

Marshall Memo 17

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 15, 2003

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Quotes of the Week

"The tragedy of urban education is the dearth of effective schools for poor kids."
Chester E. Finn, Jr., *Education Week*, December 10, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #15, p.48)

"The days of inventing creative curriculum solely to appeal to teacher or student interest are waning."
Marge Sherer, *Educational Leadership*, Dec. 2003/Jan.2004, (Vol. 61, #4, p. 5)

"Schools that neglect some cultural forms, such as the arts, guarantee that they will graduate semiliterate students – students for whom the arts will be other people's pleasures."
Elliot Eisner, *Educational Leadership*, Dec. 2003/Jan.2004, (Vol. 61, #4, p. 8)

"[W]e can best prepare students for the future by enabling them to deal effectively with the present."
Elliot Eisner, *ibid.*

"Every test these kids take entails reading. Schools can't lose when they help students become more discriminating and discerning readers; more critical responders in their writing; and more effective speakers, reflective listeners, and active note-takers."
Heidi Hayes Jacobs, *Educational Leadership* (see item x)

1. Is Homogeneous Grouping Always Evil?

Grouping students by achievement levels has been a much-maligned educational practice over the last 30 years, but is it always bad? In a thoughtful article in the *Boston Globe*, education reporter Laura Pappano explores the re-emergence of

grouping and recent research on its pros and cons. So compelling was the negative press on tracking over the last twenty years that many teachers rejected any kind of homogeneous grouping. But recently, pressure to produce results has educators taking another look at achievement grouping.

James Kulik, research scientist at the University of Michigan, is quoted as saying that grouping remains “a terribly contentious area,” but goes on to say that grouping can be beneficial if (a) it is flexible (students can move up), (b) it is used for only part of the day, and (c) it allows teachers to target instruction more precisely to students’ level. “The research has been consistent that if you do grouping for the sake of adjusting curriculum, you can accomplish something,” says Kulik. “If you just divide up people and everyone gets the same curriculum, you don’t achieve anything academically.”

Much of the concern about grouping has been about the effect being in the low groups has on students’ self-esteem. Robert Slavin, co-director of the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk at Johns Hopkins University, says that research shows that it’s the type of grouping – not grouping itself – that matters to children’s egos. “There is a downside to any kind of ability grouping,” said Slavin, especially if students know that teachers have low expectations. On the other hand, he said, “if you have a kid in math who is really struggling and not getting it day after day, [heterogeneous grouping] is not a great favor to them.” The teaching challenge is catering to widely-divergent learning levels in one classroom. In achievement-grouped classes, teachers can fill in gaps and students “will be very happy about that because it gives them a chance to succeed.”

“The danger with homogeneous grouping is when you track kids for an entire year,” said Wilfredo Laboy, superintendent of schools in Lawrence, Mass. In his schools, students are grouped for reading in Grades 1 to 8, with assessments every eight weeks.

Gary Millett, the principal of Swift River Elementary School in Belchertown, Mass., has begun achievement grouping in math in response to disappointing MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) test results. But he is careful in the terms he uses. “We’re not talking about ability, we are talking about what a child can do at a particular point in time,” he said. Students are tested regularly during the year and can move between groups depending on what they have learned.

[A new variable in the tracking debate is the introduction of rigorous external standards and assessments. This may be a safeguard against the other major concern

about grouping: that students in the lower groups will get a watered-down curriculum.]

“Grouping Students Undergoes Revival” by Laura Pappano, *Boston Globe*, December 14, 2003 (p. B13)

2. Elliot Eisner on the Deep Stuff That Schools Should Teach

In a sweeping article in the current issue of *Educational Leadership*, Stanford professor Elliot Eisner asserts that schools need to involve students in five deep abilities if they are to be ready for the unknowable future:

- *Judgment* – Students need to know how to deal with problems that have more than one correct answer. To learn this, students need to be asked to wrestle with problems that require judgment in school.

- *Critical thinking* – Schools need to teach students how to critique ideas and “enjoy exploring what one can do with them.” To learn this, students need to be presented with powerful ideas that are worth exploring – “ideas that have legs, that take students someplace.” Some examples: random mutation and natural selection, the relationship between culture and personality, and the protection of minority rights in a majority-rule government.

- *Meaningful literacy* – Eisner defines literacy to include reading, writing, numeracy, music, visual arts, and dance (see quote above).

- *Collaboration* – Students need to learn to “work with others collectively, cooperatively, and in harmony.” School needs to be more than a series of solo performances. And the kind of honest-to-goodness collaborative work that we have students engage in during school time is most beneficial when it is with students who are culturally different from them.

- *Service* – Students should be able to make a contribution to the larger community while they are in school. “Schooling should be about more than individual achievement intended to serve one’s own personal ambitions... We are so wrapped up in test scores that we often marginalize the importance of developing socially responsible citizens who are willing to contribute to the larger social welfare and who know how to do so.”

Eisner concludes by urging a broader approach to accountability – measuring what really matters in education. “The primary aim of education is not to enable students to do well in school, but to help them do well in the lives they lead outside of

schools... [but p]reparation for tomorrow is best served by meaningful education today."

"Preparing for Today and Tomorrow" by Elliot Eisner, *Educational Leadership*, Dec. 2003/Jan.2004, (Vol. 61, #4, p. 6-10)

http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/200312/toc.html

3. Geneva Gay on Multicultural Education

In this article, University of Washington professor Geneva Gay argues that multicultural education as a key to closing the achievement gap: "Students perform more successfully on all levels when there is great congruence between their cultural backgrounds and such school experiences as task interest, effort, academic achievement, and feelings of personal efficacy or social accountability."

Gay notes that many teachers do not spend time on multicultural topics because they are: (a) unconvinced of its value in developing academic skills and building a unified national community; (b) skeptical that it's feasible to implement; (c) untrained in multicultural topics; and (d) overburdened by a plethora of standards. Gay argues that multicultural education should not be a add-on but should be fully integrated into all parts of the curriculum (often in an interdisciplinary fashion). She also feels that it includes "policy, learning climate, instructional delivery, leadership, and evaluation."

Gay says the key elements of successful multicultural curriculum are:

- *Reality* – Schools should not "gloss over social problems and the realities of ethnic and racial identities, romanticize racial relations, and ignore the challenges of poverty and urban living in favor of middle-class and suburban experiences."
- *Representation* – "The inescapable reality is that diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural groups and individuals have made contributions to every area of human endeavor and to all aspects of U.S. history, life, and culture."
- *Relevance* – Gay notes that many children of color find school boring and alien to their world. "They often feel unwelcome, insignificant, and alienated." These students will light up and get involved if what they are taught – and the way they are taught – have relevance to their lives.

"The Importance of Multicultural Education" by Geneva Gay, *Educational Leadership*, Dec. 2003/Jan.2004, (Vol. 61, #4, p. 30-35)

http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/200312/toc.html

4. Must the Textbook Rule the Classroom Curriculum?

In this lively article, two Chicago educators argue that today's textbooks (which are heavy enough to break your foot if you drop them) suffer from several fatal weaknesses. They are:

- *Unreadable* – Textbooks are designed to store huge amounts of information. They are reference books, written in “inconsiderate” or “unfriendly” text, overloaded with facts, dates, formulas, and taxonomies, introducing vocabulary and concepts at a mind-boggling rate. They are not written to be read like a novel, and students should not be asked to plow straight through. Textbooks should be treated like a dictionary, encyclopedia, or thesaurus.

- *Superficial* – Textbook writers struggle to include everything, but “the biggest ideas fade into the background, never get successfully communicated, or simply don't stick with students.” Textbook publishers try to please the content requirements of all the states they market to (which have been beefed up in the era of high standards), and the result is coverage that is a mile wide and an inch deep.

- *Chaotic* – Striving to make their books graphically attractive for video-game-addled youngsters, textbook publishers include a plethora of sidebars, boxes, illustrations, and other graphics (Flex Your Brain! EXPLORE, Find Out! Minds on!). The result is a “hyperkinetic” experience that is distracting and confusing for kids.

- *Authoritarian* – In all too many schools, a single textbook is the only curriculum that students experience in history, English, or physics, and the table of contents of the textbook is printed up as the school district's scope and sequence and curriculum guide. Textbook reps claim that their book covers every single relevant state standard [and few school districts take the time to systematically check]. Daniels and Zemelman think that it is unwise to rely on one source for all the material students are taught: “It is unacceptable for schools in a democracy to teach young people that only one view is sufficient – or permitted.”

- *Inaccurate* – Although publishers strive to eliminate errors, textbooks are still full of them. In one analysis of 12 physical science textbooks, researchers catalogued 500 pages of errors, some trivial, others grave.

Daniels and Zemelman conclude that “[i]f we want students to actually remember information and care about the subjects taught in school, we must change what they read.” This means treating textbooks as a reference and drawing on a much broader range of material. Most adults don't read textbooks; instead, “they read newspapers, magazines, and other nonfiction materials, and often talk about them

with their friends, coworkers, and families... Luckily, the world is full of fascinating, important, debatable, and sometimes inflammatory nonfiction, from partisan magazines to primary source materials to stirring biographies to revisionist histories.”

“Out with Textbooks, In with Learning” by Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman, *Educational Leadership*, Dec. 2003/Jan.2004, (Vol. 61, #4, p. 36-40)

http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/200312/toc.html

5. Doing Cooperative Learning Right

When employers are asked what they look for when they hire new employees, the ability to work with others is often at the top of their list. Unfortunately, too much of students’ school experience centers around competition and individual achievement and students don’t get much *practice* at collaborative work. But just setting up cooperative learning groups is not enough, and poorly-planned efforts produce neither cooperation nor learning. There are several key characteristics to making cooperative learning work effectively in the classroom:

- *Careful planning* – Teachers need to (a) design group tasks that develop group skills and content knowledge; (b) create groups that use these skills; (c) monitor group progress to make sure students are developing these skills; and (d) evaluate and reward the development of group process skills.

- *Training students* – Students need explicit training in group process skills; otherwise their cooperative learning experiences will be empty and/or filled with conflict.

- *Teamwork outside the classroom* – The games that students play at recess are important to their developing skills, especially for boys.

- *Teacher training* – For cooperative learning to be successful, teachers need explicit training in how to build positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, and group process into their lessons.

“Research Link: Student Teamwork” by John Holloway, *Educational Leadership*, Dec. 2003/Jan.2004, (Vol. 61, #4, p. 91-92)

http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/200312/toc.html

6. Short Items:

- *Twelve lessons for administrators* – Pamela Wheaton Schorr reports that successful school leaders have learned these lessons:

- Don't try to play spin doctor; be candid from the word go.
- Remember that kids are your customers.
- Don't forget who writes the checks.
- Don't just call when you need something.
- Don't play the blame game.
- Acknowledge people's feelings.
- Distinguish fact from opinion.
- Close the technology gap between teachers and students.
- Demonstrate a vested interest in your community.
- Mentor your teachers.
- Empower staffers.
- Empower yourself.

"Twelve Things Top School Leaders Know (and You Should Too)" by Pamela Wheaton Schorr in *Scholastic Administrator*, November/December 2003.
<http://www.scholastic.com/administrator/novdec03/articles.asp?article=secrets> (via PEN Weekly NewsBlast, December 12, 2003)

• *Curriculum mapping* – In an interview in *Educational Leadership*, Heidi Hayes Jacobs explains curriculum mapping and shares some thoughts on what schools should (and should not) teach. "Curriculum mapping is a procedure for collecting data about the operational curriculum in a school and in a district – the instruction that students are experiencing." By collecting information on what is actually being taught and putting it in electronic form, it's easy to see the big picture and make revisions. After doing hundreds of curriculum maps over the years, Jacobs has concluded that a lot of curriculum is dated. For example, she thinks that the practice of studying state history in elementary schools (often in fourth grade) is silly now that families move around the country so much. She also thinks that the lower grades should teach history in a much deeper, richer way and make it into more of a *story*. She feels that U.S. teachers should *slow down* and teach fewer math concepts in more depth and with more use of language (explaining the steps they are taking in words). In Japan, the average eighth-grade class covers only eight math concepts, versus about 35 in the U.S. And she feels passionately that literacy is at the core of student achievement (see quote above).

Creating a Timely Curriculum: A Conversation with Heidi Hayes Jacobs" by Deborah Perkins-Gough, *Educational Leadership*, Dec.2003/Jan.2004 (Vol. 61, #4, p. 12-17)

http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/200312/toc.html

• *Temper, temper* – In this punchy piece, Max Fischer urges teachers (and other educators) to keep a tight rein over the three T’s – thought, temper, and tongue. “On a few occasions in my teaching career,” he confesses, “I have endured hits to my professional credibility due to my inability to master one or another of these three T’s.” Only a saint is under control at all times, but when teachers lose their cool in the classroom, it’s a poor model for students. “A teacher risks much when inner rage boils over. Not only might they do permanent damage to the student/teacher relationship, they might also skew the dynamics of the entire classroom for some time to come.” In the words of Fred Jones, CALM IS STRENGTH. UPSET IS WEAKNESS.

“Taming the Three T’s” by Max Fischer, *Education World* website, October 20, 2003
http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/voice/voice098.shtml (through PEN Weekly NewsBlast, December 12, 2003)

• *Recommended children’s books* – Each year the International Reading Association compiles a list of books that students and teachers across the U.S. think are the best. This year there were more than 11,000 nominations just for the teenage books. To be listed, a book has to have at least two positive reviews from recognized sources. Below is a sampling from the list.

- *Among the Imposters* by Margaret Peterson Haddix
- *Darkness Before Dawn* by Sharon Draper
- *This Side of Paradise* by Steven Layne
- *True Believer* by Virginia Euwer Wolff
- *Jimi Hendrix* by Rita Markel
- *Slave Narratives: The Journey to Freedom* by Elaine Landau
- *Things I Have to Tell You: Poems and Writing by Teenage Girls*, Betsy Franco (ed.)

At the following website, you can get the entire list, along with book recommendations for younger readers and also teachers’ recommendations:

<http://www.reading.org/choices>.

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, or if you saw an article or web item

in the last week that you think should be covered,

please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo aims to keep busy principals, teachers, and other educators very well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is your “designated reader,” searching through a wide range of publications the week they come out, zeroing in on the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning at the school level, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Target topics include the following:

- *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
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 Week
Educational Leadership
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
New York Times
New Yorker
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine
and occasional books, lectures, and websites.

If one of the summaries is of particular interest, subscribers are encouraged to read the full article. E-links will be provided whenever possible. If you would like to suggest additional publications, please be in touch.

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The Marshall Memo is published weekly (with occasional breaks), usually on Monday. Major support from Research for Better Teaching and New Leaders for New Schools makes it possible to offer individual subscriptions at \$50 a year. To subscribe, please contact Kim Marshall at kim.marshall8@verizon.net or at 222 Clark Road, Brookline, MA 02445 (617-566-4353).