Marshall Memo 119

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 16, 2006

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Quotes of the Week

"Why read this stuff? All I have to do is watch *South Park* to learn everything I need to know."

A Texas middle-school student on reading Harry Potter books (see item #5)

"There's no question that all students must now graduate from high school college-ready, as the skills for work, college, and active and informed citizenship have converged."

Tony Wagner (see item #3)

"Although some students can learn fairly well by doing little more than listening to explanations offered by teachers, the great majority cannot reach acceptable levels of understanding without reconstructing their current ideas in the conversational company of other learners (including the teacher).

Mark Windschitl (see item #2)

"I believe that what we should be doing in special education is *minimizing the impact* of disability and *maximizing the opportunity* to participate in the world. All our interventions should be directed toward this goal."

Thomas Hehir (see item #1)

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Thomas Hehir (*ibid.*)

1. Tom Hehir Speaks Out on Special Education

"Special education is adrift as a field," says Harvard professor Thomas Hehir (pronounced HAIR), a former big-city and federal education official who has just published a book, *New Directions in Special Education*. In this interview in the *Harvard Education Letter*, Hehir says that when he asks educators what the goal of special education should be, he gets "20 different responses from 20 different people." Here is how Hehir defines the mission: "I believe that what we should be doing in special education is *minimizing the impact* of disability and *maximizing the opportunity* to participate in the world. All our interventions should be directed toward this goal."

Hehir goes on to condemn "ableism" in its ugliest forms, such as assuming that students with disabilities are incapable of achieving at a high level and denying opportunities to people with disabilities. But he also warns about more subtle forms, including "the desire for disabled people to perform life tasks in the same ways as non-disabled people… [for example] the desire for children with very little vision to read print as opposed to Braille; having deaf children read lips as opposed to signing; or having kids with physical disabilities spend an inordinate amount of time taking physical therapy so that they might walk – even if it's just a few stumbling steps – at the expense of taking academic instruction."

Asked about the difference between accommodations and modifications, Hehir says that they are not synonymous, as many teachers seem to think.

• *Accommodations* give children access to the curriculum but don't change the content. For example, a child who reads slowly because of a learning disability might be given a taped version of a homework assignment so he can complete all the problems just like the rest of the class. Hehir says that it would be a mistake to modify the assignment by letting him do fewer problems. The issue with accommodations is appropriately high expectations. "People are very quick to modify curriculum for children with disabilities," says Hehir, "which reflects, in my view, an assumption that these kids aren't capable."

• *Modifications* change the content and are entirely appropriate in some cases. For example, a girl with mental retardation who is well below grade level can still profit from the subject matter but needs it to be modified to her current level. For a boy with a learning disability, modifications may be appropriate in areas directly related to his disability, for example, reading or spelling, but not in other areas. But schools have to be very careful with modifications, says Hehir: "[I]f primary-grade teachers make the decision to modify curriculum, it's going to have a cumulative effect: those kids might not be able to pass a high school exit exam."

Asked about inclusion, Hehir says that for 90 percent of students with special needs, it works. These students fall into four categories: learning disabilities, speech and language disorders, ADHD, and moderate behavioral and intellectual disabilities. "So if you're going to be an inclusive school," says Hehir, "you have to look at two key areas: reading and behavior. You will need a more diversified approach to the reading program. Similarly, you should develop positive, consistent strategies for dealing with behavior and discipline. If from the beginning you are developing consistent approaches to behavior and interventions for all kids, not just for disabled kids, you're going to be able to serve disabled kids better."

Hehir criticizes advocates of inclusion who are so dogmatic that they don't see the benefits of pullout or separate programs in certain cases. "Sometimes being educated in the regular class doesn't minimize the impact of a disability," he says. For example, high-school students who are virtual non-readers because of learning disabilities need very intensive work in reading. Placing them in regular English classes will deprive them of that kind of attention.

But Hehir is for carefully-targeted pullout. If students with learning disabilities are removed from science and social studies classes, their disability will have a cumulative effect on achievement. They need specialized pullout help with reading (and probably writing and spelling as well) and inclusion in content areas. Hehir talks about IEPs that have pages of goals in science and math: "These IEPs can go on forever!" he says. "And what they're going on forever about is dumbing down the curriculum. That's a disservice. A better plan would be to give the kids specialized reading intervention and to make sure he has access to digitized text in the rest of his subjects, so that he's learning at grade level."

Wrapping up the interview, Hehir has a final comment, "One thing that has emerged from the literature on inclusion, is that in order to do inclusive education correctly, you have to deal with the issue of teacher isolation. Decisions around behavior, around reading, around curriculum accommodations and modifications, need to be made consistently across the grades."

"Eliminating Albeism: Thomas Hehir on the Aims of Special Education" in *Harvard Education Letter*, January/February 2006 (Vol. 22, #1, p. 8, 7), no free e-link available

2. Talking Sense About Science Education

In this helpful article from the January *Kappan*, former middle-school science teacher Mark Windschitl, now a Seattle education professor, bemoans the endless, unproductive verbal contests about science education ("hands-on" versus "basics") that balkanize teaching communities. He suggests a solid middle ground; his four basic points are worth quoting in full:

• State and national science standards ask students to demonstrate basic conceptual knowledge, but that's not all. Students are asked to solve non-routine problems, to design and carry out investigations themselves, and, finally, to write about these efforts in clear explanatory prose. These are authentic tasks that have value beyond the classroom.

• To achieve these standards, students need two things. The first is the opportunity to engage in inquiry and problem solving as part of their regular curriculum – not, however, to the exclusion of learning concepts or facts. The second is to receive regular formative feedback from teachers on their thinking and on their performances.

• Students need time and opportunity to make sense of scientific ideas as well as disciplinary practices. This means being able to "talk out" their thinking with the teacher and with others. Although some students can learn fairly well by doing little more than listening to explanations offered by teachers, the great majority cannot reach acceptable levels of understanding without reconstructing their current ideas in the conversational company of other learners (including the teacher).

• To support this vision of classroom learning, reform-minded teachers need to facilitate activities that are unlike any they experienced themselves as learners. This requires knowing how to elicit students' current understanding of scientific ideas, to orchestrate classroom discourse so that it moves students from everyday ways of talking about phenomena to scientific ways, to mentor students through complex investigative experience so that they become capable of inquiry without following predetermined protocols, and to use formative feedback to help students understand where their thinking is breaking down.

In Windschitl's view, "learning the basics" can coexist very happily with "hands-on," and teachers can combine direct teaching with coaching as they run classrooms that are both active and well-disciplined.

For educators who are stuck in an unproductive either-or debate with their colleagues, parents, school board members, or community activists on one side or the other, he suggests *getting specific*. Start by picking a topic that is likely to be taught in your school this year, for example:

- The seasons (elementary)
- Mechanical advantage (middle)
- Ecosystems (high school)

Then use the topic (along with real student work, if some brave soul is willing to share it) to explore these questions:

- What is really important for students to understand and be able to do?
- What would it mean for our students to think deeply about this topic?
- What would mark the differences between a superficial understanding of the topic and an in-depth understanding?
- How would you assess the knowledge and skills of your students?

Windschitl says that when people do this, abstract arguments about "discovery," "covering the curriculum," "controlling students," and "the basics" get grounded in the realities of what's being taught and how we will know when students are learning it. "The aim here is not necessarily to come to consensus," he says, "but to listen to the thinking of others, to get a better sense of your own understandings, and, perhaps most important, to see what meaning others make of your point of view."

"Coming to consensus may be an impossible goal for participants," concludes Windschitl, "but developing some shared meaning is where progress will occur. Let's look in the mirror together."

"Why We Can't Talk to One Another About Science Education Reform" by Mark Windschitl in *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 2006 (Vol. 87, #5, p. 348-355), no free e-link available

3. What Does "Rigor" Look Like in the Classroom?

"There's no question that all students must now graduate from high school college-ready, as the skills for work, college, and active and informed citizenship have converged," writes Harvard leadership expert Tony Wagner in the current *Education Week*. But he's concerned that too much emphasis is being placed on what students must learn in order to get *admitted* to college and not enough attention is being paid to what they need to *graduate* and be successful as adults.

Wagner is concerned about improving and broadening the tests that control college admission, but this article is mainly about how to instill deeper skills and knowledge in all the grades K-12. He recently spent several days working with a group of school leaders in Kona, Hawaii who had read an article he'd written about the "Three R's:" Rigor, Relevance, and Respectful Relationships. The principals wanted to explore what these three qualities look like in schools on a day-to-day basis, and spent several days developing a rubric and applying it on "learning walks" in six of their schools. The results were disappointing: principals came up with very different scores after observing the same classrooms.

So they went back to the drawing board and devised a new rubric that achieved much better inter-rater reliability in another round of classroom visits. What happened between the first and second rounds was that they shifted their focus from *teacher-centered* observations to asking randomly-chosen students the following questions:

- What is the purpose of this lesson?
- Why is this important to learn?
- In what ways are you challenged to think in this lesson?
- How will you apply, assess, or communicate what you've learned?
- How will you know how good your work is and how you can improve it?
- Do you feel respected by other students in this class?
- Do you feel respected by the teacher in this class?

This process gave the principals a new understanding of the meaning of rigor and how they could talk to each teacher after an observation to foster more rigorous instruction. They committed themselves to organizing discussions of the criteria with their teachers and conducting their own walkthroughs. They also agreed to meet periodically in a colleague's school, do a "learning walk," and talk about the level of rigor they found in classrooms.

One thing that struck the members of the group as they observed high-school teachers was that Advanced Placement classes were less rigorous (using the criteria above) than the best non-AP classes. To be sure, AP students were covering higher-level content at a faster pace,

but the focus was on memorizing copious amounts of material for the test. "In our opinion," writes Wagner, "not a single one of the AP classes we saw was sufficiently rigorous to prepare students for work, citizenship, or continuous learning in today's world. In fact, in several of the non-AP classes we observed, there was a stronger purpose to the lesson, more thinking being done by students, and assessments that required more analysis."

This got Wagner thinking about what it means to graduate students from high school who are "jury-ready." He asks us to imagine that we have been accused of a serious crime and are on trial for our lives. "How confident would you be of getting a fair trial if the members of your jury had merely met the intellectual standards of our college-prep courses as they exist today?" he asks. "Certainly they would know how to memorize information and perform on multiple-choice and short-answer tests. But would your jurors know how to analyze an argument, weigh evidence, recognize bias (their own and others'), distinguish fact from opinion, and be able to balance the sometimes competing principles of justice and mercy? Could they listen with both a critical mind and a compassionate heart and communicate clearly what they understand? Would they know how to work with others to seek the truth?"

Wagner suggests that the goal of K-12 schools should be to graduate students who are both college ready *and* jury-ready.

"Rigor on Trial" by Tony Wagner in *Education Week*, January 11, 2006 (Vol. 25, #18, p. 28-29), no free e-link available

4. Nine Common Math Misconceptions

Students' difficulties with math often stem from the fact that they misunderstand basic concepts that their teachers assume they know. This article from a British online teacher magazine lists nine common student misconceptions:

• *A number with three digits is always bigger than one with two* (for example, 3.24 is more than 4.6 because it has more digits). As children emerge from the primary grades, where it's true that more-digits-means-it's-bigger, the new ground rules need to be taught explicitly.

• *When you multiply two numbers together, the answer is always bigger than both the original numbers*. This seemingly obvious "rule" also falls apart after the primary grades. One way to help mid-elementary students is to substitute the word "of" for "times" in fraction multiplication problems (for example, ½ of ¼).

• *The size of the denominator determines the size of a fraction* (for example, 1/6 is bigger than 1/3, right?). This reveals a misunderstanding of the role of the bottom number in a fraction. Hands-on experiences, like cutting pre-divided circles into thirds and sixths and comparing the shapes, helps dispel this misconception.

• *Shapes are different when they're turned slightly* (for example, a square is different sitting flat than when it's turned 45 degrees, like a baseball diamond). Teachers can inadvertently feed this misconception if they always draw rectangles or isosceles triangles in the "usual" position. The solution is to sometimes draw them upside down, facing a different

direction, or tilted over, so students will focus on their essential properties, not their orientation.

• *The diagonal of a square is the same length as the side*. This notion is tempting for many young minds. Students should be challenged to investigate by drawing and measuring squares and diagonals.

• *To multiply by ten, just add a zero*. Not always! How about 23.7 x 10, 0.35 x 10, or 2/3 x 10? This misconception needs to be swatted down aggressively.

• *Part-to-whole confusion*. There are three red M&Ms and two blue M&Ms. What proportion is blue? Many students will say 2/3 rather than 2/5, thinking that they're comparing blue to red rather than blue to the total number of M&Ms. Teachers need to stress that the "big idea" of proportion is "part to whole."

• *Perimeter and area confusion*. Students who have been taught to understand the concept of area by counting the squares inside a quadrilateral often apply that method when asked to find the perimeter – counting the squares all the way around the outside (for example, saying the perimeter of a 3 x 2 rectangle is 14 rather than 10).

• *Any interval on a scale must be one unit*. For example, a scale of 30 to 40 could have a mark every five intervals. Students need to get lots of experience handling scales with different numbers of units per interval.

"Maths Misconceptions" by Steve McCormack in *Teachers Magazine*, January 2006 (Issue 42)
http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachers/issue42/primary/features/Mathsmisconceptions
For samples of elementary mathematics unit plans from the British Numeracy Project, see
http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/numeracy/unit_plans/year2/autumn/

5. Using Harry Potter in Middle-School Classrooms

In this article in the new *Middle School Journal*, Texas social studies teacher Christopher Witschonke describes how his school used Harry Potter books in a highly-successful elective course (dubbed Hogwarts) with middle-school students. Teachers were nervous that students might regard the books as too young or too academic for their media-steeped minds. "Why read this stuff?" said one student. "All I have to do is watch *South Park* to learn everything I need to know." But enrollment in the course has increased steadily, and students are enthusiastic.

One reason, Witschonke believes, is that each of the Harry Potter books deals with broad moral and intellectual themes that grab students' attention:

- *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997) – greed, self-sacrifice, fear of the unknown, and self-confidence;
- *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1999) – heritage, pride, and prejudice;
- *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999) – revenge, justice, and mercy;
- *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000) – pride, prejudice, the power of the media;
- *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003) – racism and the power of the media.

Witschonke has cooked up a series of assignments to get his Hogwarts students engaged, among them:

• Groups of students are given access to a computer and challenged to find as many parallels as possible between items in Harry Potter books and other works of literature (e.g., Fluffy, the three-headed dog, in *Sorcerer's Stone* and Cerberus in Greek mythology), other languages (e.g., Latin used in Harry's incantations), and current events.

• Students are asked to explain why *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* has a different title in Britain (*Harry and the Philosopher's Stone*) and why there are numerous other language changes between the original British editions and the American "translations" (students scratch their heads about questions like "Why do they spell things so weird?" and "How come they call it that?").

• Students are guided through a teacher-constructed website and links to other websites to hone their skills in telling fact from opinion and make links between episodes in Harry Potter and the Salem Witches trial, the Trail of Tears, and slavery.

• To explore the issue of prejudice and racism in the fourth and fifth Harry Potter books, students are required to conduct a social experiment in the cafeteria – going up and sitting with a group of unfamiliar students. Students experience first-hand a lot of unfriendly looks and questions like "What are you sitting here for?" Some persist in sitting with the new group for several days and break through the resistance; others come back and report that they know what it feels like to be excluded and despised. "What do I think of people who I don't really know?" wrote one boy in his journal. "Just because of where they sit at lunch I think this or that of them, that's just not right. I don't think I'm racist but I do assume stuff of people and I don't think I make it easy on them to change my mind. So I have some work to do on myself to make sure I don't treat people the way I was treated, because it sucked."

Most confessed that they thought the Hogwarts course was going to be a "blow-off" when they signed up, but they found it taught them a lot. By the end, Witschonke reports, "the students began to see that most books they read, movies they watch, and even magazines they peruse, contain messages that the author is trying to communicate beyond what they see at first glance. Witschonke is making the case to have the course material introduced in regular classes or used in a book club setting.

"Harry Potter Casts His Spell in the Classroom" by Christopher Witschonke in *Middle School Journal*, January 2006 (Vol. 37, #3, p. 4-11), no e-link available

6. Dealing With Bullying

The authors of this thoughtful article in the January *Middle School Journal* lead off with a haunting anecdote:

> Jared hides behind the school building for an hour, hoping Tom has forgotten about him and walked home already. Maybe this will be the first night he will make it home without being pushed or taunted. Jared slowly leaves his hiding spot, gripping his backpack as tight as he can. As he gets farther away from

school, his stomach begins to unknot. He is relieved that he will make it home tonight without incident. Just then, Tom appears around the corner with a smirk on his face, ready to fight.

"A main characteristic of a bully is his or her need to gain control over another," write the authors. Bullies hit, kick, shove, threaten, name-call, tease, insult, make racist comments, and exclude victims from friendship groups. Male bullies tend to operate more at the physical end of the spectrum, females more at the verbal and relational end, but they all wreak psychological havoc on their victims. Bullying tends to peak in late childhood and early adolescence, which means that middle schools are crucial arenas for prevention and intervention.

Adult inattention is one of the first things to attack: bullying is most likely to flourish when students believe it can take place without adults intervening and bringing down serious consequences on the bully and bystanders. Bullying will continue, says one study, "until there is a philosophical shift among school personnel in how they view and respond to coercive behavior."

Experts say that to deal effectively with bullying, schools need to assess the types of bullying behavior that are most prevalent and then take a comprehensive approach, targeting students, schools, families, and the community. Schools need to attend to the needs of victims, giving them adult support, telling them it's not their fault, and helping to build their self-esteem, social skills, and assertiveness. Schools also need to intervene with bullies – with consequences, yes, but also with adult support and explicit instruction in empathy, perspective-taking, social skills, self-awareness, labeling emotions, anger management, conflict resolution, and self-control.

One effective approach is *Bullybusters*, a play put on by students for their peers (and later on, for parents) portraying realistic bullying scenarios. Studies have found that seeing dramatizations and discussing them afterwards helped students name bullying that was taking place around them and think through how to deal with it. Teachers followed up with classroom anti-bullying rules and anti-bullying pledges (by signing the pledge, students promised not to bully, to look out for bullying behavior, and to report bullying when they saw it).

Broader climate interventions can also be helpful. An elementary school conducted a needs assessment, identified verbal bullying as its main problem, and went to work on school climate, including core values (respect, responsibility, honesty, readiness to learn, and personal best), practice giving compliments, cooperative learning in classrooms, and staff training. Other schools have required regular classroom discussions on bullying.

Staff training is one of the more potent interventions. One study found that when teachers participated in a training program, they filed fewer bullying reports and felt more confident in their ability to intervene when their students were victimized. Since a lot of bullying happens in cafeterias, playgrounds, and other common spaces, it's important to include other staff in any training.

7. What Does It Mean When a Student Looks Away After a Question?

According to a new British study, if students look away from their teacher when asked a question, it's not a sign of disrespect, inattention, or cluelessness; they're processing the question and are more likely to answer it correctly. Stirling University psychologist Gwyneth Doherty-Sneddon, who organized the study, says that taking one's gaze away from the human face is very important when trying to concentrate. "Looking at faces is quite mentally demanding," she said. "We get useful information from the face when listening to someone, but human faces are very stimulating and all this takes processing. So when we are trying to concentrate and process something else that's mentally demanding, it's unhelpful to look at faces."

The researchers say that teachers and parents often mistake "gaze aversion" with not understanding the question and rush in with further prompts – or move on to another student. "The mistake adults make is to interject too quickly; they need to try and hold back," said Doherty-Sneddon. "If they avert their gaze, it's worth waiting because they are probably trying to come up with something. There is this idea 'Look at me when I'm talking to you,' but it should be okay to look away at some point in the interaction."

By the age of eight, say the researchers, children instinctively look away when processing a question. In fact, if children eight or older maintain eye contact after being asked a question, it's probably a sign that they *haven't* understood the question. Younger students should be encouraged to look away. The study found that when five-year-olds were not instructed to look away from the teacher after being asked a question, they answered correctly less often.

"Pupils Must 'Look Away' to Think" from BBC News, January 11, 2006, from a study published in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* (spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, January 13, 2006) http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/1/hi/education/4602178.stm

8. What's Wrong With This Assignment?

In this short piece in *Education Week*, retired New York City history teacher Mildred Alpern describes how she helped her granddaughter, Zoe, on a 6th-grade history assignment. The teacher had asked students to take their birth date, find newspaper headlines from that date in three separate years, and glue them onto a 2-by-3-foot poster. The idea was to tell about historical events and famous people, showing how life was different in those years. Students were to be graded on careful research, neatness, organization, and imagery.

Before she even met with Zoe, Alpern spent hours exploring the Internet, and found huge amounts of material. But when she looked at it, a lot seemed inappropriate and confusing: Monica Lewinsky, Jimmy Carter's "malaise" speech, Macy's bankruptcy protection, Clinton's welfare-reform bill, Jesse Ventura, the first World Trade Center attack, a corked-bat baseball scandal, ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, massacres in Rwanda, and so on.

Zoe and her grandmother finally finished the project and it was acceptable to her teacher, but Alpern had an unsettled feeling about the whole thing, for three reasons:

• She wondered how well other students who didn't have a freed-up grandmother, high-speed Internet access, and a photo printer in their homes were able to handle the assignment.

• She was concerned about the line between helping and doing. "Where does one end and the other begin?" she asks. "Should an assignment clarify specific parent roles, and provide surrogates when necessary? Should evaluations take these into account?"

• She questioned whether the assignment was appropriate for sixth grade. To do it properly, students needed a high-school level of global and U.S. history knowledge under their belts, a higher reading level, and a deeper knowledge of current events. "Not now," concluded Alpern, "but in a few more years, Zoe and her classmates will be at an age and stage to figure out sites to search, libraries to investigate, materials to include. They will be prepared to reflect upon what is significant, unusual, intriguing, even special about their birthdates. Best of all, the project then can be all theirs."

"Zoe's Poster" by Mildred Alpern in *Education Week*, January 11, 2006 (Vol. 25, #18, p. 29), no free e-link available

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 36 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 43 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through scores of 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 (with occasional breaks; there were 50 issues in 2004-05).

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Boston Globe
CommonWealth Magazine
District Administration
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update (ASCD)
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Harper's
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record
Theory Into Practice

E-links will be provided whenever possible.