Marshall Memo 340

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 14, 2010

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Most teachers teach because they want to help students learn. If they aren't succeeding, it's because they don't know how to do any better, not because they are holding out for higher pay."

James Stigler (see item #1)

"Think how it must feel to sit with your colleagues and produce subpar results month after month. This would indicate, perhaps, that you should try a different line of work."

James Stigler (*ibid.*)

"Teachers should not be seen as technicians whose work is to implement strictly dictated syllabi, but rather as professionals who know how to improve learning for all."

A Finnish commentator on his country's schools (see item #2)

"Among my favorite tricks was raising my hand for the lavatory pass, and then heading out for an epic schoolwide spin. I was evolving into the kind of kid who knew the line between hijinks and delinquency, but had no sense of how easily the first led to the second."

Ta-Nehisi Coates (see item #3)

"I hadn't had so much fun since the time I got locked out of the house in my underwear."

The opening line of *Klutzhood* by Chris McMahen (see item #5)

1. Low-Stakes Accountability in Japan Through Interim Assessments

In this thoughtful and timely *Education Week* article, UCLA professor James Stigler questions the idea being promoted by U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan and philanthropist Bill Gates – that bad teachers should be removed and good teachers rewarded based on their students' test scores. The problem with this logical-sounding idea, says Stigler, is that it is the "inspection" approach to accountability – an approach that quality expert W. Edwards Deming found to be highly ineffective.

Why doesn't inspection work? Because it has no effect on the *process* that caused disappointing results in the first place. To get significant and lasting improvement, said Deming, workers need to study *interim* outcomes and tweak ineffective processes so that the final product is near-perfect. Here is Deming's quality improvement cycle:

- Start with a well-defined goal and agreed-upon measures of progress.
- Workers check quality in real time.
- If there are problems, workers are empowered to try something different.
- Effective innovations are incorporated as permanent changes.
- As a result, the process continuously improves.

Deming's ideas on quality are rarely used in U.S. schools, says Stigler, but they were linked to Japan's "lesson study" approach, which has brought about steady improvement in Japanese teaching in recent decades, resulting in some of the highest student achievement in the world.

This happened for two reasons. First, effective methods were developed by those closest to the teaching/learning process. But teaching is complex and not every method works in every situation – which is why the second reason is so important: Japanese teachers became more and more skilled at selecting the best method to use in their classrooms and implementing it in an expert way. So over time, lesson study has produced and spread good ideas and developed teacher expertise and adaptability.

Some American schools have used lesson study as an alternative form of professional development. "But in Japan," says Stigler, "lesson study is part of a wider, albeit informal, accountability system." Same-grade teachers within a school (e.g., the 4th-grade team) meet to develop monthly tests based on their curriculum goals, have their students take the tests, and then meet to score and discuss the results. "Because the teachers themselves construct common exams," says Stigler, "they see them as fair and valid assessments of learning outcomes."

Since Japanese students are randomly and heterogeneously grouped, teachers can compare results without preconceptions about which class should be doing better. With instructional methods as the variable, teachers can have candid discussions about why some students are doing better on certain items. "They might wonder, for example, why so many

students in one teacher's class failed to find common denominators before adding fractions, whereas most students in other classes did not make that error," says Stigler. "Questions like these lead to open discussions that may at times be difficult. Sometimes a particular teacher's classroom will consistently produce the lowest average score month after month, and this can be the focus of a lesson-study-type investigation. A low-performing teacher may ask others to observe his teaching and give him feedback. And other teachers in the group are willing to help. Through this process, a lower-performing teacher has an opportunity to learn and improve."

Stigler reports that teachers who don't improve, either because they can't or because they won't, often leave the profession. "Think how it must feel to sit with your colleagues and produce subpar results month after month," he says. "This would indicate, perhaps, that you should try a different line of work."

Stigler believes the Japanese approach to accountability has significant advantages. It's not dependent on flawed standardized tests and doesn't require the statistical manipulations to produce value-added data. Interim assessment results are private to teacher teams but absolutely credible and immediately useful. "In this elegant Japanese accountability system," says Stigler, "teachers are given realistic feedback on their performance. But, equally important, they are given a regular context in which, assisted by their colleagues, they can use outcome data to drive improvements in practice."

