

Marshall Memo 386

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
May 16, 2011

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Quotes of the Week

“The goal of education is not acquiring knowledge alone, but developing the dispositions to seek and use knowledge in effective and ethical ways.”

David Light Shields (see item #1)

“If the work we are engaging in is the wrong work, or if it's the correct work and we fall short in our implementation, then we have little chance of success.”

Steve Benjamin (see item #3)

“The two most important reasons why employees fail to implement strategy are unclear expectations and failure of the leaders to check for satisfactory implementation.”

Steve Benjamin (*ibid.*)

“The amount of information on learning and the brain circulating in the education community can be dizzying, and, unfortunately, much of this information is inaccurate.”

Kurt Fisher, Jennifer Worden, and Christina Hinton (see item #4)

“No neuroscientific data suggest that boys' brains are better suited to any given domain or subject or vice versa... Individual differences in talents certainly exist, and every student has a profile of strengths and weaknesses, but no evidence suggests that these profiles are biologically limited by gender.”

Kurt Fisher, Jennifer Worden, and Christina Hinton (*ibid.*)

“This is the Facebook generation, and technology is in their DNA. They are never unplugged.”

Joan Richardson on Millennial teachers (see item #5)

1. Developing Character in Schools

“We have too often equated excellence of education with the quantity of the content learned, rather than with the quality of the character the person develops,” says University of Missouri/St. Louis professor David Light Shields in this passionate *Kappan* article. “The goal of education is not acquiring knowledge alone, but developing the dispositions to seek and use knowledge in effective and ethical ways. When we focus on the character of the learner, rather than the content of learning, we address what’s likely to be sustained through time and circumstance.”

Shields argues that the true purpose of education is to develop intellectual, moral, civic, and performance character in students, and the collective character of the school. “Together,” he says, “the four forms of personal character define what it means to be a competent, ethical, engaged, and effective adult member of society. Isn’t that what we want from our education system?” Here are his comments on each kind of character:

- *Intellectual character* – A person with strong intellectual character is curious, open-minded, reflective, strategic, skeptical, and truth-seeking, says Shields. These are qualities that span different school subjects and extend to all parts of life. When teachers are focused on building intellectual character, they tend to use more inductive, exploratory methods rather than rote learning, making clear *why* students are being asked to learn the material.

- *Moral character* – “At its core, moral character reflects a disposition to seek the good and right,” says Shields. “The goal is to develop a disposition to seek goodness, not inculcate a specific list of preferred virtues.” He sees the school’s role as helping students become sensitive to moral considerations and gaining “the cognitive capacity to think deeply and clearly about moral issues and principles.”

- *Civic character* – “A thriving nation depends on citizens who participate in governance and civic life,” says Shields, noting that developing civic character has always been one of the primary goals of U.S. schooling. This means more than knowing how government works, but developing “a capacity for self-transcendence,” says Shields. “It requires a disposition to consider the common good and to work toward it in collaboration with others.” For schools, this means “cultivating respect for freedom, equality, and rationality; an appreciation of diversity and due process; an ethic of participation and service; and the skills to build the social capital of trust and community.”

- *Performance character* – The dispositions embedded in this kind of character are perseverance, diligence, courage, resilience, optimism, initiative, attention to detail, and

loyalty. These help people manage themselves and do their best. Shields points out that these qualities can work for good or ill. “A person could be courageous in stealing cars or persistent in hiding the truth,” he says. “One can be loyal to ignoble people.” So performance character, developed through young people’s work in school, athletics, music, art, and other domains, needs to be harnessed to moral ends.

• *The culture of the school* – To support the development of students’ individual character, schools need a *culture of character*, says Shields: “What we seek in terms of individual virtues must be developed simultaneously as group norms.”

- To develop intellectual character, a school needs a culture of thinking.
- To develop moral character, it needs a culture of love and justice.
- To develop civic character, it needs a culture of service and engagement.
- To develop performance character, it needs a culture of quality and excellence.

The individual virtues are constantly interacting with the school’s culture, he says, each enhancing the other.

“Character As the Aim of Education” by David Light Shields in *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2011 (Vol. 92, #8, p. 48-53), <http://www.kappanmagazine.org>

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2. Three Factors That Produce Highly Effective Teaching

In this thoughtful *Kappan* article, professor Richard Allington and graduate teaching associate Rachael Gabriel of the University of Tennessee/Knoxville, and Brookline, Massachusetts literacy specialist Jeni Peiria Day report on their study of 30 fourth-grade teachers from around the U.S. who have been getting excellent results in high-poverty schools. Amy, one of the teachers, captured the questing spirit of the group: “I have a really strong belief – and since I started teaching – that the kids’ success, I really believe, is up to me. And I feel like if the kids are not getting it, if they’re floundering or a few kids are lagging behind or failing or whatever, I look at that as my failure. And so I figure there’s something else I need to be doing if they are not getting it.”

This spirit led teachers like Amy to become expert “child watchers” and seek out the most effective classroom methods and materials. In interviews, they all pointed to three key factors that supported their development:

• *Professional development* – This was not standard PD on methods, materials, and strategies but training that provided a systematic way to observe and interpret students’ work and actions. Two examples: Reading Recovery, which teaches a specific framework for observing and teaching reading to struggling first graders; and a course about writing Individual Education Plans that provided a structure and set of guidelines for collecting information through informal, ongoing observations.

• *Collegial support* – The teachers all had a peer support network in which they could share ideas and speak reflectively about practice. These included mentors, grade-level or subject teams, and sometimes informal partnerships, such as a teacher who would walk into the

other fourth-grade teacher's classroom and say, "Help! What are your ideas on this?," and another who shared ideas from educational journals with a colleague in her school.

• *Engaged autonomy* – All the teachers spoke about administrators who allowed them significant independence to try out ideas yet stayed in touch with the process and the results. One teacher in Texas described an administrator who said, "Try it. It doesn't have to be perfect. And, let's talk about it. Let's talk about what went wrong, let's talk about what went right."

"Our hope," conclude Allington, Gabriel, and Day, "is that this synthesis of voices of exemplary teachers will encourage administrators to loosen the strictures of mandated practice in order to make room for teachers to innovate context-specific solutions that match the individual needs of their students. Allowing teachers to work together and try new things with few instructional mandates is worth the risk."

"Exemplary Teacher Voices on Their Own Development" by Rachael Gabriel, Jeni Peiria Day, and Richard Allington in *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2011 (Vol. 92, #8, p. 37-41), <http://www.kappanmagazine.org>

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3. Getting Clear on Goals, Strategies, Implementation, and Results

In this forceful *Kappan* article, Indiana-based consultant Steve Benjamin says that many American educators and parents can't answer these fundamental questions about their schools:

- What are the most important goals that we are trying to achieve?
- What are the key organizational strategies that we believe will help us achieve our goals?
- How well are the strategies being implemented?
- How well are the strategies working?

On the last question, Benjamin says that very few principals and teachers he works with know the percent of students reading at or above grade level, the percent of students mastering core academic standards, or three-year result trends for state testing.

Strategy is crucial, says Benjamin, because it is "the work we agree to do in order to close a performance gap. If the work we are engaging in is the wrong work, or if it's the correct work and we fall short in our implementation, then we have little chance of success."

To find the most effective strategies, it's vital for educators to know research-based best practices – for example, What is the most important predictor of future reading success in young children? What are the most effective classroom strategies in elementary reading? What are two of the most important contributors to greater reading success among adolescents? What are the two most important interventions that can be used to support struggling elementary and middle-school math students? Benjamin suggests that a school might use this continuum of strategy knowledge to self-assess:

- No best practices have been identified.
- We identified several. They're on a paper somewhere. Let's see if I can find it.

- I can say and explain the best practices.
- I believe our best practices can improve teaching and student learning.
- I'm trying my best to align my practice with our list.
- We are aligning our best practices with the way we interview and select teachers, our mentoring process, professional development, supervision and evaluation, and how we recognize excellent performance.

