

Marshall Memo 1009

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 30, 2023

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Quotes of the Week

"I am always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught."
Winston Churchill

"Sometimes I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company?"
Zora Neale Hurston

"It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it."
Joseph Joubert

"Fewer slides, more stories."
Adi Ignatius in "[Leaders, What's Your Story?](#)" in *Harvard Business Review*,
November/December 2023 (Vol. 101, #6, p. 12)

"Sometimes even in the toughest situations, the smallest bit of praise can give a person enough confidence, enough of a dopamine hit, to keep going and keep trying. But to work, the praise needs to be specific. Generic praise does no good at all."
Jennifer Gonzalez (see item #1)

"Research has shown that storytelling has a remarkable ability to connect people and inspire them to take action."
Frances Frei and Anne Morriss (see item #5)

"A leader's optimism is highly infectious – but so are emotions such as stress and anxiety."
Frances Frei and Anne Morriss (*ibid.*)

1. Jennifer Gonzalez on Pausing Helpful Suggestions and Just Appreciating

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez says she recently had a conversation with a teacher who sometimes feels inadequate reading all the ideas Gonzalez shares on her website and podcast – and with well-meaning suggestions from her principal, PD workshops, articles, and material on social media. To a hard-working teacher, the message that comes across is, *Do more!*

Looking back on the material she’s shared over the years, Gonzalez hears this teacher. “While I fully believe it’s all good, useful stuff,” she says, “I get how it could be overwhelming…” especially when higher-ups are pushing teachers to implement this and adopt that and *get better*.

“So right now,” says Gonzalez, “I want to pause my usual stream of ideas and suggestions and talk to those administrators, to principals and superintendents and instructional coaches and anyone else in a position to tell teachers how to do their jobs. I have no new strategies or tools or books to share with you this week. Nothing new to implement. My only message for you is that your teachers need a win, and they need it now.”

“When a person receives criticism,” Gonzalez continues, “– direct or implied – and no praise, they’re drained of motivation. And this is especially true when that person is doing something difficult. Something like teaching. Without any feedback about what they’re doing right, it becomes easier and easier to give up. The opposite is also true. Sometimes even in the toughest situations, the smallest bit of praise can give a person enough confidence, enough of a dopamine hit, to keep going and keep trying. But to work, the praise needs to be specific. Generic praise does no good at all.”

Gonzalez suggests that this week administrators choose ten teachers and make a point of giving each one of them specific, positive feedback – either for something you know they’ve been doing well, or for something you observe in a short classroom visit. Maybe ask them to invite you in to see something they’re pleased with. Some possible areas for praise:

- Relationships and rapport with students;
- Conveying excitement and interest;
- Clear and engaging explanations and examples;
- Well-chosen curriculum materials;
- Checking for understanding and wait-time;
- Providing tools students need to manage their own learning;

- Smooth classroom management and making good use of unexpected leftover time;
- Nimble decision-making.

This is not a checklist, says Gonzalez. “It’s not a walk-through sheet.” Just a list of possible areas for appreciation. “Every teacher is good at something, and they need to hear about it – the more specific, the better.”

Having given compliments to ten teachers this week, she urges, pick another ten (or five, or two) for the following week, and keep it up. “My guess is that once you’ve done just a few, you’re going to want to do more, and it’s going to get easier. Because the person receiving the compliment isn’t the only one who gets a dopamine hit. The giver gets one too.”

[“Your Teachers Need a Win”](#) by Jennifer Gonzalez in *Cult of Pedagogy*, October 22, 2023; Gonzalez can be reached at gonzjenn@cultofpedagogy.com.

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2. A Surprising Surge of Creativity During Unexpected Interruptions

In this *Harvard Business Review* interview by Eben Harrell, Tim Schweisfurth (Hamburg University of Technology, Germany) describes his research on the effect of unexpected interruptions on people’s work – for example, a business shuts down temporarily because of a fire in a supplier’s factory [or a snowstorm closes a district’s schools]. Schweisfurth found that people’s output of creative ideas increased significantly in this kind of situation – but that was not true over a long weekend or a vacation.

