Marshall Memo 188

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 4, 2007

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Education is about preparing our people for the future. To thrive in the world in 2015, [students] need strong analytical, communication and interpersonal skills. They have to be more risk-taking, entrepreneurial, and able to tolerate greater ambiguity. Most importantly, they need to continuously learn, unlearn, and relearn to remain relevant in a dynamic environment."

From a recent report by the Singapore Ministry of Education (see item #5)

"[T]he measure of success in today's economy is not just what you know but how you use that to imagine new ways to get work done, solve problems, or create new knowledge."

Charles Fadel, Margaret Honey, and Shelley Pasnik (*ibid.*)

"In human beings, one's strength is always one's weakness. For instance, detail-oriented people who are wondrous at keeping track of minutiae are often unable to see the big picture. Similarly, big-picture people, although completely aware of the forest, may lose sight of its individual trees."

James Popham (see item #6)

"Adolescents receive a barrage of messages representing the world as full of pitfalls and problems… a place to be endured rather than enjoyed."

Theresa Thorkildsen (see item #2)

"When adults thoughtfully organize opportunities for adolescents to assert and defend their opinions, they encourage the formation of personal standards."

Theresa Thorkildsen (*ibid.*)

1. Why Do Children Favor Those They See As Lucky?

This intriguing article in *Harvard Magazine* reports on a study on luck by doctoral candidate Kristina Olson and four colleagues. The researchers asked 5-7-year-olds how much they liked each of the following children on a six-point scale of smiley to frowning faces (*really like* to *really don't like*):

- Jane, who found $5 on the sidewalk
- Johnny, who was splashed by a passing car
- Jim, who helped his mom bake a cake
- Sue, who took a toy from her little brother

The researchers were stunned by how much children liked lucky Jane. Kids also liked helpful Jim, but it was the whopping "lucky effect" that led the researchers to conduct a second experiment.

This time they showed 5-7-year-olds screen images of a series of cartoon children with nearly identical facial features but different color T-shirts – five wore blue and five wore green. The researchers told different stories about each of the cartoon characters:

- Three of the blue-shirted children had lucky things happen to them (e.g., they put money into a candy machine and got two candy bars).
- Three of the green-shirted children were unlucky (e.g., they were riding in a car that broke down).
- The other two green-shirted and blue-shirted children in each group were described with neutral information (e.g., they liked to eat oatmeal or ride a bike).

Two new cartoon kids then appeared on the screen, one wearing a blue T-shirt and the other a green T-shirt, and the subjects were asked which they liked better. The results were "even more shocking" than those in the first study, said Olson: kids overwhelmingly picked the character wearing the blue shirt. They did this, said Olson, "despite the fact that this person did not experience a lucky or unlucky event as far as they knew, and despite the fact that group membership wasn't perfectly predictive of whether they'd experience a lucky or unlucky event."

Social psychologists have found that adults tend to favor the fortunate, but assumed it was learned behavior. The fact that such young children did the same thing raises the question of whether this behavior is innate. Could it be an evolutionary trait that aided survival over the millennia? But why would that be true, since lucky and unlucky events happen randomly and

don't predict future behavior or results? Favoring the fortunate is irrational among adults and irrational in children. So why do people act this way?

Olson and her colleagues speculate that it may be rooted in children's tendency to think that people "deserve" good and bad luck through some mysterious, perhaps divine, process. "In the process of trying to make sense of the world," says Olson, "they may actually come to justify the world as it is."

What's most worrisome is that children (and adults) might generalize a "they deserved it" attitude to others in the same group. "How might seeing news of Hurricane Katrina influence kids' perceptions of black people who are living in Ohio?" asked Olson. There's clearly more research to be done on this.

"Fortune's Favor: The Lucky Effect" by Harbour Fraser Hodder in *Harvard Magazine*, March/April 2007 (p. 19-20), no e-link available; original article: "Children's Biased Evaluations of Lucky Versus Unlucky People and Their Social Groups" by Kristina R. Olson, Mahzarin R. Banaji, Carol S. Dweck, and Elizabeth S. Spelke in *Psychological Science*, Vol. 17, # 10, p. 845-846

2. Helping Teenagers Make Good Moral Decisions in a Crazy World

"Adolescents receive a barrage of messages representing the world as full of pitfalls and problems… a place to be endured rather than enjoyed," writes University of Illinois/Chicago professor Theresa Thorkildsen in this article in *Theory Into Practice*. For example:

- TV talk shows and sitcoms often start with unusual social problems that people have to "cope" with.
- Commercials describe physical and social ailments that drug companies need to solve.
- Schools have programs that focus on dealing with depression, teen pregnancy, delinquency, and substance abuse.

This pathology-focused approach is common, especially in urban schools, says Thorkildsen, and she believes that it negatively influences students' behavior: "Telling adolescents that many or most in a group are engaged in delinquent activities or otherwise inappropriate and antisocial behavior, as occurs in a wide range of high schools, could well increase the prevalence of such behavior or alternatively heighten feelings of marginalization or anomie."

There's research evidence that the opposite approach – presenting students with a positive view of what they are doing and are capable of doing – is far more productive. One study on littering and math achievement divided students into three groups:

- Students in the first group were told they were keeping their classroom tidy and had strong math skills and were working hard.
- Students in the second group were told what they should and shouldn't be doing (don't litter, be tidier; try to be good at math and work harder on math assignments).
- Students in the third group received no feedback.

The first group made gains while those in the second and third showed no change in behavior or achievement, which suggests that a positive approach is far more productive.

Thorkildsen's article then shifts to a discussion of "moral engagement" – how adults can help teenagers develop their sense of right and wrong and take the better fork in the road, choosing hard, productive work over shortcuts and cheating. She believes that, while many adolescents are good at hiding their reactions to adult messages, they're listening nonetheless and are particularly responsive (inwardly, at least) to teachers and parents when they discuss moral dilemmas. Such discussions help teens come to grips with the complexities of their world and do the right thing. Thorkildsen has the following advice for teachers and parents in guiding such discussions:

• *Introduce ethical dilemmas as part of everyday communication.* "In so doing," she writes, "they point out the moral complexities inherent in a broad range of situations and help adolescents recognize the prevalence of ethical questions; interesting moral and intellectual dilemmas are everywhere… [B]y ignoring daily moral dilemmas, adolescents can undermine their awareness of the ethical implications of their actions and nurture a sense of moral disengagement."

• *Use a gentle style of questioning*. Thorkildsen says there are six ways in which adults talk to adolescents:

- Asking a youth's opinions, paraphrasing what was said, asking clarifying questions, and checking for understanding.
- Supportive, active listening, being encouraging, or adding humor in a way that suggests empathy.
- Adding opinions, indicating agreement, requesting change, or indicating a desire for closure.
- Directly critiquing, challenging, or offering counter-considerations.
- Introducing distractions, refusals, or devaluing statements, distortions, or other forms of hostility.
- Mumbling or uttering incomplete sentences.

Studies indicate that the first two are the most effective in raising adolescents' level of moral reasoning and influencing them to take the right path.

• *Allow multiple perspectives.* Adolescents benefit from expressing their views and hearing the views of others. Thorkildsen recommends that teachers allow a lot of give and take in classroom discussions, keeping the discussion on track by using humor and repetition.

• *Offer opportunities for self-expression.* "When adults thoughtfully organize opportunities for adolescents to assert and defend their opinions," says Thorkildsen, "they encourage the formation of personal standards. By asking leading questions that offer information while requesting feedback, adults can influence adolescents' decision-making skills and knowledge about the world." Active participation in discussions allows adolescents to get their own thoughts on the table and reflect on the fairness and usefulness of their experiences. In the words of an eighth grader, "Each person in this world has something to teach someone else."

"In urban settings," Thorkildsen concludes, "adolescents negotiate a complex array of ethical dilemmas and need at least one adult who will thoughtfully listen, avoid trite comments

about growing pains, and help them think through the multifaceted dimensions of the ethical dilemmas they face."

"Adolescents' Moral Engagement in Urban Settings" by Theresa Thorkildsen in *Theory Into Practice*, Spring 2007 (Vol. 46, #2, p. 113-120), no e-link available

3. How Schools Can Build Students' Resilience in Five Key Areas

In this article in *Theory Into Practice*, UC/Santa Barbara professor Gale Morrison and doctoral student Megan Redding Allen argue that teachers and principals can play a powerful role in building student resilience. Here is their analysis of "protective possibilities" in the major areas where high-risk students need work:

• *Autonomy* – If students are dependent, have low self-efficacy, and have an external locus of control, they are unlikely to do well in school. They need skills, self-confidence, and self-responsibility. It's helpful when teachers adopt learner-centered practices and involve students in making rules.

• *Sense of purpose* – If students feel helpless and have no vision for the future, they won't be successful in school. They need goals, positive attributions, and optimism. Teachers and schools can help by capitalizing on students' interests, providing activities that are culturally relevant, allowing students to contribute time and talent, offering a variety of extracurricular programs (with students involved in the planning), making career exploration opportunities available, and providing service learning activities.

• *Social competence* – If students have poor social skills, lack friends, and have poor relationships with teachers, they are at serious risk of school failure. They need to be liked by others, be able to initiate positive interactions, be able to take others' perspective and have empathy, and exercise leadership. Teachers and schools can foster these key attributes by providing opportunities for students to help each other, using cooperative learning strategies, mixing peers of varied popularity, building group unity, organizing mentors for students, and providing activities that help students make connections.

• *Problem-solving* – If students can't prevent themselves from reacting impulsively, they will constantly get into trouble. They need to learn to think before they act and develop planning skills. Teachers and schools can help by explicitly teaching cognitive strategies, role-playing social problem-solving strategies, and offering mediation/conflict resolution programs.

• *Achievement motivation* – If students don't try, give up easily, don't take risks, and avoid failure, they won't excel. They need to learn the importance of making an effort, being persistent, and having a positive attitude toward school. Teachers and schools can help by giving students choices, providing activities with the right degree of challenge, building in intrinsic incentives (versus depending on external rewards), communicating high expectations, and helping families buy into the importance of school.

"Promoting Student Resilience in School Contexts" by Gale Morrison and Megan Redding Allen in *Theory Into Practice*, Spring 2007 (Vol. 46, #2, p. 162-169), no e-link available; the lead author can be reached at gale@education.ucsb.edu

4. How Schools Can Support High-Risk Students with Special Needs

In this article in *Theory Into Practice*, education professors Christopher Murray and Robert Pianta argue that secondary-school students with learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, and mild mental retardation are more likely than others to experience depression, anxiety, conduct problems, delinquency, school drop-out, incarceration, and poor outcomes after they leave school. The good news is that schools can do a lot to reduce these risks. Murray and Pianta suggest four areas on which educators should concentrate. All four benefit all students – but they are especially helpful for students with disabilities.

• *Schoolwide structures and resources* – This includes an overall ethos that places a high value on positive student-teacher relationships; reducing the size of the school or creating schools-within-schools to allow students and teachers to get to know each other better; and using block scheduling to create longer amounts of time for teachers and students to interact.

• *Classroom structures and practices* – This includes rules and consequences, clearly stated and explicitly taught routines, peer tutoring, and cooperative learning – all of which help create an environment in which teachers can have more one-on-one and small-group interactions with high-risk students and students can develop their social skills.

• *Teacher beliefs, behaviors, and actions* – "Historically," write Murray and Pianta, "teachers have held more negative attitudes and directed more negative behaviors towards students with disabilities and low-achieving students than towards high-achieving students." This includes "lower levels of emotional support, praise, and other positive behaviors and greater levels of criticism, ignoring, and negative behavior." The most effective teaching style is often described as authoritative, warm, and demanding. Studies have found that the key components of this style are high expectations for achievement; consistent praise, feedback, and personal involvement; and strong classroom management and discipline policies. There is also research on the effectiveness of regular (perhaps weekly), one-on-one meetings with students to set goals and monitor progress.

• *Social-emotional learning* – High-risk students tend to have poor social, emotional, and behavioral skills, and as a result do not develop positive relationships with peers and adults. These students benefit from explicit instruction in self-awareness and self-management, training to use social awareness when interacting with others, and promoting and teaching responsible decision-making. For reviews of social-emotional curriculum programs, see http://www.casel.org, the website of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

"The Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships for Adolescents with High-Incidence Disabilities" by Christopher Murray and Robert Pianta in *Theory Into Practice*, Spring 2007 (Vol. 46, #2, p. 105-112), no e-link available

5. The Shape of Better Testing to Come?

In this *Education Week* article, a group of testing experts notes that over the last 50 years we have moved from an industrial-based to an information-based economy – and now we're shifting again – to an economy based on innovation. In order to thrive in this brave new

world, people will need three levels of skills: analytical, practical, and creative. "[T]he measure of success in today's economy is not just what you know," say the authors, "but how you use that to imagine new ways to get work done, solve problems, or create new knowledge."

Making this shift is imperative, they say, because our global competitors are thinking along the same lines. Here's an excerpt from a recent report by Singapore's Ministry of Education: "Education is about preparing our people for the future. To thrive in the world in 2015, Singaporeans need strong analytical, communication and interpersonal skills. They have to be more risk-taking, entrepreneurial, and able to tolerate greater ambiguity. Most importantly, they need to continuously learn, unlearn, and relearn to remain relevant in a dynamic environment."

These challenges call for a different concept of learning, say the authors – and new types of assessments that are more comprehensive and informative than the fact-based tests most of our students are taking now. A new generation of assessments needs to contain the following ingredients:

- Be largely performance-based to discern whether students can apply content knowledge to critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical tasks.
- Make students' thinking visible so we can see the kinds of conceptual strategies they are using.
- Generate data that can be acted upon so teachers, principals, and policy-makers can follow up with appropriate action to expand opportunities for students.
- Build capacity in both teachers and students by giving frequent feedback and allowing tweaks in teaching and programming.
- Be part of a comprehensive and well-aligned K-12 continuum of learning.

The authors believe that cutting-edge technologies will help push testing beyond its current limits, allowing teachers to present students with complex tasks, track their cognitive processes, and provide rapid feedback for immediate application in the classroom.

"Assessment in the Age of Innovation" by Charles Fadel, Margaret Honey, and Shelley Pasnik in *Education Week*, May 23, 2007 (Vol. 26, #38, p. 34, 40),
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/05/23/38fadel.h26.html

6. Getting the Right "Grain Size" in Test Reports

(Originally titled "All About Accountability: Grain Size: The Unresolved Riddle")

In this helpful article in *Educational Leadership*, UCLA assessment guru James Popham puts his finger on one of the key problems with summative and interim test reports: *grain size*. The way tests are reported varies all the way from data on a single curriculum objective that could be learned in a day to data on a broad curriculum goal that would take a whole year to develop – for example, getting students reading at Fountas-Pinnell level T with good comprehension.

Popham says that test companies often misjudge their audience, providing too much detail – or not enough. The usefulness of different levels of granularity varies with the recipient: teachers usually want small grain size – how did my kids do on question 19 and

which wrong answers did they pick? – while parents and central-office administrators want more general data.

When grain size is wrong for the audience, educators miss the power of assessment data. "In human beings," says Popham, "one's strength is always one's weakness. For instance, detail-oriented people who are wondrous at keeping track of minutiae are often unable to see the big picture. Similarly, big-picture people, although completely aware of the forest, may lose sight of its individual trees."

So getting the grain size right really matters. Popham recommends that if a test company is producing data at the wrong level of granularity, we should complain. "Educators should never defer to the score reports pumped out for them – even though those reports have a prestigious computer pedigree," he says. "The folks who designed such reports may be paying more attention to the magic of their machinery than to users' grain-size needs."

The bottom line, he concludes, is that data should be helpful in making good instructional decisions.

"All About Accountability: Grain Size: The Unresolved Riddle" by James Popham in *Educational Leadership*, May 2007 (Vol. 64, #8, p. 80-81); this article is available free at http://www.ascd.org, click on Publications and navigate to the May issue

7. Involving Parents in Their Children's Education Via a Website

In this article in *Perspectives*, Massachusetts middle-school principal Sandra Esmond describes her school's increasing use of a secure website to share student grades and other school information with parents. The idea sprang from the following:

- Some parents requested weekly progress reports on their children, but teachers felt that would be too much paperwork.
- Some print information sent home with students wasn't reaching its destination.
- Report card grades came too late for students to be able to change poor grades.
- Parents didn't hear about some school events they might have wanted to attend.
- In general, paper communication with parents was intermittent and iffy.

Esmond had an idea. What if teachers used electronic grade books and posted their grades on a secure website called Edline (by Jackson Software – it's one of a number of similar products)? Teachers were highly skeptical. They were worried about: (a) keeping their grades in electronic form (what if the school district's server crashed and all their grades were lost?); (b) security on the website (would students' grades stay private?); and (c) an increase in phone calls if parents had access to grades on a daily basis (how could they keep up with a flood of calls and e-mails?).

But Esmond persisted, and over the last four years, the system has been very well received by teachers, parents, and students. Parents appreciate being able to keep tabs on their children's grades and behavior. Students have access to information on homework and projects at all hours of the day and night. Teachers have found that parent calls and e-mails have

actually decreased because of the ready availability of detailed information. And security has been tight because all parents and students have individual passwords.

Most teachers were already using electronic grade books; those who weren't received training, as did all teachers on the process of downloading grades to the website. Teachers agreed to update their grades on the website every two weeks, and the workload is far less than paper progress reports. The school has taken the further step of making report cards available online, and 85% of parents have chosen this option (the remaining 15% continue to receive paper report cards).

After the first year, the school expanded the website to include regular updates on school events, individual teacher websites (with copious information on assignments, calendar dates, special links, and e-mail messages for parents), the principal's monthly bulletin and weekly e-mail to parents, and student behavior information from the assistant principal in charge of discipline. Esmond says the expense of the website – $2.50 per student, funded by the Parent Advisory Council the first year and the district since then – has been well worth it.

"Digital Home/School Communication: One School's Success" by Sandra Esmond in *Perspectives*, Summer 2007, p. 21-22; the author's e-mail is sesmond@bird.walpole.ma.us.

8. How Participation in Sports Helps Young Women Achieve in Science

In this article in *Theory Into Practice*, Catholic University sociology professor Sandra Hanson reports that many young women who get involved in high-school sports do better in science classes. This happens with any type of athletics, team or individual. The mechanism appears to be increased self-confidence, self-efficacy, an increased belief that effort, not luck, determines success or failure, increased skill at working as part of a team, and the ability to navigate in a "chilly" male-dominated world. "Furthermore," writes Hanson, "access to sports, whether it be as captain or team member, on varsity or non-varsity teams, provides exposure to a set of non-traditional gendered interactions that young women have little exposure to elsewhere."

The benefits, of course, go beyond science. Young women who participate in sports are healthier, less likely to smoke, have fewer eating disorders, and are less likely to become pregnant as a teen than those who don't play sports.

Curiously, this sports-to-science-success relationship is strongest for white and Hispanic girls and less pronounced with African-American girls. Hanson does not have a good explanation for this difference.

"Young Women, Sports, and Science" by Sandra Hanson in *Theory Into Practice*, Spring 2007 (Vol. 46, #2, p. 155-161), no e-link available

9. A Principal's Summer Book Club with His Teachers

(Originally titled "The Principal Connection: How I Spend My Summer Vacation")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, St. Louis principal Thomas Hoerr tells how he started a voluntary book club with some of his teachers several years ago. They read Howard

Gardner's book, *Frames of Mind*, one chapter at a time and met over breakfast or lunch to share their reactions. A third of the faculty took part, and in the fall, members of the group shared their learning with the rest of the staff. Hoerr says the ideas in Gardner's book had a direct impact on classrooms the next school year.

Since then, he has convened a group every summer, and he and his colleagues have devoured and talked about:

- *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman
- *A Mind at a Time* by Mel Levine
- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou
- *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum
- *Warriors Don't Cry* by Melba Beals

"A summer book group won't just boost your teachers' professional growth," says Hoerr. "It's a great way to develop collegiality among teachers and administrators." He'd love to hear your ideas on good books or articles if you're starting a group (trhoerr@newcityschool.org).

"The Principal Connection: How I Spend My Summer Vacation" by Thomas Hoerr in *Educational Leadership*, May 2007 (Vol. 64, #8, p. 85-86); this article is available free at http://www.ascd.org; click on Publications and navigate to the May issue.

10. Short Item:

Evaluation tools for after-school programs – The Harvard Family Research Project has a link to measurement tools for out-of-school time programs. Check out: http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/snapshot6/index.html

Spotted in "Additional Resources for Classroom Use" in *Theory Into Practice*, Spring 2007 (Vol. 46, #2, p. 170)

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 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 (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs
Atlantic Monthly
Catalyst Chicago
CommonWealth Magazine
Daily EdNews
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
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
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
TESOL Quarterly
Theory Into Practice
Times Educational Supplement, Magazine
Tools for Schools