

Marshall Memo 892

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 21, 2021

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Quotes of the Week

“Classics for whom? Who decides something is a classic?”

Donalyn Miller (quoted in item #2)

“Are your students the readers, writers, and thinkers you want them to be?”

Angela Peery (see item #3)

“Learning how to express ideas, take risks in sharing perspectives publicly, and collaborate with peers has enormous social, cognitive, and economic value over time and is therefore central to high-quality education.”

Kristie Ford and Kendra Welling-Riley (see item #1)

“When you allow students to have the agency of knowing that history is not always as authoritative as we tend to imagine, it actually invites them to establish a deeper intellectual relationship with the past.”

Jarvis Givens (see item #4)

“Many of us were taught that dogged, singularly focused practice is the way to mastery, and our belief in this runs deep. But research indicates that gains during interleaving promote longer-term skill development and retention, plus more seamless transfer to other contexts.”

Meg Riordan, quoted in [“How to Use Interleaving to Foster Deeper Learning”](#) by Hoa Nguyen in *Edutopia*, June 11, 2021

“Honestly? I’d rather we didn’t have to talk to kids about explicit media, and I wish pornography weren’t, for so many, their first encounter with human sexuality, that it didn’t arrive so early to hijack their imaginations with its proscribed fantasies. But given all that, parents and educators need to work together to help kids develop a critical stance – to help them understand what’s untrue and what’s missing from those images – to ensure that, here in the real world, they proceed with consent, mutual respect, and authentic intimacy. Awkward as it may be, we can no longer afford the luxury, or the false comfort, of silence.”

Peggy Orenstein in [“Ignoring Pornography Won’t Make It Go Away”](#) in *The New York Times*, June 15, 2021

1. The Link Between Classroom Talk and Equity in Detroit Science Classes

In this article in *The Learning Professional*, Kristie Ford and Kendra Welling-Riley say that despite decades of progress in U.S. schools, there are still “stubborn patterns of inequity in graduation rates, grades, test scores, disciplinary actions, and access to extra- and co-curricular activities. These patterns exist across urban, suburban, and rural schools, and even within schools.” With the implementation of Next Generation Standards, they say, science has been especially challenging from an equity standpoint.

As district science leaders in the Detroit Public Schools, Ford and Welling-Riley are working to close achievement gaps, with a special focus over the last two years on students’ verbal participation during instruction. That’s because the students who are typically talking least in classrooms are English learners, students of color, and students with disabilities. Verbal discourse – between teachers and students and among students – plays a key role in equitable learning outcomes because:

- Student talk helps them process information.
- It helps students create connections between and among facts and concepts.
- It facilitates reasoning and problem-solving.
- It solidifies science vocabulary, content, and conceptual understanding.
- It helps move ideas from working memory to long-term storage.
- Students who participate substantively in class have fewer disciplinary referrals.
- Verbal facility in science is vital to progressing in science, math, engineering, and technology courses beyond high school.

“Apart from STEM ,” say Ford and Welling-Riley, “learning how to express ideas, take risks in sharing perspectives publicly, and collaborate with peers has enormous social, cognitive, and economic value over time and is therefore central to high-quality education.”

In Detroit schools, implementing rigorous science standards has unfortunately led to certain classroom dynamics becoming even more entrenched: teacher lectures, only a few students being called on or speaking up, lots of worksheets, and classes hurrying through the required curriculum – with highly inequitable student outcomes.

That’s why Ford and Welling-Riley worked with colleagues to launch a science initiative focused on breaking down the standards and getting teachers to plan lessons around experiments, hypothesis-development, debates, and problem-solving activities that get more students talking. Some key training topics in their PD monthly meetings:

- Integrating science standards into units and lessons;
- Writing unit and lesson plans around open-ended, authentic prompts;
- Instructional materials that involve inquiry, problem-solving, and discussion;
- Creating questions that provoke three-minute student debates open to all;

- Writing short formative assessments to check for understanding during lessons;
- Creating posters with student-talk scaffolds;
- Posting essential questions to get students thinking and talking about central concepts.