“The two most important reasons why employees fail to implement strategy are unclear expectations and failure of the leaders to check for satisfactory implementation,” says Benjamin. “Therefore, the first step for leaders is to create rubrics or checklists that clearly specify what each person is to do to support the strategy.” Here’s a sample checklist from a school that asked teachers to identify the top five reasons for students’ low reading levels and the best ways to combat each one:

- Students aren’t reading on grade level.
 - We have high-quality screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring tools in place.
 - We have recent data for each student and know at what level every student is reading.
 - We have identified a list of research-based strategies for phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension to use with students
 - We have highly qualified teachers who model these research-based strategies.
 - We have additional instructional time for students who require extra direct instruction.
- Students don’t have enough to read.
 - We ask students at least twice each year to tell us what kind of material they want to read.
 - We have materials that span a wide range of reading levels.
 - We have established excellent classroom libraries that allow easy access to books.
 - Students are reading many books.
 - We coordinate with the public library to ensure availability and access.
- Students don’t have enough time to read.
 - We have an uninterrupted 90-minute reading block in our schedule.
 - Each teacher also sees content time as an opportunity to practice reading skills.
 - Students who need extra help have an extra 30-60 minutes of support each day.
 - We have aligned our homework policy with research and require at least 20 minutes of reading and writing per night before other work is assigned.
- Students lose ground over the summer.
 - We develop a summer reading list with input from students.
 - We have two 2-week reading camps for all students who are struggling.
 - Students discuss what they have read, write about their reading, and engage in other literacy-building experiences. These camps are led by our literacy coaches.
- Adults are not collaborating about best practices and performance data.
 - We have identified a list of best practices, created a self-reflection tool, and meet weekly to discuss growth and needed improvements to our list and to our practice.
 - As part of our collaboration, we review student growth in reading.

- We have highly trained literacy coaches, and all teachers must regularly engage with the coaches – some more frequently than others.

But developing an excellent checklist isn't enough, says Benjamin. Leaders have to set up regular, structured collaborative meetings – central office with principals and principals with teacher teams – to see how well the practices are being implemented, whether they're working, and to tweak them if necessary.

“Simple Leadership Techniques: Rubrics, Checklists, and Structured Collaboration” by Steve Benjamin in *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2011 (Vol. 92, #8, p. 25-31), <http://www.kappanmagazine.org>

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4. Brain Science and Brain Myths

“The amount of information on learning and the brain circulating in the education community can be dizzying,” say Harvard educators Kurt Fisher, Jennifer Worden, and Christina Hinton in this *Kappan* article, “and, unfortunately, much of this information is inaccurate.” Here are three neuromyths that are particularly unhelpful:

- *Myth #1: A child is either right-brained or left-brained.* This is “simply not true,” say the authors. Yes, certain hemispheres play a larger role in certain functions (e.g., the left side handles many speech functions in most people), but “all complex learning tasks involve a widely distributed network of brain areas.” The right-brain/left-brain myth has been particularly harmful because it's led many parents and educators to lower their expectations for some children because they are thought to be immutably weaker in a particular area. “It's wrong to imply that strengths and weaknesses come from the dominance of one hemisphere and are resistant to good teaching and learning,” they say. “Profiles of strengths and weaknesses are much more complex than simple hemispheric dominance, and they're malleable because the brain is remarkably flexible and adaptive.”

- *Myth #2: Girls are better at reading, boys at math and science.* Nonsense, say Fischer, Worden, and Hinton: “Girls show a small advantage in language on average, but many boys are better at language than most girls. Boys show a small advantage in spatial reasoning on average, but many girls are better at spatial reasoning than most boys. No neuroscientific data suggest that boys' brains are better suited to any given domain or subject or vice versa... Individual differences in talents certainly exist, and every student has a profile of strengths and weaknesses, but no evidence suggests that these profiles are biologically limited by gender.”

- *Myth #3: People can't learn a new language after a certain critical period.* Not true, say the authors. There's no evidence that there is a critical period for academic skills such as learning a foreign language. The reason is the remarkable plasticity of the brain throughout life. There are *sensitive* periods for certain aspects of language learning – “windows of opportunity” within which people can acquire a certain ability most easily and efficiently – for example, infants' ability to recognize and distinguish phonemes across multiple languages, which fades when they hear one language and unused neurons are pruned in their brains. But

there's no reason that adults can't learn a new language and acquire an almost native accent. In our interconnected global economy, say the authors, it's more and more important for people to master more than one language: "If American students are to be successful, educators and parents must have clear expectations regarding students' language acquisition based on evidence, not neuromyths."

Fischer, Worden, and Hinton say there has been plenty of genuinely helpful brain research – for example, studies have helped educators understand the brain's underlying learning mechanisms, particularly with dyslexia. It's now possible to quickly identify students at risk for dyslexia and design interventions that will help them be more successful in school and life. There needs to be better communication between neuroscientists and educators, say the authors, and the best way for that to happen is within lab schools where teachers and researchers work together to formulate a question for analysis, design a study, gather data, interpret the results, and design an intervention.

"What Does the Brain Have to Do with Learning?" by Jennifer Worden, Christina Hinton, and Kurt Fischer in *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2011 (Vol. 92, #8, p. 8-13), <http://www.kappanmagazine.org>

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5. What's Different About Millennial Teachers

In this helpful *Kappan* article, editor Joan Richardson lists the pet peeves of Millennial teachers (those born in 1978 and after): cynicism and negativity; unfair treatment; sarcasm; condescending remarks; low expectations; and meetings that move too slowly, use lecture and out-of-date technology, and imply that they can't do something. Richardson then lists the implications of the increasing percentage of Millennials in school staffs:

- *Millennials think they're pretty special.* "These are the children who received trophies for finishing in eighth place," says author Suzette Lovely in her 2007 book, *Generations at School*. They expect to be praised more often. Certificates may mean more to them than to veteran teachers. Millennials appreciate eye contact, being called by name, being asked about their non-work life, being acknowledged in a breakfast or lunch at the beginning of the school year, and having their bio and photograph in the school newsletter.

- *Millennials love technology.* "This is the Facebook generation, and technology is in their DNA," says Richardson. "They are never unplugged." They know how to get information from the Internet at all hours of the day and night, and are more comfortable dealing with routine school information in e-mails and electronic forms at their convenience than in meetings. This suggests that schools might consider offering staff development that is experiential and online and is open for blogging interactions afterward. It also suggests the need for guidelines on whether it's okay to text during staff a meeting, communicate with students on Facebook, and post certain material on YouTube.

- *Millennials are comfortable with their parents' values and not as rebellious as earlier generations.* This means they're fine with being mentored and coached by more-experienced

teachers and appreciate feedback and praise. Given their affinity for technology, Millennials are also likely to be comfortable with online mentoring.

- *Millennials have a high tolerance for change, innovation, and learning.* “Millennials don’t expect to sign up for a 30-year relationship with an employer as their parents did,” says Richardson. “Because they expect to make numerous moves during their career, however, they place a high value on continuing to learn and on moving ahead quickly.” They’re less wedded to the idea of tenure, more receptive to being retooled, don’t mind changing, and are ambitious about moving up to the principalship or another role after only three or four years of teaching. School leaders should open up learning and leadership opportunities as Millennials develop as professionals.

- *Millennials love being on teams.* “They were nurtured in environments that emphasized cooperative learning and team sports,” says Richardson, and parents included them in more domestic negotiation and collaboration. This means Millennials are ideal members of grade- or subject-area teams, provided the conditions are right (including clear protocols) and they’re accepted as equals.

- *Millennials are expert multitaskers, don’t want to miss opportunities, and expect a lot of themselves.* “They learned how to juggle AP classes with before-school choir practice and after-school sports,” says Richardson. “They listened to music and watched television while they did homework.” The role of the school leader, she suggests, might be to try to help Millennials slow down: “Help guide them to focus on the most important issues, not just the urgent issues of their new lives. Mentors can be a great support for beginning teachers struggling in this area.”

- *Millennials are not afraid of accountability.* “This is a group that had to pass a high-school exit exam to graduate from high school and a state test to get certified to be able to teach,” says Lovely. “Accountability is what they expect.” This means they’re likely to be comfortable developing common interim and unit assessments and sharing results with other teachers – and may even become leaders in accountability efforts.

“Tune In to What the New Generation of Teachers Can Do” by Joan Richardson in *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2011 (Vol. 92, #8, p. 14-19), <http://www.kappanmagazine.org>

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6. Giving Feedback That Empowers Students

In this *Principal Leadership* article, San Diego State University professors Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher say, “Without processes to provide students with solid feedback that yields deeper understanding, checking for understanding devolves into a game of ‘guess what’s in the teacher’s brain.’” A good athletic coach would never say, “No, you’re doing it wrong; keep practicing.”

But what does good feedback look like? Here are four types, as conceptualized by Hattie and Timperley (2007):

- *Feedback about the student as a person* – for example, “You’re a good writer” – doesn’t add anything, even when it’s positive.

- *Feedback about the task* – for example, “You need to put a semicolon in that sentence” – has limited usefulness because it’s difficult to generalize to other tasks – but this is the most common form of feedback that students get in classrooms.
- *Feedback about the processing of the task* – for example, “Make sure that your sentences have noun-verb agreements because it’s going to make it easier for the reader to understand your argument” – is useful because it provides information about a writing convention that students need to use in all their essay-writing.
- *Feedback about self-regulation* – for example, “Try reading some of your sentences aloud so you can hear when you have and don’t have noun-verb agreement” – is the most helpful because it gives the students the tools to monitor their own writing, self-correct, and perhaps avoid errors in the future.

Frey and Fisher describe the feedback that high-school English teacher John Goodwin gave one of his students on her essay about bullying. Goodwin’s goal was to leave the student with a plan for revision that she could implement on her own:

- “It’s helpful for writers to go back to the main point of the essay,” he says, “and read to see if the evidence is right there. I highlight in yellow so I can see if I’ve done that.”
- Goodwin and student read over the first three paragraphs together and highlight where she has provided national statistics and direct quotes from teachers she knows.
- Then Goodwin says, “Now what I want you to do is look for ways you’ve provided supporting evidence, like citing sources. Let’s highlight those in green.”
- After doing this, the student sees that there’s not much highlighted in green and she needs to seek out some more sources.
- The teacher wraps by saying, “It sounds like you have a plan for revising the content. Let’s meet again on Wednesday and you can update me on your progress.”

Giving this kind of face-to-face feedback to students is time-consuming, and as a practical matter, some of the feedback needs to be delivered in writing. Grant Wiggins says that written feedback on students’ work should be: timely, specific, understandable to the student, and actionable so the student can make revisions.

Another kind of feedback comes from doing error analysis of interim assessments, either as a teacher team or as an individual teacher. Frey and Fisher describe how Ben Teichman, a high-school math teacher, creates a grid for the different classes he teaches and the key concepts in each assessment and jots down the initials of students in each class who don’t understand a concept. In some classes, virtually all students are still struggling with a concept, leading the teacher to comment, “All the feedback in the world isn’t going to do much good if what they really need is more instruction.” In other classes, he needs to follow up with only a few students who don’t understand a concept.

“Feedback and Feed Forward” by Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher in *Principal Leadership*, May 2011 (Vol. 11, #9, p. 90-93), <http://online.qmags.com/PL0511>; the authors can be reached at nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu and dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu.

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7. Website:

JFK desk view – The John F. Kennedy Library’s website has an interactive section where users can get the view from behind the late president’s desk and click on items pertaining to his military service, presidential campaign, family, phone calls, and recorded conversations: <http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/presidentsdesk/#>

“Bulletin Board” in *Principal Leadership*, May 2011 (Vol. 11, #9, p. 6)

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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 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 41 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 Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
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Harvard Educational Review
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Journal of Staff Development
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Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
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Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
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Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal
The New Yorker
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Tools for Schools