

Marshall Memo 871

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

January 25, 2021

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Quotes of the Week

“Things I never ever want to say after Covid-19: *I can’t hear you. You’re frozen. It’s lagging.*”
Vicki Jenkins, a New Jersey dance teacher, on challenges during remote teaching, in [“Schools During the Pandemic: A Report Card”](#) in *The New York Times*, January 22, 2021

“As a principal, it was my expectation that every teacher in our building would eventually serve as a teacher leader, lending their experience and expertise to support their colleagues.”
Leroy Gaines in [“Lead Through Crisis Together”](#) in *Principal*, January/February 2021 (Vol. 100, #3, pp. 30-33)

“When 70 percent of Republicans believe the election was illegitimate, it means we have a far deeper problem than just how civics and history are taught... Now more than ever, schools must impress upon the minds and souls of our young people the importance of sound judgment, integrity, modesty, and dignity.”
Dale Chu in [“What the Capitol Riot Means for Civics Education”](#) in *Education Gadfly*, January 21, 2021

“When rioters attacked the U.S. Capitol on January 6, students saw firsthand the power of social media to threaten or protect the foundation of American democracy... The entire episode presented educators who focus on digital citizenship and media literacy with yet another teachable moment.”
Alyson Klein in [“How to Talk About Social Media and the Capitol Insurrection: A Guide for Teachers”](#) in *Education Week*, January 19, 2021

“Most things in life have a level of complexity and domain knowledge that don’t allow people to verify things for themselves.”
Beth McMurtrie in [“Teaching in the Age of Disinformation”](#) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 22, 2021 (Vol. 67, #10, pp. 19-23)

“When day comes we step out of the shade,
afame and unafraid.
The new dawn blooms as we free it.
For there is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it,
If only we’re brave enough to be it.”

Amanda Gorman, the nation’s first youth poet laureate, in the concluding lines
of her [inaugural poem](#) “The Hill We Climb” delivered January 20, 2021

1. Beyond Fact-Checking: Media Literacy Skills to Combat “Truth Decay”

In this Rand Corporation report, Alice Huguet, Garrett Baker, Laura Hamilton, and John Pane bemoan what they call *truth decay* – “the diminishing role that facts, data, and analysis play in our political and civic discourse.” Here’s their analysis of what’s gone wrong and their synthesis of recommended standards for teaching media literacy skills in schools:

- *Problem #1: Increasing disagreement about facts and interpretations of facts and data*

Teaching standards:

- Recognizing the limitations of one’s own knowledge and understanding of the facts;
- Filling gaps in knowledge by using experts, libraries, and search engines;
- Understanding how today’s information sources and tools can skew facts and perspectives – for example, search engine algorithms, specialized discussion groups, choice of social media connections.

- *Problem #2: Declining trust in formerly respected sources of facts and information*

Teaching standards:

- Evaluating the expertise of purveyors of information (academic credentials, role, firsthand knowledge) and their motivations (political, financial);
- Evaluating whether information meets established scientific, journalistic, and peer review standards;
- Analyzing information for bias, deception, or manipulation;
- Considering the social, political, and historical contexts of information and how those influence meaning.

- *Problem #3: An increasingly blurred line between opinions and facts*

Teaching standards:

- Seeing the way technology (e.g., audio and video “deep fakes”) can sow doubt about formerly trustworthy sources;

- Analyzing whether evidence can be independently confirmed and identifying gaps in support or reasoning;
 - Comparing multiple viewpoints and spotting discrepancies;
 - Recognizing how one’s emotions can be triggered, influencing attitudes and eliciting certain behaviors.
- *Problem #4: The tendency for one’s own opinions and experiences to override facts*

Teaching standards:

- Monitoring the intended and unintended consequences of what one shares online;
- Recognizing how one’s own cultural perspectives influence one’s interpretations of information, especially on controversial topics;
- Remaining open to updating one’s own views when presented with new facts and evidence;
- Taking action rooted in evidence: constructing new knowledge, creating and sharing media, and engaging in informed conversations and decisions on key issues.

“Responsible engagement with the information ecosystem is not simply about consuming information,” conclude Huguette, Baker, Hamilton, and Pane. “It is also about creating, sharing, and selectively emphasizing content.”

[“Media Literacy Standards to Counter Truth Decay”](#) by Alice Huguette, Garrett Baker, Laura Hamilton, and John Pane, Rand Corporation, January 2021; Huguette can be reached at Alice_Huguette@rand.org.

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2. How Social Networking Sites Are Used in One High School

In this *American Journal of Education* article, Vanessa Dennen, Stacy Rutledge, and Lauren Bagdy (Florida State University) report on how students and adults in a 650-student high school were using Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Pinterest. Through extensive interviewing, the researchers found that social networking sites had a “pervasive presence” at the school, with pluses and minuses. Here are some key insights about each site and the interplay between personal and school-related uses:

- *Instagram* – Students thought of this site as “who I am” – a space for sharing visuals and documenting their days for others to see, and to save. Many teachers had personal Instagram accounts, but few used it as part of their teaching.

- *Snapchat* - Students said this site was “for the moment” – communicating directly with friends and sharing what they were doing, thinking, and seeing. Students racked up Snapchat “streaks” – a sustained series of communications with one person – and used it to get help with homework. Teachers likened Snapchat use among students with texting, but with a visual edge, and frequently had to intervene in drama caused by Snapchat shares. This was often because students had a false sense of messages’ impermanence, but others took screenshots and shared them with peers. Few teachers saw a role for Snapchat in the classroom.

- *Facebook* – Students used this site for family communication, keeping it separate from interactions with peers. This was to avoid what the researchers call “context collapse” –

peers having insights into private family matters and vice-versa. Seniors close to graduation used Facebook more frequently to scope out colleges and share with “class of” groups. Teachers realized that this platform was “just not cool anymore because grandmas are on it,” and mostly avoided contact with students on Facebook. Many had personal accounts and a love-hate relationship with the site. Few made instructional use of Facebook.

- *Twitter* – Among students, Twitter was “for following” – mostly celebrities, school events, and local sports teams. Teachers had a similar profile, and only the librarian reported using Twitter instructionally and for professional development (but without much success with PD).

- *YouTube* – Students said it was like watching TV – amusing videos made by people they didn’t know (although some students said that at another school, students had put videos of student-to-student fights on YouTube). Teachers reported many uses of YouTube in their classrooms, including music and short clips related to curriculum they were covering.

- *Pinterest* – For students, this site was personal, used almost entirely by girls to get information on crafting, cooking, makeup, and hairstyles. There was a similar profile among female teachers; some used it to bookmark images, lesson plans, icebreakers, and organization ideas.

Summarizing what they learned, the researchers say that teachers used social networking sites for professional development, lesson planning, self-directed learning, and social interactions. Students used them for homework, extracurricular activities, self-directed learning, and social interaction. The only ways students and teachers used social networking sites together were for a few classroom and extracurricular activities. Dennen, Rutledge, and Bagdy don’t believe the limited classroom use of social networking in the school was a problem; student achievement was impressive and the school seemed to be doing well.

“However,” they say, “we saw missed opportunities for SNS-related education in this school” – mainly in “developing digital literacy and digital citizenship skills and preparing students to become well-informed, powerful users of SNSs.” And they noted that isolated students could feel more isolated when they were not part of social media interactions. “This is a situation,” say Dennen, Rutledge, and Bagdy, “where highly connected students and highly motivated students will continue to do more, and those who are less connected or motivated recede further into the periphery. Teachers may also feel disconnected.”

[“\(Dis\)connected: The Role of Social Networking in the High School Setting”](#) by Vanessa Dennen, Stacy Rutledge, and Lauren Bagdy in *American Journal of Education*, November 2020 (Vol. 127, #1, pp. 107-136); Dennen can be reached at vdennen@fsu.edu.

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3. Four Key Teacher Roles in Personalized Classrooms

In this *Elementary School Journal* article, Penny Bishop, John Downes, Steven Netcoh, Katy Farber, Jessica DeMink-Carthew, Tricia Brown, and Rachel Mark (University of Vermont) report on their interviews with a number of elementary and middle-school teachers on personalized learning. The researchers define personalization “as an approach that

encourages partnership between individual students and teachers in the design of learning that emerges from students' interests, questions, needs, and preferences to foster self-directed learning." Assessments may take the form of portfolios of student work, authentic performance tasks, and exhibitions of learning in which students demonstrate their skills and understandings.

