Marshall Memo 591

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 15, 2015

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Technology amplifies preexisting differences in wealth and achievement. Children with greater vocabularies get more out of Wikipedia. Students with behavioral challenges are more distracted by video games… Without addressing the underlying socio-economic chasm, technology by itself doesn't bridge the gap, it only jacks it further apart."

Kentaro Toyama (see item #5)

"The 'spray and pray' approach gets you nowhere – spray every kid with a device and pray something miraculous happens in the education system for them. It's a process, and the vision upfront is what's primary."

Leslie Wilson (quoted in item #4)

"Single-subject expertise isn't the secret sauce; the key is familiarity with a *broad range* of subjects, enabling young readers to make inferences smoothly and reflexively across topics. A child, for example, may read that 'annual flooding in the Nile Delta made Egypt ideal for agriculture.' If she's doing a unit on ancient Egypt, she has the background knowledge to contextualize the unfamiliar word 'annual.' If she knows nothing of Egypt and the Nile, or has no idea what agriculture or a delta is, then 'annual' is just one more word in a stew of non-comprehension. The child who knows those things learns a new word; the child who doesn't falls one more word behind. Repeated exposure to new words in familiar contexts in and out of school – Native Americans observed *annual* rituals; it's time for your *annual* checkup; some plants are *annuals* while others are perennials – solidifies the child's understanding until the word becomes part of her working vocabulary, even without explicit study. In elementary school, reading comprehension and vocabulary development are key, and breadth of knowledge builds both."

Robert Pondiscio in "Building Literacy Skills: The State of Reading Instruction in Grades K-3" in *Education Gadfly*, June 10, 2015 (Vol. 15, #22), http://bit.ly/1Laj1ZC

1. Grant Wiggins Quotes

We lost a great educator and thinker last month. Grant Wiggins's work with Jay McTighe on backwards curriculum unit design, assessment, and school improvement has made a huge difference in countless schools and elevated the entire profession. Here is a collection of his thoughts from recent years on three major topics:

Assessment and feedback

"Students should be presumed innocent of understanding until proven guilty by the preponderance of the evidence."

"Results are what counts. You have to *measure*."

"Teachers over-plan and under-assess."

"The more you teach without finding out who understands the information and who doesn't, the greater the likelihood that only already-proficient students will succeed."

"Practicing for a standardized test to raise the scores is like practicing for your physical exam to become healthy. It mistakes measures for goals."

"Decades of education research support the idea that by teaching less and providing more feedback, we can produce greater learning. Basically, feedback is information about how we are doing in our efforts to reach a goal."

"Students are entitled to a more educative and user-friendly assessment system. They deserve far more feedback – and opportunities to use it – as part of the local assessment process. Those tasks should recur, as in the visual and performing arts and in sports, so there are many chances to get good at vital work. When assessment properly focuses teaching and learning in this way, student self-assessment and self-adjustment become a critical part of all instruction…"

"If you really understand the topic, you should have no trouble handling a question that looks a little different from the questions the teacher asked. If you learned only by rote, however, a novel question will stump you."

"Assessment tasks must model and demand important real-world work. Focused and accountable teaching requires ongoing assessment of the core tasks that embody the aims of schooling: whether students can wisely transfer knowledge with understanding in simulations of complex adult intellectual tasks. Only by ensuring that the assessment system models such (genuine) performance will student achievement and teaching be improved over time."

"What makes any assessment in education formative is not merely that it precedes summative assessments, but that the performer has opportunities, if results are less than optimal, to reshape the performance to better achieve the goal. This is how all highly successful computer games work."

Improving teaching and learning

"The point of school is not to get good at school."

"No one masters something they are not passionate about."

"By the very nature of the job of teaching, we are prone to be insensitive (literally) to the actual daily experience of our students, what they feel, unless we get outside of ourselves by acts of will."

"For the majority of learners, school is a place where the teacher has the answers and classroom questions are intended to find out who knows them." (with Jay McTighe)

"Like the music or athletic coach, the classroom teacher's job is to help the student 'play the game' of the expert."

"Expert coaches uniformly avoid overloading performers with too much or too technical information. They tell the performers one important thing they noticed that, if changed, will likely yield immediate and noticeable improvement."

"Reform is strongly needed in many schools. Many teachers are just not currently capable of engaging and deeply educating the kids in front of them, especially in the upper grades. Why can't we just admit this?" (from an open letter to Diane Ravitch)

"[T]eachers can be remarkably thin-skinned when someone questions their methods or decisions, and many of us resist seeking or receiving feedback from students, parents, colleagues, and supervisors. When students fail to learn, some teachers end up blaming the

students, without an honest investigation of where student fault ends and teacher responsibility begins."

