

Marshall Memo 51

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 30, 2004

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1. Reaching troubled high-school kids with the classics
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4. Short items: (a) Shaping effective after-school programs; (b) Poll finds Americans want to have their cake and eat it too

Quotes of the Week

“These kids had never been actively involved in any part of school except gym and art. Doing Shakespeare honored them.”

Richard Kinslow, a teacher working in Kurt Wootton’s Rhode Island literacy program for urban high-school students (see item #1)

“Like immigrants of earlier generations – the Italian stonecutter tuning his radio to opera, the Irish stevedore reciting Yeats in a tavern, the Jewish tailor viewing a Yiddish production of *King Lear* – Mr. Wootton sees high culture not as the oppressor of the lowly but as an agent of their liberation.”

Samuel Freedman on this literacy program (see item #1)

“Life is not always fair. You don’t get what you want. Things like this are learned on the playground.”

Tom Reed (see item #2)

“We want high test scores and high standards, but gosh, isn’t all this testing a bit much? We want consequences for failure for everybody but *my* kid. Yes, public schools are a mess – *those* public schools, not *this* public school that my kids attend. And yes, let’s close the racial achievement gap, it’s the moral thing to do – but let’s not report test scores by race.”

Justin Torres (see item #4b)

1. Reaching Troubled High-School Kids with the Classics

In his *New York Times* "On Education" column the week before last, Samuel Freedman profiled ArtsLit, a program created by Rhode Island teacher Kurt Wootton for inner-city high-school students. When Wootton, who is white, began his teaching career ten years ago at Hope High School in Providence (which had a 50 percent dropout rate), he assumed that the way to motivate his mostly African-American students was through "relevant" literature and music. It didn't work, which led to a radical shift in Wootton's thinking: "He has changed his tool of choice," writes Freedman, "from a mirror in which students see only reflections of themselves to a window that opens onto the rest of the world." The reading list for the ArtsLit includes many classics of the Western literary canon, including Shakespeare's *Othello*, Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Rudolfo Anaya's coming-of-age novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*.

"It is no accident," continues Freedman, "that he has drawn from the greatest-hits chart of Dead White European Males, no more of an accident than ArtsLit's location on the verdant and venerable campus of Brown University. Like immigrants of earlier generations – the Italian stonecutter tuning his radio to opera, the Irish stevedore reciting Yeats in a tavern, the Jewish tailor viewing a Yiddish production of *King Lear* – Mr. Wootton sees high culture not as the oppressor of the lowly but as an agent of their liberation."

Says Wootton, "We want to give kids access to the ideas and the texts they'll need to understand to attend a university like Brown. Performance provides the immediate gratification, the sense of energy and engagement. But the real goal is to read the text and to use it to understand your own life. There's a sense of accomplishment these students feel to know *Othello*, to feel how it connects to them."

The ArtsLit program puts a professional actor or director, a teacher, and two assistants into a classroom with every 15 students, and they meet for four hours each weekday for a month. Students learn their play or novel inside out and write personal

responses in a journal, constantly relating the work to their own family and heritage. Even the toughest students become highly engaged: one boy who had been suspended nearly 40 times by March snuck into school during yet another suspension so he wouldn't miss the rehearsals for *Macbeth*. "These kids had never been actively involved in any part of school except gym and art," said Richard Kinslow, an ArtsLit teacher. "Doing Shakespeare honored them. If you want to talk about self-respect and pride, it made a big difference."

The program has been highly successful raising money, including a good deal from the Department of Education in Washington, because of strong qualitative evidence that it raises students' interest in reading and improves their public-speaking skills. But does it raise test scores? A final evaluation will be completed by 2005; at Wootton's request, an outside researcher is looking at all aspects of the program, including standardized test results. He's confident that ArtsLit will measure up on all measures of student learning.

"Turning to Classics to Stir Troubled Youth" by Samuel Freedman in *The New York Times* "On Education" column, August 18, 2004. This article can be purchased at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=FA0F10F93B5B0C7B8DDDA10894DC404482>

2. Should Recess Be Regulated?

A number of Sacramento-area schools (and others across the nation) are clamping down on rough games at recess. This is driven by fear of injuries, bullying, damaged self-esteem, and parental lawsuits. The games most frequently banned are tag, cops and robbers, dodgeball, football with tackling and blocking, and other contact sports. One school even forbids one student pushing another on a swing.

There has been opposition from some early-childhood experts and parents who contend that recess is the only part of the school day when kids can do what they want. They say that free, spontaneous play fosters creativity and imagination and helps children learn how to socialize, cooperate, and resolve conflicts. "Adults need to be there," says Dolores Stegelin, associate professor of early childhood education at Clemson University, "but there needs to be more time for kids to be innovative and do their own activity." Tom Reed, a professor at the University of South Carolina Upstate, argues that dodgeball teaches eye-hand coordination and gross motor skills. Getting singled out and eliminated is part of life, he argues. "Life is not always fair. You don't get what you want. Things like this are learned on the playground." Kellie Randle, a parent in Elk Grove, agrees: "I'm concerned about the direction of a society

where kids are encouraged not to run and play. If you take away running, freeze tag and red light, green light, you're taking away a big part of childhood."

But school officials counter that children nowadays need more explicit direction on how to play with each other, including taking turns and dealing with conflict. By setting limits on rough games, they feel they are helping students learn self-direction. An anecdote from Woodbridge Elementary School near Sacramento illustrates how this might happen: a group of girls made up rules for Switched, a four-square-like game they liked to play at recess. The rules were scrawled on a piece of paper and shown to any new participants to prevent shouting matches and hurt feelings (and keep their game from being banned by teachers). The list of rules included the following:

- You have to read the rules to play the game of Switched.
- You must say "Switch, switch" two times to begin the game.
- If two people get a corner, choose a number between one and 20. The person who is closest gets the corner.
- Make right choices, no yelling.
- If you make bad choices, you must leave the game.

"It went better today with the rules," said Erma Murphy, 11, after their first day using the code, and her friends nodded in agreement.

"Recess Gets Regulated" by Sandy Louey, *The Sacramento Bee*, August 22, 2004, <http://www.sacbee.com/content/news/story/10469970p-11389340c.html> (spotted in in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, August 26, 2004)

3. Disaggregating Data and Asking the Right Questions

The August "question from the real world" to Doug Reeves read in part: "This year, our School Improvement program has stepped up to the level of disaggregation of data, specifically gender and ethnicity. Can you give me a simple formula to compute these statistics?"

Reeves's response was that the easiest way to look at equity gaps is to plot the following numbers on bar graphs and see what you notice (it's sometimes helpful to have a separate bar graph page for reading, math, writing, different subscales of reading and math and different writing traits):

- Percent of *all* students scoring proficient or higher
- Percent of white students scoring proficient or higher
- Percent of minority (or each group separately) scoring proficient or higher

- Percent of free/reduced meal students scoring proficient or higher
- Percent of second-language students scoring proficient or higher
- Percent of IEP and 504 students scoring proficient or higher with appropriate accommodations and adaptations
- Percent of boys scoring proficient or higher
- Percent of girls scoring proficient or higher

With the data in front of you, ask questions like these:

- On what subjects and subscales do disadvantaged students do their best?

How are the teaching, assessment, and other professional practices we're using different in those areas and what can we learn from this?

- On what subjects or subscales is performance highest for *all* students? What can we learn from those strengths?

"You are conducting a 'treasure hunt,'" says Reeves, "using data to find your best practices in general and your best practices with particular groups of students. You might be surprised that subscales analysis in particular reveals some strengths that you didn't think you had."

"Questions and Answers from the Real World" by Doug Reeves in the *Center for Performance Assessment Monthly E-Mail Newsletter*, August 2004

4. Short Items:

a. Shaping effective after-school programs – A new report from the business community notes that 14.3 million American youngsters are taking care of themselves after school, spending an average of seven hours a week with no adult supervision. Demand for after-school programs far exceeds the supply; the report calls for better after-school programs and lists these elements in successful programs:

- Learning is the central mission;
- There are links between parents, schools, and programs;
- Parents have high-quality program options;
- The program recruits, trains, and compensates professional staff who have the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to support students;
- The program creates and supports high-quality infrastructure with local, state, and national help;
- The program articulates learning outcomes appropriate to an after-school setting;
- There is accountability for measurable results;

- Partnerships are built to govern, finance, sustain, and improve the program.

“After School for All: A Call to Action from the Business Community” described in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, August 26, 2004. The full study is available at <http://www.cvworkingfamilies.org/>

b. Poll finds Americans want to have their cake and eat it too – Reporting on the new Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll of attitudes toward schools, Justin Torres of *Education Gadfly* makes the following pointed comments about the contradictory beliefs held by many Americans: “We want high test scores and high standards, but gosh, isn’t all this testing a bit much? We want consequences for failure for everybody but *my* kid. Yes, public schools are a mess – *those* public schools, not *this* public school that my kids attend. And yes, let’s close the racial achievement gap, it’s the moral thing to do – but let’s not report test scores by race, which is *the only way to know if the achievement gap is closing or widening*... If the PDF/Gallup poll shows anything, it’s that Americans haven’t yet fully digested what high standards, rigorous assessment, and serious accountability for results might mean, much less what a choice among schools might mean. That is, I think, the real lesson of the poll; that our opinions about education are no more contradictory than the goods we desire.”

“Believing impossible things about education” by Justin Torres in *Education Gadfly* August 26, 2004 (Vol. 4, #31)
<http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/gadfly/index.cfm>

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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 aims to keep busy principals and other educators very well-informed on important research and ideas in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is your “designated reader,” searching through 37 publications the week they come out, choosing the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Some ideas will be familiar, reinforcing what readers already know, but others will be new and genuinely thought-provoking. Target topics include:

- *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; supervision and evaluation of teachers; time management.
- *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; professional development of teachers; teacher leadership and career ladders; multiple intelligences and brain research.
- *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in sight; teaching for understanding; new ideas in reading, writing, and math.
- *Assessment* – Aligned formative and summative assessments; using data and student work for continuous improvement; graphic display of student achievement data; standardized testing and the debate on standards.
- *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/economic achievement gap; the innate-ability/intelligence/effective effort debate; safety-net programs.
- *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development; parent involvement; and community partnerships.
- *And...* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Curriculum/Education Update (ASCD)
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education 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
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

E-links will be provided whenever possible.

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