What explains the difference? Schweisfurth’s theory is that during an extended, planned downtime, our brains mostly disengage from work, but during a temporary interruption, there’s what psychologists call an *attention residue*. This turns out to be a “sweet spot for creativity,” he says. “It’s when our minds continue to mull over something that’s important to us even after we’ve moved on to another activity. Think of all the times you’ve had a ‘Eureka!’ moment in the shower or while pushing a cart around the grocery store. Those insights all resulted from your brain’s behind-the-scenes perseverance.”

An emotionally charged interruption such as 9/11 doesn’t have this effect; creative thinking is the last thing on people’s minds in situations like that.

Schweisfurth suggests that the positive possibilities of unexpected interruptions can be increased in several ways:

- Making yourself take periodic breaks during the workday;
- Ending a meeting earlier than planned;
- A manager announcing a no-work day with little advance notice (so it’s not possible to plan a getaway vacation).

[“Unexpected Interruptions Can Boost Creativity.”](#) An Interview with Tim Schweisfurth by Eben Harrell in *Harvard Business Review*, November/December 2023 (Vol. 101, #6, pp. 34-35)

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3. Cynicism, Intelligence, and Competence: Are They Linked?

In this article in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Olga Stavrova (Tilburg University, The Netherlands) and Daniel Ehlebracht (University of Cologne, Germany) report on six studies of common beliefs about cynicism and intelligence – and what cognitive science actually reveals. The researchers begin with this definition of cynicism: the belief that self-interest is the ultimate motive guiding human behavior, even seemingly altruistic actions. Stavrova and Ehlebracht then share their findings:

- Surveys show that an increasing number of people have a cynical view of human nature, and young adults are less trusting of each other and more cynical about institutions than ever before.

- Starting with the ancient Greeks, literary works have often described cynics as clear and realistic, not dark and pessimistic. Among 19th- and 20th-century writers, cynicism was seen as a sign of intelligence and wit. Ambrose Bierce and Lillian Hellman said cynicism was the art of seeing the true nature of things, and George Bernard Shaw called it the “power of accurate observation.” Fictional characters like Sherlock Holmes were depicted as cynical, experienced, insightful, competent, and knowledgeable.

- The lay public seems to have picked up on this narrative from fiction and popular culture. Surveys show that people most often hold a “cynical genius” belief – that cynics are smarter than their less-cynical counterparts.

- Indeed, say Stavrova and Ehlebracht, there is an “abundance of smart and witty cynics in fiction... As the primary goal of fiction is entertainment, fictional worlds are typically more dangerous, their villains are meaner, and the costs of mistakes are higher than in reality.... In these hostile and dangerous worlds created for our entertainment, cynicism is warranted and often turns out to be essential for survival, suggesting that those who endorse it are likely to be the smart ones.” (Commenting on the *House of Cards* series, Barack Obama said, “Life in Washington is a little more boring than displayed on the screen.”)

- But in fact, empirical data show that cynical individuals tend to do *worse* on cognitive tasks and objective tests, and are generally less educated than people with a more positive view of human nature. Conversely, people with more education and cognitive ability tend to be less cynical.

- It gets worse. Research shows that a cynical view of human nature is associated with poor quality of relationships, lower psychological well-being, diminished self-esteem, decreased financial success, bad health outcomes, and increased risk of mortality. The opposite is true for those with a more upbeat view of the world.

- In addition to the influence of fiction and popular culture, the authors suggest two other explanations for how people’s cynical beliefs are self-reinforcing and distort a clearer view of reality. First, *negativity bias*: the pain that comes from betrayals of trust is stronger in people’s minds than the pleasure associated with positive outcomes (trust rewarded), so people better remember narratives about gullibility and hurt and draw general life conclusions from those experiences. Second, when people buy into a cynical stance, they are distrustful and may

not give others a chance to prove them wrong. “It usually remains unknown,” say the authors, “whether their cynicism resulted in missed opportunities.”

- While the studies showed that many people associate cynicism with competence, causation is not explored. “Do they think that cynicism makes people more competent,” ask Stavrova and Ehlebracht, “or that higher levels of competence turn people into cynics?” In addition, since cynicism is closely related to distrust, it’s possible that cynical individuals are more distrustful of others’ opinions and knowledge, preventing them from expanding their own knowledge and understanding.

- Causation is also unclear with the data linking cynicism with competence. It’s possible that people with higher levels of cognitive ability, education, and academic achievement go through life more protected from adverse experiences and have a better chance of living in a safe, friendly environment, which works against the development of cynicism. More research is needed, say the authors.

Stavrova and Ehlebracht conclude with a quip from Stephen Colbert: “Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the furthest thing from it.”

[“The Cynical Genius Illusion: Exploring and Debunking Lay Beliefs About Cynicism and Competence”](#) by Olga Stavrova and Daniel Ehlebracht in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, July 2018 (Vol. 45, #2, pp. 254-269); Stavrova can be reached at O.Stavrova@uvt.nl.

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4. Literacy As a Springboard for Student Empowerment

In this article in *Language Arts*, Chris Hass (James Madison University) says that as a second- and third-grade teacher, he used to ask his students, What *is* reading? At first they said reading was figuring out unfamiliar words and learning new vocabulary, but as he continued to ask the question, their responses evolved:

- *Reading is imagining you’re the character in a book.*
- *It’s trying to figure out what might happen next.*
- *It’s forgetting what’s going on around you because you’re so into the story.*

“The power of returning to this question over time,” says Hass, “was that it scaffolded my students to continue thinking more deeply about their practice as well as their relationship to reading.”

Then he began asking a follow-up question: *Why is it important that we’re growing as readers, writers, and speakers?* At first, students’ responses were pedestrian: to get ready for fourth grade, do well on “those tests,” go to a good college and get a well-paying job.

But one day a quiet student raised her hand and suggested, “So we’ll be able to stand up for ourselves.” This comment got the class thinking about literacy at a different level. Students recalled reading Malala Yousafzai’s story, doing a project on saving sea animals, lobbying a state legislator, and writing letters to a city council member.

“Once they had the eyes to see how literacy and democratic practices go hand in hand,” said Hass, “they could not help but continue to share more expansive visions of literacy...”

– talking out disagreements, reading a news article about unfair dress codes, exploring reports of problems around the world. Hass built on this pivotal discussion for the remainder of the school year, continuing to see literacy as a tool for students standing up for themselves and others. There were three main vehicles for the theme:

- *Keeping classroom journals* – As part of morning meetings, students added to journals (made of stapled sheets of art paper) that explored a wide range of questions: *Why do worms crawl on the driveway when it rains? Why do things look darker when they're wet? Why do people want to ban books at school? Why aren't there any female presidents? Why is there racism?* “The discussions that grew from these questions,” says Hass, “created a culture of inquiry in the classroom – one that positioned each of us to think more critically about the workings of the world around us.”

- *Inquiring about activism* – Hass purchased a set of books with stories about different types of community advocacy – the 1909 Shirtwaist Factory strike, protecting Egypt’s treasured books, African-American freedom fighters, how Selma’s teachers changed history – and led discussions about the problems confronted in each story. Students took the books home and reported back on insights from discussions with family members. Realizing that they all had the power to create change, students generated a list of what taking action looks like in practice.

- *Acting on their convictions* – Hass asked each student to choose one issue from the list that was especially important to them. Kids read a variety of texts on their chosen issue, conducted surveys and interviews, and created a culminating project. There were petitions, schoolwide signature drives, and letters sent to city officials and state legislators, school board members, food service providers, and the school’s principal.

“By the end of the school year,” Hass says, “my students learned there is much more to reading than simply decoding words or gaining skills to do well on a test.” Students were informed about issues in their communities and around the world, built understanding and empathy for others, became more-critical consumers of information, and took action on issues that were important to them.

[“Learning to Stand Up for Themselves: Using Literacy As a Vehicle for Change”](#) by Chris Hass in *Language Arts*, September 2023 (Vol. 101, #1, pp. 65-68); Hass can be reached at hassel@jmu.edu.

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5. Leading Change with a Compelling Story

“Research has shown that storytelling has a remarkable ability to connect people and inspire them to take action,” say Frances Frei (Harvard Business School) and Anne Morriss (Leadership Consortium) in this *Harvard Business Review* article. They quote author Tim O’Brien: “Storytelling is the essential human activity. The harder the situation, the more essential it is.” Here’s what Frei and Morriss have learned from leaders who’ve used narrative most effectively:

- *Understand your story so well that you can describe it in simple terms.* Using jargony, complex prose won't convince people beyond a narrow subset of stakeholders. Can you distill the essence of your vision and your plan to a page? A paragraph? A word? The French philosopher Blaise Pascal once apologized for writing a long letter because he didn't have time to write a short one.

- *Revisit and honor your organization's past.* "It's easy to become so focused on the things you want to change that you forget to communicate what you *don't* want to," say Frei and Morriss. "To get everyone on board with your ideas, you need to show that you truly understand the organization, starting with the good stuff." The planning process should include people who are institutional loyalists, listening carefully to their sense of history. "Honor the past they're holding on to," say the authors, "and they may gradually loosen their grip." At the same time, it's important to deal with the not-so-good parts of the past with honesty and optimism: here are the problems, and we can solve them together.

- *Provide a clear and compelling mandate for a better future.* Leaders need to be clear about the problem that needs to be solved – and the cost of not solving it. "Your answers must be persuasive enough to override the comfort of familiar beliefs and behaviors," say Frei and Morriss. And there must be enough energy behind the rationale to overcome the inevitable bumps. Kanter's Law says, *Everything looks like a failure in the middle.*

- *Describe a detailed and hopeful way forward.* It's important to share what persuaded you to choose a particular strategy – but "when it comes to data in storytelling," caution Frei and Morriss, "less is more." Pick a few numbers that convey the care you've put into the overall plan, and show confidence that there will be positive outcomes.

- *Put these pieces together to tell your story.* "Use words, numbers, cartoons, pictures," they say, "– anything that helps activate your team – to bring your change story to life. Spark joy in the process, and stay open to the unexpected."

- *Be intentionally redundant.* Tell the story again and again in presentations, interviews, meetings, videos, and one-on-ones. "You'll probably need to communicate far more often than you think you should," say the authors. "In our experience, change leaders generally need to double or triple their pace of strategic messaging... One test of whether you're communicating your change story often enough: are you sick of hearing yourself talk?" That's what it takes to get through to busy, distracted stakeholders and enable success even when you're not present – because you can't be everywhere at once.

- *Identify and use your emotions.* "A leader's optimism is highly infectious," say Frei and Morriss, "– but so are emotions such as stress and anxiety... When you're a leader, there's no button to turn off the broadcast feature on your feelings." One of the most interesting leadership stories in this article is from former PepsiCo chief executive officer Indra Nooyi. She regularly sent thank-you notes to her colleagues' *parents*. Some of these high-flying executives said that hearing from their parents about one of her notes was the best thing that had ever happened to them.

In a sidebar to this article, Frei and Morriss say, “In addition to being powerful tools for persuasion, emotions can ground us and make us more authentic.” They list ten emotions that leaders tend to undervalue and can be harnessed in their change storytelling:

- Frustration – empathizing with others when things are not going as they should;
- Discomfort – so much important stuff happens outside our comfort zone;
- Anger – often a mask for other feelings – like disappointment and sadness;
- Regret – kicking yourself for not saying something that could have made a difference;
- Enthusiasm – rocket fuel for positive change;
- Devotion – commitment to another’s success shouldn’t be withheld;
- Fellowship – an essential support in times of trouble;
- Grace – giving it to ourselves before granting it to others;
- Joy – one of Steve Kerr’s core values with the Golden State Warriors (it shows);
- Happiness – the end point of any change effort.

[“Storytelling That Drives Bold Change: How to Craft a Narrative That Matters”](#) by Frances Frei and Anne Morriss in *Harvard Business Review*, November/December 2023 (Vol. 101, #6, pp. 62-71)

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6. Crafting a Strong Statement of Purpose

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Catherine Bailey, Catherine Tilley, and Anna Lelia Sandoghdar suggest five criteria for a well-crafted purpose statement, which they say should articulate “the reason the organization exists:”

- Societal – Explicit reference to a pressing human problem the organization addresses;
- Authentic – Accurately and honestly reflect the organization’s true aims;
- Believable – What can be realistically accomplished; not too grandiose;
- Relevant – Clear explanation of who will benefit and how;
- Engaging – Well-written, inspiring, and “appealing to the ears as much as the mind.”

[“What Makes a Great Corporate Purpose Statement?”](#) by Catherine Bailey, Catherine Tilley, and Anna Lelia Sandoghdar in *Harvard Business Review*, September 11, 2023

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7. Teaching Skimming and Close Reading

In this *Edutopia* article, Michael McDowell says many students need explicit instruction on when to skim and when to slow down and dive into the details. Expert readers can switch seamlessly from one to the other, skimming to quickly look for new information and key points, pick up a few surface-level ideas, get the general idea or the gist of multiple ideas, and make connections with ideas across new contexts – then zeroing in on a specific subject or task at a much slower pace. But many students need to be taught these skills.

McDowell suggests several steps for teaching students to master switching from skimming to focusing:

- Practice identifying what needs deep focus and what can be skimmed based on the priorities of the task.
- Understand the strengths and weaknesses of skimming and focusing. Skimming can be helpful or superficial, rewarding or frustrating; focusing may not be emotionally rewarding but produces a cognitively engaging experience.
- Establish a study schedule that allocates time for each – for example, doing sustained reading or working on a series of math problems in the morning, then skimming other material or surfing the Web for ideas in the afternoon.
- Practicing skimming skills – “Skimming is not about merely scrolling through content,” says McDowell; “it’s about extracting valuable insights efficiently.” Students need to notice headings, subheadings, and summaries and see how key points are organized. They might create a Venn diagram to compare situations, perspectives, and tasks.
- When it’s time to focus, eliminate distractions and create an environment conducive to deep work, perhaps in 15-minute chunks.
- Reflect and adjust – Students should be guided to journaling or use other reflection tools to periodically evaluate their skimming/focusing skills and make necessary adjustments.

[“Guiding Students to Know When to Skim and When to Focus”](#) by Michael McDowell in *Edutopia*, October 19, 2023

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8. Children’s Books on Excellence in the African Diaspora

In this feature in *Language Arts*, Aeriale Johnson recommends books that highlight notable achievements among people of African descent (click the link below for the cover image and a short synopsis of each book):

- *Because Claudette* by Tracey Baptiste, illustrated by Tonya Engel
- *Black Girl Rising* by Brynne Barnes, illustrated by Tatyana Fazlalizadeh
- *Fearless Mary* by Tami Charles, illustrated by Claire Almon
- *We Are Here* by Tami Charles, illustrated by Bryan Collier
- *Zion Unmatched* by Zion Clark and James Hirsch
- *When the Schools Shut Down* by Yolanda Gladden and Tamara Pizzoli, illustrated by Keisha Morris
- *Black Boy, Black Boy* by Ali Kamanda and Jorge Redmond, illustrated by Ken Daley
- *Hold Them Close: A Love Letter to Black Children* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow, illustrated by Patrick Dougher
- *A Song for the Unsung: Bayard Rustin, the Man Behind the 1963 March on Washington* by Carole Boston Weatherford and Rob Sanders, illustrated by Byron McCray
- *Jump At the Sun: The True Tale of Unstoppable Storycatcher Zora Neale Hurston* by Alicia Williams, illustrated by Jacqueline Alcántara
- *Your Legacy: A Bold Reclaiming of Our Enslaved History* by Schele Williams, illustrated by Tonya Engel
- *That Flag* by Tameka Fryer Brown, illustrated by Nikkolas Smith

[“Children’s Literature Reviews: ‘Walk Together, Children’”](#) by Aeriale Johnson in *Language Arts*, September 2023 (Vol. 101, #1, pp. 69-75)

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9. Short Item:

Helping Students Master Spelling Demons – On her free [Drawings Of... website](#), Lillie Marshall uses cartoons to share clever strategies for committing to memory the correct spelling of notoriously tricky words – for example, column, grateful, lose, dessert, attendance, and answer.

“Commonly Misspelled Words and How to Correct Them” by Lillie Marshall in *Drawings Of...*, updated October 16, 2023

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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 54 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
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
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 Ed (formerly Ed. Magazine)
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