Marshall Memo 416

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 28, 2011

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Quotes of the Week

"I suspect there are a lot of people in leadership positions who have never seen a truly exemplary school, and they doubt that it could happen."
Ronald Ferguson (see item #1)

"You learn from failure, you learn from mistakes, and every idea you generate is not going to be a great idea …but the more ideas you generate, the more likely it is that some of them will succeed."
Ellen Carson (see item #3)

"I have spent many a late night wondering why the heck I was writing comments on student essays that were never going to be read."
Timothy Quinn (see item #4)

"How leaders respond to external pressures and filter those messages for their staffs will determine how the school community internalizes and responds to those challenges."
Brooke Haycock (see item #2)

"We're constantly dealing with students who are inappropriate in what they say online."
High-school principal Franklin Caesar (see item #5)

"What's happened for most people is they become frustrated with one topic or another, or have a bad experience along their education, and they kind of fall off and start to believe that they don't like learning. When really, they just don't like being frustrated, they just don't like being talked down to, and they don't like when the information is going past them."
Salman Khan in Q&A with Khan Academy's Sal Khan in *American School Board Journal*, January 2012 (Vol. 199, #1, p. 8-9), http://www.asbj.com

1. Asking Students What They Think About Their Teachers

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, Tracy Crow (publications director for Learning Forward) describes the work of Ronald Ferguson and Rob Ramsdell on the Tripod Project, which has tapped students' perceptions of their teachers on the "Seven Cs'" from the Gates Foundation's Measures of Effective Teaching Project:

- Care: My teacher in this class makes me feel that he or she really cares about me.
- Control: Our class stays busy and doesn't waste time.
- Clarify: My teacher explains difficult things clearly.
- Challenge: My teacher wants me to explain my answers – why I think what I think.
- Captivate: My teacher makes learning enjoyable.
- Confer: My teacher wants us to share our thoughts.
- Consolidate: My teacher takes the time to summarize what we learn each day.

Students generally do better academically and are happier, harder-working, more engaged, and more satisfied with their achievements in classrooms in which teachers rate high on these criteria, Ferguson and Ramsdell have found. And it's not just about better test scores: "Most of us as parents would sacrifice a few points on a test in exchange for more happiness," says Ferguson. "We want to build a love of learning, not just maximize the scores on the next test coming up."

Should students' ratings of teachers be shared with teachers – and should they be part of teachers' evaluations? Ferguson has found that teachers learn a great deal from seeing their students' perceptions of them as instructors – in fact, it's one of the most valuable forms of professional development and can prompt teachers to look for support in specific areas. "Everybody in the building is a learner," he says. "None of us is fully realized in terms of our potential and we're going to work together to help each other to reach our potential."

Ferguson is more cautious about using student input to evaluate teachers, suggesting that what students say about their teachers should inform professional development rather than be used as part of the formal evaluation – with possible evaluative consequences down the road if teachers don't use critical feedback to improve.

One thing that intrigues Ferguson and his colleagues is the interaction between students' perceptions of their teachers and teachers' perceptions of their students. For example, certain Tripod Project questions of teachers and students reveal how tenacious teachers are with difficult-to-teach students (Ferguson calls it the "give-up index"). "When you look at how a teacher's rating on the give-up index correlates with how the students have rated the teacher,

there's a clear relationship," he says. "When you put all this together, you get an image of a social environment where the feedback effects operate in both directions. What the teacher is doing affects how the student is responding and how the student is responding is affecting what the teacher is doing." Teachers aren't always aware of how their own behaviors are causing students to react in certain ways, he says.

Ferguson is also a strong believer in the value of teacher teams looking together at student work, with a focus on two questions:

- How *feasible* was the instructional task? Was success possible for all students? Was the vocabulary confusing? Were the concepts clear?
- How *focused* were the students? Were they paying attention? Was the content interesting to them? Was it related to the world outside the classroom?

"When I sit with teachers who go through this exercise, they virtually always get up from the table with a different understanding of their students and their students' work," says Ferguson. And they almost always have specific ideas on what to do next.

Unfortunately, there aren't enough teacher meetings like this, he laments. Nor does every school leader have a clear vision of what a good school looks like. "I suspect there are a lot of people in leadership positions who have never seen a truly exemplary school," says Ferguson, "and they doubt that it could happen."

But not every principal and teacher who succeeds has a crystal-clear vision up front, says Ferguson. People can act their way into a new way of believing as well as believing their way into a new way of acting. Mandates and accountability can push educators into doing things that (surprise, surprise) get results, and their expectations and beliefs and aspirations rise to meet what their students have achieved.

"The View from the Seats" by Tracy Crow in *Journal of Staff Development*, December 2011 (Vol. 32, #6, p. 24-30), http://www.learningforward.org; Crow can be reached at tracy.crow@learningforward.org.

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2. Keys to Inspiring the Troops

"How leaders respond to external pressures and filter those messages for their staffs will determine how the school community internalizes and responds to those challenges," says Brooke Haycock of the Education Trust in this *Kappan* article. She contrasts Henry V's stirring words to his troops before the Battle of Agincourt – "Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more…" – with the speeches that all too many principals give at the beginning of the school year: "As I think you all know, we didn't make AYP last year because of scores from our diverse students. We're going to be starting a new reading program this year as part of our improvement plan for raising test scores to get off the list."

Well-meaning and doubtless hard-working, principals like this tap into an unmistakable subtext: some students and parents are the problem – *These kids just don't like to read. Nobody at home reads to these kids. Parents would rather buy video games for their children than books*. "These are fictions woven from threads of truth and spools of misunderstanding," says

Haycock. "Educators frequently talk about kids using the same clichés propagated by Hollywood directors: African-American kids come from multi-child, single-parent, drug-addicted, bullet-riddled homes while white kids play hopscotch in the two-car driveways of their two-parent, two-point-five kids, education-centered suburban homes. These narratives are not only damaging, they're dead wrong… When education leaders use narratives like these to explain away student performance, teachers are left without agency or urgency, powerless observers of an inevitable achievement gap, not the great equalizers of the American dream."

Haycock decries the way some school leaders focus on raising test scores, missing the chance to use assessment data to see what students are and are not learning and improve instruction. This leaves principals "without one of the most powerful tools in their diagnostic toolbox for highlighting success and driving real achievement and outcome-oriented change in their buildings," she says. What's even worse is trying to motivate teachers with the threat of federal or state sanctions. This leads to "drill-and-kill test prep, strangled curriculum, teacher disillusionment, and student disengagement."

"Good leaders know that they're the tone setters and meaning makers in their buildings," she concludes. "They choose their words to build urgency and collective agency… Good leaders constantly communicate to their staffs how critical they are to the mission and to the children they serve. They don't allow excuses to trivialize the importance of the work or the people who do it… They don't waste breath on the obstacles or on conditions not in their control. They build within their ranks a true sense of honor, camaraderie, and duty. And they fight alongside them all the way to victory." They use words like, *We are it. For these kids, we are it. It is on us.*

"Sounding the Charge for Change: How Leaders Communicate Can Inspire or Defeat the Troops" by Brooke Haycock in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2011/January 2012 (Vol. 93, #4, p. 48-51), http://www.kappanmagazine.org; Haycock can be reached at bhaycock@edtrust.org.

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3. Increasing Students' Creativity

In this *Education Week* article, Sarah Sparks reports on recent insights on how to foster creativity. It seems logical that arts education would do this, but that's not what the research is finding. "These transfer claims have been posited without any particular mechanism," says Boston College professor Ellen Winner. "There's a lot of magical thinking going on."

Why isn't a causal link showing up? First, because few studies have defined what arts classes teach that fosters creativity. And second, because most studies have used paper-and-pencil tests that don't capture the dynamic and subject-specific aspects of creativity. "The most difficult problem we're facing is coming up with valid measures of creativity in the visual arts and other subjects," says Winner.

Other research points to the two key aspects of creativity that are the most difficult to teach:

- The willingness to take risks and learn from failure;
- The ability to transfer a problem-solving strategy from one situation to another.

A study of 300 working-class families found that risk-taking was linked to playfulness and creativity. "The ones that emerged as most creative …used their play as work," says Stanford professor Shirley Brice Heath. "They were very difficult to disengage from play. To a person, they disliked, avoided, subverted education if it was not related to what they saw as their interests."

Heath found that disadvantaged children were sometimes more creative than middle-class students in exploring untested ways of doing things. "Risk is essential to creativity," says Robert Sternberg of Oklahoma State University, "but if you want to get into a good college and the good graduate school and the good job, you don't want to take too big a risk. Schools sometimes encourage you to do the opposite of what you'd need to be creative."

Winner has been videotaping classes in two Boston-area arts schools and has identified eight "habits of mind" that may transfer to other subject areas. One of them is "stretching and exploration," which is similar to experimentation in science classes – students are asked to go beyond subject-area knowledge to try new things.

Harvard psychologist Ellen Carson has found that challenging tasks spark creativity. She says it's also important for schools to expose students to creative work, explicitly value unique and creative work, and encourage students to be curious and adventurous. Feeling safe about exploring and taking risks is crucial. "Every creative person knows that failure is part of the process," says Carson. "You learn from failure, you learn from mistakes, and every idea you generate is not going to be a great idea …but the more ideas you generate, the more likely it is that some of them will succeed."

"Science Looks at How to Inspire Creativity" by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, Dec. 14, 2011 (Vol. 31, #14, p. 1, 16), http://www.edweek.org.