Instructional coaches observed lessons and gave teachers feedback afterwards on how these elements were working out.

An important focus of the initiative has been changing teachers' expectations of students and convincing them of the importance of getting more students talking during lessons. "Teachers have to believe in the power, agency and resiliency of their students as they puzzle through understandings with greater depths of knowledge," say Ford and Welling-Riley, "which is often captured by student discourse. In short, we want to help shift teacher mindsets from getting through content to understanding how students grow their skills and knowledge to become adept STEM thinkers."

Detroit's science initiative is piloting [TeachFX](#), an app that automatically measures the amount of teacher and student talk during lessons, as well as questioning techniques, think time, equity of voice, and lesson design. The app provides data to teachers – but not to their supervisors – which encourages teachers to take risks, try new strategies, and reflect on results without fear of negative consequences in their formal evaluations. Data from this app has been a wake-up call for many teachers. "The very first time I used TeachFX, I was amazed at the amount of time I was talking," said one.

"Teachers can triangulate data from TeachFX, student work, live coaching feedback, and summative assessments to calibrate their own instruction and learn from peer educators," say Ford and Welling-Riley. "By anonymously analyzing discourse patterns by student group, grade level, and content area among volunteer teachers, we can see where we need to better support teachers to make science talk more equitable."

Feedback on Detroit's science initiative has been encouraging so far. More than 300 teachers have used TeachFX or attended PD workshops on teaching in ways that increase student talk. Among teachers experimenting with the app, there has been a 45 percent increase in student talk. Teachers say they have a better grasp of science standards, are developing their skills, and are more frequently sharing ideas and techniques with colleagues. One teacher said, "I like the idea of building on questions from one to another to add depth to the classroom discussion and the engagement of the students."

["Student Talk in Science Class"](#) by Kristie Ford and Kendra Welling-Riley in *The Learning Professional*, June 2021 (Vol. 42, #3, pp. 58-61); the authors can be reached at kristie.ford@detroitk12.org and kendra.wellingriley@detroitk12.org.

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2. A North Dakota District Thinks Through Its Secondary ELA Curriculum

In this article in *The Learning Professional*, Aimee Volk, district curriculum coordinator for English in the West Fargo Public Schools, describes the district's journey toward more-inclusive literature options for secondary students. It started when Donalyn Miller, a visiting speaker, was asked where the classics fit into the curriculum. "Classics for

whom?” Miller responded. “Who decides something is a classic?” This got Volk thinking about several other questions:

- What is the purpose of requiring all students to read a specific text?
- Do the same texts need to be read across a grade or course to ensure equity?
- When does text uniformity help and when does it undermine equity?
- Why are so many middle- and high-school students turned off reading, especially the less-advantaged students?

Committed to implementing a “guaranteed and viable curriculum” built around rigorous curriculum standards, teachers and administrators had a series of meetings to decide what students at each grade should know and be able to do, vetted classroom resources and a number of texts, and continued the practice of allowing teachers to choose the texts their students would read.

Strong disagreements emerged. “Some educators spoke passionately about including more relevant and diverse texts and offering more student choice,” says Volk. “Others felt their current instructional practices and beliefs were being challenged.” She realized they needed to slow down, build trust, and think more carefully about the deeper purpose. Volk asked English teachers to think about three questions: *Who are you as a reader? What is your reading life story? When did you fall in love with reading?* Some teachers said they’d always been readers, while others remembered they had been nonreaders until a particular book ignited their passion. This exercise got teachers thinking about how they could get more of their students engaged in reading. They embraced the metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors: books in which students could see themselves or identify with a main character or experience; books that helped students relate to the experiences and perspectives of others; and books that made students want to vicariously take part in the experience of a story.

“Next,” says Volk, “we focused on the components that needed to be present in the books we chose.” They wanted identity development, skill development (which had been overemphasized in the past), intellectual development, and criticality; books that would build students’ self-efficacy, agency, and identity.

What emerged from all these discussions was a compromise between books read by all students in a grade or course and student choice:

- An anchor text that would be a shared classroom experience, to which teachers and students would refer through the year;
- A mentor text that illuminates an author’s craft;
(All students read the anchor and mentor texts, which are chosen to be engaging, diverse, relevant, and offer different perspectives.)
- Book club books that students read in groups and that include different perspectives, reading levels, and formats;
- Classroom library books with a wider variety of topics, experiences, and reading levels;
- The media center, with an even wider range of choices.

As this policy was implemented, not all stakeholders agreed on what was appropriate for each grade level: *Is this a social studies or an English class? What standards are you teaching?*

Why are you teaching politics? This led to further discussion and teachers providing a rationale for their choices to colleagues and families, pointing to specific state standards: reading and writing skills, content knowledge, and critical understandings of themselves, their community, and the world. Students whose parents disagreed with a reading selection were offered an alternative text.

“Teachers have been passionate about this work,” concludes Volk, “and eager to incorporate more relevant and diverse texts to add to our district resources. Still, there has been much debate about the importance of whole-class reading, teaching the classics, and how to ensure that our texts are complex enough.” Even so, the most common reactions from students and teachers have been positive: students saying they loved reading for the first time since third grade, eagerly looking forward to literature circles, and showing improvements in classroom engagement and reading achievement.

[“Reading List Rewrite”](#) by Aimee Volk in *The Learning Professional*, June 2021 (Vol. 42, #3, pp. 66-69); Volk can be reached at aimee.volk@gmail.com.

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3. Conducting a Schoolwide Literacy Check-Up

“Are your students the readers, writers, and thinkers you want them to be?” asks consultant/author Angela Peery in this *Cult of Pedagogy* article. After visiting hundreds of classrooms in recent years, she’s concerned about:

- A paucity of authentic reading and writing activities;
- Cut-color-paste activities masquerading as literacy instruction;
- Low-level worksheets;
- Disparities in the content taught by same-grade and same-course teachers;
- Teachers calling on students who raise their hands while other students are inattentive and bored.

The pandemic has challenged teachers, students, and families and sparked many creative efforts, but also led to passive screen time and too many YouTube videos without thoughtful follow-up discussions.

As schools return fully to in-person instruction, Peery believes that literacy is, more than ever, a civil rights issue. Without key skills, knowledge, and habits of mind, she says, K-12 graduates “become prey to misinformation and economic manipulation... will earn lower wages... and risk living a life devoid of the beauty and power of literature.” She suggests that schools and districts should conduct a *literacy check-up* to fill gaps and fine-tune the K-12 effort. “What gets monitored gets done,” she says. “It’s time to refocus.” Some key areas:

- *Defining good literacy instruction* – A starting point is being clear about what it means to be well-prepared, literate high-school graduates. They:
 - Choose to read independently and can tackle complex texts in all disciplines;
 - Can speak and write well, share information effectively, defend their positions with evidence, and collaborate;

- Can think critically, analyze and synthesize, and take into account the credibility of sources;
- Seek out information about their interests and find answers to meaningful questions;
- Are global citizens who embrace diversity and seek cultural understanding.

All this prepares graduates for success in the years ahead.

- *Whole-school environment* – A team might conduct a building tour looking at literacy displays in common areas, hallways, and classroom doors, including:

- Students’ responses to what they are reading;
- Students’ writing;
- Displays of books students are reading;
- A sign on each classroom door saying what book the teacher is currently reading.

“Displays don’t have to be elaborate or time-consuming,” says Peery. “Encouraging and celebrating all things literate throughout a school sends a clear message to students and families that literacy is valued.”

- *Classroom libraries* – In addition to the school library, all students should have ready access to books in the rooms where they spend most of the school day. Some look-fors:

- A robust collection – about 30 books per student;
- A mix of fiction and nonfiction, including reference books;
- A range of readability levels – at, above, and below grade level;
- A multicultural mix with plenty of recent books;
- An organization system;
- Books displayed in an inviting manner.

Classroom libraries should have their own area in the classroom and lend themselves to browsing, so groups of students can find related books to read together.

- *Reading instruction* – For building tours by administrators and peers (a.k.a. instructional rounds or learning walks), some look-fors in the elementary grades:

- Interactive readalouds conducted by the teacher;
- Direct vocabulary instruction (versus video);
- Analysis of focus words and explicit connections to word meanings and context;
- A word wall with sight words and academic vocabulary, frequently referenced;
- Effective lesson execution, including clear objectives, success criteria, background knowledge activated, checks for understanding;
- Minilessons and modeling, guided practice, and independent practice, with gradual release of responsibility.

For middle- and high-school classrooms, some additional look-fors:

- Clarity on lesson intentions;
- Direct teaching of key vocabulary;
- Activating background knowledge;
- Direct instruction of new content/skills, checks for understanding, then gradual release of responsibility;
- Text-based, higher-level questions;

- Reciprocal teaching, jigsaw;
- Time for independent and self-directed reading;
- Instruction in note-taking, summarizing, annotating, and other study skills.

Big-picture objectives in the upper grades: increasing student independence and motivation.

• *Writing instruction* – Elementary students need to be able to “express their ideas with correct spelling and fluent, legible handwriting,” says Peery. “They need lots of opportunities to write in order to become both more competent and confident.” Some components:

- Orchestrating whole-class, small-group, and independent writing work;
- Handwriting instruction, modeling, and practice;
- Spelling instruction and practice;
- Direct instruction and practice with language conventions;
- The teacher using shared and interactive writing;
- The teacher reading aloud and discussing mentor texts and sentences;
- Using exemplar texts and explicit instruction about a certain type of writing;
- The teacher modeling/demonstrating the writing process;
- Minilessons focused on a need that has arisen as students write;
- Students holding peer conferences, conferring with the teacher, and sharing their writing.

In middle- and high-school ELA and content-area classrooms, Peery is concerned about what she calls “fake writing assignments” – students making posters and writing reports with lots of material pasted in from websites. “Students do these assignments,” she says, “with little conversation among themselves and with very little initial direction or ongoing feedback from their teachers.” Many of the secondary-level look-fors are the same as elementary, with these additions:

- Writing as an integral part of content courses, including note-taking and entrance and exit tickets;
- Clear directions for the current writing assignment;
- A word wall with domain-specific terms for the current unit;
- Dictionaries, atlases, encyclopedias, displays, and print material from the library;
- Exemplars of writing appropriate to the discipline;
- Rubrics or proficiency scales;
- Teachers modeling and using think-alouds and exemplars;
- Teachers conferring individually and with small groups.

[“Does Your School Need a Literacy Check-Up?”](#) by Angela Peery in *Cult of Pedagogy*, June 14, 2021; Peery can be reached at drangelapeery@gmail.com. Her book (with Tracey Shiel) is *What To Look for in Literacy* (Routledge, 2021).

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4. More on What It Means to Be an Anti-Racist Educator

In this *Vox* piece, Sean Illing interviews Jarvis Givens (Harvard Graduate School of Education), focusing on the current debate about how U.S. schools should handle teaching about the nation’s racial history. Some excerpts:

• *What is the historical context of anti-racist teaching?* “We’ve been talking about it in public as though it’s this novel thing,” says Givens, “and perhaps it’s because so much of this discussion is about how to teach white students, but for well over a century, black teachers have been modeling an anti-racist disposition in their pedagogical practices. They recognized how the dreams of their students were at odds with the structural context in which they found themselves. And they had to offer their students ways of thinking about themselves that were life-affirming, despite a society that was physically organized in a way that explicitly told them they were subhuman.”

• *Does anti-racist teaching have a political agenda?* “Any approach to framing history is going to have some political commitments baked into the narrative,” says Givens. “The choices we make about what to highlight or omit, all of that reflects certain values and biases... The best educational models can teach us to recognize injustices, and they can cultivate a commitment to resisting those things, but equally important – and this is something black educators have done for a long time in their own communities – is modeling other ways of being in the world, other ways of being in relationships to the world.”

