Marshall Memo 444

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 9, 2012

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Writing frumpy, lumpy prose is the equivalent of showing up on a first date with unwashed hair and dirty clothes, and then talking about yourself in a way that leaves the other person looking at her watch and remembering she has to do laundry."

Rachel Toor (see item #2)

"When we see a natural style, we are astonished and charmed, for we expected to see an author, and we find a person."

Blaise Pascal (quoted in *ibid*.)

"Negative mindsets stifle perseverance and undermine academic behaviors, which results in poor academic performance. Poor performance in turn reinforces negative mindsets, perpetuating a self-defeating cycle."

Camille Farrington, Melissa Roderick, Elaine Allensworth, Jenny Nagaoka, Tasha Seneca Keyes, David Johnson, and Nicole Beechum (see item #1)

"If a teacher cannot find something positive to say, then feedback is not what needs to come next. Additional teaching needs to come next."

Rick Stiggins (see item #5)

"Once they feel they understand what to do and why, most students develop a feeling that they have control over their own learning."

Susan Brookhart (*ibid*.)

"When students see a new word in print, use it orally as they talk about it, notice its structure and grammatical function, and learn its spelling, they are well on their way to making the word their own."

Nancy Padak, Karen Bromley, Tim Rasinski, and Evangeline Newton (see item #3)

1. Noncognitive Factors As Levers for Improving Academic Achievement

"In addition to content knowledge and academic skills, students must develop sets of behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies that are crucial to academic performance in their classes, but that may not be reflected in their scores on cognitive tests," say Camille Farrington, Melissa Roderick, Elaine Allensworth, Jenny Nagaoka, Tasha Seneca Keyes, David Johnson, and Nicole Beechum in this thoughtful 78-page literature review from the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. Here is their analysis of why noncognitive factors are so important.

Changes in the U.S. economy have raised the stakes for academic attainment, creating dire consequences for workers without a high-school diploma and some college. In response, American teenagers have dramatically increased their educational aspirations – almost all now say they expect to go to college. States have increased their high-school graduation standards, and middle schools have ramped up expectations (for example, algebra in eighth grade). New high-stakes tests hold schools accountable for students reaching the standards. The Common Core State Standards are creating a *de facto* national curriculum with higher expectations than existed in most states.

However, higher standards and more-rigorous tests *in and of themselves* won't produce more college success, say the authors. In fact, there is a weak correlation between standardized test scores and college success. How students do in their high-school courses – their GPA – is a much better predictor of college and life attainment.

Why are high-school grades so much better at predicting success? The authors believe it's because they capture a range of noncognitive factors that tests don't measure – factors that turn out to be crucial to helping young people manage new environments and meet new academic and social demands. The authors grouped these noncognitive factors into five categories:

- Academic behaviors
- Academic perseverance
- Academic mindsets
- Learning strategies
- Social skills

The newfound importance of these noncognitive factors springs from several research projects in recent years:

- Duckworth and Seligman's research has shown that lack of self-control and "conscientiousness" is a major reason that many students fall short of their intellectual potential.
- Dweck and her colleagues' research on "mindsets" – beliefs about the malleability of intelligence and talent – has shown how quickly students can change their concept of human potential.
- Steele, Aronson, Cohen, and McColskey's work on "stereotype threat" has shown how noncognitive factors help explain racial/ethnic achievement gaps.

All three groups of researchers are finding evidence that short-term interventions can bring about striking improvements in students' noncognitive behaviors, which in turn improves their academic performance.

The authors of this paper aimed to do a more systematic analysis of noncognitive factors than has been conducted before. They reviewed the literature, organized the factors into five categories, and asked five questions about each one. Their focus was on the implications for students in the middle grades, as they entered high school, and transitioning to college. Here is a summary of their findings:

• Academic behaviors – These are "the visible, outward signs that a student is engaged and putting forth effort to learn," say the authors. They are commonly associated with being a "good student" and lead directly to high academic performance. Academic behaviors include: *regularly attending class, arriving ready to work (with the right supplies and materials), doing homework, organizing materials, participating in class, and studying*.

a. How is this factor related to academic performance? Directly. "All aspects of academic performance, cognitive and noncognitive, are expressed through academic behaviors," say the authors. "They have both a strong direct and indirect effect on grades."
b. Is this factor malleable? Yes.
c. What is the role of classroom context in shaping this factor? Direct, through behavioral expectations and strategies, and indirect, through its effect on the other noncognitive factors.
d. Are there clear, actionable strategies for classroom practice? There are numerous interventions, but few have been evaluated on a large-scale basis, say the authors. However, we know that attendance and assignment completion can be affected by close monitoring and support.
e. Would changing this factor significantly narrow gender or racial/ethnic gaps? Perhaps, but the evidence here is murky.

