Marshall Memo 497

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 12, 2013

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Students in my classes over the years have blurted out highly inappropriate comments only to have maturity catch up with the front of their brains seconds later."
Rick Wormeli (see item #2)

"Sometimes the best way to make a good decision is to sneak up on it – one small experiment at a time."
Chip Heath and Dan Heath (see item #1)

"Boredom is not always something to be avoided. It is to be accepted and worked through."
Mark Bauerlein (see item #6)

"Stop saying, 'Do you have any questions?' and start asking, 'What questions do you have?'"
Richard Wood and Helen Burz in "Literacy Gets a Makeover" in *Journal of Staff Development*, August 2013 (Vol. 34, #4, p. 40), www.learningforward.org.

"Does this child know how to do what we expect him to do?"
Principal Karen Poplawski (see item #3)

"I am, first and foremost, a teacher."
Karen Poplawski (*ibid.*)

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1. "Ooch" Before You Leap

In this thoughtful article in *ASCA School Counselor*, authors Chip Heath and Dan Heath share an excerpt from their new book, *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work* (Crown Business, 2013). In this piece, the Heath brothers make the case for "ooching", which is their word for doing a small experiment to reality-test a hypothesis before making an important life decision.

Here's an example. Steve decides he wants to go to pharmacy school. He's considered medical school and law school but thinks pharmacy is a better match for his interest in a helping profession with reasonable hours and a good salary. "But this is pretty thin evidence for such an important decision!" say Heath and Heath. "Steve is contemplating a minimum time commitment of two years for graduate school, not to mention tens of thousands of dollars in tuition and foregone income. He's placing a huge bet on paltry information. This is a situation that cries out for an ooch, and an obvious one would be to work in a pharmacy for a few weeks. He's be smart to work for free, if need be, to get the job."

This seems common-sensical, but every year, thousands of young people go to law school without ever working in a law office or medical school without spending time in a hospital or clinic. "This is a truly terrible decision process," say the Heaths, "in the same league as an impromptu drunken marriage in Vegas."

Here's a less momentous ooch in a family setting. Eight-year-old Colin liked to come down to breakfast in his pajamas, but his father insisted that he be fully dressed so he wouldn't be late for school. After several arguments, dad decided to try an ooch. "Okay, Colin," he said, "we'll try it your way for three days. But if you're late for school on any of those days, then we go back to the old system." Colin was amazed at his father's turnaround and rose to the challenge, eating breakfast in his PJs and getting dressed in time to be punctual at school. PJs became the routine, and both sides were happy with the outcome. (In addition, Colin learned the potential of lodging a protest with an adult.)

The Heaths close with a caveat: ooching is less effective in situations that require commitment. They describe the following scenario: two men drop out of college, but now they're in their mid-20s, their careers are going nowhere, and they know they need college degrees. The first man doesn't like the academic world and puts off the decision. For him, ooching by taking one course would be a cop-out – a way of forestalling the inevitable. The second man has always been fascinated with marine biology, but isn't ready to commit. Ooching would be perfect for him – shadowing a marine biologist for a few hours a week to see if the work appeals to him, and also auditing a class at a local university. If it's a good fit, he'd be ready to take the plunge and enroll in a marine biology program.

"Ooching, then, should be used as a way to speed up the collection of trustworthy information," say the Heaths, "not as a way to enable emotional tiptoeing, in which we ease timidly into decisions that we know are right but might cause us a little pain. In short, to ooch is to ask, why predict something we can test? Sometimes the best way to make a good decision is to sneak up on it – one small experiment at a time."

"Ooching" by Chip Heath and Dan Heath in *ASCA School Counselor*, July/August 2013 (Vol. 50, #6, p. 30-32), www.schoolcounselor.org

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2. Developing Teenagers' Executive Function

"Students in my classes over the years have blurted out highly inappropriate comments only to have maturity catch up with the front of their brains seconds later," says author/consultant and former middle-school teacher Rick Wormeli in this helpful article in *AMLE Magazine*. "They think jumping off a one-story building will work just fine if they have an opened umbrella to slow them down. They shoplift a Snickers bar even if they have the cash to pay for it." And they do things like crossing a busy street while talking on a cell phone. What these adolescents are struggling to develop is executive function, a key set of skills including planning and prioritizing, organization, time management, goal-directed persistence, sustained attention, task initiative, emotional control, response inhibition, flexibility, working memory, and metacognition.

Many teachers' response to undeveloped executive function in their students is to say something like, *Come on, step it up, get organized, use your time wisely, show respect, get your act together*. "These comments are a little like telling a student who doesn't speak our language that he is intellectually incapacitated," says Wormeli. Here are his suggestions for helping students gradually improve their executive function:

• *Break down big projects into smaller chunks*. Then help students develop the skill of doing this themselves.

• *Confirm, reconfirm, and reconfirm all directions*. Students may not have tuned in the first two times.

• *Cue from afar*. "Communicate indirectly (for example, note, text message)," say authors Richard Guare, Peg Dawson, and Colin Guare. "The idea is to create distance between you and your teen so that the cue can work without the two of you being in the same space at the same time."

• *Announce upcoming events and schedule changes in advance*. "No surprises, if possible," says Wormeli.

• *Practice transitions from one activity to another*. This may seem more suited to elementary school, but adolescents need it too, says Wormeli.

• *Remind students of due dates*. It's best to put these at the top of every assignment or on the opening page of an electronic file.

• *Remove clutter*. Students' immediate work area should be clear of stuff that may distract them.

• *Regularly do a book-bag dump*. Once a week, students should get everything out of the bag and sort it out. Students who keep reminders on an iPad should look through all of them once a week to make sure the organizational system is working well.

• *Frequently provide effective, constructive, descriptive feedback*. "Focus on decisions students make, not the quality of the work," Wormeli suggests. "It's specific feedback that motivates and matures, not the label on the performance."

• *Make every goal transparent*. Examples of the final product are very helpful, as is experience critiquing others' products. "In doing this, they build a robust internal editor that helps them compare their own work with given exemplars in real time," says Wormeli. "They monitor their own progress and adjust their effort without feeling threatened."

• *Provide compelling visual aids*. These are important for everything students have to learn.

• *Help students identify risks*. Adolescents are naturally drawn toward risk-taking, which is pleasurable because it increases dopamine production in the brain. Schools can use role-playing, ropes courses, opportunities to get into new sports, clubs, and programs, examining real-life scenarios, and connecting to their core values – the people they want to be and their families want them to become. Students should know how executive function skills help them achieve what they want in their lives.

• *Graphically display progress*. Frequent mapping of how students are doing with respect to goals is helpful.

• *Get students to exert themselves physically*. "Aerobic exercise can grease the wheels of executive brain function," says author Annie Murphy Paul.

• *Create a positive emotional atmosphere*. This is the opposite of being an adversarial "gotcha" taskmaster.

"Looking at Executive Function" by Rick Wormeli in *AMLE Magazine*, August 2013 (Vol. 1, #1, p. 41-43); Wormeli can be reached at rwormeli@cox.net.

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3. Dealing with a Foul-Mouthed Kindergarten Student

In this charming article in *Responsive Classroom Newsletter*, Karen Poplawski describes how she, as a novice principal, handled Devin, a boy who was repeatedly sent to her office for using profanity. The boy had lost privileges, his parents had been called, and he'd even been suspended for a day, but nothing seemed to work. Other students' parents were calling, and the pressure was on Poplawski to come up with a solution – which was assumed to involve *consequences*.

The next time Devin arrived in the office holding a referral sheet and looking remorseful, Poplawski suddenly remembered Word Cemetery, an approach she'd used as a classroom teacher to help students avoid bland, overused words in their writing. She cut a piece of paper into strips and said to Devin, "Tell me all the words that keep getting you in trouble." He nervously muttered each profanity, and Poplawski wrote it on a slip of paper, showing no reaction.

"All the words we just wrote down are now dead," she said, "and we are going to bury them." Poplawski took a spoon from her cabinet and they went outside. On the way, Devin noticed a dead cricket on the ground and asked if he could bury it with the words, and she agreed. Devin dug a hole with the spoon, and Poplawski said, "Today, we are saying goodbye to *#!," and read the word on the first slip. They continued until all the words had been buried – and then interred the cricket.

Back inside, Poplawski said, "Now that we can't use those words, we need to think of other words to use. What else can you say to the kids in your class?" Seeing Devin's blank stare, she realized that he actually didn't know acceptable ways to speak to his peers. She hadn't asked herself the most important question: *Does this child know how to do what we expect him to do?* Principal and student started brainstorming a list of conversation starters: "What is your favorite thing to do at recess?" "Do you want to play?" "I like your shoes." and made a poster of the new phrases with picture clues. They practiced a few, and Devin, encouraged by his teacher, decided to hang the poster near his desk as a reminder. In the next few weeks, every time Poplawski made her daily rounds, Devin pointed to the poster and beamed.

"Working with Devin reminded me that while consequences may stop a problem, only teaching – making sure the child knows how to do what we're asking him to do – can solve it," Poplawski concludes. "Devin buried his words that day, and I buried my notion that an administrator's role is merely to enforce consequences. I am, first and foremost, a teacher."

"A Principal's Job Is Also to Teach" by Karen Poplawski in *Responsive Classroom Newsletter*, Fall 2013, www.responsiveclassroom.org

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4. Tuning Up a Curriculum Unit by Focusing on the Content

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, professional development guru Jon Saphier suggests a 15-minute protocol for getting a teacher or teacher team to focus on the deeper purposes of a curriculum unit. The key, says Saphier, is to analyze the *content* students are meant to understand before getting into the activities, materials, student groupings, and behavior management. By digging deeply into the content, the teacher can reflect on the big ideas, the sequence, hierarchy, and relationships among them, the prior knowledge required to do the tasks assigned, what will be difficult for students, and what the big take-aways should be for students. Here some guiding questions for teachers or teacher teams:

- What content will you be focusing on?
- What are the most important things you want students to understand?
- Can you explain them in kid-friendly language?
- What would students need to know from their own experience in order to be ready to move forward?
- How would you break down this concept into parts?
- Which part of this concept do you think students need to understand first?
- How will you present the objectives to the class?

- Say it out loud just as if you were talking to the class.
- How will you present the content information? On the board? SmartBoard?
- How will you know if students understand? Will you have an assessment?
- If you were to go around and interview students at the end of the unit, what would you want them to say to show they really understand?
- Okay, now what are you going to have students *do*?

"When practiced in 15-minute conversations with peers, coaches, or administrators, content analysis quickly becomes a habit of mind that individual teachers internalize," says Saphier. "The reward is intellectual satisfaction as well as better student learning."

Here are the big ideas and student outcomes for a middle-school unit plan on the human respiratory system that resulted from one of these conversations:

The big ideas:

- Every cell in the body, not just the muscles, needs oxygen. That includes bone marrow, hair, everything.
- When oxygen arrives at a cell, the chemical reactions within the cell release energy. In other words, oxygen is absolutely necessary for all cells to grow and muscles to move.
- The bloodstream is the highway that carries oxygen to the cells.
- We also have to get rid of the carbon dioxide that is produced by this release of energy. If we didn't, we'd die.
- Respiration is a process for getting oxygen into the body so the oxygen can do its work as well as getting rid of waste products. It's a lot more than what we call "breathing."

Students will be able to:

- Describe the mechanism by which oxygen enters the body and the pathways it follows;
- Explain the magic moment when oxygen crosses cell membranes (the alveoli) into capillaries and thus is transported through the bloodstream/circulatory system;
- Explain the process by which oxygen does its work in the body;
- Explain how the respiratory system expels items the body needs to get rid of (carbon dioxide and water).

"15 Minutes to a Transformed Lesson" by Jon Saphier in *Journal of Staff Development*, August 2013 (Vol. 34, #4, p. 56-59), www.learningforward.org; a video of a teacher conversation can be viewed at http://bit.ly/17k1kj0; Saphier can be reached at jonsaphier@comcast.net.

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5. Super-Early Warning of High-School Failure

In this *Education Week* article, Sarah Sparks reports on a dropout-warning system being developed in Montgomery County, Maryland. By looking back at the school records of students in the class of 2011 and 2012, the district identified telltale signs as early as the spring of first grade, as well as three other transition points – the fall of third, sixth, and ninth grades. "It's like getting your blood pressure checked," says Chris West, a former Montgomery County evaluation specialist. "You have to do it often and over time." Here are the three most telling indicators of later problems:

- High absenteeism (missing 10 percent or more of school days);
- Discipline problems and, in the early grades, subtle signs like report-card notations that the student isn't completing homework;
- Low report card grades in reading and math (these had the highest correlation with future school failure).

Taken together, students' attendance, behavior, and grades in first grade predicted about 75 percent of the students who dropped out in the 2011 and 2012 cohorts. Between 1/4 and 1/3 of students who had at least one warning sign in first grade had more signs in sixth and ninth grades.

The district is focusing on report cards as the best data source. "A parent has the report card, student has a report card, teacher has a report card," says West, "so if we base our conversation on the report card, at least everybody's talking from the same page."

One finding in Montgomery County was that socioeconomic status and race were not the best predictors of eventual failure; the data showed that fewer than 40 percent of dropouts were from low-SES families. Rather, ELLs were overrepresented among dropouts, as were student with special needs. Looking at long-term data has revealed that there are lots of false positives: more than half of students flagged as potential dropouts in the early grades ended up graduating from high school. The district is trying to figure out what's going on here: in some cases, excessive absence might have been caused by a case of chicken pox; in other cases, improved academic performance might be the result of a successful intervention program. "These kids do move in and out of these indicators," says West.

The idea going forward is to implement interventions for at-risk students that will head off failure. "If these kids are always with us, we can do something about this," says West. "Remember, these are signs of students who drop out – it doesn't mean they *are* dropouts… You will not reduce dropout rates by [identifying] the students; it's what you do with them. Early-warning systems are part of an intervention strategy." The district is also analyzing data on Montgomery County high-school graduates to see what correlates with their ability to be successful in college.

"New Dropout-Warning System Flags Pupils' Risks in 1st Grade" by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, Aug. 7, 2013 (Vol. 32, #37, p. 10), www.edweek.org

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6. Preparing Students to Deal with Boring Instruction in College

In this troubling *Education Week* article, Mark Bauerlein (Emory University) addresses a troubling paradox: high-school students whose teachers work hard to jazz up classes with engaging activities may be unprepared to survive poorly-taught, boring classes in college. "Usually, when students start college, they have to take freshman composition, a course universally dreaded by 18-year-olds," says Bauerlein, who teaches freshman comp. "Few of them enjoy grammar exercises or paragraph development or the revision process. And chances are they don't easily relate to the readings… Many also have to take a math or other quantitative-skills course – subject matter irrelevant to students interested in the arts and

humanities. Often, too, they face a U.S. history and civics requirement covering events and texts 200 years old and thoroughly alien to their job ambitions and leisure activities." And many courses are taught using the lecture method, which is likely to put students to sleep. No wonder the on-time graduation rate is only 59 percent in four-year colleges and 31 percent in community colleges, with boredom and irrelevance cited as the major reason for early departure.

Bauerlein's conclusion: high-school graduates need more than academic skills to survive the general-education courses they must take in college before plunging into their major. They need a range of "soft" skills that will help them finish work they find boring, poorly taught, and irrelevant. Somehow, high-school teachers need to teach these skills, and Bauerlein worries that when high-school teachers bend over backwards to make courses relevant and interesting, they're giving students the following message: "If you're not interested in a course, there's something wrong with it, and you needn't bother." His conclusion: "Boredom is not always something to be avoided. It is to be accepted and worked through."

[Is Bauerlein implying that high-school instructors should teach badly to prepare students for bad teaching in college? Surely a better conclusion is that students and their parents should demand better teaching in college before shelling out tens of thousands of dollars for tuition. K.M.]

"Boredom's Paradox" by Mark Bauerlein in *Education Week*, Aug. 7, 2013 (Vol. 32, #37, p. 31), www.edweek.org

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7. Increasing the Content Focus of Teacher Evaluation

In this *Harvard Educational Review* article, Heather Hill (Harvard Graduate School of Education) and Pam Grossman (Stanford Graduate School of Education) argue that teacher evaluation needs to (a) use subject-specific observation instruments, (b) involve more content experts, and (c) design systems "in which feedback from observations is both accurate and usable in the service of improving instruction."

On the first two points, Hill and Grossman acknowledge that "content expertise is not always necessary: some elements of teaching – managing behavior, building a safe climate for learning, motivating student effort – are common across subjects, and, to the extent that a teacher requires assistance with these areas, a well-trained generalist observer might make a large difference in teaching and learning outcomes." But there's another layer of observation, they say, and current practices "ask us to believe that teaching kindergarten requires the same set of practices and knowledge needed to teach high-school algebra." A principal could focus on classroom management and entirely miss important problems in the content.

On the third point, Hill and Grossman note the importance of improving the expertise of principals and other classroom supervisors and say, "One of the challenges for any observation instrument is getting the grain size right. By grain size, we mean the scope and level of detail around desired practices… Grain size matters in both the design and use of

observation instruments. The more specific the grain size, the more specific the feedback for teachers can be." But the more specific these are, the narrower the group of teachers that can be evaluated.

Hill and Grossman also address the question of how many classroom visits and how many follow-up coaching sessions are needed to make significant improvements in classroom practices. "Research suggests that coaching programs that are successful in supporting improved student outcomes provide at least monthly coaching sessions," they say. Two to four visits a year – the frequency suggested by many reformers – are clearly not enough to make much difference, but asking principals to make more visits to each classroom is seen by many as impractical.

And there's the further problem of grain size – giving teachers feedback that's detailed enough to be helpful. This is why Hill and Grossman suggest more subject-specific evaluation instruments and more attention to the content training of principals and other supervisors. Follow-up with teachers is a perennial problem: many principals "may have trouble scheduling follow-up conversations," say Hill and Grossman; "they may not return to a teacher's classroom for months, at which time both may have forgotten important details surrounding the original feedback."

"If these new evaluation systems are to have a chance of improving the quality of teaching," they conclude, "policy makers must resist the urge to simplify the inherently complex nature of teaching. This will require grappling with how best to focus on issues of content in efforts to evaluate and improve teaching, how to select and develop raters with expertise in both observation and professional development, and how to concentrate resources to provide the kind of high-quality coaching that can actually have an impact on practice."

"Learning from Teacher Observations: Challenges and Opportunities Posed by New Teacher Evaluation Systems" by Heather Hill and Pam Grossman in *Harvard Educational Review*, Summer 2013 (Vol. 83, #2, p. 371-384),

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8. Keys to Effective Professional Development

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, Laura Thomas (Antioch Center for School Reform, Keene, NH) shares her insights on what makes for effective (and ineffective) professional learning:

- Survey teachers and use their input to drive professional development.
- Plan on multiple sessions and follow up with small-group discussion and coaching.
- Administrators should sit in on professional development sessions.
- Focus up front on the desired learning outcomes.
- Make sure external consultants coordinate with each other and with teachers.
- Brief consultants on the situation in your school. Be candid.
- Don't jump to a new initiative each year; give programs time to work.
- Don't be seduced by glossy brochures and expensive programs; sometimes locally developed, in-house, or low-cost programs are the best.

- Don't be fooled by hype; the key question is whether a program will be effective in your district.
- Be pragmatic with conferences and workshops; use what works.

"10 Good Ways to Ensure Bad Professional Learning" by Laura Thomas in *Journal of Staff Development*, August 2013 (Vol. 34, #4, p. 60-61), www.learningforward.org;

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9. Common Core Curriculum Development Websites

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, Vicki Phillips and Lynn Olson of the Gates Foundation recommend free websites that can serve as resources for teachers and administrators designing curriculum units and lessons aligned to the Common Core:

- America Achieves: http://commoncore.americaachieves.org
- Better Lesson: http://betterlesson.com
- EduCore: http://educore.ascd.org
- LearnZillion: http://learnzillion.com
- Literacy Design Collaborative: http://www.literacydesigncollaborative.org
- Mathematics Design Collaborative: http://www.mygroupgenius.org/mathematics
- Student Achievement Partners: http://www.achievethecore.org
- The Teaching Channel (videos of teachers): http://www.teachingchannel.org
- TNCore (Tennessee's website): http://tncore.org

"Teachers Connect with Technology: Online Tools Build New Pathways to Collaboration" by Vicki Phillips and Lynn Olson in *Journal of Staff Development*, August 2013 (Vol. 34, #4, p. 34-37), www.learningforward.org.

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10. Short Item:

How to use the semicolon – This delightful cartoon from The Oatmeal really nails the way to use this frequently misused punctuation mark: http://theoatmeal.com/comics/semicolon

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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.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 42 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 64 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year).

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief/Public Education NewsBlast
Better Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
ED Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update/Curriculum Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
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Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Journal
NJEA Review
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Wharton Leadership Digest