Teachers in the study described the shift from running adult-centered classrooms to supporting students as they brought their interests, needs, and different levels of readiness to the classroom. One teacher drew a distinction between personalization and individualization, the latter being more about getting all students "to arrive at the same spot through different means."

Synthesizing what they learned from interviews, the researchers identified four roles teachers played in personalized classrooms:

- *Empowerer* – Teachers sought to increase students' independence and ownership of learning by letting them lead, offering choices, enabling students to work at their own pace and level, increasing student talk, and learning with and from students.

- *Scout* – Teachers often needed to seek out resources to support students and figure out next steps in their learning progressions. This involved ascertaining students' interests, aligning the curriculum with those interests, curating digital and material resources, and connecting students with helpful people inside and outside the school. "We can't offer everything," said one teacher, "but it's not our job to offer everything. It's our job to explain how to navigate the world."

- *Scaffolder* – Teachers constantly worked to ensure that students engaged productively in learning. This involved structuring routines, time, and learning experiences, fading the support when students didn't need as much, modeling possible approaches, and asking questions. "Okay," said one teacher to her students, "you have your team leaders. You have your roles. You do it. Sign up on the board if you need my help." She then "floated" around the room.

- *Assessor* – Teachers said it was important to distinguish between assessment and evaluation (with the latter, offering lots of narrative feedback to students), provide ongoing formative assessment (a lot of over-the-shoulder checking for understanding and redirection), and be clear about learning targets and rubrics posted around the room.

["Teacher Roles in Personalized Learning Environments"](#) by Penny Bishop, John Downes, Steven Netcoh, Katy Farber, Jessica DeMink-Carthew, Tricia Brown, and Rachel Mark in *Elementary School Journal*, December 2020 (Vol. 121, #2, pp. 311-336); Bishop can be reached at Penny.Bishop@uvm.edu.

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4. A Continuum of Inquiry-Based Learning

In this article in *Social Education*, Kathy Swan (University of Kentucky), S.G. Grant (Binghamton University), and John Lee (North Carolina State University) describe their Inquiry Design Model, which involves building curriculum units around questions, tasks, and

sources. The authors describe five types of inquiry, ranging from teacher-developed to student-developed:

- *Focused inquiry* – The teacher develops the inquiry but focuses on a particular disciplinary skill and piece of content – for example, causation, maps, or research. The authors describe a curriculum unit on the federal debt, guided by the “compelling question,” *Does debt matter?*

- *Structured inquiry* – The teacher develops the blueprint to scaffold disciplinary and civic outcomes. An example is a unit on the Great Compromise of 1787, with the question, *Is compromise always fair?*

- *Embedded action* – The teacher develops the inquiry, but focuses on structuring the understand-assess-act sequence into the core of the blueprint. The authors describe a curriculum unit on the debate over Obamacare, guided by the question, *Why is the Affordable Care Act so controversial?*

- *Guided inquiry* – The teacher develops the inquiry but there are dedicated spaces for students to conduct independent research. The authors describe a curriculum unit on the Civil Rights Movement, guided by the question, *What made nonviolent protest effective during this movement?*

- *Student-directed inquiry* – Students develops the blueprint on a question of interest and plan the inquiry using the blueprint. The sample curriculum unit here is an investigation of the LGBTQ+ movement, guided by the question, *What makes a movement successful?*

The “roof” over this “house of inquiry,” say the authors, is that students “ask good questions and develop robust investigations into them; consider possible solutions and consequences; separate evidence-based claims from parochial ones; and communicate and act upon what they learn.” Above all, students increasingly take ownership of the process and can replicate it in the years ahead.

[“Blueprinting an Inquiry-Based Curriculum: Planning with the Inquiry Design Model”](#) by Kathy Swan, S.G. Grant, and John Lee in *Social Education*, November/December 2020 (Vol. 84, #6, pp. 377-383); Swan can be reached at kswan@uky.edu.

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5. Getting Middle-School Students Talking About Transition to High School

In this article in *Middle School Journal*, Joyce Epstein, Douglas Mac Iver, Martha Mac Iver, and Steven Sheldon (Johns Hopkins University) describe a strategy for improving home-school communication in elementary and middle schools: Teachers send home an interactive assignment that asks students to have a positive conversation with a parent or family member about something interesting they are learning in math, science, language arts, or another subject area. The goal is to improve the often dreary homework routine by:

- Involving any family member, not just those who know the subject matter;
- Students sharing their work, ideas, and progress, versus asking the family member to “teach” the material;
- Asking students to share how a particular school skill applies to the real world;

- Having parents comment on their interactions and pose questions to teachers.

The results of the TIPS intervention (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork) were very positive: there were significant improvements in student and parent attitudes about homework, improved student report card grades, and/or better math, science, and ELA test scores.

The researchers go on to report on an exploratory study in four school districts aimed at getting eighth graders talking with their parents (or another family member) about their upcoming transition to high school. An English teacher in each school sent home the following discussion topics over four successive weeks. They prepared students to conduct discussions and interviews with a parent or family member in the language of the home, urging students to make the project a serious part of their homework:

- *The role of attendance, passing courses, and extra-curriculars to high-school success*
 - An overview of the four home discussion assignments;
 - The student's current extracurricular activities and aspirations for college and career;
 - Key factors in successfully navigating the first year in high school;
 - Discussing how the parent or family member will help meet the student's goals – e.g., checking homework, securing the student's electronics overnight, and pushing for good attendance.
- *The importance of regular attendance to learning and on-time graduation*
 - Discussing a bar graph correlating ninth-grade school attendance with on-time graduation;
 - Texting or tweeting advice to a hypothetical national campaign encouraging good school attendance.
- *The way high schools compile grades in four years of courses into a cumulative GPA*
 - Discussing a bar graph connecting student GPAs at the end of ninth grade with percentages of students who (a) did not graduate from high school, (b) went to a two-year college, and (c) attended a four-year college;
 - E-mailing a hypothetical peer about improving GPA to enter college.
- *The importance of passing all courses in high school*
 - Discussing a bar graph correlating ninth-grade course passing with on-time graduation (the graph showed that failing even one course in ninth grade can reduce the likelihood of completing high school in four years);
 - Reading aloud to a parent or family member truncated Facebook posts by students reflecting on their plans to graduate from high school, and completing the posts. One example: *Avery is giving advice to his sister, who is just starting high school. "My advice to my sister is..."*

Epstein, Mac Iver, Mac Iver, and Sheldon were pleased with how many students completed all four assignments (91-100%), parents who reported that their children enjoyed the activity (72-80%), and parents who said the assignments helped them think about ongoing involvement in their child's high-school education (80-94%). The researchers don't have data on how this intervention affected students' actual performance in high school, but they are hopeful that an intervention like this can make a positive difference.

[“Interactive Homework to Engage Parents with Students on the Transition from Middle to High School”](#) by Joyce Epstein, Douglas Mac Iver, Martha Mac Iver, and Steven Sheldon in *Middle School Journal*, January 2021 (Vol. 52, #1, pp. 4-13); Epstein can be reached at jepstein@jhu.edu.

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6. Understanding Mathematical Equivalence in the Elementary Grades

In this article in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching P-12*, Caroline Byrd Hornburg (Virginia Tech/Blacksburg), Heather Brletic-Shipley (a North Carolina teacher), Julia Matthews (formerly a teacher in Tennessee and Indiana), and Nicole McNeil (University of Notre Dame) say that mathematical equivalence is one of the Big Ideas of the subject – absolutely essential to developing children’s algebraic thinking. But it’s a concept that bedevils many students in the elementary grades. Commonly symbolized by the equal sign, mathematical equivalence is the relation between two quantities that are equal and interchangeable. It involves:

- Interpreting the equal sign to mean *Is the same amount as*;
- Correctly reading and encoding the structure of equations;
- Correctly identifying and equalizing the two sides.

Elementary children often stumble when asked to solve problems like $3 + 4 = 5 + \underline{\quad}$. Incorrect responses include adding up all the numbers ($3 + 4 = 5 + \underline{12}$) or adding up the numbers on the left of the equal sign ($3 + 4 = 5 + \underline{7}$). Children tend to see the equal sign as an *operational* symbol, meaning “add up all the numbers,” “calculate the total,” or “put the answer,” rather than as a *relational* symbol of mathematical equivalence. This misunderstanding isn’t an issue with simple math problems like $3 + 4 = \underline{\quad}$, but it’s big trouble with problems like $3 + 4 = 5 + \underline{\quad}$ and the chickens come home to roost when students get into algebraic contexts.

Why do children struggle with mathematical equivalence? Researchers believe it’s because of the way arithmetic problems are almost always presented in elementary classrooms ($3 + 4 = \underline{\quad}$), which encourages students to think of the equal sign in operational terms. Problems like $3 + 4 = 5 + \underline{\quad}$ are seldom seen in textbooks and workbooks, and only slightly more in progressive programs like *Everyday Mathematics*.

Why does this matter? “To succeed in algebra,” say the authors, “students must be able to recognize that any number, numerical expression, algebraic expression, or equation can be represented in an infinite number of ways that have the same value.” To solve algebraic equations, students must understand that the equal sign is not a signal to perform an operation but a statement that “the two amounts are the same” or “the two sides can be exchanged.” Studies have shown a direct link between understanding equivalence and success in algebra.

The good news, say the authors, is that it’s possible for students to develop a clear understanding of mathematical equivalence in the elementary grades, and do it in a way that is engaging and even fun. Several strategies:

- *Use nontraditional arithmetic problems.* These include problems like $3 + 4 = 5 + \underline{\quad}$ and problems that mix up the format to have the missing number in different positions – for example, $\underline{\quad} + 7 = 5 + 4$.

- *Introduce the equal sign outside the context of arithmetic.* Students can be asked to put an *equal* or *not equal* sign between groups of objects (e.g., pencils or dog bones) and pairs of numbers.

- *Fade from concrete to abstract.* Present equivalence problems first with physical objects (sharing stickers or balancing a scale), then shift to numbers.

- *Have children compare and explain different problem formats and strategies.* Students are asked to compare what’s going on in a problem like $3 + 4 = 5 + \underline{\quad}$ versus a problem like $3 + 4 = \underline{\quad}$, and explain to a hypothetical classmate why a correct strategy is correct and why adding up the numbers in a mathematical equivalent problem is incorrect.

- *Be precise with words, graphics, and gestures.* For example, with $3 + 4 = 5 + \underline{\quad}$, the directions should be “What number goes in the blank?” rather than “What’s the answer?” With the problem $5 + 4 = 9$, have children say, “Five plus four is the same amount as nine” rather than “Five plus four equals nine.” It’s also helpful when writing a math problem on the board to put an extra-wide space before and after the equal sign so the two sides of the equation are more distinct and the position of the equal sign is emphasized, e.g., $3 + 4 = \underline{\quad} + 5$.

The authors also advise against using the equal sign with a “run-on equation” like $20 + 30 = 50 + 7 = 57 + 8 = 65$. And when working with an equation at the board, it’s important to use a balancing gesture, mimicking a scale, with your left arm for one side and right arm for the other, perhaps saying, “I want you to make one side [left hand sweeping under that side] equal to the other side [right hand under the other side].”

[“Improving Understanding of Mathematical Equivalence”](#) by Caroline Byrd Hornburg, Heather Brletic-Shiple, Julia Matthews, and Nicole McNeil in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, January 2021 (Vol. 114, #1, pp. 16-26); the authors can be reached at chornburg@vt.edu, shipleh@yahoo.com, matthews.julia.m@gmail.com, and nmcneil@nd.edu.

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7. How Gifted Students Affect Their Classmates in Heterogeneous Classes

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Brandon Wright reports on a study in Switzerland of the effect gifted students had on their classmates in mixed-achievement classes (in these schools, giftedness was determined by IQ scores over 130 and qualitative measures):

- Daily exposure to gifted peers over two school years had a consistent, positive, statistically significant effect on non-gifted students’ academic achievement.
- Prolonged exposure to gifted classmates increased the likelihood that non-gifted students would attend academic versus vocational tracks in subsequent years.
- The greatest impact on non-gifted students was on males and high achieving students.
- Male regular-education students benefited from being in class with gifted students regardless of the gifted students’ gender.

- Female regular-education students benefited most from being in class with female gifted students.
- These benefits did not occur when gifted students had emotional or behavioral disorders; in fact, the presence of gifted students with those challenges had a negative effect on the academic achievement of their classmates.

[“How Gifted Students Improve the Outcomes of Their Classmates, Regardless of Their Ability Levels”](#) by Brandon Wright in *Education Gadfly*, January 21, 2021

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8. Short Item:

Updated Media Bias Chart – Here’s the latest edition of the [Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart](#) by Vanessa Otero. It’s very helpful for sorting out the myriad news sources on two axes: reliability and left-right bias.

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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
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