Marshall Memo 580

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 30, 2015

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Lemov is wary of big ideas and educational philosophies… But he does have a philosophy, even if he wouldn't call it that. One of its tenets is that teachers need to maximize the amount of thinking and learning going on in their classroom at any one time, and to ensure that this effort is widely distributed."

> Ian Leslie in "The Revolution That Could Change the Way Your Child is Taught" in *The Guardian*, March 11, 2015, http://bit.ly/1HeFGPr, about the second edition of Doug Lemov's book, *Teach Like a Champion 2.0* (Jossey-Bass, 2015)

"Here's what the Common Core is designed to communicate: If your children are meeting the standards, it means they are believed to be on track for college and career readiness by the end of high school – real readiness, the kind that doesn't require remediation on campus. If they aren't meeting the standards, it means that they are off track. That doesn't mean they are 'failing,' or even 'below average.' But it does mean they need to accelerate their progress if they are likely to be able to take bona fide college courses upon entry or have the best possible shot at a well-paying job."

> Michael Petrilli in "Not Meeting Standards: A Warning Light, Not a Death Sentence" in *The Education Gadfly*, March 25, 2015 (Vol. 15, #12), http://bit.ly/1CoIici

"Using the present day as a standard, students initially judge historical actors as stupid or morally deficient, and they impute motivations without regard for contextual circumstances."

> Abby Reisman (see item #3)

"Our approach is not to roll out a lot of technology, then figure out how to use it. Our teachers use a variety of approaches, and we support them like crazy when they head in a particular direction."

> John Palfrey, head of Andover Academy, in "Elite Private Schools Tackle Ed Tech" by Benjamin Herold in *Education Week*, March 25, 2015 (Vol. 34, #25, p. 1, 14-15), www.edweek.org

1. Unintended Consequences from the Use of Value-Added Measures

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Susan Moore Johnson (Harvard Graduate School of Education) reviews the history of value-added measures (VAMs) as part of teacher evaluation:

- Influential studies in 2004 and 2005 used value-added measures to establish that the quality of teaching is the most important school-level factor in student achievement.
- The same studies found that teacher effectiveness varies widely within each school – some teachers produce much better student learning than others.
- Further research showed that effective teachers have a positive impact on students' future earnings and quality of life.
- All this was taken to mean that some teachers were intrinsically more effective than others, by virtue of their education, credentials, experience, and skills (a human capital conclusion).
- Impressed by this research, many states and school districts began to include VAM ratings as a significant factor in teachers' evaluations.
- The federal Race to the Top program encouraged this trend by offering substantial grants to states that used data on student achievement as a major element in decisions on teacher compensation, promotion, and retention.
- Soon 35 states and the District of Columbia had fallen in line, with student achievement used as a significant (or the most significant) factor in teachers' evaluations.
- VAM proponents argue that this use of data will raise professional standards, attract high-caliber teachers, provide current teachers with evidence of their effectiveness, and create incentives for improved teaching and learning.
- Some VAM proponents also argue that student achievement will be improved by dismissing teachers with the lowest VAM ratings (the bottom 5 or 10%) and replacing them with teachers with average or good ratings – a "housecleaning" approach to increasing a school's human capital.

The problem, says Johnson, is that many studies, including one from the American Statistical Association, have raised serious concerns about the reliability and validity of VAM data and question whether they should be used for high-stakes decisions about individual teachers. VAM proponents push back, saying we should pay more attention to students' futures – their right to effective teaching – than to teachers' employment interests. But VAM skeptics argue

that using these data for employment decisions will result in unintended consequences that compromise the quality of teaching and thus the kind of education students receive.

Watching this debate, many teachers are wary of the use of VAM data as part of their evaluations. They are also aware of anecdotal evidence (backed up by some research) that teachers who serve students who are economically disadvantaged, have low entering achievement, and are English language learners tend to get lower VAM scores. This perception is particularly problematic, since it creates incentives for effective teachers to leave needy schools and avoid challenging class assignments.

Johnson notes that most scholarly writing on value-added measures has focused on how accurately they measure teachers' contributions to student learning. "However," she says, "it is important to step back and consider a prior set of questions about the use of VAMs: Will assessing and basing employment decisions on the individual teacher's contribution to students' learning – however refined and defensible VAMs may become – lead to better schooling? If so, by what process? Is this strategy of augmenting human capital one teacher at a time likely to pay off for students?"

Johnson focuses on an area that has received little attention so far: the impact of VAMs on the *social capital* within each school. In a classic 1988 analysis, James Coleman argued that human capital – the power of individual teachers to benefit students – is directly affected by the qualities of the organization in which they work. The educators hired to work in a school, says Johnson, "can subsequently be developed by interactions among teachers, principals, and others within the organization through activities within subunits such as grade-level or subject-based teams of teachers, faculty committees, professional development, coaching, evaluation, and informal interactions. In the process, the school organization becomes greater than the sum of its parts, and in this way, the social capital that transforms human capital through collegial activities in schools increases the school's overall instructional capacity and, arguably, its success."

To the extent that a school resembles an "egg crate," with teachers closing their classroom doors and working in isolation, the bell-shaped curve of teaching quality within that school tends to remain the same – to the detriment of students who wind up with the lowest-performing teachers. But if a school is run in a way that allows teachers to systematically share their expertise, effective practices spread and all students benefit. "This analysis suggests that teachers are not inherently effective or ineffective," says Johnson; a major factor in the quality of teaching is the amount of collaboration among teachers. She points to recent research indicating that teachers' improvement trajectory in the first decade of service is highly influenced by the professional working climate of their school [see item #2 in this Memo]. "Because students move through schools from class to class and grade to grade," she says, "they are better served when human resources are deliberately organized to draw on the strengths of all teachers on behalf of all students, rather than having students subjected to the luck of the draw in their classroom assignment… By contrast, a strategy for school improvement that focuses substantially on identifying, assigning, and rewarding or penalizing individual teachers for their effectiveness in raising students' test scores depends primarily on

the strengths of individual teachers."

Collegiality with a school is often fragile, dependent on the quality of leadership and the level of trust between teachers and administrators. "[I]f teachers become dissatisfied with efforts to coordinate and assess their work," says Johnson, "they can decide to literally or figuratively 'close their classroom door' and revert to working alone." Highly effective teachers may decide to transfer to schools with more collegial working conditions – or leave the profession entirely. Teacher turnover and the loss of good teachers are especially damaging in schools that serve high-need students.

Johnson gives an example of how collaboration might be undermined. An elementary teacher team regroups students to take advantage of particular teachers' strengths – for example, letting one teach math and another social studies so that all students get the benefit of teachers' strongest subjects. But if VAMs were used to determine a significant part of teachers' evaluation (and possibly pay), teachers would likely pull back from this kind of collaboration, wanting to get maximum credit for their own strongest areas. Some states and districts have tried to use "fractional linkages" to pinpoint precisely which teacher is responsible for which students in which subjects. But Johnson points out that a fifth grader "who successfully solves word problems on his math test may actually owe that success to his fourth-grade ELA teacher who taught him to read carefully, not to his fifth-grade math teacher, whose lessons emphasized memorizing algorithms. Such diffuse effects of instruction, which are part and parcel of the educational process, would not be apparent, even with the most rigorous effort to attribute instructional responsibility to individual teachers."

Johnson is quick to point out that she is not in favor of schools continuing to employ ineffective teachers. However, she doubts that VAMs are the best strategy for reducing their numbers. Rather, she advocates focusing on the professional climate within schools and involving lead teachers in hiring, mentoring, and coaching their colleagues. She points to the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program as one that involves exemplary teachers in supervising and evaluating, as well as New Haven's Teacher Evaluation and Development System (TEVAL), which combines standards-based observations, meeting student-achievement goals, and principals' assessments of teachers' professional practice. One feature of the New Haven program is letting teachers know by November if they are in danger of losing their job (if an outside observer corroborates that assessment, rapid dismissal may result) – and also if teachers' performance is exemplary.

"Until more extensive studies are available about the use of VAMs in schools," Johnson concludes, "policymakers and school officials would do well to rely on approaches that have been shown to improve schools as organizations. Ignoring the unintended consequences of using VAMs to make employment decisions may set back hard-earned, but still fragile, progress."

"Will VAMs Reinforce the Walls of the Egg-Crate School?" by Susan Moore Johnson in *Educational Researcher*, March 2015 (Vol. 44, #2, p. 117-126), http://bit.ly/19BeJtK; Johnson can be reached at susan_moore_johnson@harvard.edu.

Back to page one

2. When Does a Teacher's Learning Curve Level Off?

The conventional wisdom is that teachers are on a steep learning curve in their first 3-5 years in the classroom and then plateau and stop growing, reports Stephen Sawchuk in this *Education Week* article. "For some reason, you hear this all the time, from all sorts of people, Bill Gates on down," says John Papay of Brown University. But in several recent studies, Papay and other researchers have found that teachers continue to improve their ability to boost student achievement for at least the first ten years of their careers, and likely longer. Teachers' deepening experience has other benefits as well, including improved student motivation, attendance, diligence with homework, reading habits, and behavior.

"My policy conclusion from this," says Helen Ladd of Duke University, a co-author of one of the studies, "is that we have to help teachers grow. They have the potential. You want to get high-quality teachers in the first place and then you want to stick with them."

"Experience Seen As a Boost for Teachers" by Stephen Sawchuk in *Education Week*, March 25, 2015 (Vol. 34, #25, p. 1, 10), www.edweek.org

Back to page one

3. Getting High-School Students Into the "Historical Problem Space"

In this article in *Teachers College Record*, Abby Reisman (University of Pennsylvania) reports on her study of text-based discussions in 11th-grade history classrooms. With an eye on Common Core and college-ready expectations, Reisman observed teachers as they presented meaty historical documents, got students analyzing the texts in small groups, and then led whole-class discussions in which students were asked to back up claims in response to a central historical question. Here were some of the questions that students considered:

- Was Abraham Lincoln racist?
- Were Lewis and Clark respectful to the Native Americans they encountered?
- Did President Wilson have good reasons for entering World War I?
- Were Texans justified in declaring independence from Mexico?
- Were American soldiers required to follow orders during the Philippine War?
- Was the New Deal a success or failure?

After six months of classroom observations and careful analysis of videotapes of 100 lessons, Reisman concluded that, despite the fact the teachers were experienced and enthusiastic and were working with authentic documents on engaging topics, "disciplinary discussion was surprisingly rare, and discussion that promoted historical understanding even rarer." In the 7,000 minutes of discussions she videotaped, Reisman found only 132 minutes that met her basic criteria:

- The teacher posed the lesson's central historical question.
- Students read at least two documents prior to the discussion.
- There were at least three distinct student "turns" responding to the central question.
- The discussion lasted four minutes or longer.

Again and again, teachers missed opportunities to get students engaged in thoughtful, extended

discussions. All too often, the classes reverted to the time-honored pattern of recitation, lecture, and IRE (initiate, respond, evaluate).

Reisman believes that what she observed is quite common in American high schools. Why is teaching with historical documents so difficult? Adolescents, after years of textbook-driven instruction, tend to view texts as "receptacles for decontextualized historical information" and, as they get older, "as pieces of testimony that should either be accepted as truth or discarded." The teacher's challenge is getting students into what she calls the "historical problem space" where they can look skeptically at several texts, appreciate why people in the past acted as they did, and truly understand historical events.

When studying history, says Reisman, "the strangeness of the past butts up against the human desire to render it familiar. When the desire for familiarity pulls too strongly, one runs the risk of presentism, or the application of anachronistic, present-day standards, values, or worldviews to the past… Using the present day as a standard, students initially judge historical actors as stupid or morally deficient, and they impute motivations without regard for contextual circumstances. Limited subject matter knowledge and a political (and classroom) culture of intransigent debate also militate against student entry into the historical problem space." Discussions are of little value when texts become "a trampoline for one's own creative leaps or political demands" (LaCapra, 1980).

Of course students shouldn't entirely lose historical perspective. As Sam Wineburg put it, "Trying to shed what we know in order to glimpse the 'real' past is like trying to examine microbes with the naked eye: The instruments we abandon are the ones that enable us to see" (2001). The middle ground, which students reach only when they are guided through close reading of well-chosen documents, is *contextual historical empathy* (Ashby & Lee, 1987) – they begin to understand what shaped the behaviors and worldviews of those who lived in another era. When a classroom discussion reaches this level, says Reisman, students strain "to understand the foreignness and complexity of the past." There's "puzzlement, wonder, and a reluctance to rush to judgment" and students' claims "reflect the tentative nature of historical knowledge."

Reisman was discouraged at how rarely students reached this level. In one discussion on Abraham Lincoln's racism, the teacher prompted students to quote evidence from the texts, but they never moved past their initial judgments (he's a racist) and never came to grips with the "strangeness" of the past and the complexity of the issue – specifically, the hidden meaning of Lincoln's 1858 statement (in a response to Stephen Douglas) that "perhaps" the Negro is not his equal in moral or intellectual endowment. "How can we begin to understand a world in which the mere suggestion that slaves were morally and intellectual equal would make a white politician a 'progressive'?" asks Reisman. "A world where many accepted as given the notion that God made one race to serve another? How can we fathom a society where the buying and selling of human beings was part of the market economy? Had students entered the historical problem space, they would have had to pause and ask whether Lincoln's words sounded as irreconcilable to his audience in 1858 as they sound to us today."

Reisman concludes that there are three reasons it's an uphill battle for teachers to get students into genuine historical discussions, even with well-chosen documents:

• *The quote sandwich* – In this widely used writing scaffold, textual evidence is the meat and the slices of bread are the claim and analysis. "While arguably useful as a structural support during the writing process," says Reisman, "the quote sandwich, when used as a blueprint for student text-based claims during historical discussion, inverts the inductive process of historical reading. Rather than prompting students to derive their claims from careful, collective analysis of text, the quote sandwich model of discussion prompts students first to stake a claim, and then to find a textual warrant to support it, even one that happens to be decontextualized." Reisman is critical of the Common Core standards for not making a distinction between the kind of argumentation appropriate in different content areas: "How one reads in order to argue whether or not Lewis and Clark were respectful differs from how one might read to argue whether or not a particular species of bird should be considered endangered, and both differ from how one might read to argue for or against school uniforms."

• *The human tendency toward presentism* – "We all struggle to see ourselves historically, to recognize that our beliefs, our institutions, our values – our very reality – do not belong to some timeless, universal truth, but rather, to a particular socio-historical moment," says Reisman. "To assume an agnostic or impartial orientation toward a past filled with grave and unconscionable injustice may seem unacceptable to social studies teachers, many of whom entered the profession because of their commitment to social justice. Yet, to bring students into the historical problem space, the teacher need not sacrifice the moral lessons that tie the past to our lived experiences and contribute to the betterment of humanity. The teacher need only commit to helping students appreciate the complexity of the past, and to allow the actual texts to paint a picture of a textured and foreign historical context."

• *Contemporary student-centered norms* – As Reisman observed lessons and analyzed videotapes of these teachers in action, she was struck by how important it was for teachers to take charge and actively facilitate discussions – in other words, to be more directive than is customary in many schools. She found that the following teacher "moves" were helpful in getting students into the historical problem space:

- *Modeling* – The teacher shows how to use text to support a historical claim or how to agree or disagree with a classmate's interpretation of evidence ("When you disagree, I want you to say, 'I disagree with so-and-so's interpretation of Document C'").
- *Re-voicing* – The teacher reformulates or refines a student's text-based claim in order to highlight or clarify the relationship between the claim and the warrant ("So you're arguing that the New Deal was a success because more people were employed?").
- *Uptake* – The teacher follows up students' textual references with a question ("What do people think of Suzanne's interpretation of Lincoln's speech?").
- *Marking text* – The teacher directs student attention to a particular document and asks an interpretative question about it.
- *Textual press* – The teacher asks students to substantiate a claim with textual evidence.

- *Stabilize content* – The teacher authoritatively reviews content knowledge relevant to the discussion at hand ("What did the Missouri Compromise say?").
- *Presentist question* – The teacher poses a question that is ahistorical or that prompts students to turn from the documents and bring contemporary worldviews to bear on the topic ("If an officer tells you to shoot a civilian, what could you do?").

"Such a teacher-centered, didactic intervention is often frowned upon in teacher-education programs," says Reisman; "it is viewed as heavy-handed, squelching the child's agency. Yet it is precisely these moves that pave the way to substantive historical discussion… Collectively, these moves increased the probability that students would enter the historical problem space and engage in disciplinary discussion that would prepare them not only to enter the college classroom, but also to succeed."

Beyond high-school and college classrooms, Reisman concludes, "There is moral value in slowing one's judgment and stretching one's understanding to grasp the unfamiliar. To engage in the historical problem space is not to fetishize esoteric historical trivia. Rather, it is a deliberative stance that cultivates the habit of pausing to ask: What more do I need to know before I label this person and dispense with his or her views? Such habits foster humility in the face of the unknown and serve as a check on the certainty and arrogance of the present. It behooves us to consider the value of such a disposition as we race to legislate and quantify 'college and career readiness.' Such a capacity to understand lies at the core of our humanity."

"Entering the Historical Problem Space: Whole-Class Text-Based Discussion in History Class" by Abby Reisman in *Teachers College Record*, February 2015 (Vol. 117, #2, p. 1-44), http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=17783; Reisman can be reached at areisman@gse.upenn.edu.

Back to page one

4. Effective Time Management for Teachers

In this *Edutopia* article, consultant Maia Heyck-Merlin (author of *The Together Teacher*, Jossey-Bass, 2012) suggests seven steps to help teachers organize their lives for success – and keep their sanity:

• *Select a tool to plan the week*. Whatever worksheet you use – a handwritten template, a typed-in template, or a digital platform – the key is putting all time commitments and to-dos in one place so they can be viewed together.

• *Plan the next week before the weekend*. On Thursday or Friday, spend 30-45 minutes sorting the week's accumulated sticky notes, student work, office memos, and other stuff into piles – short-term to-dos, long-term items, meeting follow-ups, etc. – and fill out your planning template for the following week. The goal is to have next week's worksheet totally ready by Friday afternoon so as to maximize weekend R&R.

• *Set priorities for the week*. These should include big-picture classroom and personal goals – boosting student attendance, improving class culture, getting students reinvested in Big Goals for math, finalizing plans for the big field trip, planning a baby shower.

• *List out all your meetings and appointments*. Heyck-Merlin recommends keeping one master calendar for your personal and professional lives to avoid "collisions" – items like grade-level meetings, report card nights, staff retreats, doctor's appointments, your brother's birthday.

• *Decide how you will use discretionary time*. Your sanity is definitely improved by getting the most out of prep periods, lunch, before- and after-school time, etc. – and that requires deliberate planning.

• *Allow flexibility for the "hallway ambush."* There will always be unexpected requests and crises, and Heyck-Merlin recommends carrying your master calendar/list at all times (on a clipboard, in your pocket, or in a device) to make instant revisions when the unexpected happens.

• *Review and adjust daily*. "Things change," she concludes. "Life happens. At the end of every school day, sit down for five minutes and cross off what you've accomplished, roll over what didn't happen to another time slot, or decide to delete something you had intended to do."

"7-Step Prep Make a Weekly Plan for YOU!" by Maia Heyck-Merlin in *Edutopia*, August 1, 2014, http://www.edutopia.org/blog/7-step-prep-weekly-plan-maia-heyck

Back to page one

5. Short Item:

The origins and wanderings of the English language – This Vox website by Libby Nelson http://www.vox.com/2015/3/3/8053521/25-maps-that-explain-english traces the origins and spread of English with diagrams and maps. Be sure to check out the video in #22 in which Siobhan Thompson hilariously imitates all the regional accents of the British Isles.

Back to page one

If you have feedback or suggestions,
***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 44 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).

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for a year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and how to pay by check, credit card, or purchase order.

Website:

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

- How to subscribe or renew
- A detailed rationale for the Marshall Memo
- Publications (with a count of articles from each)
- Article selection criteria
- Topics (with a count of articles from each)
- Headlines for all issues
- Reader opinions (with results of an annual survey)
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

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

- The current issue (in Word or PDF)
- All back issues (also in Word and PDF)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- A collection of "classic" articles from all 11 years

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
AMLE Magazine
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 Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle School Journal
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
School Library Journal
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
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