• *Can teachers find the right balance?* “If you’re striving to create more justice in the world, you can’t do that if you’re only focusing on the things you’re trying to negate,” says Givens. “You have to have some life-affirming vision that you can hold on to, a vision that’s more meaningful and points us in the direction of a better world... Absolutely, there’s injustice. This is a part of the story, part of our story, but black life is much more expansive than that. It always has been... Our strategy can’t be just about proving injury. At the same time, the public has to stop denying that harm and violence has been and continues to be done. Both of these things are challenges before us.”

• *What was the role of the Brown decision?* The U.S. Supreme Court ruling was vital to dismantling *de jure* segregation, with schools for African-American students systematically underresourced, says Givens. But before *Brown*, many black teachers were providing first-rate schooling for the likes of Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and Angela Davis, not to mention writing textbooks challenging distortions of black history in the standard curriculum and setting up organizations to advocate for black educators and students. “This is all to say, we can hold both things in our minds,” says Givens. “We can talk about the violent resistance against black educational strivings and the intentional underdevelopment of African-American schools, but we also have to rigorously account for the things black folks were doing on a daily basis to make meaningful education possible despite the neglect.”

• *Can individual teachers make a difference?* “One of the best things my high-school U.S. history teacher did for me,” says Givens, “was help me understand that no history is an exhaustive representation of anything. She made me aware of silences. When you allow students to have the agency of knowing that history is not always as authoritative as we tend to imagine, it actually invites them to establish a deeper intellectual relationship with the past. It allows us to think about why certain scholars might have chosen to represent certain aspects of the past in ways that they did.”

• *What does it mean to be an anti-racist teacher?* “A lot of the conversations around anti-racist teaching are directed at white teachers and white students, without actually being named as such,” says Givens. “This is obviously very different than talking about how black educators engaged black students in the Jim Crow South, or even my own experience growing up in Compton, California, where I attended majority-black schools with mostly black teachers... A fundamental part of being a critical educator, an educator committed to justice and equality, means being committed to reckoning with the history of racial injustice and trying to teach students in a way that supports the development of a critical awareness of the past, which includes acknowledging how that past continues to structure the ways in which we’re in relationships with one another in the present.

“It means recognizing that many of the institutions we have inherited have very long roots in this history. There’s a moral imperative for all teachers who choose to face those realities of history and own it in the present. Being an anti-racist teacher in this moment means to honor the depths of human suffering reflected in that history by telling the truth about it. But then again, that’s what anti-racist teaching has always demanded of those educators who chose to teach in a manner that was disruptive of the racial inequality in our society. We can’t look away from it because it’s in every direction you turn. I do recognize that learning the truth about our histories as different racial groups, and as a country, can be difficult. There’s going to be some level of discomfort, and we have to be real about that.”

• *How much discomfort can we handle?* “One thing I do know,” concludes Givens, “is that there are some people in this country who never had the luxury of not facing this stuff. And they’ve always encountered a lot of discomfort. It’s not comfortable for black folks or Native American communities to think about this history of land dispossession or slavery or Jim Crow or lynchings, and how the legacy of these things persists today... So now we’re in a place where we’re trying to figure out how to be more intentional in acknowledging our history and its consequences, and that means that discomfort is going to have to be shared in a way it hasn’t been up to this point.”

[“Is There an Uncontroversial Way to Teach America’s Racist History?”](#) An Interview of Jarvis Givens by Sean Illing in *Vox*, June 11, 2021; Illing can be reached at seanilling@vox.com. The stimulus for this interview was Givens’s May 2021 article in *The Atlantic*, [“What’s Missing from the Discourse about Anti-Racist Teaching.”](#) Givens is the author of *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Harvard University Press, 2021); he can be reached at jarvis_givens@gse.harvard.edu.

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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 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
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