Marshall Memo 74

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 14, 2005

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Why do the majority of school improvement efforts fail to develop true learning communities? Because they don't adequately engage teachers in collaborative inquiry where it matters most: in the daily learning-teaching interactions between students and teachers."

Georgea Langer and Amy Colton (see item #1)

"Learning to teach is not easy, partly because no one practice works for every student or for every learning outcome. The challenge is to figure out which strategies work for whom and in what combination and sequence."

Georgea Langer and Amy Colton (*ibid*.)

"Schools that engage in collaborative inquiry develop a sense of collective efficacy that helps educators reconnect with their original point of passion; ensuring student success."

Georgea Langer and Amy Colton (*ibid*.)

"You can't feel sorry that something doesn't work. You just have to try something different."

A California principal after dumping an unsuccessful program (see item #2)

"Effective programs surround students with evidence that the people they most care about think academic success and effort are important."

AERA study on effective schools (see item #4)

"I don't know what to believe. I just want my child to go to heaven."

A mother troubled about the evolution controversy (see item #8)

1. How to Make Collaborative Teacher Teamwork Really Productive

"Why do the majority of school improvement efforts fail to develop true learning communities?" ask Michigan researchers Georgea Langer and Amy Colton in this important *Educational Leadership* article. "Because they don't adequately engage teachers in collaborative inquiry where it matters most: in the daily learning-teaching interactions between students and teachers." Langer and Colton's work over 17 years has culminated in CASL (Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning), a protocol in which teachers discover the relationship between their instruction and students' performance on classroom assessments and other samples of student work.

Langer and Colton say that merely "looking at student work" (a fairly common practice in schools) will not yield learning results unless teachers conceive it more broadly as *collaborative inquiry*, which places the student at the heart of the endeavor. The process is most powerful, they say, when:

- Teachers look at an individual learner's progress over time;
- A theory of action guides the inquiry process;
- Teachers learn and follow collaborative norms;
- Leadership and structures support the inquiry.

"Learning to teach is not easy," they say, "partly because no one practice works for every student or for every learning outcome. The challenge is to figure out which strategies work for whom and in what combination and sequence." Langer and Colton believe that teachers learn best when they work from the specific to the general, focusing on the details of one student's learning over time. They believe that "individual students are the point around which teachers develop their theories of what works, with whom , and for what purpose." Periodic formative assessments give the teacher data on how the whole class is doing; "the teacher's theories are tentative and modifiable when applied to larger groups of students."

Langer and Colton draw a sharp comparison between this inductive approach and the way most schools use test results – "as a mere baseline rather than as a source of information about students' current understanding that can inform instruction. When teams move directly from data analysis to workshops to 'fix' the problems, they make three erroneous assumptions:

- That all low-performing students are struggling in the same way;
- That the same strategies will work for all students; and
- That all teachers need the same professional learning experiences."

Using the CASL approach, a team of teachers follows one student through the whole learning process: "[L]ooking at the same student's work over time enables teachers to study how students develop complex understandings through an intricate tapestry of scaffolded experiences… Because such deep learning rarely results from a single experience, teachers need time to conduct longitudinal studies in which they test and reconstruct their current theories of what works." In the process, teachers discover gaps in their own knowledge and teaching repertoires and decide on reading they need to do, workshops they need to attend, or consultants they need to bring in.

However, Langer and Colton caution teachers about the tendency to jump immediately to solutions. They recommend a four-stage inquiry cycle:

- *Observing* – taking time to see all the relevant aspects of what is taking place;
- *Analyzing/interpreting* – entertaining several possible explanations for events;
- *Planning* – working with colleagues to devise a plan of action;
- *Acting* – putting the plan into action.

This kind of teacher collaboration, say Langer and Colton, will not happen by itself: "Many schools have not developed a culture in which teachers and leaders can safely take risks – by sharing less successful students' work, for example – and engage in dialogue about assumptions, beliefs, and practices." Teacher teams have to learn how to develop group norms, paraphrase, build on each others' ideas, and withhold judgment. Only then will they move beyond "a culture of polite conversation" and begin to deeply analyze teaching and learning.

How can a principal launch this process? By describing the process in a staff meeting, carving out blocks of time, helping teachers slow down their hectic pace, establishing group norms, and asking teachers to observe patterns on a sequence of formative assessments.

"We believe that every teacher's passion is to see his or her students succeed," conclude Langer and Colton. "Yet too many teachers attribute student failure to external forces – a mind-set that is due, in part, to cultures of isolation and failed professional development. Schools that engage in collaborative inquiry develop a sense of collective efficacy that helps educators reconnect with their original point of passion; ensuring student success."

"Looking at Student Work" by Georgea Langer and Amy Colton in *Educational Leadership*, February 2005 (Vol. 62, #5, p. 22-26), no e-link available

2. What It Takes to Sustain School Improvement

This study compared California schools that sustained improvement over two years with schools that only showed one year of gains. There were some surprises: the more successful schools were larger and had somewhat higher student mobility rates and fewer fully-credentialed teachers. The success factors seemed to be:

• *Data-driven teacher teamwork* – Three key conditions were present in the successful schools: (a) Grade-level and subject-matter teams had time to meet (1-4 hours a week, both formal and informal) and used this time to look at student work and discuss how to strengthen classroom instruction. (b) Teachers used interim learning assessments to create a cycle of continuous improvement: they modified their instruction, tweaked their pacing calendars when they realized that students were grasping new concepts more quickly or more slowly than anticipated, created student intervention and enrichment groups, and compared different classroom strategies and environments to see which worked best; they also created rubrics and assessments, shared lesson designs, and chose appropriate professional development. (c) Teachers used data to make policy decisions on intervention programs, grading systems, grouping students, team teaching, reciprocal teaching, and mentoring new teachers. (Teachers in the less successful schools said they collaborated "when the principal scheduled it in place of a staff meeting." Their meetings usually covered planning field trips, special events, and standardized tests.)

• *Principal leadership* – Principals in the successful schools created time for teachers to collaborate and visited grade-level or department meetings to monitor their work. These principals were comfortable with data and used interim assessment results to make changes when student achievement wasn't rising. "You can't feel sorry that something doesn't work," said one principal after deciding to dump an unsuccessful after-school program. "You just have to try something different." By contrast, the principals of less successful schools were not as comfortable using data and seemed fatalistic about the chances of improving achievement. One said it was like "shooting at moving targets" because "the failing group just keeps changing."

• *District office support* – Successful schools benefited from focused district-wide professional development on pedagogy with follow-ups each year for new teachers. In addition, successful schools often got assessment data at the beginning of each school year disaggregated by teacher and individual student with support on how to use the data, and were more likely to use the district's benchmark assessments to track student's learning during the year.

• *English Language Learners* – The successful schools had more rigorous programs for ELL students accompanied by better teacher training. These schools focused on teaching academic English to ELL students (versus just conversational English).

"How Schools Sustain Success" by Valerie Chrisman in *Educational Leadership*, February 2005 (Vol. 62, #5, p. 16-20), no e-link available

3. Leading a School for When You're No Longer There

In this *Educational Leadership* article, former principal Linda Lambert describes how principals can prepare a school to maintain excellence after they move on. She thinks that principals who transition out successfully seem to have gone through three stages in developing school culture:

• *The instructive phase* – In this early stage, the principal's role is to "insist on attention to results, start conversations, solve difficult problems, challenge assumptions, confront incompetence, focus work, establish structures and processes that engage colleagues, teach about new practices, and articulate beliefs that eventually get woven into the fabric of the school." There is often some teacher resistance, disengagement, and dependence at this stage.

• *The transitional phase* – During this middle stage, the principal's role is to "gradually let go, releasing some authority and control while providing continued support and coaching as teachers take on more responsibility. Teachers often feel tempted to abandon the effort at this point – it seems too hard. The principal provides support by continuing the conversations, keeping a hand in the process (rather than accepting quick fixes), coaching, and problem-solving within an atmosphere of trust and safety." To get through the challenges of this phase, principals need to have a clear vision of where the school is going and gradually empower teacher leaders. "One of the most challenging aspects of the transitional phase," writes Lambert, "is the need to break through dependencies. In a dependent culture, teachers believe that they need to ask the principal's permission for most actions – and they come to expect the principal to make the decisions and take care of them. During the transitional phase, principals need to hand decisions and problem solving back to the teachers, coaching and leading for teacher efficacy while refusing to hold tight to authority and power." The principal can even use a crisis (such as poor test scores) to energize teachers by saying (as one principal in the study did), "I don't know what to do. We'll have to figure this out together."

• *The high leadership capacity phase* – During this stage, the principal has a lower profile and teachers are encouraged to play more prominent leadership roles. "The principal no longer needs to convene or mediate the conversations, frame the problem, or challenge assumptions alone. Principal and teachers begin to share the same concerns and work together toward their goals. In schools where principals have led their school for "whenever they will not be there," teachers share responsibility and are ready to effect a smooth transition to the next school leader.

"Leadership for Lasting Reform" by Linda Lambert in *Educational Leadership*, February 2005 (Vol. 62, #5, p. 62-65), no e-link available

4. Rigor and Support: The Keys to High Achievement

A recent AERA study, "Closing the Achievement Gap: High Achievement for Students of Color," cites several programs that have been successful in closing the gap, including Baltimore's Calvert program, KIPP schools (Knowledge Is Power Program), U.S. Department of Defense schools, High School Puente programs in 30 California high schools, and the AVID program (Advancement Via Individual Determination) in 1,000 middle and high schools nationwide. The study says these programs have two common threads:

• "Providing rigorous educational experiences means giving students the chance to study a mainstream, undiluted curriculum with the best possible teachers. Performance improves when all students have the opportunity to learn the same challenging curriculum, marked by high standards and expectations.

• It is not enough just to teach a rigorous curriculum, however. Attention also must be given to the social environment. Effective programs surround students with evidence that the people they most care about think academic success and effort are important. For elementary students, this means committed parental involvement. For older students, the support network expands toward peer groups and mentors."

Spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, February 11, 2005. This study is available at http://www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Journals_and_Publications/Research_Points/RP_Fall-04.pdf

5. Turning Around a Chaotic Kentucky Elementary School

In this *Educational Leadership* article, the principal of a Kentucky elementary school that had degenerated into rowdiness and low student achievement describes the process of bringing the school back. The key ingredients seem to have been:

• Adopting a consistent schoolwide discipline approach with plenty of teacher training (they used Randy Sprick's behavior management program, *Foundations: Establishing Positive Discipline Policies*, 2002).

• Making the decision to turn away from punitive discipline and focus on prevention.

• Absorbing some staff turnover – Some teachers left, but those who remained were committed to the new approach.

• Reaching out to the whole community for ideas; a survey identified the worst part of the day – the time students entered school every morning.

• Getting a "quick win" by getting this hot spot under control with improved supervision and effective new procedures and routines.

• Stressing the importance of teachers handling most discipline problem in their classrooms.

• Stressing respect and civility: "When they feel honored and safe," writes the author, "students stop misbehaving, and when students stop misbehaving, teachers have more time to focus on teaching."

"From Chaos to Consistency" by Susan McCloud in *Educational Leadership*, February 2005 (Vol. 62, #5, p. 46-49), no e-link available

6. Ideas from Canada on Getting Adolescent Boys Reading

One of the most frequently-mentioned reasons for boys' relatively poor performance in literacy is that they think reading is for girls. Two Canadian researchers, Laura Sokal and Herb Katz, recently conducted a survey to see if this was true. They found that 76 percent of the boys did not see reading as a feminine activity and 73 percent said they enjoyed reading. On the flip side, though, the survey showed that as early as second grade 24 percent of boys already felt alienated from reading and 27 percent had a negative attitude toward reading.

Sokal and Katz believe that a key strategy for changing these numbers is giving boys more choice in what they read. "Choice conveys ownership," says Sokal. She believes that for boys, being able to choose which book to read (rather than having it picked out for them by an adult) is almost as important as having access to books.

Another Canadian study by Heather Blair and Kathy Sanford (*Canadian Adolescent Boys and Literary*, http://www.education.ualberta.ca/boysandliteracy/) used "literacy digs" in boys' desks and backpacks to see what kinds of reading matter boys chose on their own. Blair and Sanford found sports and video game magazines,

comic books, and collectable trading card games such as Yu-Gi-Oh and Pokémon. While many teachers don't see these kinds of reading matter as very edifying, the researchers credit the boys with "a sophisticated understanding of these multimodal, content-rich sources of information. Boys scour these magazines to access video game cheat codes, to easily navigate websites and online game worlds, and to compare the statistics of their favorite trading card characters." This, say the researchers, is literacy in action.

Watching boys poring over these materials, Blair and Sanford found five themes that "hooked boys and kept them coming back for more:"

- Personal interest
- Action
- Success
- Fun
- Purpose

These were too often absent from standard school reading materials, which bore many boys and start them doodling, daydreaming, and clowning around. But Blair and Sanford think that these seemingly off-task and disruptive activities are actually an attempt to "transform the assigned literacy work into something more fun, engaging, and personally meaningful for themselves. [Boys] liven up the activity by changing or converting the teacher's instructions, adding elements of humor and satire, and using characters from their out-of-school literacies." The researchers call this "morphing literacy" – boys changing it to fit their interests by using words learned from their video game experiences to gain skills that adults often don't recognize as legitimate. The researchers advocate allowing boys to use more of these unconventional materials to further their literacy development. "Recognizing the new face of literacy and providing boys with springboard materials is a key to fostering book-reading boys," says the author of the article.

"Are Canadian Boys Redefining Literacy?" by Liam O'Donnell in *Reading Today*, February/March 2005 (Vol. 22, #4, p. 19), no e-link available. The study, "Masculine Literacy: One Size Does Not Fit All", appeared recently in *Reading Manitoba*. If you scroll down in the following website, you'll find lots of resources of boys' reading: http://www.wsd1.org/PC_LMS/pf/boysandreading.htm

7. Differing Home/School Perceptions on Parent Involvement

The Parent Institute in Fairfax, Virginia recently presented a sample of parents and educators with a list of 25 parent involvement activities and asked "Which of the

following do you feel are the most important things parents can do at home to help their children do better in school?" The results of the survey revealed a striking divergence in parents' and educators' views. Here are a few samples:

	Educators' Ranking	Parents' Ranking
• Read to your child every day and have your child read to you.	1	15
• Employ firm, fair, and consistent discipline at home.	4	11
• Talk about school every day and make sure your child knows you think it is important.	6	14
• Make sure your child is required to live with the consequences of his or her actions.	9	17
• Talk to your child and pay attention to what your child says to you.	10	1
• Help your child develop homework routines.	13	2

Parent Institute president John Wherry was troubled by these findings and thinks they reflect the fact that many parents are so busy that they don't carve out enough time to encourage learning at home. He suggested that schools conduct surveys of teachers and parents (the 25-item list is available at http://www.parent-institute.com) to see if there is a similar divergence in views. If there is a gap, Wherry suggests that the school choose three or four priorities from the list and feature them in parent newsletters, memos, conferences, and meetings. "Repeat them and repeat them," says Wherry.

"Do You Have a Parent Involvement Disconnect?" by John Wherry in *Principal*, March/April 2005 (Vol. 84, #4, p. 6), no e-link available

8. Finding Common Ground in the Evolution Controversy

"Eighty years after the Scopes trial, in which a Tennessee high-school teacher was convicted of violating a state law against teaching evolution, Americans are still fighting the slur that they share an ancestry with apes." With these words, *Newsweek's* science reporter Jerry Adler frames the current battle in America's long-running war

about evolution. "Intelligent design" is the banner being used to rally today's anti-evolution troops, and it couches its arguments in the language of science. "[E]volution is a theory, not a fact… [and] should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully and critically considered" say the stickers that the Cobb County, Georgia school board voted to place in biology textbooks. This sounds reasonable, says Edward Lawson, a law professor who is an expert on the evolution controversy, but the wording encourages confusion over the everyday meaning of "theory" (as in "hunch") with the scientific meaning (a systematic framework to explain observations). Since nobody was present to witness evolution as it unfolded over the millennia, it will always be a theory in the scientific sense of the word.

The proponents of Intelligent Design, taking their lead from the Discovery Institute, a Seattle think tank, are uncomfortable with two of evolution's central precepts:

• *Universal common descent* – All forms of life on earth originated from the first primitive life forms, which arose from nonliving matter billions of years ago.

• *Natural selection* – All the complexity of life evolved from the accumulation of small random mutations that were helpful to species' survival.

The Intelligent Design folks assert that all this is just impossible; the complexity and ingenuity of something as amazing as the human eye could only be the work of a conscious, rational intelligence. At what point did this supernatural intelligence get involved? Could it have started the process rolling billions of years ago and let evolution do the rest of the work, or was it more actively involved along the way? "We don't know," says Steven Meyer of the Discovery Institute. He admits that the diversity of life is a "mystery" we may never solve.

Those who oppose Intelligent Design think Meyer and his cohorts have a different agenda. "It's just another way of saying God did it," declares Eugenie Scott, executive director of the National Center for Science. "It isn't a model of change; it isn't a theory that makes testable claims." Accepting Intelligent Design allows a supernatural process into the realm of science; for this reason, say evolution proponents, the bogus "controversy" over Darwin's basic theory has no place in the science curriculum.

Michael Behe, a biochemist who wrote *Darwin's Black Box* (1996), notes that while most Christians accept a God who set the universe in motion according to natural laws, evolution raises more difficult existential questions. "People want to feel that God cares for them personally," he says. Margaret Evans, a biologist at the

University of Michigan, sees the appeal of creationism: "We are biased toward seeing the world as stable and purposeful," she says. A parent told her recently, "I don't know what to believe. I just want my child to go to heaven."

"So does the Pope," writes Jerry Adler, "but the Vatican has said it finds no conflict between Christian faith and evolution." Neither do numerous genuinely religious scientists who see no reason why God couldn't have chosen to work through the process of evolution.

Could this be the common ground we've been seeking for the last century?

"Doubting Darwin" by Jerry Adler in *Newsweek*, February 7, 2005 (p. 45-50), no e-link available

9. Short Items:

a. Do small learning communities work? A study of small learning communities (small schools, schools-within-schools, and teacher teams) in Cincinnati and Philadelphia found that they had positive effects on the *communal culture* of schools and the relationships among teachers. But small learning communities only changed the *instructional culture* between teachers and improved student achievement if they were coupled with a specific instructional initiative.

"Developing Communities of Instructional Practice" by Jonathan Supovitz and Jolley Bruce Christman, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2003, spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, February 11, 2005; the full study is available at http://www.cpre.org/Publications/rb39.pdf

b. First Amendment quiz – Click on "Take the First Amendment 101 Challenge" on this website to a good quiz on what the Constitution says about free speech. This might be a good site for secondary school students.
http://www.firstamendmentschools.org/

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 best practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 35 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 39 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, provide e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the memo to subscribers every Monday (with occasional breaks; there were 50 issues in 2003-04).

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for the school year ($25 for a half-year, beginning late January). Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

Website:

If you go to http://www.marshallmemo.com you will find detailed information on:

- How to subscribe or renew
- Why the Marshall Memo?
- Focus topics
- Headlines for issues 1-68
- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall
- A free sample issue

Subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, article headline, source, article title, author, and level
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
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
Elementary School Journal
Harper's
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Staff Development
Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

E-links will be provided whenever possible.