"My question is basic, history teachers. Given that most history textbooks are comprehensive and reasonably well-written, why do you feel the need to talk so much? Your colleagues in science and English, for example, do not feel the same urge."

"Without regular opportunities to consider, observe, and analyze best practice and receive helpful, non-evaluative feedback, how likely are teachers to engage in continual professional improvement?" (with Jay McTighe)

"Being willing and able to rethink requires a safe and supportive environment for questioning assumptions and habits, as well as a curriculum designed to foster thinking,"

Backwards planning

"When curriculum is defined as a linear march through stuff covered once (and where no pre-tests are ever done), it is *inevitable* that we end up exaggerating differences and constantly talking (wrongly) about too many kids 'falling behind.' Falling behind *what*? Some mythical average 'pace' of teaching in a single way?"

"What we need to see more clearly is that the common learner failure to transfer is not a student weakness or a teaching deficit but a mistake in planning. You have to design backward from the goal of transfer if you want to achieve it… Too often, though, teachers merely teach, then ask in their tests: Did you learn my lesson?"

"To design a school curriculum backwards from the goal of autonomous transfer requires a deliberate and transparent plan for helping the student rely less and less on teacher hand-holding and scaffolds." (with Jay McTighe)

"We contend that teachers can best raise test scores over the long haul by teaching the key ideas and processes contained in content standards in rich and engaging ways; by collecting evidence of student understanding of that content through robust local assessments rather than one-shot standardized testing; and by using engaging and effective instructional strategies that help students explore core concepts through inquiry and problem solving."

"Knowing that you're a novice who's a long way from true mastery is not inherently debilitating. On the contrary, having a worthy, far-off goal and tracking your progress in closing the gap are key to mastery in all walks of life."

Back to page one

2. The Limits and Value of Cooperative Learning

In this article in *American Educator*, British author/high-school teacher Tom Bennett casts a skeptical eye on the enthusiastic research about cooperative learning. Yes, there are benefits, says Bennett, but are also these downsides:

• *Disguised inactivity* – "In group scenarios," he says, students are provided with an opportunity to really put their backs into doing nothing." One student may carry a disproportionate load while others slack off, their inaction "hidden inside the smog of collaborative effort."

• *Unequal loading* – Some students will contribute "at glacial speed, while others will race and caper through every task and subtask."

• *Inappropriate socializing* – "Students may end up competing to see who can discuss the task the least," says Bennett. "Pupils are well aware that group work can devolve into recess."

• *Unfair assessment* – When teachers give a collective grade to a group, the praise or blame can be unfairly apportioned. "We should do this as rarely as possible," he says, "and praise and reward individual effort where possible. Groups, after all, cannot think or learn; that is possible only for individuals."

• *Opportunity cost* – Could the time spent in cooperative learning groups have been spent more productively in all-class instruction, individual work, or some other modality?

So when *is* group work helpful? Bennett believes there are several situations where it is the best classroom strategy:

- To consolidate learning after direct instruction – for example, having students pair up and debate both sides of a historical controversy;
- To mix things up after a period of individual or all-class work;
- To accomplish a specific task together;
- When tasks can't be achieved without a group – for example, an orchestra or a football team;
- To improve students' ability to cooperate, reason with each other, and listen to each others' opinions.

Bennett adds that it's important to have a specific purpose when we get students working in groups. "Utility should be at the heart of this decision-making process," he says; "use group work when you feel it is appropriate to the task you want your students to achieve… It's one strategy among many. And it's a perfectly reasonable part of a teacher's arsenal of strategies… because the teacher feels it's appropriate at that time, for that lesson, with those children. And not before."

"Group Work for the Good: Unpacking the Research Behind One Popular Classroom Strategy" by Tom Bennett in *American Educator*, Spring 2015 (Vol. 39, #1, p. 32-37, 44), http://www.aft.org/ae/spring2015/bennett

Back to page one

3. Doing Co-Teaching Right

In this *Education Week* article, Christina Samuels reports that between 2003 and 2013, the percent of students with special needs who spent most of the school day in general-education classrooms rose from about 50 percent to 61 percent. The idea behind this trend is ensuring that special-education students get the full curriculum and spend as little time as possible in isolated settings. However, says Samuels, "poorly implemented co-teaching practices may be taking the 'special' out of special education." When co-teaching is working well, says Marilyn Friend of the University of North Carolina/Greensboro, "it is clear that there are two different teachers with two types of expertise." When collaboration isn't good, when the special-education teacher is acting like a classroom helper, "You might as well keep pulling kids out, because they're not going to get what they need." Another problem is when co-teachers are so focused on content that they don't meet the needs of all students.

The challenge is getting schools to the point where co-equal, productive, collaborative relationships aren't dependent on positive chemistry between the two teachers. Kentucky recently launched a statewide initiative called Co-Teaching for Gap Closure, which stresses that general- and special-education teachers are jointly responsible for all students in the classroom. "It becomes a huge 'Aha!' moment for [teachers]," says Bonnie Tomberlin, who works with the program. "They understand, 'Oh, I don't have to sit at the back of the room at the table with my kids. I don't have to send these children to the back of the classroom and make them feel like a pariah.'" Administrators are trained to look for effective implementation of a mix of five different configurations over time (see the diagrams in the article):

- One teaches, one supports – One teacher works with the entire class while the other circulates observing and/or helping students and supporting classroom management.
- Station teaching – Teachers divide the content into segments, then present the information to separate groups of students; there may be an additional station for some students to work independently.
- Parallel teaching – Teachers divide the class into two heterogeneous groups and deliver the whole lesson to their group.
- Alternative teaching – One teacher works with a small group more intensively while the other instructs the rest of the class.
- Team teaching – Both teachers share the instruction of the entire class.

"Challenge of Co-Teaching: A Special-Education Issue" by Christina Samuels in *Education Week*, June 10, 2015 (Vol. 34, #34, p. 1, 11), www.edweek.org

Back to page one

4. Eight Cautionary Notes Before Buying a Lot of Technology

In this *Education Week Technology Counts* article, Malia Herman shares the lessons learned from the troubled rollout of district-wide computers in Los Angeles and elsewhere:

• *Articulate your vision*. Why is the district buying technology? How will teaching and learning be different?

• *Start small*. "Do a pilot," advises technology consultant Bob Moore. "Roll out over a period of years. Don't let the sense of urgency force you to make rash decisions." This might mean starting with one grade or one subject area.

• *Get schools tech-ready*. It usually takes schools one or two years to get up to speed on wireless bandwidth, training, and other necessities.

• *Prepare teachers*. "There's a big difference between training and professional learning," says Leslie Wilson of Michigan's One-to-One Institute. "Teachers have to learn new things, change old habits, develop networks."

• *Visit other districts*. The Houston schools sent teachers to visit Mooresville, North Carolina to get on-the-ground sense of its 1-to-1 initiative.

• *Engage the community*. "If the game plan is limited to a select group of people, the potential for success is lost," says Mooresville superintendent Mark Edwards. "Include the school board, elected leaders, teachers, principals, parent groups so that there is a sense of community vision."

• *Build a brand*. Houston decided on POWER UP as the slogan for its initiative. "Everyone needs to understand clearly what is being done and why," says Leslie Wilson. "That doesn't mean they have to agree, but they have to understand."

• *Make content king*. There is nothing transformative about buying devices and loading textbooks into them, says Wilson. Mooresville's Edwards agrees: "The new digital content that is being developed is so superior to old-world print, and it's cost-efficient." His district is using about 50 different content providers.

"District Smooths 1-to-1 Initiative by Heeding Others' Mistakes" by Malia Herman in *Education Week Technology Counts*, June 11, 2015 (Vol. 34, #35, p. 18-19), www.edweek.org

Back to page one

5. The Matthew Effect with Digital Devices

In this article in *The Atlantic*, Kentaro Toyama (University of Michigan) says that the all-too-frequent failure of expensive technology initiatives to make a difference in schools is explained by what he calls the Law of Amplification: Computers, tablets, and smartphones tend to heighten schools' and children's existing tendencies – those that boost learning and those that pull in the other direction. That's especially true when we leave young people on their own with digital devices. "To be sure, children have a natural desire to learn and play and grow," says Toyama. "But they also have a natural desire to distract themselves with Angry Birds. Digital technology amplifies both of these appetites. The balance between them differs from child to child, but on the whole, distraction seems to win out when there's no adult guidance… That is, if you provide an all-purpose technology that can be used for learning and entertainment, children choose entertainment. Technology by itself doesn't undo that inclination – it amplifies it."

Which leads Toyama to the conclusion that technology won't solve America's educational problems, including our poor showing relative to other developed countries and the widening achievement gaps between our advantaged and less-fortunate students. He takes U.S.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to task for saying (in a recent speech), "Technology can level the playing field instead of tilting it against low-income, minority and rural students – who may not have laptops and iPhones at home." This is "misleading and misguided," says Toyama. "Technology amplifies preexisting differences in wealth and achievement. Children with greater vocabularies get more out of Wikipedia. Students with behavioral challenges are more distracted by video games. Rich parents will pay for tutors so that their children can learn to program the devices that others merely learn to use… Without addressing the underlying socio-economic chasm, technology by itself doesn't bridge the gap, it only jacks it further apart… Technology at school may level the playing field of access, but a level field does nothing to improve the skill of the players, which is the whole point of education."

The key ingredient in closing the achievement gap is *good in-person teaching*, says Toyama – "a deliberate allocation of high-quality adult supervision focused on those who need it the most." What this means is that public schools should allocate serious resources to adapt curriculum and train teachers to make the best possible use of technology. Using wealthy families in high-tech Seattle as an example, Toyama points out two ironies. First, these parents, many of whom are executives at Microsoft and Amazon, often keep their children away from digital devices for several years, even sending them to Waldorf schools, which ban electronics till eighth grade.

Second, these parents pay for private tutoring when their children are having academic difficulty. For several years, Toyama has provided one-on-one help to students at a Seattle private school. "All the content I tutored is available on math websites and in free Khan Academy videos," he says, "and every student had round-the-clock Internet access. But even with all that technology, and even at a school with a luxurious 9:1 student-teacher ratio, what parents wanted for their kids was more adult guidance… These parents aren't anti-technology – at work, they tend to be exuberant digital evangelists – but they apparently don't believe that more machines in and of themselves contribute to education. What is it that they know?"

"Why Technology Alone Won't Fix Schools" by Kentaro Toyama in *The Atlantic*, June 3, 2015, http://theatln.tc/1MWDNKm

Back to page one

6. Choosing the Right Technology: Does One Size Fit All?

In this *Education Week Technology Counts* article, Robin Flanigan quotes Leslie Wilson of Michigan's One-to-One Institute: "The 'spray and pray' approach gets you nowhere – spray every kid with a device and pray something miraculous happens in the education system for them. It's a process, and the vision upfront is what's primary."

Should districts choose one device for all students K-12, as Baltimore County has done for its 110,000 students and 8,800 teachers (the HP EliteBook Revolve 810 G3 laptop-tablet hybrid)? Perhaps not. Flanigan shares some possible considerations for each level:

• *Pre-K and elementary grades:*

- Durability is an issue, as is a touchscreen interface that works well with small fingers.

- Portability is important for project-based learning and individual reading time, which points to iPads and other tablets. But some districts are moving to Chromebooks, Kindles, and tablets made by Samsung and Android.
- A single device can work for research, nature field-trip photos, and written documents, and tablets are a good choice because of the many apps available.
- Accommodations and modifications – The Albuquerque, New Mexico schools have found iPads effective for students with special needs. Accessibility features address vision problems and students can convert speech to text or listen to voiceovers.

• *Middle school:*

- Students at this level move from consuming to creating content, do more multitasking, and need to use the Internet heavily.
- Flexible learning environments are key so teachers can differentiate in academic, behavioral, and social-emotional domains.
- Immediate access to cloud-based documents is also desirable. Regional School Unit #4 in Wales, Maine has found Chromebooks a good fit in these areas; they are operating within the Google ecosystem, which is compatible with Chromebooks.
- Customized educational experiences are also important, including easy access to e-mail, documents, grades, and subscription-based resources.

• *High school:*

- Complex multimedia applications are necessary at this level, so devices should be powerful enough to handle them.
- Technical problem-solving and critical-thinking skills are key, and devices must support students' development in word processing, data analysis, and presentation software skills. Barrington High School in Illinois is using 11-inch Macbook Air computers and the software development platform Swift.
- Enrichment opportunities are also important; the Horry County, South Carolina schools are using Dell Venue 11 Pro 5000 series tablets (with detachable keyboards).

"Device Decisions Revolve Around Grade-Level Needs" by Robin Flanigan in *Education Week Technology Counts*, June 11, 2015 (Vol. 34, #35, p. 16), www.edweek.org

Back to page one

7. A Middle-School Science Inquiry Software Program

In this article in *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, Mike Sharples (The Open University, UK) and 10 coauthors report on their study of middle-school students working with their teachers on the nQuire software toolkit to conduct scripted science inquiries. "A central challenge for science educators is to enable young people to act as scientists by gathering and assessing evidence, conducting experiments, and engaging in informed debate," say the authors. "In a complex and uncertain world, in which major scientific issues are publicly contested, it is essential for the well-being of society that young people better understand and engage in the science that affects their lives.

"There are two fundamental reasons for encouraging young people to engage in personally meaningful scientific inquiry. The first is to give them the experience of being scientists. By engaging in scientific practices within and outside the classroom, young people can come to understand the nature of shared scientific investigation and the value of building their investigations on the findings of others. With the Web providing easy access to conspiracy theories and pseudoscientific articles, there is more need than ever to enable young people to understand the practices of scientists, the need for scientific rigor, and valid interpretation of results…

"The second reason is that by undertaking meaningful and satisfying investigations of their locally accessible world, young people can feel the surprise and unease that are the foundations of scientific curiosity… a vague feeling that something is out of place or an experience of unexpected response to a habitual action. This stimulates a need for resolution through reasoned investigation. Inquiry also arises from positive affect: a sense of wonder that leads to curiosity and a desire for explanation. It is this aspect of personal commitment to an inquiry that is often missing from school science, and it cannot be assumed to drive science education outside the classroom in museums or discovery centers… It is not feasible to take pupils outside the classroom to engage in scientific reasoning as part of a 40-minute science lesson."

Hence the attractiveness of a software product that simulates scientific inquiry in the classroom and builds students' ability to work collaboratively, argue and debate from evidence, judge the veracity of source information, deal with "noise" in data, and construct and interpret appropriate visualizations of data.

The researchers found that the nQuire toolkit successfully guided students through investigations of pollution, microclimates, food packaging, healthy eating, diet, and exercise and was used successfully in several settings: teacher-directed lessons, an after-school club, field trips, and learner-managed homework. Students went through these steps:

- Find my topic.
- Decide my inquiry question or hypothesis.
- Plan my methods, equipment, and actions.
- Collect my evidence.
- Analyze and represent my evidence.
- Respond to my question or hypothesis.
- Share and discuss my inquiry.
- Reflect on my progress.

The nQuire process, say Sharples and colleagues, "effectively supported the transition between individual, group, and whole-class activities and supported learning across formal and informal settings." Teachers played a vital role in the inquiry process, "explaining its purpose and methods, locating it within the science curriculum, guiding the design and conduct of investigations, and coordinating the outcomes to reach a satisfying conclusion that helps learners understand the value of scientific inquiry."

However, altering students' attitudes toward science proved more difficult, and the authors report mixed success in that department.

"Personal Inquiry: Orchestrating Science Investigations Within and Beyond the Classroom" by Mike Sharples, Eileen Scanlon, Shaaron Ainsworth, Stamatina Anastopoulou, Trevor Collins, Charles Crook, Ann Jones, Lucinda Kerawalla, Karen Littleton, Paul Mulholland, and Claire O'Malley in *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, April-June 2015 (Vol. 24, #2, p. 308-341), http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10508406.2014.944642; Sharples can be reached at mike.sharples@open.ac.uk.

Back to page one

8. Good News for Reading Recovery Implementation

In this *American Educational Research Journal* article, Henry May (University of Delaware) and seven colleagues from the University of Pennsylvania report on their study of the first year of a $55 million i3 scale-up of Reading Recovery instruction for at-risk first graders. The results were impressive. The estimated impact of Reading Recovery on students' ITBS Total Reading scores was .69 standard deviations relative to the study sample and .47 standard deviations relative to the national population of first graders. This is 5.7 times larger than the average effects of Title I programs reviewed in a 1996 study (.11). Gains in percentile rank were also large, with treatment students outperforming control students by up to 20 percentile points – analogous to an additional 1.9 months of learning or a growth rate 38 percent greater than the national average growth of beginning first graders.

The key to these gains was fidelity to the intensive Reading Recovery training model, which involves intensive coaching by teacher leaders, analyzing effective strategies with fellow trainees, and observing colleagues teaching numerous "behind the glass" lessons. "Many RR teachers reported that their RR training was transformative in terms of their own instruction and understanding about literacy," conclude May et al.

"Year One Results from the Multisite Randomized Evaluation of the i3 Scale-Up of Reading Recovery" by Henry May, Abigail Gray, Philip Sirinides, Heather Goldsworthy, Michael Armijo, Cecile Sam, Jessica Gillespie, and Namrata Tognatta in *American Educational Research Journal*, June 2015 (Vol. 52, #3, p. 547-581), available for purchase at http://bit.ly/1Lbrfxr; May can be reached at hmay@udel.edu.

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).

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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
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Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
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Elementary School Journal
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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