Note that these interim assessment results don't affect teachers' pay or evaluations. "But then, does anyone really think that American teachers would 'teach better' for higher pay?" asks Stigler. "Most teachers teach because they want to help students learn. If they aren't succeeding, it's because they don't know how to do any better, not because they are holding out for higher pay."

Could this kind of accountability system work in the U.S.? Stigler things it could, if the professional culture changed. "Teachers would need to willingly make their work public," he says, "at least to their colleagues, and be willing to engage in frank discussion and analysis with colleagues. They would need to change their view of teaching from being an idiosyncratic art to a practice that can be studied and improved over time. They would need to take pride in the quality of education at the school level, and not just at the individual teacher level."

Stigler believes merit pay would have the opposite effect, making teachers less collaborative as they tried to outperform their colleagues for monetary gain. "Lost in this system would be the individual satisfactions that can come from working as a team to achieve tangible student benefits," he says. True, some teachers would leave the profession, but perhaps for the wrong reasons. "Shouldn't we at least look seriously at some alternative accountability systems that provide mechanisms for improvement," he concludes, "not just a means of inspection and sorting?"

"Rethinking Teacher Accountability – Before It's Too Late" by James Stigler in *Education Week*, June 9, 2010 (Vol. 29, #33, p. 36, 30)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/06/09/33stigler_ep.h29.html

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2. How Finland's Schools Got So Good

In this *Rethinking Schools* article, Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond describes how Finland's schools went from low achievement and rampant SES-based inequality in the 1970s to having the highest student achievement in the world and among the most equitable outcomes today. About 90 percent of Finnish students compete upper secondary school, two-thirds of graduates enroll in universities or professionally oriented polytechnic schools, and PISA, an international test for 15-year-olds in language, math, and science, ranks Finland number one among economically developed nations. This has been accomplished while Finland (about the size of a mid-sized American state) became more linguistically and culturally diverse – in some urban schools, the percentage of immigrant children from Sweden, Afghanistan, Bosnia, India, Iran, Iraq, Serbia, Somalia, Turkey, Thailand, and Vietnam is close to 50 percent.

Those who have analyzed Finland's schools have found that several core principles have produced this dramatic improvement. "The logic of the system," says Darling-Hammond, "is that investments in the capacity of local teachers and schools to meet the needs of all students, coupled with thoughtful guidance about goals, can unleash the benefits of local creativity in the cause of common, equitable outcomes." Here are the key drivers:

• *A level playing field* – Finland has a highly egalitarian ethos and the educational system is set up to provide equal access to all. Every student gets a free meal daily, free health care, transportation, learning materials, and counseling. Most schools have fewer than 300 students, class size is in the twenties, and all schools are well-equipped.

• *Skilled teaching* – All future educators get three years of post-graduate preparation at state expense, having been selected from a pool of college graduates (only 15 percent are admitted to these coveted positions). Teacher preparation involves extensive coursework and a year of clinical work in a model school, with an emphasis on building action research skills – going through cycles of planning, teaching, assessing, reflecting, and evaluating. Teachers learn how to use formative assessments to improve their practice, and get in the habit of meeting with grade-level colleagues once a week. There are also frequent interchanges among neighboring schools as teachers search together for the most effective methods and materials.

• *High standards* – There is a lean set of K-12 national standards (all math standards fit in 10 pages) designed to give all students equal access to higher education via a "thinking curriculum." Building students' independent learning and inquiry skills is a focus at all levels, with teachers trained to ask open-ended questions and help students address them. Achievement grouping has been abolished and teachers are expected to differentiate instruction in their heterogeneous classrooms. It's rare to see Finnish teachers lecturing from the front of the classroom; what's more common is students setting weekly targets with the teacher and working independently and in small groups with the teacher moving around helping and monitoring the process.

• *A balance between centralization and decentralization* – While hewing to the national standards, schools are largely autonomous to develop the most effective teaching methods.

• *Systematic assessment and follow-up* – At the end of 2nd and 9th grades, there is a NAEP-like assessment to inform curriculum development and school investments. At the end of high school there is a national matriculation exam with open-ended questions focusing on problem-solving, analysis, and writing. The matriculation exams are scored locally by teachers, following national guidelines. The national curriculum has recommended assessment criteria for each grade and subject, which teachers flesh out in more detail, providing students with regular feedback on how they are doing and systematic interventions for struggling students. Other assessments are locally developed, using curriculum-embedded, open-ended tasks. Most feedback to students is in narrative form, with descriptions of learning progress and areas for growth.

One Finnish official summed up the key lessons learned from the reforms implemented in his country: "Empowerment of the teaching profession produces good results. Professional teachers should have space for innovation, because they should try to find new ways to improve learning. Teachers should not be seen as technicians whose work is to implement strictly dictated syllabi, but rather as professionals who know how to improve learning for all."

"Steady Work: Finland Builds a Strong Teaching and Learning System" by Linda Darling-Hammond in *Rethinking Schools*, Summer 2010 (Vol. 24, #4, p. 30-35), http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/24_04/24_04_finland.shtml.
This article was adapted from *The Flat World of Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future* by Linda Darling-Hammond (Teachers College Press, 2010).

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3. New York City's "School of One"

"Among my favorite tricks was raising my hand for the lavatory pass and then heading out for an epic schoolwide spin," writes Ta-Nehisi Coates, recalling his mid-1980s school days in this article in *The Atlantic*. "I was evolving into the kind of kid who knew the line between hijinks and delinquency, but had no sense of how easily the first led to the second… I think that what went wrong with me and school, went wrong very early and was never fixed." Coates believes it had to do with his restlessness and impatience with lecture teaching – he wanted to dive in and learn by doing. His continued failures in school ate away at his self-concept: "I thought I was lazy (and maybe I was) and lacking the will to learn."

Coates's super-vigilant father pushed him through to high-school graduation, but the young man dropped out of college after two years "with a sense of impending doom," he says, "partly convinced that I would immediately start accumulating felony convictions and make the old black-boy prophecy come true." But he landed a career in journalism, started a family that is still intact, and is now a contributing editor to *The Atlantic*.

All this made Coates particularly interested in visiting the after-school program at I.S. 339 in New York City, the so-called School of One, which is using computers to personalize and individualize instruction in math. Would a program like this have made school tolerable – even interesting – when he was young, he wondered. "Teaching each child at his or her optimal

level with the optimal technique has traditionally been left to private schools and expensive tutors," he notes. Could Joel Rose, the head of the School of One, pull this off for ordinary kids in a public school? Here's what a visit to P.S. 339's after-school program revealed:

- Individual students, their parents, and their teachers are surveyed about the students' classroom habits.
- Students then take a diagnostic test to assess basic math knowledge and skills.
- Each day, a computer in the New York City Department of Education headquarters uses an algorithm and the student data to create a tentative lesson plan for each child, which is e-mailed to teachers.
- Teachers revise the lesson plan as they see fit.
- At the front of each after-school classroom, a large electronic monitor that resembles an airport departures display tells students what to do, and they get started. Some might be working in a small group at a dry-erase board learning to add fractions; others might be using the Internet to practice calculating the area of a circle with a tutor in Kentucky; others might be learning about factoring using a laptop game.
- At the end of each session, students take another short diagnostic test, which is used to create the next day's tentative lesson plan – which is e-mailed to teachers by 8 o'clock that evening.

Results so far have been encouraging, with robust student-achievement gains, and New York City's leaders are excited about the School of One's potential.

Watching the after-school students at P.S. 339 working at their own pace and in their own way, Coates wondered whether all he had ever really needed in school was "the equivalent of a warm hug from a cold algorithm."

"The Littlest Schoolhouse" by Ta-Nehisi Coates in *The Atlantic*, July/August 2010 (Vol. 306, #1, p. 82-84) http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/07/the-littlest-schoolhouse/8132

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4. Vision Therapy – Does It Work?

In this *New York Times Magazine* article, Judith Warner reports on vision therapy, which has true believers (especially among parents who are skeptical of what they call the "learning-disability industrial complex") and non-believers (who include most ophthalmologists).

Behavioral optometry, the formal name for vision therapy, is a subspecialty of optometry that treats problems with reading, spelling, attention, learning, hyperactivity, and coordination. Many of these problems are related to "how eyes work together and move together and process information and store information and do something with the information," says Maryland-based vision therapist Stanley Appelbaum. He and other vision therapists don't claim to be able to cure "real" cases of A.D.H.D., dyslexia, and other learning disabilities, but they believe that in many cases, these problems are misdiagnosed. Vision therapists zero in on vision-related problems like:

- poor eye-movement control (tracking issues)

- eyes not focusing well together or sustaining focus at various distances
- convergence insufficiency
- difficulties sustaining visual attention
- poor hand-eye coordination
- inability to reproduce and generalize shapes
- poor visual memory.

These can manifest themselves in children "getting lost on the page" while reading, having trouble copying from the blackboard or from one page to another, skipping words while reading, avoiding close-in work, having trouble remaining focused, poor handwriting, or poor performance in sports.

How does vision therapy work? Behavioral optometrists give children in-office and at-home eye exercises such as standing in hula hoops, dodging balls suspended from strings, looking through prisms that give them double vision and trying to fuse the image, playing Wii-like games for balance and visual thinking, pointing at bright spots blinking on a light box, and a Visagraph – black goggles hooked up with infrared sensors. Vision therapists claim that in many cases they can completely cure long-standing problems, and they have many glowing testimonials from happy parents – see http://www.visionandlearning.org.

But most ophthalmologists say that vision therapy is baloney. "It has no validity," says Marshall Keys, a pediatric and adolescent ophthalmologist who is outspoken in his criticism. He and others say that the evidence cited by vision therapists is largely anecdotal and that reading difficulties are caused by glitches in language processing in the brain and problems with executive function and don't originate in the eyes.

A review of the literature on vision therapy from 2000-2008 by the U.K. College of Optometrists found no evidence that vision therapy makes a meaningful difference with children who are diagnosed with conditions like A.D.H.D., learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, or problems with coordination (it did find positive results with convergence insufficiency and helping with recovery of vision among stroke and trauma patients). The American Academy of Pediatrics also reviewed the research and condemned vision therapy, saying that visual problems are not the basis for learning disabilities. "Ineffective, controversial methods of treatment such as vision therapy may give parents and teachers a false sense of security that a child's learning difficulties are being addressed," it said, "may waste family and/or school resources and may delay proper instruction or remediation." Other critics say that the positive effects that vision therapy sometimes has are caused by the Hawthorne effect – the tendency for problems to improve when people pay attention to them.

But vision therapy advocates aren't giving up. They counter that ophthalmologists and learning/attention specialists are competitors for patients and have a vested interest in trashing their work, and have waged a vigorous campaign to get vision therapy into schools. They have been effective at broadening the vision screening in many schools (not just the chart on the wall, which doesn't detect close-in vision problems) and firing up advocates who tout the life-changing benefits of vision therapy.

Why are vision therapists successful in maintaining such strong support in the face of near-unanimous disapproval from the mainstream medics? "Vision therapy is noninvasive, nonjudgmental and logical-seeming," says Warner. "If a kid has problems with reading, copying from the board, tires easily during homework and loses focus, wouldn't it stand to reason that there's something wrong with his eyes? The fact that virtually no medical doctors endorse the wider claims of vision therapy means little to those who, whether because of temperament, philosophy or discouraging experience with the medical establishment, are used to going it alone when it comes to their child's treatment."

It's also appealing that vision therapists attribute children's problems to external factors – the stress of growing up in a visually demanding world, not spending enough time outside, watching too much television, etc. – rather than defects in their brain wiring. "In this scheme," says Warner, "vision therapy just undoes what culture has created. There's nothing actually wrong with the child who's struggling to learn or pay attention – his or her dysfunction has been caused by the outside world. This reasoning is filled with the promise that, with the right kind of care, any child can rise to any sort of opportunity. Its logic is particularly well suited to parents who believe that if they have the time and money they can – indeed, must – do all they can to give their children the best shot in life."

"Issues with a Fix for Kids with Issues: The Fight Over Vision Therapy" by Judith Warner in *The New York Times Magazine*, March 14, 2010 (p. 41-51)
http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9900E3DC1739F937A25750C0A9669D8B63&scp=2&sq=Issues%20with%20a%20fix%20for%20kids%20with%20issues&st=cse

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5. Story Beginnings that Hook the Reader

In this *Reading Today* feature, author Margriet Ruurs shares some several opening lines that hook the reader and suggests using examples like these to help students write stronger beginnings to their stories:

• "I hadn't had so much fun since the time I got locked out of the house in my underwear."

Klutzhood by Chris McMahen (Orca, 2007)

• "Just before Pap died he told me that I'd be fine as long as I never depended on anybody but myself."

Alabama Moon by Watt Key (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006)

• "I was thirteen the first time I saw a police officer up close."

Schooled by Gordon Korman (Hyperion, 2007)

• "My name is India Opal Bulani, and last summer my daddy, the preacher, sent me to the store for a box of macaroni and cheese, some white rice, and two tomatoes and I came back with a dog."

Because of Winn-Dixie by Kate DiCamillo (Candlewick, 2000)

• When she heard the first yelp, Angel was at the sink washing the supper dishes."

The Same Stuff As Stars by Katherine Paterson (HarperCollins, 2004)

"Write Away! Practical Tips for Helping Young Writers" by Margriet Ruurs in *Reading Today*, June/July 2010 (Vol. 27, #6, p. 46)

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6. Children's Book Recommendations

In this regular *Reading Today* feature, Ohio-based writer David Richardson suggests the following books:

• *Word After Word After Word* by Patricia MacLachlan (Harper/Collins 2010), age 7 and up – A visiting author works with children from a variety of backgrounds using unconventional teaching methods, getting them to create amazing stories.

• *Hot Rod Hamster* by Cynthia Lord, illustrated by Derek Anderson (Scholastic, 2010), age 3 and up – A good interactive readaloud about a hamster building a hot rod for a big race.

• *Drizzle* by Kathleen Van Cleve (Dial, 2010), age 9 and up – Polly Peabody lives on a farm with chocolate rhubarb and giant insects where it rains every Monday at 1:00 p.m. – except that now it's stopped raining.

• *Shark vs. Train* by Chris Barton, illustrated by Tom Lichtenheld (Little Brown 2010), age 2 to 10 – A humorous book about what would happen if a shark and a train competed in various arenas.

• *Dream of Night* by Heather Henson (Atheneum, 2010), age 10 and up – A teenage girl abandoned by her mother, a neglected horse starving to death, and a caretaker with her own wounds…

• *Mirror Mirror* by Marilyn Singer, illustrated by Josee Mass (Dutton, 2010), age 6 and up – Both points of view in well-known fairy tales.

• *The Gardener* by S.A. Bodeen (Feiwel & Friends, 2010), age 12 and up – Fifteen-year-old Mason discovers that his mother and most of the town work for a powerful company that is turning kids into autotrophs (people who can perform photosynthesis) and must expose the company.

• *Miss Brooks Loves Books! (and I don't)* by Barbara Bottner, illustrated by Michael Emberley (Knopf, 2010), age 4 and up – Miss Brooks tries valiantly to find a book that will turn a non-reader into a reader.

• *The Dreamer* by Pam Munoz Ryan, illustrated by Peter Sis (Scholastic, 2010), age 9 and up – How the poet and Nobel Prize winner Pablo Neruda was shaped by the world around him.

"Make Lemonade: Children's Book Reviews" by David Richardson in *Reading Today*, June/July 2010 (Vol. 27, #6, p. 32)

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7. Short Items:

a. International space station taking shape – This website shows how the space station has gradually added components over the years. Quite a cool sequence!
http://i.usatoday.net/tech/graphics/iss_timeline/flash.htm

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b. Classic literature summer reading list – The National Endowment for the Humanities sponsors this K-12 list of Summertime Favorites: http://www.neh.gov/projects/summertimefavorites.html.

"No Excuses! Summer Reading Lists Galore" in *Reading Today*, June/July 2010 (Vol. 27, #6, p. 36)

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c. Books for boys who don't love to read – The Loveland Public Library in Colorado suggests these books for reluctant male readers: http://www.ci.loveland.co.us/Library/Youth/booklists/boys/index.htm.

"No Excuses! Summer Reading Lists Galore" in *Reading Today*, June/July 2010 (Vol. 27, #6, p. 36)

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d. Cool books list – This list of books includes classics and favorites: http://www.parents.com/fun/entertainment/books/the-coolest-reading-list-for-one-hot-summer.

"No Excuses! Summer Reading Lists Galore" in *Reading Today*, June/July 2010 (Vol. 27, #6, p. 36)

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e. Books across America – Students can "travel" across a map of the U.S. by reading a book that takes place in each of the states: http://www.nea.org/grants/13235.htm.

"No Excuses! Summer Reading Lists Galore" in Reading Today, June/July 2010 (Vol. 27, #6, p. 36)

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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).

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- 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
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
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools