

Marshall Memo 365

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 20, 2010

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Quotes of the Week

“[U]ltimately, teaching is an attempt to change other human beings, and... such enterprises cannot succeed unless the other human beings cooperate.”

Mary Kennedy, quoting Cohen (1988) (see item #1)

“[E]ven when students are willing to cooperate, they are still children. They are immature, disorganized, unreliable, and easily distractible, and they begin their schooling with little or no experience of the kind of sustained, focused, purposeful work that is required for learning. This simple fact – that teachers work with children rather than adults – has profound implications for teachers. For their task is not merely to teach other human beings about school subjects, but also to teach them how to cooperate and how to learn, neither of which comes naturally, so that teachers must also persuade students that all of this is worthwhile.”

Mary Kennedy (*ibid.*)

“An effective way to infuse relevance into the learning environment of the 12th grade in a highly personalized way is to immerse seniors in an area of study that should be of high interest: *themselves*.”

Janice Dreis and Larry Rehage (see item #4)

“[I]n the typical classroom, assigned tasks overwhelmingly emphasize copying, remembering, and reciting with few tasks assigned that engage students in thinking about what they’ve read.”

Richard Allington (2001), quoted in “A Study of Thoughtful Literacy and the Motivation to Read” by Anthony Applegate and Mary DeKonty Applegate in *The Reading Teacher*, December 2010/January 2011 (Vol. 64, #4, p. 232)

1. The Fundamental Attribution Error and Teacher Accountability

“We in the United States tend to think of teachers as individual artisans,” says Michigan State University professor Mary Kennedy in this thoughtful *Educational Researcher* article. “We regularly confuse *teaching* quality with *teacher* quality, as if the two were indistinguishable. We label *teachers* as caring, efficient, engaging, or boring, as if the events we see in classrooms sprang entirely from personal qualities that teachers bring with them when they enter the room.”

This is due to what social psychologists call the *Fundamental Attribution Error*, says Kennedy. We tend to overestimate the impact of personal characteristics and underestimate the impact of situational factors. In the current debate about teacher hiring, support, evaluation, and accountability, this is a consequential error.

Why is the Fundamental Attribution Error so common? Social psychologists have found that when we explain our own behavior, we look at the situation more than our own personal qualities. But when we explain the behavior of others, we tend to make assumptions about personal qualities. If we see a generous act, we assume the person who did it is generous. If we hear an unkind comment, we assume the speaker is mean. In each case, we tend to overlook the circumstances that might have contributed to the actions, conflating behavior with character.

For years, researchers have been looking for the magic ingredient that makes some teachers more effective than others. Is it credentials? Courses taken in college? Test scores? Content knowledge? Specific teaching skills? Personal values? The underlying assumption has been that causation works this way:

Teacher characteristics → Teaching practices → Student learning

But researchers have found only weak links between teacher characteristics and student achievement. In addition, the correlations that do exist are unstable; teachers who get good results one year don't always get good results the next.

What's becoming clear is that the qualities teachers bring to the classroom are only part of good teaching. “It is what teachers actually *do*,” says Kennedy, “that is most relevant to student learning.” And that is affected by a number of factors in classrooms and schools. Our model of teaching, says Kennedy, needs to shift to something like this:

Teacher characteristics ↘
Situational factors ↗

Teaching practices → Student learning

We need to let go of the naïve assumption that teacher credentials, preparation, or personal qualities will have the same impact in every teaching situation. Of course these factors are important, but we also need to look at important variables in the classroom and school setting. Kennedy says four factors have a major impact on teaching and learning – school variables, student variables, institutional interruptions, and reform clutter – enhancing or degrading teachers’ entering characteristics:

- *School factors* – These include the size and shape of classrooms, the rules and norms of behavior, policies for rewards and sanctions, schedules and standard operating procedures, curriculum standards and assessments, and more. Kennedy focuses on three major variables:

- Planning time – The amount of time that most U.S. schools allocate for teachers to prepare lessons and evaluate student work is “impossibly low,” says Kennedy, and she believes this is one of the reasons our quality of teaching is lower than it is in many other countries, even with the time that many teachers voluntarily spend on evenings and weekends. What’s more, planning time is often “invaded” by other activities – meetings, professional development, assemblies, paperwork, and other institutional tasks. “Ironically,” says Kennedy, “many of these time-consuming noninstructional activities are intended to make teachers more thoughtful about their practice; yet they do so by reducing the time available for thinking about tomorrow’s lessons.” In her visits to schools, she often sees teachers rushing to classes without even reading the day’s textbook lesson, forgetting to bring materials, and discovering unforeseen problems half way through a lesson.
- Materials – American teachers often have to contend with state and district curriculum standards that are broad and vague, textbooks that are a mile wide and an inch deep, poor-quality teachers’ manuals (compared to those in high-performing countries), and standardized tests that focus mostly on recitational knowledge. There’s also the problem of poor alignment between standards, textbooks, and tests and the fact that many teachers make idiosyncratic decisions to deviate from the curriculum, leaving students with gaps in their skills and knowledge as they move from grade to grade.
- Work assignments – In high schools, there are big variations in the number of classes each teacher must prepare for: a math teacher who has five sections of algebra has a much easier workload than a teacher who has algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and calculus classes. There is also great variation in the number of out-of-class assignments teachers have – hall duty, recess supervision, after-school clubs, field trips, science fairs, etc. – and in the number of students pulled out for special education, ELL work, and other subjects. “These movements further complicate the teachers’ work,” says Kennedy.

She notes wryly that researchers might discover that teachers’ course assignments and schedules had more impact on their value added than their personal characteristics. If that were the case, it would be a lot easier to improve teaching by altering work assignments than by trying to change their personal characteristics.

- *Student factors* – Students’ entering skills and knowledge have a major impact on teaching and learning in a given classroom, says Kennedy. In addition, “Students influence teaching practices when they are restless, gregarious, or frustrated, and even when they are happy. And they interrupt the learning of other students as well... [U]ltimately, teaching is an attempt to change other human beings, and... such enterprises cannot succeed unless the other human beings cooperate.” The problem is that American culture has an anti-intellectual streak and a strong youth orientation, neither of which boosts students’ deference toward teachers. In high schools, a number of students are there involuntarily, creating variations in cooperativeness from class to class. “Teachers’ sense of efficacy depends on the particular students they teach,” says Kennedy.

“But the problem is not merely one of cooperation and motivation,” she continues. “For even when students are willing to cooperate, they are still children. They are immature, disorganized, unreliable, and easily distractible, and they begin their schooling with little or no experience of the kind of sustained, focused, purposeful work that is required for learning. This simple fact – that teachers work with children rather than adults – has profound implications for teachers. For their task is not merely to teach other human beings about school subjects, but also to teach them how to cooperate and how to learn, neither of which comes naturally, so that teachers must also persuade students that all of this is worthwhile.” Students sometimes pressure teachers to reduce their workload and the cognitive demand of assignments, creating what Ted Sizer wrote about in *Horace’s Compromise* – easier work in exchange for good behavior.

- *Institutional interruptions* – These include public-address announcements during class time, fire drills, telephone calls, and visits from administrators asking for signatures on paperwork. All these disrupt the flow of a lesson and force the teacher and students to backtrack and start over with a train of thought. In addition, there are assemblies, testing days, holiday festivals, science fairs, field trips, and parent-teacher conferences. One researcher estimated that in many schools, only about 40-60 percent of classroom time is actually used for instruction.

- *Reform clutter* – “The zeal to reform American education has reached such a pitch that teachers are confronted with one or more new initiatives every year,” says Kennedy. “Each new superintendent and each new building principal feels obligated to introduce a new initiative. They shift to block scheduling, then away from it; to a zero-tolerance policy, then away from that; to a new textbook or a new curriculum framework, then to something else... Most reforms distract teachers from the core of their work, forcing them to stop thinking about science or history and to think instead about scheduling, grouping, or recordkeeping.” It’s no wonder that many teachers are suffering from reform fatigue and speak of wanting to “shut the door” and just teach.

“The question I raise,” concludes Kennedy, “is not whether teachers make a difference, nor is it about what constitutes teacher quality. My question is, To what extent is the quality of teachers’ everyday *practice* – actual classroom behavior – really a function of enduring personal qualities that they bring with them, and to what extent it is a function of schedules,

materials, students, institutional incursions into the classroom, and the persistent clutter of reforms that teachers must accommodate?” To be sure, she says, some teachers are better at accommodating all the stresses and strains – and some have better luck than others in the hand they are dealt in their school and their classroom.

But researchers and policymakers are making the Fundamental Attribution Error when they insist that teacher characteristics are the only variable we should consider when holding teachers accountable. Why are so many people making this mistake? Kennedy believes one reason is that we have readily available data on teacher credentials, test scores, college majors, and the rest, but we don’t have data on how much planning time teachers have, how many interruptions they have, the nature of their schedule, and so forth. “*We study teachers’ credentials,*” she says, “*because we can.*” Researchers are like the man who loses his watch in a dark alley but looks for it under a streetlight because that’s where he can see.

“Attribution Error and the Quest for Teacher Quality” by Mary Kennedy in *Educational Researcher*, November 2010 (Vol. 39, #8, p. 591-598), no e-link available; Kennedy can be reached at mkennedy@msu.edu.

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2. Mike Schmoker on Students Writing More, Teachers Grading Less

In this helpful article on his website, author/consultant Mike Schmoker says the way many teachers handle student writing leads to students overloaded by feedback, infrequent writing assignments, delayed comments, and teacher exhaustion – all of which have a negative impact on students’ writing proficiency. Here’s how it plays out:

- Students are overwhelmed and discouraged by teachers’ detailed comments and mostly ignore them.
- Because grading is so burdensome and time-consuming, students don’t get prompt feedback on their writing.
- Because grading papers takes so much time, teachers don’t assign much writing.

This dynamic is the exact opposite of what will improve students’ writing, namely: students doing lots of writing; students internalizing the key criteria of good writing; students taking ownership for continuously improving their work; and effective coaching and feedback from peers and teachers.

“There is a better way,” says Schmoker. He recommends frequent writing assignments and cutting down burdensome grading by teaching the basics of writing carefully, explicitly, and frequently, giving students rubrics and exemplars that clarify the criteria, and getting students involved in revising and editing their own writing before handing it in to the teacher. Here are the details:

- *Teach one trait or feature at a time* – for example, voice, transitions, or sentence fluency – and share a rubric and student or adult model papers to guide the work.
- *Have students evaluate and revise sample papers* one trait at a time, while the teacher walks around monitoring and assessing.

- *Immediately give students a chance to practice that trait* in a short writing assignment, have them peer-edit on that trait only, and then give teacher feedback on that trait only.

- *Regularly have students write short papers* in which they are asked to organize and explain only one point or argument in 1-2 paragraphs. Before they write, explicitly teach the skill, provide exemplar papers as models, and after they write, have students self- and peer-edit before handing in their papers.

- *Regularly have students write about their reading* – “When students write – especially about what they have carefully and closely read,” says Schmoker, “they enlarge their intellects and prepare themselves for college, careers, and civic participation in a way that can’t be surpassed.”

- *Vet thesis statements* – “Many papers are confused and incoherent (and devilishly hard to grade) because students don’t know how to develop and write a clear thesis or argument,” says Schmoker. Students need explicit instruction on writing thesis statements, with exemplar papers and immediate peer and teacher feedback on first attempts.

- *Vet outlines* – Have students free-write, create a web, or make lists of quotes from a close reading of one or more texts and then draft a brief working outline. The teacher should have students self- and peer-edit their outlines and then walk around the class giving quick feedback before they flesh out their full essays.

- *Have regularly-scheduled writing days* – Students read or write, the teacher reads and grades papers, and students are free to come up with questions about their drafts.

“If we implement practices like the above,” concludes Schmoker, “then grading even longer papers, in stages, will take far less time, because it ensures that students do a lot of the work for us – before handing their work in. Such processes reduce the time spent grading, which means far more writing and far more effective writing instruction.”

“Write More, Grade Less” by Mike Schmoker; article available at <http://www.mikeschmoker.com/write-more.html>; Schmoker can be reached at schmoker@futureone.com.

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3. How High Schools Can Maximize Their Graduates’ College Success

“Many students who are *eligible* for college are not *ready* for college,” says University of Oregon/Eugene professor David Conley in this *Principal Leadership* article. He believes that to bridge this gap, students need:

- Key cognitive strategies – Problem-solving is especially important: identifying and collecting information, interpreting findings, and precisely and accurately communicating conclusions;
- Specific content knowledge – Students need to grasp and retain the key concepts and skills of major academic disciplines;
- Academic behaviors – Students have to be able to function academically in the college environment;

- College knowledge – Students who are first-time college aspirants have to be explicitly taught how college is different from high school and supported through the application and financial-aid process.

Here are Conley’s recommendations for high schools that want to prepare students in these areas:

- *Create and maintain a college-going culture.* Readiness for college success must be a schoolwide goal at the substantive and symbolic level.

- *Align the core academic program to college readiness.* This means rethinking syllabi and making sure there is a smooth progression of skills and knowledge through the grades.

- *Teach key self-management skills and expect students to use them.* This includes time management techniques, study skills, working in study groups, setting goals, and monitoring their own progress.

- *Support the college application and transition process.* This should begin in ninth grade, says Conley, and might include a mock college application in junior year. Preparation is most important for students who are the first in their families to attend college.

- *Use assignments and grading policies similar to those in college.* This includes clear homework expectations, assignments that require students to work independently and in study groups, lots of writing, stringent grading criteria, and the expectation that students will take individual initiative.

- *Make the senior year meaningful and challenging.* A lackadaisical senior year is poor preparation for college, says Conley. High-school seniors should do challenging math, nonfiction reading, extensive writing, senior seminars, projects, take AP courses, visit college campuses, and enroll in college courses if possible. It’s also a good idea for seniors to take a college placement test to see if they need to shore up skill areas to avoid ending up in remedial courses in college.

- *Align high-school and college expectations.* Conley suggests that high-school teachers reach out to college professors and discuss their expectations for student work, especially writing. High schools should also set up dual-enrollment courses with nearby colleges.

- *Look downstream.* High schools should keep track of how their graduates do in college and draw conclusions about which programs are working and which need revision.

“Eligible and Ready for College” by David Conley in *Principal Leadership*, December 2010 (Vol. 11, #4, p. 18-22), no e-link available; Conley is at david_conley@epiconline.org.

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4. Senior Seminars for 12th Graders

“Senior year is the perfect time to offer students challenges that will help prepare them for life after school,” say consultants Janice Dreis and Larry Rehage in this *Principal Leadership* article. They suggest the “senior seminar” as a way to give students a dose of rigor, relevance, and personalization and prevent the all-too-common phenomenon of senioritis.

There are two types:

- *Academic seminars* – These are interdisciplinary courses (for example, forensic science) that explore a given topic in depth. They are fast-paced, emphasize higher-order thinking, develop habits of mind, get students writing, editing, and rewriting, have measurable outcomes and clear grading criteria, and give frequent feedback from the teacher, peers, and external sources.

- *Guidance seminars* – “An effective way to infuse relevance into the learning environment of the 12th grade in a highly personalized way is to immerse seniors in an area of study that should be of high interest: *themselves*,” say Dreis and Rehage. Guidance seminars focus on seniors’ unique transition issues, including the social and personal management skills needed to be successful in college and the workplace. They are usually heterogeneous classes with lots of small-group work and feedback, and focus on problem-solving, goal-setting, independent research, developing portfolios and culminating presentations, preparing college applications, and reflecting, journaling, and rewriting.

“Senior Seminars: Focus on the Future” by Janice Dreis and Larry Rehage in *Principal Leadership*, December 2010 (Vol. 11, #4, p. 24-28), no e-link available. The authors can be reached at dreisj@gmail.com and lrehage@gmail.com.

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5. What Works for Boys in the Classroom

(Originally titled “Successfully Teaching Boys: Findings from a New International Study”)

In this *ASCD Express* article, author and former headmaster Richard Hawley and psychologist/consultant Michael Reichert report on their 2009 study of classroom practices that seem to be effective for boys. They asked teachers and students in all-male secondary schools in the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa to write about specific lessons and practices that worked well.

From 1,000 faculty and 1,500 student responses, Hawley and Reichert identified the most successful instructional elements (often several were combined in a single lesson):

- The lesson culminates in a product.
- It is structured as a game.
- It requires vigorous motor activity (for example, having students simulate swordplay while studying *Romeo and Juliet*).
- It requires boys to teach other students.
- It requires boys to address “open,” unsolved problems.
- It requires a combination of teamwork and competition.
- It focuses on boys’ personal realization of masculinity, values, or present and future social roles.
- It contains surprises and dramatic novelties.

Students also appreciate when teachers are lighthearted and funny – and when teachers show patience, commitment, and confidence in them. Boys seem to be most engaged and motivated when they have a strong relationship with a teacher. Many said they appreciate highly structured, demanding, no-nonsense teachers, especially if they are fair.

“One of our central findings,” say Hawley and Reichert, “is that boys tend to elicit the pedagogy they need. In other words, teachers present material, and if either the substance or conveyance isn’t right, boys will disengage and will engage in either passive inattention or diverting disruption.” Observing this, thoughtful teachers change their approach, and “boys’ positive responses in turn reinforce and lock into place the better pedagogy. In this manner, teachers committed to boys’ success will reinforce the boys’ adjustments in a continuous, self-correcting cycle...”

“Successfully Teaching Boys: Findings from a New International Study” by Richard Hawley and Michael Reichert in *ASCD Express*, Nov. 25, 2010 (Vol. 6, #4) <http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol6/604-hawley.aspx>. The authors can be reached at richardhawley32@gmail.com and mreichert@csbgl.org.

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6. Using Hand Gestures to Signal Reading Comprehension Strategies

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, author Lori Oczkus suggests teaching elementary students hand gestures to signal the need each of the “Fabulous Four” reading comprehension skills:

- *Predicting* – Students put their hands around an imaginary crystal ball to evoke the image of a fortune teller predicting the future.
- *Questioning* – Students hold a pretend microphone in front of their mouths to evoke the image of an interviewer asking questions. Accompanying words: “Why do you think...?” and “I wonder why, what, how, when, where or who.”
- *Clarifying* – Students form two circles with their thumbs and index fingers and put them over their eyes as if examining something closely with eyeglasses. Alternatively, they can hold their two hands vertically in front of them to signify a TV remote pause button – *Hold it for a moment while we think and figure out difficult words or confusing passages.*
- *Summarizing* – Students whirl an imaginary lasso over their heads to “rope in” the main ideas of a text and create a summary.

Oczkus says students can use these nonverbal gestures in whole-class discussions or in small-group literature circles.

“Toolbox: Rope Them in With Hand Gestures” by Lori Oczkus in *The Reading Teacher*, December 2010/January 2011 (Vol. 64, #4, p. 282-284), no e-link. Clips from a classroom at: http://www.reading.org/General/Publications/Books/SupplementalContent/BK507_SUPPLEMENT.aspx

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7. Short Items:

a. The best Hans Rosling yet – in four minutes – The Swedish statistics whiz outdoes himself dramatizing the poverty/health trends of the last 100 years. This one is really powerful! <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbkSRLYSojo>

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b. Ken Robinson animated talk – This clever TED commentary on contemporary education http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_changing_education_paradigms.html is by Sir Ken Robinson.

“RSA Animate” by Ken Robinson, October 2010

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c. No yell bell – The Memo doesn’t generally recommend commercial products, but I saw this one in action in a New York City classroom a few weeks ago and thought it was really neat. This bell-shaped machine has eight pre-recorded tunes and sounds, and teachers can play them as cues for students to listen up, clean up, line up, etc. The teacher I saw using the bell had a student choose the sound – a fun bit of delegation! Much better than shouting or ringing a real bell!

http://www.amazon.com/Educational-Insights-1250-Yell-Bell/dp/B001YSF8W2/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1292871807&sr=8-1

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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 41 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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- A free sample issue

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, 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
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
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools