

Marshall Memo 42

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 14, 2004

In This Issue:

1. Can new teachers resist the tug of negativism and mediocrity?
2. Closing the achievement gap with Reading Recovery
3. From bottom of the class to brain surgeon
4. Ten rules for conflict management
5. Slowing down and working on quality
6. Difficult math: should we fake it till we make it?
7. Short items: (a) Tennessee's "value added" system gets tweaked; (b) Good books for high school students

Quotes of the Week

"Don't leave your future on the floor!"

Shouted in unison by North Star Academy (Newark, NJ) middle-school students at morning assemblies to fellow students who have left their textbooks behind more than once

"Cynicism can be deeply entrenched in big-city public schools, and it's also wildly contagious."

Gregory Michie, Chicago teacher educator (see item #1)

"Not only does chaos in your classroom make you crazy but it directs all your energy toward addressing student misbehavior. Other concerns – such as whether your kids are learning anything – lessen in importance."

Gregory Michie, *ibid.*

"When I was in 5th grade I thought I was stupid. So I conducted myself like a stupid person. And I achieved like a stupid person."

Ben Carson, pediatric brain surgeon (see item #3)

"We are trying to operate at the speed of light. We think we're going to get somewhere at this speed. I think the only place we're getting is sick and tired and overwhelmed."

Margaret Wheatley, leadership speaker (see item #5)

"There is no 'I' in 'team.'"

Business adage (see #4)

1. Can New Teachers Resist the Tug of Negativism and Mediocrity?

Teacher educator Gregory Michie learned the hard way about the “undertow” that pulls new teachers in challenging schools away from the shore and threatens their professional lives. During his nine years as a Chicago teacher, he was often swept along by the “pedagogy of poverty” (Martin Haberman’s term for worksheet-driven teaching with constant teacher direction and student compliance) and pulled down by teachers around him who seemed jaded and resigned to mediocrity. “At times like these,” Michie writes, “the undertow pulls in the direction of fatalism, despair, and emotional disengagement. It beckons you to stop trying so hard, to be more ‘realistic’ about the kids you teach, and to abandon your belief that public schools can be transformed in a meaningful or lasting way.”

Michie has four pieces of advice for new teachers on how they can resist the negative currents in many schools:

- *Seek out allies.* If like-minded and supportive colleagues don’t exist within your own school, reach out to other schools and the broader community of educators. And don’t judge every colleague by initial appearances. Michie found that some teachers who at first seemed burned out and hopelessly traditional had useful advice to impart and sometimes were not as one-dimensional as they seemed.

- *Resist the urge to whine.* “Cynicism can be deeply entrenched in big-city public schools,” he says, “and it’s also wildly contagious. One of the first temptations for a new teacher is to join this chorus of negativity and begin, however reluctantly, to recite the sorts of excuses you were certain you’d never make: that you can’t really get to know your students because there are too many of them, that you can’t engage

students in group work because they get out of control, that you can't focus on building critical thinking skills when your kids are having a hard enough time just finding a vocabulary word in the dictionary."

Whining may be therapeutic on the short run, but on the long run it keeps teachers from taking steps that would remedy the problems they're complaining about. Author Bill Ayer suggests viewing each obstacle from a more hopeful perspective, saying, "OK, this is my situation, these are the realities. Given that, what can I do?" Not everything is possible, at least not right away, but there's always a first step you can take. It may be something small, like putting up bulletin boards on interesting themes.

- *Pick one area of the curriculum and bring it to life for your students.* Novice teachers can feel overwhelmed by the amount of curriculum they are required to cover, the pressure of high-stakes tests, and the mediocre quality of textbooks and other materials they're given. "Because you can't do everything, you delay doing anything," Michie says. Starting small can help teachers get a handle on the bigger issues and start down the road to more ambitious goals, like deciding "what knowledge and experiences are most worthwhile for my students,... limiting the use of biased and oversimplified textbooks, bringing in primary source documents, connecting topics to real-world issues, reading whole novels instead of chopped-up basal selections, giving students opportunities to write about their lives, weaving the arts throughout your subject areas, inviting your kids to help decide what they want to study, and so on."

- *Approach the issue of classroom discipline with a solid plan of action.* "Many young teachers," says Michie, "...delude themselves with the belief that they'll be viewed as such cool teachers that they won't have to worry about disciplinary issues. Progressive approaches to teaching often encourage such an attitude by glossing over classroom management concerns, or by suggesting that if teachers simply come up with engaging lessons, management issues will largely take care of themselves. But my experience is that, in many urban classrooms, it's far more complicated than that, and if you're blindsided by serious discipline concerns, as I was, you can feel compelled to adopt draconian corrective measures."

The consequences of not having a viable approach to discipline are horrible. "Not only does chaos in your classroom make you crazy," writes Michie, "but it directs all your energy toward addressing student misbehavior. Other concerns – such as whether your kids are learning anything – lessen in importance." It's very easy for

new teachers to fall into this pattern and begin to conform to the expectations of certain drill-sergeant administrators, rating their days on how quietly their students sit at their desks or how straight a line they form in the hallway.

Part of getting your act together on discipline, Michie suggests, especially if you are an outsider to the school community, is to educate yourself on the social, political, and economic context and cultivate an unwavering respect for the cultural integrity of the people in that community.

Michie concludes: “Resisting the suffocating pull – and holding on to hope instead – requires a delicate balancing act: acknowledging the grim systemic realities and personal limitations you face as a teacher, but at the same time re-committing yourself to working toward something better. You have to forgive yourself for your failings, then turn around and try to use them to re-focus and re-energize your teaching the next day. You also have to allow yourself to appreciate the good moments that do take place in your classroom – no matter how small they may seem in the grand scheme of things.” Michie thinks new teachers should tape the following quote on their desks, classroom doors, refrigerators or bulletin boards: “Even the smallest victory is never to be taken for granted. Each victory must be applauded, because it is so easy not to battle at all, to just accept and call that acceptance inevitable.” (Audre Lorde)

“Teaching in the Undertow” by Gregory Michie in *Rethinking Schools*, Summer 2004 (Vol. 18, #4, p. 18-21), no e-link available

2. Closing the Achievement Gap with Reading Recovery

This paper by two Ohio State University researchers examines whether Reading Recovery (a program for struggling first graders that was developed in New Zealand and has been widely adopted in the U.S.) is successful in closing the achievement gap. The Ohio study looked at the 2001-02 achievement of 7,282 first graders who received Reading Recovery and a comparison group of 1,915 first graders who had regular classroom instruction.

The control group showed a marked widening of the racial and economic achievement gap from the beginning to the end of first grade. But students who attended Reading Recovery classes narrowed the gap. This happened even with students who do not complete the full Reading Recovery program, but results were strongest for students who “discontinued” (completed the program). The two graphs below show the effect on the racial (left) and economic (right) gaps, using the Hearing

and Recording Sounds in Words assessment. The solid line on each graph represents regular-education students, the dotted line “discontinued” Reading Recovery students.

Figure 2. Fall-Spring Gains for the Discontinued Group (RRDis) on Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words (HRSW) Measure Disaggregated by Race/Ethnicity

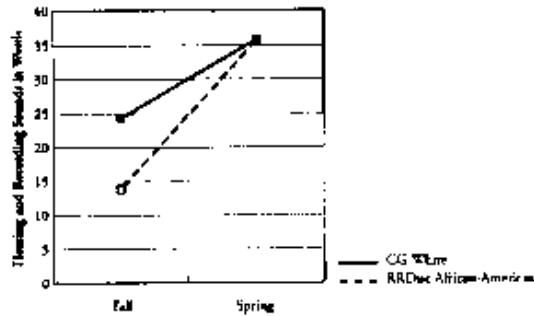
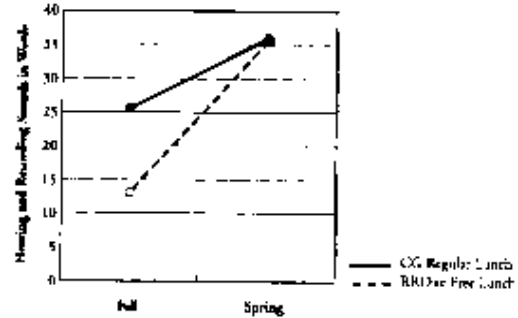


Figure 3. Fall-Spring Gains for the Discontinued (RRDis) Group on Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words (HRSW) Measure Disaggregated by Economic Status



Results were not quite as strong using a Text Reading Level assessment, but the gap did narrow and Reading Recovery students met the standard proficiency target (Text Level 18) for first graders. Here are the details:

	Fall Raw Scores	Spring Raw Scores
White students' text reading levels:	5.2	21.4
Black students' text reading levels:	0.9	18.4

These are very encouraging results. What are the key factors at work? The researchers listed these:

- Reading Recovery is a complex response to a complex problem, highly tuned to the needs of individual students and the unique factors at work within each school.
- Reading Recovery brings students who enter school with significant disadvantages in reading readiness up to their classmates' average level before they fall too far behind.
- Reading Recovery brings sophisticated, data-driven training to teachers, which can have an impact on the whole school.
- Reading Recovery reduces retention and special education referral rates.

“Closing the Achievement Gap in Ohio with Reading Recovery” by Emily Rodgers and Francisco Gomez-Bellengé in *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, Fall 2003 (Vol. 3, #1, p. 65-74), no e-link available.

3. From Bottom of the Class to Brain Surgeon

“Dummy” is what classmates started calling Ben Carson when he ranked last in his elementary-school class. “When I was in 5th grade I thought I was stupid,” he recalls. “So I conducted myself like a stupid person. And I achieved like a stupid person.” Distressed by his low grades and even lower self-esteem, Carson’s mother set limits on his TV-watching time, encouraged his interest in science, and required him to read two books a week and write book reports. Even though she couldn’t read the reports herself (she never got beyond third grade), Ben began to read voraciously and one day surprised his teacher and classmates by showing how much he knew about rocks. “When I was in the 7th grade I thought I was smart. So I conducted myself like a smart person and achieved like a smart person. So what does that say about expectations?” Carson went on to become one of the first African-American pediatric neurosurgeons and is famous for separating conjoined twins.

Carson believes that children are highly sensitive to whether the adults around them are “discouragers” or “encouragers.” In the recent ASCD convention, he shared his “Think Big” philosophy for getting young people to strive for excellence:

T is for talent. Use your natural gifts to elevate others.

H is for honesty. Lead a clean and decent life.

I is for insight. Listen to other people.

N is for nice. Be kind to people and they will be kind to you.

K is for knowledge. This is what makes you a more valuable person.

B is for books. Books convey knowledge.

I is for in-depth learning. This contrasts with superficial learning.

G is for God. Godly principles include loving one’s fellow humans, caring about your neighbor, having values, and developing your gifts to the utmost so you become valuable to the people around you.

“A Journey from the Bottom of the Class to Brain Surgeon” in *ASCD Education Update*, June 2004 (Vol. 46, #4, p. 1), no e-link available

4. Ten Rules for Conflict Management

Howard Guttman, a business consultant who specializes in managing conflict in the workplace, has ten tips for steering clear of unproductive conflict and harnessing the energy that productive conflict can bring to an organization. These ideas have good crossover value for schools:

- *Confront issues, don't sidestep or bury them.* When workers avoid conflict, resentment builds, eventually sapping creativity and productivity.
- *Make sure it's safe to disagree.* Encourage discussion, and realize that if people feel that others respect their ideas, they're not likely to speak up.
- *Depersonalize issues.* As the old adage goes, there's no "I" in "team." By focusing on business, not personal issues, it's possible to resolve conflicts and make better decisions.
- *Make leaders accountable.* Ultimately, it's up to managers to create a climate and provide the training so that employees use conflict-resolution techniques.
- *State the rules.* At some point, someone has to make a decision and everyone needs to move on. Being transparent about this prevents misunderstandings.
- *Don't accuse in absentia.* The target of criticism should be present if an employee wants to complain.
- *Discourage bringing issues to third-party rescuers.* Employees who have an issue should discuss it with each other and only approach a manager if they're unable to resolve differences.
- *Use "boomerang" questioning.* Turn assertions into questions – and really listen to the answers. This makes it possible to discuss issues in a less combative way.
- *Don't permit "hand-raising from the grave."* Once a group makes a decision, don't allow complaints and second-guessing. Disagreements should occur during debate, not afterward. Everyone should understand that silence will be taken as agreement.
- *Cheer and reward successful conflict resolution.* Acknowledge the use of conflict-resolution skills, use feedback and evaluation systems to measure success and create incentives.

One more: the 24-hour rule from Patrick Parenty, a New York businessman: "If a person has a disagreement or an issue with how someone else is handling things, they must address it within 24 hours or drop it."

Spotted in *Arrive Magazine*, May/June 2004. The book is *When Goliaths Clash* by Howard Guttman (Amacom, 2003)

5. Slowing Down and Working on Quality

In a speech at the recent ASCD convention, Utah leadership consultant Margaret Wheatley urged school leaders to shake off the Lone Ranger mentality and connect with colleagues. "We live in a culture that tells us that if you're strong, if

you're worthy, if you're a good person, then you can make it on your own. This is just nonsense – it's one of the most paralyzing concepts we have right now."

Wheatley also thinks we're in too much of a hurry. She derided the idea of stand-up meetings and the rush-rush atmosphere in most schools. "We are trying to operate at the speed of light," she said. "We think we're going to get somewhere at this speed. I think the only place we're getting is sick and tired and overwhelmed." Instead, she advocates operating at "the speed of life," taking time to think, reflect, and see the big picture. She spoke admiringly of a school where teachers make time for a short meeting after school every day. Wheatley suggests that we ask the following questions to evaluate how productive a meeting has been:

- Did we create more trust?
- Did we understand each other?
- Did we come up with a good idea?
- Did we review what we did last time to see if it really worked?

"Making Time to Think and Reconnect" in *ASCD Education Update*, June 2004 (Vol. 46, #4, p. 8), no e-link available

6. Fake It Till You Make It?

Keith Devlin, a Stanford professor and "The Math Guy" on National Public Radio, has a theory about why more advanced math procedures are so hard for a lot of people to learn, and a heretical suggestion on how to teach them. In a speech at the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in April, Devlin said that basic procedures like counting, simple arithmetic, algebra, and geometry come naturally to almost everyone and can be taught with an emphasis on logic and understanding. But "formal" mathematics (like adding fractions and learning calculus) cause problems for most people. Devlin thinks this is because formal math does not make common sense to our brains.

Because it requires a different way of thinking, Devlin thinks that teachers should approach formal math differently in the classroom. His recommendation: teach the procedure first and when students become proficient, *then* get into the logic of the procedure. If he's right, then understanding what you're doing is a luxury you can afford once you know how to do it. "You have to be psychologically willing and able to just follow the formal rules, play the game and not try to make sense of it," says Devlin. For some people this may take a lot of frustrating, repetitious and rote

rule-following, but at least they'll be functional while they travel the road to deeper understanding.

Keith Devlin is Executive Director of Stanford University's Center for the Study of Language and Information and a Consulting Professor of Mathematics at Stanford. His website is <http://literati.net/Devlin/DevlinBooks.htm> (Spotted in the *Boston Herald*, April 25, 2004)

7. Short Items:

a. Tennessee's value added system gets tweaked – There were two pieces of good news last week for Tennessee's widely-admired "value added" assessment system: it survived an attempt in the Tennessee legislature to de-fund it, and officials decided to switch from norm-referenced tests to the state's new criterion-referenced tests. The new legislation (which still needs the governor's signature) will also reduce the number of test items that must be new each year from 100 percent to 70 percent. William Sanders, the statistician who created the system, said he was "extremely pleased" with these developments.

"Tenn. 'Value Added' System Survives Legislative Attack" by Lynn Olson in *Education Week*, June 9, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #39, p. 22)
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=39Tenn.h23>

b. Good reading for high-school students – This book, with annotated list of more than 400 high-interest books for adolescents, might be a good resource: *Great Books for High School Kids: A Teachers' Guide to Books that Can Change Teens' Lives*, edited by Rick Ayers and Amy Crawford (Beacon Press, 2004, 240 pp. \$15).

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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, 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
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
NAASP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine
E-links will be provided whenever possible.

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