Marshall Memo 318

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 11, 2010

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Regardless of how 'good' a faculty may consider its school, for the parent whose child does not learn, the school has failed the child – 100 percent."

Richard DuFour (see item #7)

"Asking 'Does anyone have any questions?' does not work, and it's a classic rookie mistake. Students are not always the best judges of their own learning."

Amanda Ripley (see item #1)

"I keep six honest serving-men:
(They taught me all I knew)
Their names are What and Where and When
And How and Why and Who."

Rudyard Kipling in *Just So Stories* (1902), quoted in "How the Scientist Got His Ideas: A Just-So Story" by David Barash and Judith Eve Lipton in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 8, 2010 (Vol. LVI, #17, p. B13)
http://chronicle.com/article/How-the-Scientist-Got-His-I/63287/

"I became a teacher who actively listened. I had in the past often confused listening with waiting for my students to stop talking so that I might resume the very important business of performing. I learned that if I listened carefully, thoughtfully, generously, and non-judgmentally, my students would delight me with the complexity of their thinking, the depth of their insight, the delicious wickedness of their humor, and with their compassion, their wisdom, and their honesty."

Elaine Smokewood (see item #3)

"Until principals know that they are going to be evaluated on things like poking their noses into a teacher's business, most of them aren't going to do it."

Joseph Murphy (see item #5)

1. What Teach for America Is Learning About Highly Effective Teachers

In this important article in *The Atlantic*, Amanda Ripley reports preliminary data from Teach for America's nine-year study of what makes some of its teachers much more successful than others. Former teacher Steven Farr is leading the study for Teach for America, which has put the data to work within the organization and significantly increased the percent of its teachers who get dramatic student learning gains. Now it's releasing the results for the first time. Some highlights from the list of what the most successful teachers do:

- They set ambitious goals for their students.
- They avidly recruit students and their families into the improvement process.
- They set up routines that are so well established that "they run virtually without any involvement from the teacher," says Farr. "In fact, for many highly effective teachers, the measure of a well-executed routine is that it continues in the teacher's absence."
- They plan exhaustively and purposefully by working backward from the desired learning outcome.
- They constantly check for understanding using methods that allow them to see if all students get it (dry-erase boards, popsicle sticks, clickers, exit tickets, etc.) – and follow up if some don't. "Asking 'Does anyone have any questions?' does not work," says Ripley, "and it's a classic rookie mistake. Students are not always the best judges of their own learning."
- They work very hard, refusing to let poverty, bureaucracy, and insufficient funds get in their way.
- They are constantly reevaluating what they do, looking for ways to improve their teaching, and reorganizing their classrooms and approaches.
- They stay focused on what's working, ensuring that everything they do contributes to student learning.

"Strong teachers insist that effective teaching is neither mysterious nor magical," says Farr in *Teaching as Leadership*, a forthcoming book he's written with his colleagues. "It is neither a function of dynamic personality nor dramatic performance."

Teach for America is also using the data to look back at what showed up when its most successful teachers were interviewed – and critique interview questions and techniques. Some conclusions:

- Past performance, especially measurable past performance, is the best predictor of future performance.

- Having achieved big, measurable goals in college and/or previous workplaces is a very good sign – for example, running and doubling the size of a tutoring program.
- Knowledge matters, especially in high-school math, but not in every case.
- Graduating from a selective college is a plus, but graduating from an Ivy League college does not guarantee classroom success.
- An improved GPA in the last two years of college tells more than straight *A*s all the way through. This speaks to a key characteristic – perseverance or "grit" in the face of adversity.
- A master's degree in education has no correlation with classroom effectiveness.
- "Life satisfaction" matters – teachers who report that they are very happy with their lives seem to convey this enthusiasm and zest to their students.

Using these and other insights, Teach for America has improved its screening and interviewing process – among other things, watching carefully with specific criteria in mind as finalists teach a five-minute lesson to a group of adults. "[I]f school systems hired, trained, and rewarded teachers according to the principles Teach for America has identified," concludes Ripley, "then teachers would not need to work so hard. They would be operating in a system designed in a radically different way – designed, that is, for success."

"What Makes a Great Teacher?" by Amanda Ripley in *The Atlantic*, January/February 2010 (Vol. 305, #1, p. 58-66) http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/201001/good-teaching with several videotapes of great teachers

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2. Should Teachers Try to Match Instruction to Students' Learning Styles?

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, David Glenn reports on recent research debunking the idea of catering to different learning styles in the classroom. The widely-touted and intuitively appealing notion that teachers should match instruction to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners has "no strong scientific evidence," say four psychologists in an the December 2009 issue of *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*.

The authors agree that different learning styles exist and that each student has a preferred style. But they say there's no evidence that matching teaching to learning styles is the best way to improve learning. Instead, they assert, there's an optimal way to teach each chunk of content to all students.

Here's an experiment using a week of instruction on complex molecules as an example. The style-matching hypothesis would predict that if students manipulate ball-and-stick models of molecules, kinesthetic learners will do better, while verbal learners will do better reading a few pages about the logic of molecular design. But in a well-designed experiment that randomly assigned students to two classrooms, one using hands-on instruction and the other reading, here were the results:

- In the hands-on classroom, kinesthetic learners enjoyed the lesson much more than their verbal peers, and their average score was 95% on a content test at the end of a week, while verbal learners averaged 80%.

- In the reading-oriented classroom, verbal students enjoyed the lesson much more than their kinesthetic peers, but on the test, both groups averaged 70%.

In other words, even though verbal learners enjoyed reading-oriented instruction better, they learned more in the hands-on classroom. This proved to be true in almost every well-designed study. "For a given lesson," says Glenn, "one instructional technique turns out to be optimal for all groups of students, even though students with certain learning styles may not love that technique."

The implication for teachers is clear: it's not a good use of time to scope out your students' learning styles and gear teaching to each subgroup; instead, analyze what you're about to teach and find the ideal learning modality to get that content across to students. "Some concepts are best taught through hands-on work," says Glenn, "some are best taught through lectures, and some are best taught through group discussions."

Learning-style advocates dispute this conclusion, pointing to positive results from many studies of teachers matching instruction to students' learning styles. The authors of the new study push back. First, they say, the vast majority of learning-styles studies don't meet rigorous standards of evidence. Second, when teachers and professors get learning styles training, they become more attentive to the kinds of instruction they deliver, which leads them to broaden their teaching repertoire and increase the number of lessons they teach with the optimal teaching modality. "Even though the learning-style idea might not work," says Richard Mayer of the UC/Santa Barbara, "It might encourage teachers to think about how their students learn and what would be the best instructional methods for a particular lesson." So learning-style training might be effective, but not for the reasons some might have thought.

"Customized Teaching Fails a Test" by David Glenn in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 8, 2010 (Vol. LVI, #17, p. A1, A7-A8), http://chronicle.com/article/Matching-Teaching-Style-to-/49497/; the authors of the *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* article are Harold Pashler, Mark McDaniel, Doug Rohrer, and Robert Bjork.

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3. Adapting

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Jeffrey Young describes how Elaine Smokewood, a 54-year-old English professor at Oklahoma City University who has Lou Gehrig's disease (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS), has continued to teach successfully. Smokewood is no longer able to speak, so she conducts her undergraduate literature classes from home, using a webcam and a computer hookup. She appears in the classroom on a large monitor, watches the students on her laptop, and communicates through typed text.

Smokewood believes that her "affliction," as she calls it, has made her a better professor because now she's a guiding observer rather than the prime mover. "I became a different kind of teacher than I had ever been," she says. "I became a teacher who actively listened. I had in the past often confused listening with waiting for my students to stop talking so that I might resume the very important business of performing. I learned that if I listened

carefully, thoughtfully, generously, and non-judgmentally, my students would delight me with the complexity of their thinking, the depth of their insight, the delicious wickedness of their humor, and with their compassion, their wisdom, and their honesty."

Before she got ALS, her small literature class met twice a week. Now it meets once; in place of the second class, students read a lecture by Smokewood and participate in an online forum. During each classroom lesson, students take turns leading the discussion and Smokewood listens, takes notes, and occasionally chimes in when students go astray or when she wants to emphasize a point. Young observed a class in which Smokewood questioned students individually as they presented final papers and prompted students to quiz each other. "It sounded more like a graduate seminar than an undergraduate class," he comments. Students he interviewed said that the unorthodox format works, that discussions often continued for hours after classes, and that the course was more demanding than others they took.

"One of the very good things, on a very mundane level, is that my students are always prepared now," says Smokewood, using a computer-generated voice. "They really cannot be passive. There's nowhere to hide, and the discussion periods are more intense and more special… If I regained my voice tomorrow, I would do classes the way I have learned to do them over the past couple of years. I just wish there had been an easier way to learn that lesson."

"Taught by a Terrible Disease" by Jeffrey Young in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 8, 2010 (Vol. LVI, #17, p. A10)
http://chronicle.com/article/Taught-by-a-Terrible-Disease/63347/ This link includes a videotape. Young can be reached at jeff.young@chronicle.com.

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4. Using Peer Coaches to Build Oral Reading Fluency

In this *JESPAR* article, a team of researchers reports on an experiment using second-grade students to coach their at-risk peers in reading fluency. The premise of this study was that fluency (the ability to read text aloud with sufficient speed, accuracy, and expression) and good comprehension "are rooted in rapid recognition of isolated words, facility in processing phrases and sentences, and consistent expression when reading text. Clearly, fluency is a critical component of early literacy instruction."

Here's the protocol that the teachers in 14 Southeast U.S. elementary schools used with their second-grade classes:

- A student passed out the fluency folders containing several leveled reading passages of 120-150 words geared to the independent reading level of the target students (Reading Recovery levels 6 to 31).
- Student coaches sat with their pre-assigned reading partners (the students who needed help) at desks and other locations around the classroom.
- The teacher asked students to read the day's targeted passage aloud together; each team had a passage matching the target student's independent reading level. Students raised their hands when they were finished.

- Students then read the selection aloud for a second time, alternating sentences between the coach and partner, which provided a fluent model for the struggling reader. The coach gave support as needed.
- Then the partner read the passage a third time with the coach providing help with unknown words as needed. By this time, most partners could read the passage fluently.
- The teacher monitored how well students were following directions.
- Then the teacher asked students to complete a timed reading of the passage, encouraging them to read fluently and with expression and timing them with a stopwatch for one minute.
- The coaches monitored their partners' reading, marked the spot they reached after one minute, counted the words, and recorded the number in their partner's chart.
- The district's goal for second grade was 90 words a minute; if the partner hit this target, the coach put a star on the chart next to the story read.
- If not, the partner practiced reading the same story for up to three fluency sessions before moving on to a new story (there were three stories at each level to avoid the student memorizing the first passage).
- Later in the day, the teacher checked the charts and decided on the level of difficulty for the next fluency practice session.

Once students got into the routine, this all took 10-12 minutes, and the teacher scheduled the fluency sessions three times a week.

What were the results? The treatment groups improved their Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) from 51 on the pretest to 91 on the posttest, with strong gains in comprehension. Students in the control group went from 50 to 70. The authors report that treatment students were enthusiastic about recording their progress and watching their improvement. "Once the intervention is up and running, the students begin to take ownership of the practice," write the authors. "When given the opportunity to read stories on their own level, the students gain confidence in their ability and become excited about reading. The students enjoy working with a peer and are proud to chart their growth. Our teachers have also noted that as students begin to make progress on the passages, their self-confidence is evident as they choose to read books during free time, are willing to read aloud during literacy instruction, and are eager to improve so that they, too, can move up to become ORF coaches."

What are the key elements? The authors list the following:

- Modeling fluent reading;
- Providing support with difficult words;
- Providing opportunities to read a text more than once to gain confidence and control;
- Identifying a goal the student needed to achieve with each reading;
- Charting student progress.

"Using Peer Coaches to Build Oral Reading Fluency" by Bob Algozzine, Mary Beth Marr, Rebecca Kavel, and Katherine Keller Dugan in *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* (*JESPAR*), July-September 2009 (Vol. 14, #3, p. 256-270), no e-link available

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5. A New Tool for Evaluating Principals

In this *Education Week* article, Lesli Maxwell reports that a recent Learning Point Associates study of eight principal-evaluation tools found that one is clearly superior to the others – the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED). Developed in 2006 and now available for purchase, VAL-ED gives principals 360-degree feedback on their performance and focuses on instructional leadership as well as school operations.

Vanderbilt professor Joseph Murphy, who was on the VAL-ED development team, says that evaluation of principals needs to shift from operations to instruction. "The profession for 150 years was grounded in management, organization, governance, politics, and finance," he says. Those things are important, but they are secondary to learning and teaching." The reality is that too many principals are evaluated solely on controlling conflict and running smooth operations, he says. "Until principals know that they are going to be evaluated on things like poking their noses into a teacher's business, most of them aren't going to do it." Murphy believes that the evaluation tool is one of the best levers to shape principals' actions once they're on the job – provided that it is skillfully implemented.

The VAL-ED assessment gathers evidence from the principal's immediate supervisors and all the teachers in the school to measure the intersection of two dimensions of leadership: (a) Core components of schools that support teaching and learning, and (b) Key processes that leaders use to create those core components:

<u>Core Components:</u>

- Ambitious goals for student learning – There are school, team, and individual teacher targets for academic and social learning;
- Rigorous curriculum content – Challenging academic content is provided to all students;
- Quality instruction – Effective classroom practices maximize academic and social learning;
- Culture of learning and professional behavior – A healthy school environment has student learning as the central focus; communities of professional practice serve student academic and social learning;
- External connections – Linkages to families and/or other people and institutions advance academic and social learning;
- Accountability – Leaders hold themselves and others responsible – individually and collectively – for achieving high standards of student academic and social learning.

<u>Key Processes:</u>

- Planning – Articulating shared direction and coherent policies, practices, and procedures;
- Execution – Engaging people, ideas, and resources;
- Support – Creating enabling conditions, including financial, political, technological, and human resources;
- Advocacy – Promoting the diverse needs of students within and beyond the school;
- Communication – Developing, using, and maintaining systems of exchange within and outside the school;

- Monitoring – Systematically collecting and analyzing data to make judgments that guide decisions and actions for continuous improvement.

VAL-ED uses a matrix with the Core Components on the vertical axis and the Key Processes on the horizontal axis, giving principals ratings in each cell.

"Review Finds Principal-Evaluation Tools a Bit Outdated" by Lesli Maxwell in *Education Week*, Jan. 6, 2010 (Vol. 29, #16, p. 8), for subscribers at http://www.edweek.org . Basic information on VAL-ED is at http://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/x8451.xml.

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6. What Do Novels Teach About Muslim Girls?

In this provocative article in *Rethinking Schools*, Simon Frazer University professors Ozlem Sensoy and Elizabeth Marshall focus on five recently published, highly praised books about Muslim girls in the Middle East:

- *The Breadwinner*, *Parvana's Journey*, and *Mud City*, a trilogy by Deborah Ellis;
- *Under the Persimmon Tree* by Suzanne Fisher Staples;
- *Broken Moon* by Kim Antieau.

Sensoy and Marshall believe these books convey longstanding stereotypes about Islam – backwardness, oppression, and cultural decay – and bring them to bear on their young, female protagonists in three ways:

• *Stereotype #1: Muslim girls are veiled, nameless, and silent*. "Just about every book in this genre features such an image on its cover," say the authors, referring also to the iconic 1985 *National Geographic* cover photo of the green-eyed Afghani girl. "These are familiar metaphors of how the Muslim girl's life will be presented within the novel… [T]he repeated circulation of the image of the veiled, sad Muslim girl reinforces the stereotype that all Muslim girls are oppressed. Stereotypes are particularly powerful in the case of groups with which one has little or no personal relationship."

• *Stereotype #2: Veiled = Oppressed*. Sensoy and Marshall describe how several characters in these books disguise themselves as boys to escape the veil and the burqa and move around more freely. They argue that the veil and burqa play a more complicated role than many Westerners suppose. In some countries, they are symbols of resistance and independence for women. "What we contend," they write, "is that young adult novels written by white women and marketed and consumed in the West consistently reinforce the idea that Muslim women are inherently oppressed, that they are oppressed in ways that Western women are not, and that this oppression is a function of Islam. By positioning 'Eastern' women as the women who are truly oppressed, those in the West pass up a rich opportunity to engage in complex questions about oppression, patriarchy, war, families, displacement, and the role of values…"

• *Stereotype #3: Muslim girls and women want to be saved by the West*. Sensoy and Marshall note that women's organizations in the Middle East have been fighting oppression for decades. "Novels like *Broken Moon* play on popular scripts in which the West saves the people of the 'East.' These stories cannot be seen as simply works of fiction. They ultimately

influence real-world experiences of girls in the Middle East and (most relevant to us) of Muslim and non-Muslim girls in our schools in the West."

These concerns notwithstanding, Sensoy and Marshall believe the books can be valuable instructional resources. "We are not advocating for the one 'right' Muslim girl story," they say, "nor do we suggest that teachers avoid using these books in the classroom…" Here are their suggested critical thinking questions:

- How are Muslim girls visually depicted on the cover of the book? Who produced this image and why? How accurate are the details in the image?
- Which parts of the novel are you absolutely certain are true? How do you know?
- Who is the author of this story? Is the author an expert on the subject? Who is the author addressing and on whose behalf is the author writing?
- How is the book being marketed and what does it aim to teach Western readers?
- How does Afghanistan or Pakistan fit into the region's history and geography?
- Whose story is missing? Where might we learn about their stories?

"'Save the Muslim Girl'" by Ozlem Sensoy and Elizabeth Marshall in *Rethinking Schools*, Winter 2009-2010 (Vol. 24, #2, p. 14-19), no e-link currently available

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7. Richard DuFour on Improving 'Good' Schools

In this AllThingsPLC advertisement in *Education Week*, Richard DuFour describes the pushback he recently received from a feisty high-school faculty. Teachers said their school was already "good" and they hated top-down initiatives from the central office. When pressed, they did concede that some students in the school weren't learning at high levels. DuFour asked them how many failing students it would take for them to agree that things had to change. "Put another way," he writes, "what would the level of failure have to reach in order to cause them discomfort."

"Certainly any organization that is to sustain its effectiveness over time must engage in ongoing processes of continuous improvement," he continues. "Even more certainly, a school that claims its fundamental purpose is to ensure high levels of learning for all students should search for more effective practices if even some of its students are not succeeding… Regardless of how 'good' a faculty may consider its school, for the parent whose child does not learn, the school has failed the child – 100 percent."

"We're Already a 'Good' School – Why Do We Need to Improve?" by Richard DuFour in an AllThingsPLC advertisement in *Education Week*, Jan. 6, 2010 (Vol. 29, #16, p. 12), http://www.allthingsplc.info

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8. When Student Evaluations Become Popularity Contests

In this excerpt from *The Chronicle Review's* blog, Diane Auer Jones of Washington Campus has critical words about end-of-semester student evaluations of teachers. She believes

that recent changes in many evaluation forms put students in the role of consumer, which has led students to couch their views in terms of customer satisfaction. "In other words," says Jones, "it no longer mattered whether or not the instructor actually both forced and helped the student lean how to balance a chemical equation or speak a difficult foreign language. Instead, the focus switched to whether or not the student, as a consumer, 'liked' the experience." What doesn't get commented on is whether the professor was well organized, knowledgeable, able to engage students in meaningful discussions, available after class, open to a variety of opinions, rigorous but fair with grading, and encouraging students to question their assumptions about what is right and how things work.

What can be done? "One way to get started," says Jones, "would be to structure instructor evaluations in a way that helps the student understand the role of the instructor, which is not to spoon-feed, to entertain, or to reduce rigor, but instead to lead, to motivate, to challenge, and to help the student question his or her own beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and knowledge."

"Teacher Evaluation" by Diane Auer Jones in *Highlights from Brainstorm*, *The Chronicle Review Blog*, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 8, 2010 (Vol. LVI, #17, B2), http://www.ChronicleReview.com/brainstorm

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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.marshall8@verizon.net

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 37 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).

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

Website:

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

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- Headlines for all issues
- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

Marshall Memo subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Chronicle of Higher Education
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine (online)
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal