

## Disruption at our Doors?

*What Is Disruptive Innovation?* by Clayton M. Christensen, Michael E. Raynor and Rory McDonald

Disruptive innovation is a theory that describes a process by which small organizations with fewer resources are able to successfully challenge established organizations of the same type. These smaller organizations succeed because the established organizations, when threatened, often provide their typical products or services, hoping to attract customers akin to those they have attracted in the past. Independent schools, for example, characterized by small classes, personal attention, a breadth of curricular and co-curricular activities and ample facilities, often respond to softening admissions by providing more of the same, appealing to the most demanding families of means while possibly overlooking what is most important to middle class families struggling to pay the high cost of tuition. According to the theory, disruption begins when new organizations target these overlooked populations and deliver acceptable products at a lower price. These new organizations improve their products over time. When they begin to draw customers away from the established organization, disruption has occurred. One way to deal with the disruption is to continue to offer what has made the established organization successful while creating a new organization or branch to serve the population likely to depart. The article, written by Clayton Christensen, who defined the concept of disruptive innovation, and two of his colleagues, describes the tenets of disruptive innovation and how the concept has evolved in practice. Independent schools need to learn from disruptive theory as they contemplate strategic initiatives for their viability in the near future.

Pearl Rock Kane, The Klingenstein Center, NY

*Harvard Business Review*, December 2015

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## ARTICLES, BLOGS, AND OTHER MEDIA



## Public Truth-Telling

*Bryan Stevenson on Charleston and Our Real Problem with Race*, by Corey G. Johnson

Bryan Stevenson is the founder and executive director of the *Equal Justice Initiative*, an organization based in Alabama that opposes mass incarceration and racial injustice. In this clear and powerful interview, Stevenson speaks eloquently about the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, and how our failure as a country to face the truth of our history has prevented us from solving the persistent racial injustices that we face in 2015. Because we often have created a counter-narrative glossing over or overtly omitting the suffering and systemic mistreatment of African American people, we are unable to confront and solve problems of, for example, the massive incarceration of black men and the disproportionate levying of the death penalty in crimes where victims are white. As school communities look to make sense of current tragedies such as the shooting of innocents in the AME church in Charleston, SC, Stevenson's lucid analysis will prove an anchoring text for both faculty and high school students. Stevenson's organization is making strides in Alabama in acknowledging publicly the suffering and crimes committed in the state, and they are doing so in ways similar to those that Germany employed to openly face the brutal truth of the treatment of Jews and others during the Holocaust. Students and faculty alike can learn from the concrete steps EJI is taking toward public truth-telling, and they may feel inspired to become part of the solution themselves.

Stephanie Lipkowitz, Albuquerque Academy, NM

*The Marshall Project*, June 24, 2015



## Relentless

*The Silicon Valley Suicides*, by Hanna Rosin

In a recent piece for *The Atlantic*, "The Silicon Valley Suicides," Hanna Rosin explores the extremely rare repeat of what is called a suicide cluster. There are no answers in the article about why some incredibly talented and successful teens in two Palo Alto high schools chose to end their lives, but Rosin dips her toe into the various theories that swirl around teen suicide. The piece is well written and compelling, and perhaps most important for independent school audiences, it speaks about the relentless expectation for success that our young people feel. The narrow definition of success equating high achievement is one piece of the puzzle, but others emerge such as the lack of sleep that comes with this success, the inability to have perspective when surrounded by parents, teachers, and other students who have the same definition of success, and the way we praise students for this success. We know all of this, but what has changed and what should change? Rosin does not offer any road map, but the article is an excellent catalyst for discussion in our schools about student health and wellbeing.

Eric Temple, Lick Wilmerding High School, CA

*The Atlantic*, December 2015



## Central Bond

*Hidden Brain, Episode 4: Students and Teachers*, by Shankar Vedantam

This excellent podcast from NPR's "Hidden Brain" series summarizes some significant research about the effect of the teacher-student relationship on student learning. The host of the podcast is Shankar Vedantam, and his lively and concise stories and insights are useful to teachers and administrators alike. In this episode from October 13 entitled *Students and Teachers*, Vedantam considers several studies that prove our intuitive understanding of how central the teacher/student relationship is in terms of student motivation and achievement. Additionally, he looks at it from the angle of the achievement gap between white students and students of color and from the perspective of teachers. Students may not even notice that a relationship has changed for the better, but helping teachers connect with students helps those teachers affect change in the lives of those students. Vedantam also offers some practical, inexpensive, and easy interventions that teachers can do to cause student learning to increase in significant ways. This podcast could serve as an affirming and enlightening basis for a faculty meeting, and it also underscores the efficacy of practices that are the hallmarks of independent school educators.

Stephanie Lipkowitz, Albuquerque Academy, NM

*npr podcasts*, October 13, 2015



## Emotional Competency

*Teaching Peace in Elementary School*, by Julie Scelfo  
*The 2015 Gift Guide for Raising Your Family's EQ*, by Jenn Choi

Through social and emotional learning, students become more aware of their feelings and learn to relate more peacefully to others. In a climate of anxiety for many college students struggling with resilience, worries about adolescents spending inordinate amounts of time on their devices, and heightened fears about violence, Julie Scelfo explores advocacy for training children in emotional competencies and preparing them to solve problems - within themselves and beyond themselves. "Studies have found that promoting emotional and social skills correlates with improved outcomes in students' lives," notes Scelfo. "Teaching Peace in Elementary School" identifies five main skill areas - self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationships and responsible decision making - and summarizes the compelling, ongoing research into links between emotional competency and academic success. Scelfo acknowledges the skeptics as well, but those who accept the call for social and emotional learning may want to explore Jenn Choi's list of games, toys, and other learning tools designed to help kids cultivate these skills - from stuffed animals, to board games, to the Empathy Toy (which uses blindfolds and interlocking blocks to challenge older students to build their capacity for empathy and improve their communication skills).

Meghan Tally, Windward School, CA

*New York Times*, November 15, 2015  
*Forbes*, November 7, 2015



## Broken Patterns, Broken Thresholds

*Thresholds of Violence: How School Shootings Catch On*, by Malcolm Gladwell

In this *New Yorker* essay, Malcolm Gladwell uses a social science lens to frame the story of John LaDue, a seventeen-year-old Wisconsin high school student caught planning a school shooting. Gladwell chooses to profile LaDue because LaDue does not fit the pattern of disaffected boys committing school shootings established by Barry Loukaitis (1996) and seared into public consciousness by the Columbine shootings (1999). According to Gladwell, "The problem is not that there is an endless supply of deeply disturbed young men who are willing to contemplate horrific acts. It's worse. It's that young men no longer need to be deeply disturbed to contemplate horrific acts." To make sense of this evolving understanding, Gladwell references research on riots to hypothesize that, as school shootings have become more common over the last decade, the threshold at which a child might commit such an act has become lower. Equally concerning, LaDue's psychological profile revealed that he was not driven by anger or psychosis, but instead has an autism-spectrum disorder that may have led to an obsession with perfecting the act of a school shooting. While this is certainly not a pleasant topic for educators to contemplate, Gladwell's essay does provide food for thought for all those responsible for maintaining a safe school environment.

Christopher Lauricella, The Park School of Buffalo, NY

*The New Yorker*, October 19, 2015



## Unconscionably Unconscious

*How Elementary School Teachers' Biases Can Discourage Girls from Math and Science*, by Claire Cain Miller

As many schools focus on enhancing their STEM programs, they must also recognize and address the ways that women are underrepresented in math and science fields. Specifically, recent research indicates that some of that gender gap can be traced to the unconscious bias of teachers. A study cited in the *New York Times* "Upshot" blog followed three groups of students from sixth grade through the end of high school. In sixth grade, the students were given one exam graded by teachers who knew their names and another graded by an independent agency with no knowledge of their identity or gender. The difference in the scores was used to indicate the level of teacher bias. A key indication of teacher bias in favor of boys is that girls outscored the boys on the math portion that was graded anonymously, while the boys outscored the girls on the teacher-graded exam, a result that did not hold for other subjects. The real impact of this bias showed up as researchers followed those students into high school: the girls who were subject to a teacher with bias took fewer advanced science and math courses and scored worse on national high school exams in math, while boys were helped by having a sixth grade teacher with bias. This research further emphasizes the need for teachers and administrators to understand how their unconscious biases can have lasting effects on student achievement.

Study cited in the article: [On The Origins of Gender Human Capital Gaps: Short and Long Term Consequences of Teachers' Stereotypical Biases](#), by Victory Lavy and Edith Sand

Michael Arjona, The Walker School, GA

*New York Times*, February 6, 2015

## BOOKS



## Required Reading

*Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Well known for his work as staff writer on race in America at *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates has written his latest book, *Between the World and Me*, as a letter directly to his son, now a teenager. He writes with a message, and in a voice and genre, that reaches his widest readership yet. Here he is speaking to anyone raising a child, to anyone leading a school, to any teacher or student entering the doors of a high school. The book is written to teach, to position and to articulate why, as a father, he has fears, based on race history and experience, for the son he loves so much. He writes to explain why he has anger that should not go away and why his son's relative privilege will not protect him in the world as it is today. Coates did not want to create an optimistic read, and he has succeeded. He sees hope as both unrealistic, given current race realities, and an unearned distraction from the action needed to address the crushing realities of disempowerment, poverty and injustice. He writes, he says, to provoke realistic feelings, and ultimately, wisdom. Coates, the journalist, has harnessed the message of this book to the rich language of the poet. He has said that he intentionally chose his words as the poet might: to make the reader think and feel deeply, perhaps painfully so, that freedom from fear and despair is a necessary condition of humanity for all. When he completed the book, he sent it to the one reviewer from whom he most wanted to hear. "It is," Toni Morrison said, "required reading."

Elizabeth Morley, Kobe Shirwa Women's University, Kobe, Japan

*Random House*, 2015

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