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4. How to Deal with Students Who Look Only at Their Grades

In this thoughtful *Kappan* article, high-school English teacher Timothy Quinn argues that the "manner in which grades are presented or given to students can hold significant implications for a student's ability to learn from an assessment and the feedback provided." The problem is that often, the grade itself becomes the sole focus of students' attention. This is driven by parents' intense interest in grades, which in turn is driven by the college admission process. The result is that few students look *beneath* the grade, get a sense of what they understood and didn't understand, and draw lessons for improvement.

And that's discouraging for teachers: "I have spent many a late night wondering why the heck I was writing comments on student essays that were never going to be read," says Quinn, "thinking why not just read it, put a letter on it, cut my grading time by 90% and get busy writing that great novel that all English teachers know they could write if they didn't have to spend so much time grading."

What is to be done? Quinn has a strategy. First, develop a rubric that deconstructs the content and skills students are asked to display in the assignment. Then grade papers, write a rubric score for each domain on the papers, compute each student's overall grade and write that

in your grade book, but don't write the summative grade on students' papers. Leave that for students to figure out themselves. When students get the papers back, rather than having a vague sense of having done "okay" with an overall B, they get a more nuanced understanding of their performance: "I got an A for organization so I must have organized my essay very well. I got a B for writing because there were a few too many errors, so next time I need to proofread better. But I got a C- for ideas, so I guess I'd better put some more thought into my next essay."

Quinn has another idea, taking this strategy a step further: the teacher writes comments on students' papers *without* rubric scores. Students are then asked to figure out their scores by reading the comments, then e-mail the teacher with an estimate of the grade they believe they earned. "If they make a good faith effort to do this," says Quinn, "you'll respond with their overall grade for the assignment. If not, they can wait for report cards to come out." Quinn believes this approach gets students to read comments, sparks better conversations (especially when the student's estimate of a grade differs from the teacher's), and fosters students' self-assessment skills.

"A Crash Course on Giving Grades" by Timothy Quinn in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2011/ January 2012 (Vol. 93, #4, p. 57-59), http://www.kappanmagazine.org; Quinn can be reached at tquinn@westminster-school.org.

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5. Students' Internet Indiscretions Coming Home to Roost

In this *Education Week* article, Robin Flanigan reports that the number of college-admissions officers who routinely search the Internet and Facebook and use Google to get insights on applicants has quadrupled in the past year. When college officials find inappropriate material (photos of underage drinking, vulgarities in blogs, evidence of plagiarism), they often deny admission.

What can schools do to get this message through to oblivious teenagers? "We're constantly dealing with students who are inappropriate in what they say online," says Franklin Caesar, the principal of a Central Islip (NY) high school. "The disconnect happens because of their age and level of maturity." Here are some suggestions:

- *Start early*. Some schools bombard students with cautionary tales as early as sixth grade.
- *Coordinate*. It's a good idea for elementary, middle, and high-school educators to work together to extend the message across levels.
- *Encourage Web searches*. When students Google themselves, they are sometimes surprised – and alarmed – at what turns up.
- *Get parents involved*. They may be unaware of their children's digital footprint and how it can affect college admission.
- *Repeat the message*. Students need to hear the message repeatedly through middle and high school – in assemblies, classrooms, and guidance meetings.

"Online Behavior Jeopardizing College Plans" by Robin Flanigan in *Education Week*, Dec. 14, 2011 (Vol. 31, #14, p. 11), http://www.edweek.org

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6. Statistics on Teen Pregnancy

(Originally titled "Fighting the Female Dropout Phenomenon")

In a sidebar in this *Education Update* article, Laura Vargas presents statistics on teen pregnancy in the U.S.:

- Pregnancy is the number one reason girls drop out of school.
- Only about half of teen mothers get a high-school diploma by age 22, compared with 90 percent of teen girls who haven't given birth.
- Fewer than 2 percent of teen mothers finish college by age 30.
- Over a lifetime, a high-school dropout earns $1 million less than a college graduate.
- About 4 percent of teen girls give birth each year, accounting for 10 percent of births.
- U.S. teen birthrates are up to nine times higher than in other developed countries.
- Teen pregnancy cost taxpayers (federal, state, and local level) $10.9 billion in 2008.
- Hispanic and African-American teen girls are 2-3 times more likely to give birth than white teen girls; use of birth control is higher among the latter.
- Girls born to teen parents are almost 33 percent more likely to become teen parents.
- Children born to teen parents are 50 percent more likely to repeat a grade, and only about 2/3 of them earn high-school diplomas, compared to 81 percent of children of later child-bearers.

"Fighting the Female Dropout Phenomenon" by Laura Vargas in *Education Update*, December 2011 (Vol. 53, #12, p. 1-4), http://www.ascd.org

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, 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 41 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 44 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 about 50 issues a year).

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Better Evidence-Based Education
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
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Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
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Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice