"We Love Virtual Learning: Students, Parents Explain Why" by Alyson Klein in *Education Week*, January 6, 2021 (Vol. 40, #17, pp. 8-9)

Back to page one

2. Finding and Engaging "Lost" Students

In this *Education Week* article, Christina Samuels summarizes the steps that some educators are taking to locate and re-engage students who have not been present for remote instruction during school closures:

- Provide families with the technology to connect with the school and the Internet.
- Use all channels of communication – e-mail, phone, texting, snail mail, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, other students, and "curbside" home visits.
- Persist when families don't respond.
- Visit local motels and campgrounds where homeless families may be staying.
- Create user-friendly websites and Facebook pages with information on food distribution, distance learning, and community resources.
- Set up a phone hotline for assistance.
- When delivering food, ask about other needs and encourage families to stay in touch.
- Reach out to unaccompanied youth directly, since they may have no contact with parents or guardians.
- Once you connect with a family or student, stay in touch on a regular schedule.

"Inside the Effort to Find and Help Disengaged Youth" by Christina Samuels in *Education Week*, January 6, 2021 (Vol. 40, #17, pp. 16-18)

Back to page one

3. It's Okay to Not Be Okay

In this *Education Week* article, Arianna Prothero reports on a common phenomenon in schools during the pandemic: "toxic positivity" – statements like *Look on the bright side. It could be worse. Think about the good things you've got. Teachers are heroes. You've got this. Everything happens for a reason*. The problem with these upbeat statements, says Marc Brackett (Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence) is that they fail to acknowledge very real fears and anxieties that students and educators are experiencing – and can actually make morale worse. People can be made to feel guilty for not being more positive. Ignoring negative emotions doesn't make them go away, says Brackett: "They become like a debt inside you. They show up somewhere, whether it be in a depression, or an eating disorder, or in aggression, or in physical health problems."

Anxiety might even be helpful, because it prompts people to keep their masks on, stay socially distanced, and wash their hands. The best posture for teachers may be to be as positive as possible and reassure students that the pandemic won't last forever, but acknowledge that right now, things are tough for all of us. Prothero summarizes some pointers:

- Acknowledge emotions.
- Acknowledge that people who use these upbeat statements mean well.
- Monitor your own "self-talk."
- Model a range of emotions and how to handle them.
- Don't ignore negative emotions.
- Don't pressure people to be optimistic all the time.
- Don't give pep talks without meaningful support.
- Don't make being happy all the time your goal.

"When Toxic Positivity Seeps Into Schools, Here's What Educators Can Do" by Arianna Prothero in *Education Week*, January 6, 2020 (Vol. 40, #17, pp. 10-12)

Back to page one

4. Expectations of Black Female Teachers in Predominantly White Schools

In this article in *Theory Into Practice*, Richard Milner IV (Vanderbilt University) says that in majority-white schools, there is often a narrative that race is tangential to what really matters. When a person of color raises the issue, they are sometimes accused of "playing the race card." But certain incidents can bring race to the fore:

- A report highlights that there are very few teachers of color on the faculty.
- Adults express concern about students sitting in single-race groups in the cafeteria.
- Students of color are showcased for sports accomplishments, whites for academics.
- Children of color aren't invited to outside-of-school parties and sleepovers.
- Parents express discomfort with cross-racial dating among students.
- Someone makes a racist comment.
- Parents insist that their children not be taught by a teacher of color.
- Students and parents complain that the curriculum is Eurocentric.

Events like these get people thinking about race, disrupt the race-is-not-central narrative, and may bring about positive change.

In his research, teaching, and speaking, Milner has noticed another concern that's below the surface in many schools, combining the issue of race with sexism. He describes three expectations sometimes directed at black women in predominantly white schools:

• *Be the expert on all things related to black people* – Colleagues may look to black female teachers to handle problems that come up with black students. They might also be expected to organize multicultural assemblies and similar events. In addition, there's the sense that black women's expertise on racial issues is prized above their other skills and contributions.

• *Do less-visible work on behalf of students* – Some black female teachers told Milner that their white colleagues asked them to help black students with school materials, transportation problems, extracurricular activities, and dealing with hurtful racial comments. They were happy to help out, but the work cut into planning and after-school time and was not recognized or compensated.

• *Go along with the white majority* – "When these black women teachers did not laugh when others did," says Milner, "when they did not automatically agree with their majority colleagues, when they offered a counter or inconsistent view or interpretation of a phenomenon, rumors surfaced among their white colleagues that they were not team players." One teacher who stood firm on issues and spoke her mind at faculty meetings was seen as an "angry black woman."

"I found," says Milner, "that many white teachers did not want (or perhaps refused) to learn how to build their own knowledge, skills, attitudes, dispositions, worldviews, mindsets, and practices necessary to respond to the needs of black people in these almost all-white spaces." Feeling these expectations, and noticing the reluctance of their white colleagues to step up and join in the work, many of the teachers Milner interviewed said they felt like tokens, appreciated only when they passively went along with policies they might not agree with, and many sought to leave their schools – or the teaching profession.

"Black Teacher: White School" by Richard Milner IV in *Theory Into Practice*, Fall 2020 (Vol. 59, #4, pp. 400-408); Milner can be reached at rich.milner@vanderbilt.edu.

Back to page one

5. What Will It Take to Get All Students Reading Well?

In this article in *American Educator*, Sharon Vaughn (University of Texas/Austin) and Jack Fletcher (University of Houston) summarize some key insights from 30 years of literacy research: "There is no doubt that some children have reading disabilities, but the key to improved outcomes for the vast majority of struggling readers, including those with a reading disability, is enhanced core instruction – and that means enhanced curricula, assessments, pre-service and inservice professional development, and supports." Vaughn and Fletcher bemoan the fact that some students with preventable reading problems haven't received effective instruction and are referred to special education, while others who have genuine reading

disabilities are not getting early and effective interventions. System-level improvement is needed to fix these problems.

How can schools be organized so that almost all students learn to read? The authors echo the findings of the 2002 President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, which closely parallel the current emphasis on RTI (response to intervention) and MTSS (multiple tiers of systematic support):

• Focus on *results* – frequently measuring students' reading proficiency – versus *process* – implementing bureaucratic procedures.

• Focus on *prevention* versus *remediation*. This means universal screening and early intervention, progress monitoring, and appropriate support for struggling students. "It is better to over-identify children at risk for reading problems as early as possible and provide necessary instruction," say Vaughn and Fletcher, "than to under-identify and have large numbers of students who suffer as their problems linger without the required instructional support."

• Consider students with disabilities as general education students first – using effective Tier 1 instruction – and closely align general and special education services for students who are found to need Tier 2 and Tier 3 support.

To be implemented effectively, there needs to be ongoing professional development so instruction, assessment, and interventions are handled well.

Vaughn and Fletcher say that most of what they describe requires system-level change – but what can teachers do right now to support all students? Their suggestions:

- Maximize students' time on task with proven practices versus transitions, over-explaining, and behavioral management.
- Use one-minute lessons – a very short review of a challenging task, time to practice word reading with feedback, or a chance to show what they know.
- Customize instruction to students' learning needs based on good assessments.
- Teach struggling readers in pairs or small groups, tailoring instruction to their needs.
- Get students reading a wide range of text types and text levels.
- Provide explicit instruction with feedback: clear expectations up front; direct communication of those to students; modeling what students are to say or do; asking students to demonstrate the skill; providing prompt and specific feedback; and maintaining high levels of student success, engagement, and response (not calling only on the high achievers).

"Identifying and Teaching Students with Significant Reading Problems" by Sharon Vaughn and Jack Fletcher in *American Educator*, Winter 2020-2021 (Vol. 44, #4, pp. 4-11, 40); Vaughn is at srvaughn@austin.utexas.edu, Fletcher at JackFletcher@uh.edu.

Back to page one

6. "Hauntings of Past Damage" – Middle-School Students' Literacy Beliefs

In this *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* article, Thea Williamson and Sinélia Peixoto (Salisbury University) and Kira LeeKennan (California State University/Fullerton) describe a self-assessment they administered to predominantly Latinx middle-school students

at the beginning and end of a summer enrichment program. Students were asked about their goals for the summer and then:

- *What do you do well as a reader?*
- *What do you do well as a writer?*
- *What do you want to work on as a reader?*
- *What do you want to work on as a writer?*

Students were then asked to write for 5-10 minutes on a subject of their choosing.

The researchers were struck by how much students' responses to the first four questions were driven by the importance of reading and writing quickly and on surface features of language, such as neatness and correctness, versus meaning and ideas. These seemed to come directly from schools' emphasis on reading speed and volume, and turning in work that was neatly and correctly written.

What discouraged Williamson, LeeKennan, and Peixoto was that when students filled out the same self-assessment at the end of a high-quality, culturally responsive summer program, there was very little change in students' responses. "What we mostly encountered," say the researchers, "were hauntings of past damage." It's not that students weren't capable of escaping the "language ideologies" they'd absorbed over the years, but "the project of shifting students' identities and encouraging them to value what they already do is slow and complicated."

Nevertheless, the authors believe that getting students to report on their own status as readers and writers (rather than using reading and writing tests) is a step in the right direction. "We argue that students' ability to self-assess strengths and growth areas, set literacy goals, and maintain and develop positive literacy identities is a crucial component of their development as readers and writers…We urge teachers, particularly at the beginning of their relationship with readers and writers, to emphasize meaning making and ideas in reading and writing, saving conversations about spelling, adherence to syntactical conventions, and neatness in formatting for later… It is our responsibility as teachers to drive the ghosts of dominant ideologies out of the ELA curriculum, leaving room for multiple, diverse ways of doing language and literacy."

The authors note that in the second and third years of this summer program, they modified the self-assessment questions, including this new one:

- *Explain how you know if a piece of writing is good or not.*

"More, Faster, Neater: Middle School Students' Self-Assessed Literacy Concerns" by Thea Williamson, Kira LeeKennan, and Sinélia Peixoto in *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, November/December 2020 (Vol. 64, # 3, pp. 291-300); the authors are at tcwilliamson@salisbury.edu, kleekeenan@fullerton.edu, and speixoto1@salisbury.edu.

Back to page one

7. Constructivism ad Absurdum: Learning From "Bean Dad"

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Robert Pondiscio comments on a story that's making the rounds on social media. A nine-year-old girl asks her father to make her lunch, and he

suggests that she make herself some baked beans. She brings him a can of beans and an opener, which she doesn't know how to use. His response: "How do you think this works?" The girl studies the opener, tries it every which way, and finally says with a dramatic sigh, "Will you please just open the can?" The father proceeds to send a large number of tweets describing his daughter's six-hour struggle to open the can.

On Twitter, tens of thousands of commenters savaged "Bean Dad." Among the printable comments: "Child abuser" and "Psycho." Another one: "Feed her. Then teach. Then delete your account." Pondiscio believes this episode spotlights the flaws of discovery learning. In under a minute, he says, the father could have explained how an opener works, given his daughter a chance to try it out and practice, master it, and then enjoy several hours delving into higher-level stuff – perhaps learning how to follow a recipe.

The point, says Pondiscio, is that instruction can be direct without being authoritarian – and that the widely touted "guide on the side" approach to teaching is not the best pathway to learning. He recommends a new book by Greg Ashman, *The Power of Explicit Teaching and Direct Instruction* (Sage, 2021). Ashman lists the teacher behaviors that research suggests produce the most learning – which are closely aligned with the key elements of direct instruction:

- Teachers' subject matter knowledge;
- A coherent curriculum sequence;
- A balance between conceptual and procedural knowledge;
- Thoughtful pacing;
- Proactive management;
- Active teaching;
- Teacher clarity, enthusiasm, and warmth;
- Effective use of time;
- Teaching to mastery;
- Review and feedback.

"Explicit Teaching vs. Constructivism: The Misadventures of Bean Dad" by Robert Pondiscio in *Education Gadfly*, January 7, 2021

Back to page one

8. Do Schools Make a Difference?

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Allison Atteberry (University of Colorado/ Boulder) and Andrew McEachin (RAND Corporation) say the 1966 Coleman Report (the Equality of Educational Opportunity Study) has been widely interpreted as saying that schools play a small role in students' life trajectories. Instead, said Coleman and his colleagues in their voluminous study, it was what students walked into school with that mattered: socioeconomic status and family background. Based on the Coleman Report, the "schools don't matter" narrative has had lots of currency among educators and policymakers over the decades, sometimes putting a damper on serious investments in school improvement.

A little known fact is that when the report was released, Coleman said that if he'd had access to longitudinal data – student achievement over time – he would have known more about whether schools made a difference to student achievement. Well, Atteberry and McEachin did have access to such data – 200 million NWEA assessments administered in all 50 states since 2008 – and came to a strikingly different conclusion than the Coleman Report. Most of the variation in student achievement was *between* rather than *within* schools. The authors say more research is needed, especially after Covid-19 school closures, but the strong implication is that we need to investigate within-school variables – what some schools are doing that makes them much more successful than others – and invest in replicating those key factors.

"Not Where You Start, But How Much You Grow: An Addendum to the Coleman Report" by Allison Atteberry and Andrew McEachin in *Educational Researcher*, December 2020 (Vol. 49, #9, pp. 678-685); the authors can be reached at Allison.Atteberry@Colorado.edu and mceachin@rand.org.

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.

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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
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Essential Teacher
Exceptional Children
Go Teach
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
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Education Gadfly
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time Magazine