• Academic perseverance – This is a student's tendency to complete school assignments in a timely and thorough manner, to the best of his or her ability, despite distractions, obstacles, or level of challenge. It's the ability to put a higher, long-term goal – academic achievement – above lower, more immediate pleasures. Perseverance drives positive academic behaviors, which lead to academic performance. It consists of *grit, tenacity, delayed gratification, self-discipline, and self-control*.

a. How is this factor related to academic performance? Only modestly. "Research often conflates students' innate tendency to be perseverant with the actual behavior of doing work," say the authors.
b. Is this factor malleable? Not very. "Evidence suggests that grit is fairly stable as an individual trait," say the authors. "However, students are more likely to display academic perseverance when they have positive academic mindsets or strategies to successfully manage tasks."
c. What is the role of classroom context in shaping this factor? Positive if the classroom is structured to support students' success at assigned tasks and provide them with strategies to make the tasks easier.
d. Are there clear, actionable strategies for classroom practice? Yes, there are numerous instructional practices that improve students' perseverance by changing their mindsets. However, there is little research on how teachers can structure classrooms to develop perseverance in the long run.
e. Would changing this factor significantly narrow gender or racial/ethnic gaps? No research has examined this directly.

• Academic mindsets – These are the positive psycho-social attitudes or beliefs one has about oneself in relation to academic work. They feed academic perseverance, which in turn drives academic behaviors, which produces academic performance, which circles back and validates positive academic mindsets. "Note that this reciprocal, self-perpetuating system also works in a negative loop," say the authors. "Negative mindsets stifle perseverance and undermine academic behaviors, which results in poor academic performance. Poor performance in turn reinforces negative mindsets, perpetuating a self-defeating cycle." Positive academic mindsets manifest themselves in self-statements such as: *I belong in this academic community. My ability and competence grow with my effort. I can succeed at this. This work has value for me.*

a. How is this factor related to academic performance? Quite strongly.
b. Is this factor malleable? Yes; a number of interventions have produced encouraging results.
c. What is the role of classroom context in shaping this factor? Explicit teaching can have a direct impact on students' academic mindsets.
d. Are there clear, actionable strategies for classroom practice? There are several short-term interventions that have evidence of success, such as envisioning "future possible selves" and "developing a sense of belonging." However, the research is fuzzy and the authors say there are few resources to translate social-psychological theory into classroom practices that can be easily implemented by teachers in a variety of school settings.
e. Would changing this factor significantly narrow gender or racial/ethnic gaps? Yes – but it depends on the degree to which gaps are "caused by stereotype threat or other forces that differentially harm minority students," say the authors.

• Learning strategies – These are the processes and tactics one employs to aid in the cognitive work of thinking, remembering, or learning, all of which feed academic perseverance and academic behaviors, producing better academic performance. Learning strategies include: *study skills (such as mnemonic devices to help recall facts), metacognitive strategies (like monitoring one's own comprehension while reading), self-regulated learning (self-correcting when one detects confusion or errors in one's thinking), goal-setting, and time management.*

