Marshall Memo 594

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 6, 2015

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Those who would treat schooling as designed to educate students on all important subjects are doomed to encounter the futility that faced Sisyphus: the boulder of 'essential content' can only come thundering down the (growing) hill of knowledge."

Grant Wiggins (see item #1)

"Like the music or athletic coach and the vocational education teacher, the classroom teacher's job is to help the student 'play the game' of the expert, *using* content knowledge, as contextually appropriate, to recognize, pose, and solve authentic knowledge problems."

Grant Wiggins (*ibid.*)

"With some professions, we want people to be truly knowledgeable, not to have a false sense of their knowledge. Surgeons, for example."

Matthew Fisher (see item #2)

"[H]eroism, by the very definition that came down from the Greeks, is a negotiation between strengths and weaknesses."

Ken Burns in "Life's Work," an interview with Daniel McGinn in *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2015 (Vol. 93, #7-8, p. 136), https://hbr.org/2015/07/ken-burns

"Teachers engaged in group learning can feel very vulnerable when they share work from their less-successful students. Trust in fellow group members allows teachers to bring such students' work to the group without fear of being judged or criticized."

Amy Colton, Georgea Langer, and Loretta Goff (see item #6)

"We recently heard a police officer comment that he had only drawn his gun once in the last year, but he used a pen every day at work."

Steve Graham, Karen Harris, and Tanya Santangelo (see item #5)

1. Grant Wiggins on the Myth That Everything Important Can be Learned

(Originally titled "The Futility of Trying to Teach Everything of Importance")

In this 1989 *Educational Leadership* article, Grant Wiggins addresses the challenge of deciding what's worth learning by high-school graduation. "Those who would treat schooling as designed to educate students on all important subjects are doomed to encounter the futility that faced Sisyphus: the boulder of 'essential content' can only come thundering down the (growing) hill of knowledge… The inescapable dilemma at the heart of curriculum and instruction must, once and for all, be made clear: either teaching everything of importance reduces it to trivial, forgettable verbalisms or lists; or school is a *necessarily* inadequate apprenticeship, where 'preparation' means something quite humble: learning to know and do a few important things well and leaving out much of importance. The negotiation of the dilemma hinges on enabling students to learn about their ignorance, to gain control over the resources available for making modest dents in it, and to take pleasure in learning so that the quest is lifelong… They must leave school with the passion to question, without the fear of looking foolish, and with the knowledge to learn where and how the facts can be found."

Wiggins's concern is that curriculum coverage, committee-written textbooks, didactic teaching, and short-answer tests turn education into Trivial Pursuit. Under this regime, it's very difficult for students to acquire solid habits of mind and high standards of craftsmanship and understand that some ideas are much more important than others – "touchstones of such power that our own worldviews must change as a result of encountering them." The acid test for modern curriculum, says Wiggins, "is whether it enables students, at any level, to see how knowledge grows out of, resolves, and produces questions… In short, the aim of curriculum is to awaken, not 'stock' or 'train' the mind… Curriculum should therefore be organized around essential questions to which content selection would represent (necessarily incomplete and always provocative) 'answers.'" Some examples:

- What is a "great" book?
- Is "history" the same as "progress"?
- Does art imitate life or vice versa?
- What is an adequate proof?
- Is there a fixed and universal human nature?
- Are there really heroes and villains?

We need to rethink and reorganize the curriculum, says Wiggins, spelling out clear inquiry priorities in each course that help organize and give meaning to the facts. This calls into

question the traditional lesson plan, since teachers and students should be following the essential questions where they lead within the syllabus, using textbooks as reference books, not as the curriculum. "Like the music or athletic coach and the vocational education teacher," says Wiggins, "the classroom teacher's job is to help the student 'play the game' of the expert, *using* content knowledge, as contextually appropriate, to recognize, pose, and solve authentic knowledge problems."

Much more important than accumulating facts, he says (taking a jab at E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge) is acquiring these intellectual virtues:

- Knowing how to listen to someone who knows something you don't know;
- Perceiving which questions to ask to clarify an idea's meaning or value;
- Being open and respectful enough to imagine that a new and strange idea is worth paying attention to;
- Being inclined to ask questions about pat statements hiding assumptions or confusions.

"'Knowledge' remains a forgettable patchwork of adult sayings in the absence of our own questioning and verifying," he says. The ultimate test is whether an idea illuminates student experience or provokes new thought. Anything that doesn't do that "clutters up the curriculum."

Wiggins closes with a series of exhortations aimed at designing a curriculum that makes students more thoughtful about what they know and don't know:

• *The most essential habit of mind we can provide students is the ability to suspend disbelief or belief as the situation may warrant*. For example, a high school in New York City prompted students to ask, From whose point of view did that argument originate? What is the evidence and how credible is it? How do things fit together? What if? Could it have been otherwise? What are the alternatives? What difference does it make? Why should I care?

• *All students don't need to learn the same things*. This comes from the painful realization that there are far more important ideas than we can ever know. Wiggins questions whether all students need to read the same works of literature or take mathematics courses designed only for would-be professionals. "The teacher should be an intellectual librarian," he says, "constantly making it possible for students to be challenged anew to pique their curiosity and raise their standards and expectations."

• *If teachers say everything is important, then nothing will seem important to students*. Wiggins urges us to abandon adult logic, specialized priorities, and coverage and ask:

- What must my students demonstrate to reveal whether they have a thoughtful (as opposed to thoughtless) grasp of the essentials?
- What will successful student understanding actually look like?

The ultimate test is when students say, without adult prompting, *This* is important! "A sign of successful curriculum and instruction, where priorities are clear, can be found in the students' ability to anticipate the final examination in its entirety and provide accurate self-assessments of their finished work," says Wiggins.

• *Curriculum is inseparable from assessment*. Standard school tests don't challenge students, he says. What's needed are authentic performance tasks in which students show what

they know in real-life situations – sometimes in idiosyncratic ways. "Craftsmanship and pride in one's work depend on 'tests' that enable us to confront and personalize authentic tasks," says Wiggins.

• *The essentials are not the basics*. "We should teach the minimum basic content necessary to get right to essential questions, problems, and work, within and across disciplines," he concludes. "Pride in one's work leads to greater care for the basics; pride depends on authentic and engaging work, and a product 'owned' by the student."

"The Futility of Trying to Teach Everything of Importance" by Grant Wiggins in *Educational Leadership*, November 1989 (Vol. 47, #3, p. 44-59), http://bit.ly/1UtefJT

Back to page one

2. Does the Internet Make Us Overconfident?

In this *Harvard Business Review* interview, Scott Berinato questions Matthew Fisher (Yale University) on research he's done with Mariel Goddu and Frank Keil on how being able to look things up on the Internet affects people's confidence in their general knowledge. The researchers asked two groups of adults to answer a series of moderately challenging questions – for example, what causes the phases of the moon and how glass is made. One group was allowed to go online to find answers, the other wasn't. When both groups were asked another set of questions on unrelated topics, those who had used the Internet vastly overestimated their ability to answer the questions correctly. It seemed they were unable to distinguish between information in their heads and up in the cloud.

What's going on here? Fisher speculates that this higher level of confidence may be a phenomenon called *transactive memory*. When long-married couples are asked to remember their first date, they can't remember a lot when questioned individually, but together they can create a richer memory that's more than the sum of each person's fragments. Perhaps the Internet is acting like a transactive memory partner, creating more than either a person alone or the search alone could accomplish. But what Fisher and his colleagues found was that the people in the first group thought they did it alone and gave no credit to the Internet. "Because we're so deeply plugged into it," says Fisher, "we misattribute the connection to knowledge to actually having the knowledge ourselves. It becomes an appendage. We like to use the term 'cognitive prosthesis.'"

So what's wrong with outsourcing part of our brain to Google? Well, what about situations where there's no Internet access or it would be gauche to pull out a device? "Suddenly, we don't feel as smart," says Fisher. "But we never were smarter, really; we just thought that what we could search for was actually something we already knew… With some professions, we want people to be truly knowledgeable, not have a false sense of their knowledge. Surgeons, for example… The more we use the Internet, the harder it will be to assess what people truly know. And that includes assessments about ourselves."

"Defend Your Research: The Internet Makes You Think You're Smarter Than You Are," an interview with Matthew Fisher by Scott Berinato in *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2015 (Vol. 93, #7-8, p. 26-27), no e-link available

Back to page one

3. Should We Ban D, the Sub-Mediocre Grade?

In this article in *The Atlantic*, California high-school teacher Andrew Simmons makes the case for eliminating D grades. "Getting an F typically requires some combination of compulsive truancy, a keen distaste for holding a pen, and problems outside of school," he says. "An F leads to summer school or an online course, and unrepentant F students tend to drop out or head to an alternative school before long. Fs are a serious problem in education."

But D students are a more insidious problem, he says: they get over, but barely, and don't have anything approaching what it takes to be successful in a four-year college or many jobs. Simmons confesses that 18 percent of his 10th and 12th-grade English students get by with Ds, savvy enough to avoid Fs but not putting in the effort needed to earn the Cs and Bs. What irks him is that a sub-mediocre student gets the same number of points on a transcript as a student who gets an A, B, or C.

The solution, Simmons believes, is setting the cut-off for passing at C-, perhaps 62.5 percent. Wouldn't this result in more student failures, which no high school wants? Not so, he says, pointing to a New Jersey district and a Los Angeles charter school that successfully boosted the performance of marginal students by raising the passing threshold. He believes that not allowing students to scrape by with a D gives teachers and counselors the leverage they need to prod marginal students to work harder, re-write essays, hand in missed assignments, and show up for extra help before school or during lunch. Almost all students are capable of doing better, and we need to take away the incentive to game the system and slide out of high school with virtually no marketable skills.

"There's nothing wrong with deciding against college," Simmons concludes, "but a high-school education should give all students the opportunity to sort through as many options as possible. Allowing them to opt out at the age of 14 shouldn't be one."

"The Trouble with Ds: Why the Letter Grade Should Be Banned in Schools" by Andrew Simmons in *The Atlantic*, June 29, 2015, http://theatln.tc/1UqVBCs

Back to page one

4. Is the Special Education Placement Rate of Black Children Racist?

In this *New York Times* article, Paul Morgan (Pennsylvania State University) and George Farkas (University of California/Irvine) ask whether the rate at which African-American children are placed in special-education – which is 1.4 times higher than other races and ethnicities in grades 1-12 – is a sign of racial bias. Quite the contrary, they conclude from their recent study: "The real problem is that black children are underrepresented in special-education classes when compared with white children with similar levels of academic achievement, behavior, and family economic resources."

What explains the racial disparities in placement? Morgan and Farkas argue that it's due to the "double jeopardy" faced by African-American children. First, they are exposed to more gestational, environmental, and economic risk factors associated with disabilities:

- About 65 percent of black children live in families below 200 percent of the poverty line, compared to 30 percent of white children.
- According to 1985-2000 census data, about 80 percent of black children were living in highly disadvantaged neighborhoods, with widespread unemployment, racial segregation, poverty, and single-parent households.
- 36 percent of inner-city black children have elevated levels of lead in their blood, compared with only 4 percent among suburban white children.
- Black children are twice as likely to be born prematurely and three times more likely to suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome as white children.

Second, Morgan and Farkas found that schools are less likely to diagnose and act on African-American children's learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, intellectual disabilities, health impairments, and emotional disturbances. Between kindergarten and eighth grade, black children are less likely to be identified with these disabilities than white children with similar academic performance. Why? "It may be that black children are less likely to be identified and treated for disabilities because of greater responsiveness by educational professionals to white parents," say the authors. "Low expectations regarding black children's abilities may also lead some professionals to ignore the neurological basis of low academic achievement and 'problem' behavior." For example, African-American children are less likely to be diagnosed with ADHD than white children, and those who are diagnosed are less likely to receive medication. In addition, the literature that schools send parents on disability eligibility is often written in technical, legalistic language that's difficult to decipher.

"The last thing we need," conclude Morgan and Farkas, "is to compound these widespread disparities in disability diagnosis and treatment by making school officials reluctant to refer black children for special-education eligibility evaluations out of fear of being labeled racially biased… If well-intentioned but misguided advocates succeed in arbitrarily limiting placement in special education based on racial demographics, even more black children with disabilities will miss out on beneficial services."

"Is Special Education Racist?" by Paul Morgan and George Farkas in *The New York Times*, June 24, 2015, http://nyti.ms/1M8dO1R

Back to page one

5. Keys to Effective K-8 Writing Instruction

"Writing is pervasive in the world of work," say Steve Graham and Karen Harris (Arizona State University) and Tanya Santangelo (Arcadia University) in this *Elementary School Journal* article. "Over 90% of white-collar workers and 80% of blue-collar workers must write while working. We recently heard a police officer comment that he had only drawn his gun once in the last year, but he used a pen every day at work." The problem is that U.S. students' writing skills leave much to be desired: on the 2012 NAEP assessments, only 30

percent of eighth and twelfth graders were proficient or above. For ELLs the figure was 5 percent, for students with disabilities 1 percent.

Common Core to the rescue! The new ELA standards put writing front and center and are part of a concerted effort to improve those dismal figures. Students in most states are expected to:

- Learn to craft text that skillfully persuades, informs, entertains, and narrates real or imagined experiences for various purposes and audiences;
- Write in a well-planned, reflective, and collaborative manner;
- Use writing as a tool for thoughtful reading of content material from multiple sources;
- Master handwriting, typing, spelling, conventions, word choice, grammar, and more;
- Move beyond pen and paper to the additional use of digital writing tools.

Meeting these standards means giving writing much higher priority in classrooms and increasing the use of more-effective instructional practices. Graham, Harris, and Santangelo did a synthesis of research on exemplary writing teachers and came up with the following key practices:

• *Create a writing environment that is positive and supportive*. Common Core standards make it "especially important to develop a writing environment that is motivating, pleasant, and nonthreatening," they say, "where teachers support students and their writing efforts and students support each other."

• *Motivate students*. Exemplary teachers create a stimulating mood during writing time, make their own excitement visible, encourage students to try hard and attribute success to effort, set high but realistic expectations, provide prompts geared to students' interests and needs, keep students engaged through thoughtful discussions, and help students become increasingly independent.

• *Implement a process approach*. This includes providing extended opportunities to write, having students plan, draft, revise, and edit their work, providing personalized assistance and feedback, and teaching targeted mini-lessons.

• *Get students writing frequently*. The research is convincing that additional practice time pays off, say the authors.

• *Get students composing together*. Collaboration is most effective when students are given specific guidelines and are taught explicitly how to use them.

• *Establish goals*. Effective teachers are clear, specific, and reasonably challenging with their expectations – for example, *Add three new ideas to your paper when revising it* or *Address both sides of an argument, providing three or more reasons to support your point of view and countering at least two reasons supporting the opposing view*.

• *Use 21st-century writing tools*. Word processing has a number of important advantages for young writers.

• *Provide formative feedback*. "When teachers monitor students' progress as writers, they can adjust classroom practices to meet the collective as well as the individual needs of their students," say Graham, Harris, and Santangelo.

• *Teach foundational writing skills*. These include text-transcription in the early grades and sentence construction from grades 4 to 7 – appropriate grammar, punctuation, capitalization, sentence combining, and more.

• *Increase students' knowledge about writing*. This includes gathering ideas and information to write about, the basic elements of different types of text, good models of written text, and vocabulary development.

• *Use writing as a tool to support students' learning*. Summarizing helps students decide which ideas are most important and how they relate to one another, and putting material in their own words helps students think more carefully about what the ideas mean.

"Research-Based Writing Practices and the Common Core: Meta-Analysis and Meta-Synthesis" by Steve Graham, Karen Harris, and Tanya Santangelo in *Elementary School Journal*, June 2015 (Vol. 115, #4, p. 498-522), no e-link available; Graham can be reached at steve.graham@asu.edu.

Back to page one

6. Probing for Clarity, Empowerment, and Beliefs in PLC Meetings

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, Amy Colton, Georgea Langer, and Loretta Goff explore ground rules and communication tools they believe teacher teams should develop for truly productive discussions of students' work:

- Committed listening;
- Pausing to interpret;
- Matching verbal and nonverbal cues;
- Paraphrasing;
- Probing;
- Putting ideas on the table.

"Teachers engaged in group learning can feel very vulnerable when they share work from their less-successful students," say Colton, Langer, and Goff. "Trust in fellow group members allows teachers to bring such students' work to the group without fear of being judged or criticized… Specific working agreements and communication skills provide the psychological safety teachers need to share their perspectives, inquire into those of others, and reconsider what they have been doing and how they have been thinking about it."

In this article, the authors focus on *probing*, which they define as "statements or questions that invite a deeper level of conversation about how teachers are thinking about a student's learning" and yet don't cause discomfort or defensiveness. There are three types:

• *Probing for clarity* – Teachers sometimes describe a situation in general terms and leave out key details, and probes are helpful for getting more specifics. The key, say Colton, Langer, and Goff, is asking questions in ways that get a colleague thinking but stop short of trying to solve the problem for them. They advise steering clear of "Have you tried…", instead using probes like these:

- "Tell me more about that."
- "What led you to that conclusion?"

- "Hmmm, you mentioned place value. Tell us more about what you have done to try to help Maria understand place value."
- "How does she work when she's in a group?"
- "How might you respond to him the next time he doesn't turn in his work?"
- "What have you seen that tells you they're struggling with writing?"
- "What specifically would you like to see in their writing that would represent improvement?"
- "You mentioned that your students never show their work. How true is this for your entire class? Which ones *do* show their work?"
- "So, we think that peer editing might be a helpful strategy for Joe. What might that look like, specifically? What do we need to think about to make it most effective?"

"The essence of shared inquiry in a study group is not to fix one another," say Colton, Langer, and Goff. "It is to deepen teachers' knowledge bases and build in one another the capacity for reflective analysis."

• *Probing to empower* – A teacher shares an unimpressive piece of student writing in a team meeting and one of her colleagues silently concludes the writing is sub-par because the teacher hasn't shown enough models of high-quality writing. But he bites his tongue and instead asks, "What do you believe are some of the reasons for the quality of this child's writing?" This puts the ball in the teacher's court without suggesting that she isn't a good writing teacher; even if she hasn't thought through the answer, it will get her thinking along the right lines. Another teacher's response to a different probe might be, "Well, now that you mention it, Joe's short, dry response could have been due to that – the inability to relate to the situation I posed." Here are some other empowering probes (the first to a teacher who assigned students a developmentally inappropriate writing prompt):

- "How did the students respond to the writing prompts you used?"
- "As you designed this assignment, what student outcomes did you have in mind?"
- "What other ways can you make sure your students have an experience similar to a real author?"
- "How are you planning to draw on students' cultural background when you read poetry?"

Such probes have the threefold purpose of saving teachers' dignity, getting them thinking, and changing their practice long-term.

• *Probing for beliefs* – "Occasionally we find teachers who are complacent or reluctant to give up their views," say Colton, Langer, and Goff. "Sometimes they are so sure their views are correct that they do not want to examine them closely… Probes for beliefs can help people see, in a dignified manner, how their thinking may be faulty." Since such questions may take teachers outside their comfort zone, tact and sensitivity are essential. Paraphrasing a teacher's implied assumptions is one way to probe for beliefs.

- "It sounds like you think Harry is lazy."
- "I'd like to stop for a minute and check to see what you are thinking or assuming about Phuong."

- "You mentioned that Nika just doesn't care and does sloppy work. How do you think Nika feels about his writing?"
- "What makes you feel the situation is hopeless?"
- "So, the mother is uninvolved in this student's learning. What might be some reasons for this?"
- "How do you think the mother thinks or feels about this issue?"

"Viewing the world from someone else's perspective helps teachers challenge their own beliefs," conclude Colton, Langer, and Goff. "Viewing the world from multiple perspectives increases a teacher's *cultural proficiency*. It also helps the teacher to learn that there may be many different causes for the same behaviors."

"Create a Safe Space to Learn: Probing Encourages Teachers to Delve Deep Into Their Thinking" by Amy Colton, Georgea Langer, and Loretta Goff in *Journal of Staff Development*, June 2015 (Vol. 36, #3, p. 40-45), www.learningforward.org; the authors can be reached at acolton2@gmail.com, glanger1@att.net, and lorettasgoff@gmail.com.

Back to page one

If you have feedback or suggestions,
please e-mail kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 44 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 64 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).

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for a year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and how to pay by check, credit card, or purchase order.

Website:

If you go to http://www.marshallmemo.com you will find detailed information on:

- How to subscribe or renew
- A detailed rationale for the Marshall Memo
- Publications (with a count of articles from each)
- Article selection criteria
- Topics (with a count of articles from each)
- Headlines for all issues
- Reader opinions (with results of an annual survey)
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

Subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in Word or PDF)
- All back issues (also in Word and PDF)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- A collection of "classic" articles from all 11 years

Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief/Public Education NewsBlast
Better: Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Wharton Leadership Digest