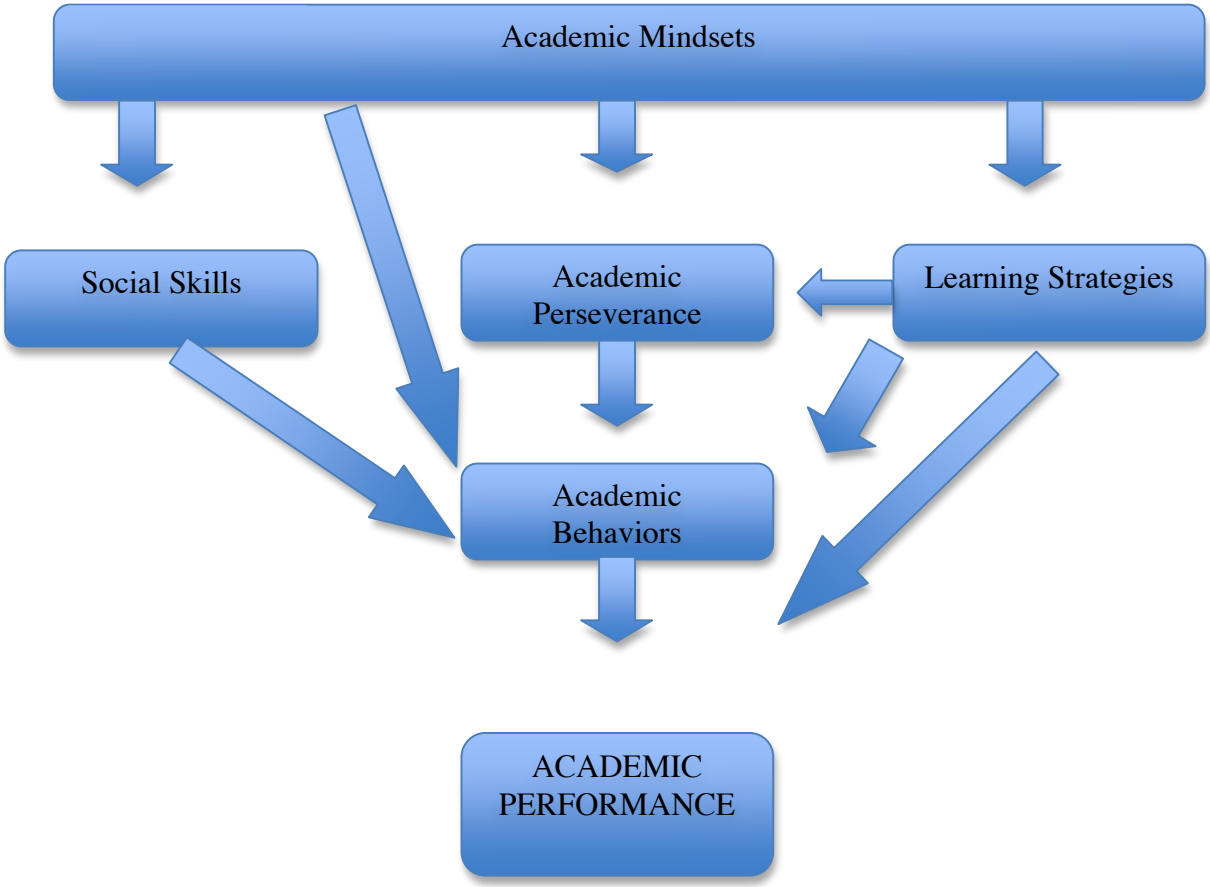
a. How is this factor related to academic performance? Directly; knowing how and when to use learning strategies is associated with higher achievement.
b. Is this factor malleable? Yes; these strategies can be directly taught, but the authors worry that some studies haven't established a causal link between teaching learning strategies and academic achievement.
c. What is the role of classroom context in shaping this factor? Classrooms are ideal for teaching these specific learning strategies.
d. Are there clear, actionable strategies for classroom practice? Yes, research is strong on this one. Teacher feedback and student assessments can strengthen these strategies day by day and week by week.
e. Would changing this factor significantly narrow gender or racial/ethnic gaps? There is little research evidence here.

• Social skills – These "people skills" are frequently mentioned as vital to future work and life outcomes, but their impact on academic achievement is indirect: they feed improvements in academic behaviors, which in turn drive better academic performance. Social skills include: *interpersonal skills, empathy, cooperation, assertion, and responsibility.*

a. How is this factor related to academic performance? Weak research evidence on this one.
b. Is this factor malleable? Yes, a number of programs have been successful in developing students' social skills.
c. What is the role of classroom context in shaping this factor? "Student behaviors are responsive to interpersonal, instructional, and environmental factors in the classroom," say the authors.
d. Are there clear, actionable strategies for classroom practice? There are formal programs, but otherwise little direction for classroom teachers.
e. Would changing this factor significantly narrow gender or racial/ethnic gaps? There is little research evidence here.

The overall finding of this study: trying to improve "grit" and perseverance is less productive than working on academic mindsets and learning strategies, especially for students who are transitioning from middle to high school and from high school to college.

Based on their research so far, the authors created a tentative model for how the five factors interact (see an adaptation of their graphic below). These relationships take place within the socio-cultural context of the community, the school and classroom context, and students' background characteristics. Note that Academic Behaviors is the junction box through which all the other noncognitive factors must operate to have an impact on student achievement.



"Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Literature Review" by Camille Farrington, Melissa Roderick, Elaine Allensworth, Jenny Nagaoka, Tasha Seneca Keyes, David Johnson, and Nicole Beechum, a University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research paper, June 2012, http://bit.ly/KxVKNk

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2. Improving the Dreary State of Academic Writing

In this piquant article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Rachel Toor (Eastern Washington University/Spokane) bemoans the way many academics express themselves on paper. "Writing frumpy, lumpy prose," she says, "is the equivalent of showing up on a first date with unwashed hair and dirty clothes, and then talking about yourself in a way that leaves the other person looking at her watch and remembering she has to do laundry."

Why do so many academics write so badly? Toor wonders. Perhaps it's to prove they're smart. Professors, says Patricia Nelson Limerick of the University of Colorado/Boulder, "are the kids no one wanted to dance with in high school." So they have to show how much they've read, drop lots of important names, use specialized language to show they deserve to be a member of the club, and constantly prove they're right. Their prose seems to be written "neither by nor for humans," says Toor, and it "keeps readers out rather than inviting them in… Pretension wins out over clarity, originality, or even meaning."

"Complaining about bad academic prose is like discussing the weather," she continues, "talk, talk, talk, and no one does anything." Toor is for doing something! "Sure, as professors we are supposed to be intelligent, and sometimes it feels like we have to keep proving that. Remember, though, it's not either/or. Attractive writing – brave, personal, narrative, zingy, imaginative, funny – will not make you appear any less smart."

Toor says professors who teach writing courses should focus on training the next generation of academics "to be good at the things that academics are supposed to do: read, write, think clearly and critically, and present new ideas and material so their importance shines through." She says academics [and K-12 educators, for that matter] should be liberated so their writing has these qualities:

- Persuasive
- Argumentative
- Claims backed up by evidence
- Compelling stories
- Original
- Imaginative
- Creative flair
- First-person anecdotes
- Catchy openings
- Concrete nouns
- Active verbs
- Lots of good examples
- Warm
- Human
- Funny

And academics shouldn't worry about appearing Not Serious or Not Smart if they write well, says Toor.

She closes with a quote from Blaise Pascal: "When we see a natural style, we are astonished and charmed, for we expected to see an author, and we find a person."

"Becoming a 'Stylish' Writer: Attractive Prose Will Not Make You Appear Any Less Smart" by Rachel Toor in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 6, 2012 (Vol. LVIII, #40, p. A22), http://chronicle.com/article/Becoming-a-Stylish-Writer/132677/; Toor can be reached at careers@chronicle.com.

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3. Five Ways NOT To Teach Vocabulary

(Originally titled "Vocabulary: Five Common Misconceptions")

"When young readers encounter texts that contain too many unfamiliar words, their comprehension suffers," say Nancy Padak (formerly at Kent State University), Karen Bromley (Binghamton University), Tim Rasinski (Kent State University), and Evangeline Newton (University of Akron) in this *Educational Leadership* article. "Reading becomes slow,

laborious, and frustrating, impeding their learning." But many teachers go about vocabulary-building the wrong way, they say, falling prey to five misconceptions:

• *Misconception #1: Definitions do the trick*. "Although knowing a word's definition is important," say the authors, "it's not nearly enough." Students need to learn its multiple dimensions. Take the word *cappuccino*: structure and pronunciation (four syllables – cap-uh-cheen-o); grammar (a noun, but not a proper noun); semantics (a definition, origins among the Capuchin monks in Italy, who wore light brown robes with white-lined hoods) and the diminutive Italian affix, *-ino*; cappuccino literally means "little hood"); and its spelling (tricky, with two p's and two c's). "When students see a new word in print, use it orally as they talk about it, notice its structure and grammatical function, and learn its spelling, they are well on their way to making the word their own," say the authors.

• *Misconception #2: Weekly vocabulary lists are effective*. Not so much, say Padak, Bromley, Rasinski, and Newton. This time-honored practice is drudgery for students – and it doesn't work. A better practice is to listen for interesting or difficult words during oral reading, write them on the board, and use them for vocabulary instruction and word play.

• *Misconception #3: Teachers should teach all the hard words, especially those printed in bold or italics*. Unproductive, say the authors. Cognitive overload! Do students already know the word? Is it essential to understanding the text? Will it appear in future readings? Focus pre-instruction on no more than 3-4 words per reading selection for primary grades, 5-7 for middle grades. Students should also learn how to find the meaning of words in the glossary or dictionary.

• *Misconception #4: The study of Latin and Greek roots is too hard for young learners*. Not true, say the authors. Latin and Greek word roots represent simple, familiar, stable concepts (*port* = carry), and primary-grade students can learn them. "Once students understand the linguistic principle that words with the same roots are related in meaning, they can use words they know to unlock the meaning of new words," say the authors.

• *Misconception #5: Word learning is boring*. This is true if it consists of writing words ten times, copying definitions, doing worksheets, drilling with flash cards, and Friday tests. But there are lots of ways to make vocabulary-building fun: Scrabble, Boggle, Balderdash, Buzzword, Pictionary, crossword puzzles, word jumbles, and much more online, including:
MindFun: http://mindfun.com/
Gamequarium: http://www.gamequarium.com/spanishvocab.html
Funschool: http://games.funschool.com/
Vocabulary: http://www.vocabulary.co.il/
MyVocabulary: http://www.myvocabulary.com/

"Vocabulary: Five Common Misconceptions" by Nancy Padak, Karen Bromley, Tim Rasinski, and Evangeline Newton in *Educational Leadership*, June 2012 (Vol. 69, online only), http://www.ascd.org; the authors can be reached at npadak@kent.edu, kbromley@binghamton.edu, trasinsk@kent.edu, and enewton@uakron.edu.

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4. High-Leverage Teaching Practices for Math and Foreign Language

In this article in *Foreign Language Annals*, Anne Cummings Hlas and Christopher Hlas (University of Wisconsin/Eau Claire) describe four high-leverage teaching practices, with a special focus on whether novice teachers can adopt them and be successful from their first weeks in the classroom. These practices come from research in mathematics, but Hlas and Hlas apply them to foreign language classrooms.

• *Anticipating student errors and misconceptions during planning* – The authors recommend a four-column lesson-planning format borrowed from Japanese Lesson Study:

- A specific objective within the lesson – for example, learning when to use the formal and informal *you* when conversing in Spanish;
- Expected student responses, questions, and misconceptions – In this example, there's possible confusion around formal and informal greetings;
- Teacher's follow-up questions or actions – Giving concrete examples, showing pictures of people and situations (children, well-known politicians, job interview, coffee shop);
- Goals and method of evaluation – Asking for an all-class response (finger signals for choice 1 or choice 2) of which *you* to use in different formal and informal situations.

• *Making connections between multiple representations* – The fable of the six blind men touching different parts of an elephant (It's a tree! It's a snake!) captures this approach. In a foreign language classroom, students might be asked to give correct and incorrect examples of how to ask for information, identify patterns, use manipulatives (photographs of different situations), practice speaking the greetings, and visualize by creating a concept map.

• *Leading a class discussion* – Hlas and Hlas present this list of steps for conducting a discussion (in math or foreign language classes) for maximum impact on student learning:

- Setting the purpose and launching the discussion;
- Using students' ideas to advance the discussion;
- Eliciting, scaffolding, and following up on students' contributions;
- Managing multiple ideas and engaging different students equitably;
- Making public records of selected ideas as the discussion unfolds and saying them out loud as they're written up;
- Using language that is accurate yet accessible to students;
- Identifying and highlighting the core of an idea or explanation;
- Working with students' errors and misconceptions;
- Clarifying terms;
- Asking students to ground discussion in shared knowledge and terms;
- Deploying and connecting representations of content.

• *Teaching through problem solving* – This involves presenting students with a problem to be solved rather than a lecture on solutions. Students are often asked to work on the problem in groups and then share problem-solving strategies. In foreign-language classes, problems might include crossword puzzles and word games, real-world dilemmas (losing a passport while abroad), communication conflicts, writing issues (*Who is my audience? What is the genre?*), and interpreting a text (exploring the motivation of characters in a story). The key

issue for teachers is choosing an appropriate problem, establishing the right amount of background knowledge, facilitating/coaching/guiding students as they wrestle with it, and sharing out solutions and strategies. Students might also be taught Polya's four-step problem-solving model:

- Understand the problem;
- Devise a plan;
- Carry out the plan;
- Look back and revisit the plan.

"A Review of High-Leverage Teaching Practices: Making Connections Between Mathematics and Foreign Languages" by Anne Cummings Hlas and Christopher Hlas in *Foreign Language Annals*, Summer 2012 (Vol. 45, #S1, p. S76-S97), http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2012.01180.x/abstract

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5. Opinions on Giving Feedback

(Originally titled "Quality Feedback: What It Is and How to Give It")

"Writing 'Nice job!' on the top of a student's paper is encouraging, but is it helpful feedback?" asks Katie Rapp in this *Education Update* article. Grant Wiggins thinks not. "Feedback is value-neutral help on worthy tasks," he says. "It is actionable information" describing what the student did in relation to goals, empowering intelligent adjustments.

Author Susan Brookhart believes feedback should appeal to the mind (cognition) and the heart (motivation). "Once they feel they understand what to do and why," she says, "most students develop a feeling that they have control over their own learning." Brookhart also says teachers shouldn't do all the work: "Rather than telling the student all the things you notice about his or her work, start by asking, 'What are you noticing about this?'"

Rick Stiggins says teachers need to give students, up front, a clear picture of end-of-unit achievement standards and how mastery will be assessed, with examples of proficient and non-proficient student work. Formative assessments tell students where they are on the continuum of proficiency. On feedback to struggling students, Stiggins says, "If a teacher cannot find something positive to say, then feedback is not what needs to come next. Additional teaching needs to come next." Ultimately, students should generate their own feedback and set their own learning goals. When students lead conferences with their teachers, says Stiggins, the "keys to the kingdom" have been turned over to them.

Trainer Carolyn Hood recommends focusing on a few bite-size chunks rather than trying to give feedback on everything. She also recommends having a 2-3-minute mini-conference with each student once a week, giving concentrated bursts of usable feedback.

"Quality Feedback: What It Is and How to Give It" by Katie Rapp in *Education Update*, July 2012 (Vol. 54, #7, p. 1, 6-7), http://www.ascd.org

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6. Is It Important for Nonnative Speakers to Lose their Accents?

In this article in *Foreign Language Annals*, University of Utah professors Rachel Hayes-Harb and Johanna Watzinger-Tharp sum up their study of whether having a "foreign accent" affects being understood by a native speaker. "Although nonnative speakers often strive to 'overcome' their accents," say the authors, "they should be reassured that an accent in and of itself does not necessarily pose an obstacle to intelligibility. In fact, a nonnative accent signals to listeners that the interlocutor's speech will contain features that are different from their own. A similar process takes place, of course, when native speakers with different regional or national accents interact with each other… More generally, learners may benefit from understanding that in a communicative exchange, both listener and speaker share the communicative burden regardless of native/nonnative status. Such awareness has the potential to empower the language learner not only to assume a more 'equal' role with the listener, but also to accommodate the speech of the interlocutor, who of course is also a speaker with his or her own accent, in order to achieve successful communication."

"Accent, Intelligibility, and the Role of the Listener: Perceptions of English-Accented German by Native German Speakers" by Rachel Hayes-Harb and Johanna Watzinger-Tharp in *Foreign Language Annals*, Summer 2012 (Vol. 45, #2, p. 260-282), http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2012.01190.x/abstract

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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.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 43 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Better Evidence-Based Education
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice