# Marshall Memo 301

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 14, 2009

## In This Issue:



## Quotes of the Week

"[C]hildren see racial differences as much as they see differences between pink and blue – but we tell kids that 'pink' means for girls and 'blue' is for boys. 'White' and 'black' are mysteries we leave for them to figure out on their own."

Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman (see item #1)

"Going to integrated schools gives you just as many chances to learn stereotypes as to unlearn them."

Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman (*ibid.*)

"Mommy, what's 'equal' mean?"

A young boy whose mother had told him repeatedly over a seven-month period, "Remember, everybody's equal." (*ibid.*)

"Simply using a strategy does not guarantee positive results. Rather, it's *how* someone uses the strategy that determines whether it produces great results, mediocre results, or no results at all… No strategy is foolproof. No strategy is proven. You have to see how it works in your particular setting."

Robert Marzano (see item #3)

"[M]ost teacher feedback is vague, limited to summative phrases (such as "very good" or "try again") with little or no detail, either positive or negative."

Tracey Huebner, reporting a study of third-grade classrooms (see item #4)

"Most schools in Restructuring… are like organisms that have built immunities, over years of attempted intervention, to the 'medicine' of incremental reform."

Mass Insight report (see item #2)

## 1. How Children's Racial Attitudes Are Shaped

In this fascinating *Newsweek* cover story, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman (drawing on a book they just published) sum up recent research on children's racial beliefs and how parents and teachers can do a better job preparing them for lives in the 21st-century.

Researchers have found that most parents, even those who consider themselves progressive, shy away from talking to their children directly about racial differences. They speak in generalities – "Everybody's equal", "God made all of us", "Under the skin, we're all the same" – but almost never have explicit conversations about race. "They wanted their children to grow up colorblind," say Bronson and Merryman, "…but they just didn't know what to say to their kids…" Parents even hesitated to draw attention to the significance of Barack Obama's election last year. "They worry that even a positive statement ('It's wonderful that a black person can be president') still encourages a child to see divisions within society," say the authors. "For the early formative years, at least, they believe we should let children know a time when skin color does not matter."

But hundreds of young white children in a study conducted at the University of Texas were far from being colorblind. The kids, age 5-7, were asked how many white people were mean and most replied, "Almost none." Asked how many African-American people were mean, many answered, "Some" or "A lot." Asked whether their parents liked black people, 14 percent said, "No, my parents don't like black people" and 38 percent said, "I don't know." The colorblind rhetoric, say Bronson and Merryman, had left these children essentially without guidance as they formed their racial attitudes – and they improvised based on other cues.

What are those other cues? It turns out that children are very quick to form in-group preferences. In a study by another group of University of Texas researchers, 4- and 5-year-old children in three classrooms were given red and blue T shirts and wore them in class for three weeks. The shirts were distributed randomly and teachers never mentioned them and didn't group the students by shirt color. In the classroom, the cafeteria, and the playground, children interacted without any visible shirt-color preferences, but when they were asked whether it was better to be on the "red team" or the "blue team," or which "team" might win a race, they chose their own color. They even believed they were smarter than classmates who were wearing the other color. "The Reds never showed hatred for Blues," said Rebecca Bigler, who led the study. "It was more like, 'Blues are fine, but not as good as us.'" When students wearing red shirts were asked how many "reds" are nice, they said, "All of us." How many "blues" are

nice? “Some.” How many “blues” are mean and dumb? “Some.” How many “reds”? “None.” This experiment seems to show that children innately latch onto differences to create divisions.

“[K]ids are developmentally prone to in-group favoritism,” say Bronson and Merryman. “They’re going to form these preferences on their own. Children naturally try to categorize everything, and the attribute they rely on is that which is the most clearly visible… Even if no teacher or parent mentions race, kids will use skin color on their own, the same way they use T-shirt colors.” This spontaneous tendency to assume that everyone in your group shares your characteristics is called essentialism. Children believe that those who look like them share their characteristics – niceness, smarts, etc. – and those who look different *are* different with respect to those traits. Researchers have noticed this tendency in babies as young as six months old: infants stare significantly longer at photographs of people of a different race than their parents, indicating that they notice skin-color differences and are trying to understand what they mean. At ages 3 and 5, children show a similar tendency to choose friends from their own racial group.

Most parents think it’s inappropriate to talk about race with children this young – but during this period, children are forming and reinforcing impressions and friendship preferences along racial lines. There’s some evidence that this developmental window may close by age 8. Studies of first graders have found that studying in cross-race classroom groups leads to increased interracial play at recess. Two years later, grouping students interracially in class makes no difference. “It’s possible that by third grade,” say Bronson and Merryman, “when parents usually recognize it’s safe to start talking a little about race, the developmental window has already closed.” Parents shush their children when say things that make adults uncomfortable: “Only brown people can have breakfast in school” or “You can’t play basketball; you’re white, so you have to play baseball.” But this embarrassment stems from not understanding why kids say such things. “Prone to categorization, children’s brains can’t help but attempt to generalize rules from the examples they see,” write Bronson and Merryman. “But shushing them only sends the message that this topic is unspeakable, which makes race more loaded, and more intimidating.”

The belief that talking to young children about race is inappropriate – perhaps a diffuse kind of racism – has a brother: that attending a diverse school or living in a mixed neighborhood automatically makes children tolerant. Not so, say Bronson and Merryman. “Going to integrated schools gives you just as many chances to learn stereotypes as to unlearn them.” They report that there is a paucity of research backing up the theory that integration produces brotherly love – and Bronson had first-hand experience with how fallacious it is. Her five-year-old son, attending a racially mixed preschool in San Francisco, pointed to his African-American classmates just before Martin Luther King Jr. Day and blurted out, “That guy comes from Africa. And she comes from Africa, too! People with brown skin are from Africa.” He’d never been taught racial names and this was all new to him, triggered by the fuss over King’s birthday. “My son’s eagerness was revealing,” says Bronson. “It was obvious this was something he’d been wondering about for a while. He was relieved to have been finally given the key. Skin color was a sign of ancestral roots.” In the months ahead, Bronson

occasionally overheard the boy talking to his white friends about skin color, including the comment, "Parents don't like us to talk about our skin, so don't let them hear you." She decided to talk openly with her son about race, saying that it was wrong to choose anyone as a friend or favorite person based on skin color – and he embraced the message and began talking about equality and how wrong discrimination was.

"The unfortunate twist of diverse schools," continue Bronson and Merryman, "is that they don't necessarily lead to more cross-race relationships. Often it's the opposite." An analysis of social-network data on more than 90,000 teenagers in 112 schools across the country showed that the more diverse the school was, the more students tended to self-segregate by race and ethnicity and the fewer close friendships there were across racial lines. The probability of a white high-school student having a best friend of another race is only eight percent. For black students, it's 15 percent. "Even in multiracial schools," says Brendesha Tynes of the University of Illinois/Urbana-Champaign, "once young people leave the classroom, very little interracial discussion takes place because a desire to associate with one's own ethnic group often discourages interaction between groups."

So what is the solution? The first Austin study turned up a startling finding: the few children whose parents *did* initiate explicit conversations about race improved their racial attitudes dramatically. "Talking about race was clearly key," say Bronson and Merryman. But many white parents are highly resistant to doing so – in fact, some of the Austin parents angrily dropped out of the study when they were asked to broach the subject with their children. Is it really that hard to talk about race at this age? Parents have no trouble talking about gender and explicitly counteracting stereotypes: "Mommies can be doctors just like daddies." Can't parents say that doctors can be any skin color? "It's not complicated to say," write Bronson and Merryman. But to be effective, researchers say that "conversations about race have to be explicit, in unmistakable terms that children understand." One woman told her five-year-old repeatedly, "Remember, everybody's equal." After seven months of listening to this, the boy asked, "Mommy, what's 'equal' mean?"

African-American parents deal with race quite differently. Almost all black parents work to instill ethnic pride in their children, and studies have shown that this helps with school engagement and attributing success to effort and ability. Virtually all minority parents also tell their children about discrimination – and that it shouldn't stop them from realizing their dreams. Researchers have found that, in moderation, this message is necessary and beneficial. "But if children heard these preparation-for-bias warnings often (rather than just occasionally)," say Bronson and Merryman, "they were significantly less likely to connect their successes to effort, and much more likely to blame their failures on their teachers – whom they saw as biased against them."

Should white parents talk to their children about ethnic pride? Horrors! "Yet many scholars argue that's exactly what children's brains are already computing," say the authors. "Just as minority children are aware that they belong to an ethnic group with less status and wealth, most white children naturally decipher that they belong to the race that has more

power, wealth, and control in society; this provides security, if not confidence. So a pride message would not just be abhorrent – it'd be redundant."

What's needed is white parents talking much more explicitly about race, starting at an early age, and a good dose of empathy and humility from parents, a diverse array of friends, and the school curriculum. A recent study compared the impact on elementary students of reading two versions of a biography of Jackie Robinson. One group of students read about how Robinson was relegated to the Negro Leagues and how, when he made it to the Majors, he was taunted by white fans. The other group of students didn't hear about segregation and racism. After two weeks, both groups of children were surveyed on their racial attitudes. White students who heard about the ugly details had significantly better attitudes towards African Americans than those who didn't. Bigler, who conducted this research, says guilt played a part in this shift in attitudes. "It knocked down their glorified view of white people," she said. It was impossible for them to justify racial superiority.

"See Baby Discriminate" by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman in *Newsweek*, Sept. 14, 2009 (p. 52-60), http://www.newsweek.com/id/214989; Bronson and Merryman's new book is *Nurture Shock: New Thinking About Children* (Twelve, 2009).

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## 2. Keys to Turning Around Failing Schools

In this article in *District Administrator*, freelance writer Victor Rivero reports on models for turning around underperforming schools, starting with four models outlined by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in a speech at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools in June 2009:

- *Drastic improvements* – Staff and students remain, but new systems are brought in: curriculum and instruction, teacher training and mentoring, performance evaluation, etc.
- *Restaffing* – A new principal takes over and all teachers must reapply; some are rehired, but most go elsewhere.
- *Charter takeover* – An organization like Green Dot or Mastery Charter Schools hires a new leader and staff.
- *Closed* – Students enroll in other schools and staff must find jobs elsewhere.

The common theme here is finding the best way to reboot a dysfunctional school so that all students receive a first-rate education. Turnarounds are distinct from incremental school improvement efforts, says a report by Boston-based Mass Insight: "Most schools in Restructuring (the federal designation for chronic underperformance) are like organisms that have built immunities, over years of attempted intervention, to the 'medicine' of incremental reform." The Mass Insight report says that six factors need to be in place for a successful turnaround:

- *Power*: Clearly defined authority to act based on what will improve teaching and learning: flexibility and control over staffing, scheduling, budget, and curriculum.
- *Leadership*: A highly capable principal and leadership team.

- *A people strategy*: Relentless focus on hiring and staff development to ensure the best possible teaching in every classroom.
- *Expectations*: Performance-based behavioral norms for teachers, students, and parents.
- *Programs*: Integrated, research-based programs and related social services specifically designed to address students' academic and social-emotional needs.
- *More time*: Additional hours in the school day and year.

These are similar to Green Dot's tenets of high-performing schools:

- Small, safe, and personalized;
- High expectations for all students;
- Local control with extensive professional development and accountability;
- Parent participation;
- Maximized funding to the classroom;
- Additional hours in the school day.

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, superintendent Peter Gorman is implementing a strategic staffing initiative for turnaround schools emphasizing:

- Leadership;
- Sending in a team of strong educators;
- Removing any staff member who doesn't fully support the changes being made to improve student achievement;
- Community support;
- Maintaining support from the district office.

"When those five things are in place, schools improve," says Gorman.

"Turning Around Schools in Need" by Victor Rivero in *District Administration*, September 2009 (Vol. 45, #8, p. 56-61)
http://www.districtadministration.com/viewarticle.aspx?articleid=2118

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## 3. Robert Marzano on Vocabulary Acquisition

(Originally titled "Six Steps to Better Vocabulary Instruction")

"Simply using a strategy does not guarantee positive results," says researcher Robert Marzano in *Educational Leadership*. "Rather, it's *how* someone uses the strategy that determines whether it produces great results, mediocre results, or no results at all." For example, giving students feedback produces a 16-percentile gain, on average. But in one-third of studies, the strategy has a *negative* effect! "No strategy is foolproof," says Marzano, "No strategy is proven. You have to see how it works in your particular setting."

This is true for teaching new vocabulary. Here is a strategy that generally works well K-12:

- Students get a definition or example of each new word. For example, to illustrate *mutualism*, a crocodile opens its mouth and allows a particular bird to eat food particles in its teeth.

- Students restate the definition or example in their own words.
- Students draw a picture illustrating each word.
- Students write in their vocabulary notebooks in ways that enhance their knowledge of the words.
- Students discuss the words with each other.
- Students play games using the words.

Achievement gains from this procedure are generally robust, but researchers have found that students gain less when teachers don't use all six steps, when students copy teachers' definitions rather than generating examples of their own, when they don't draw a picture, and when they don't play word games.

"Six Steps to Better Vocabulary Instruction" by Robert Marzano in *Educational Leadership*, September 2009 (Vol. 67, #1, p. 83-84); the full article is available for purchase at http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership.aspx

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## 4. Girls in Math and Science

(Originally titled "Encouraging Girls to Pursue Math and Science")

In *Educational Leadership*, researcher Tracey Huebner shares recent findings on girls' math/science achievement. "Research shows that the achievement gap in mathematics between boys and girls has all but disappeared," she says. But girls' gains are not matched by career choices. It appears that at a young age, girls rate their math ability lower than boys, and researchers believe low self-efficacy ultimately influences career choices. To attack this problem, there are three promising strategies:

- Teaching students that academic abilities are malleable, not innate;
- Female math/science role models;
- Interim-assessment feedback praising effort and accomplishment ("You've really mastered conversion of fractions to decimals"), identifying errors, and teaching strategies.

On the last point, a third-grade study found that "most teacher feedback is vague, limited to summative phrases (such as "very good" or "try again") with little or no detail, either positive or negative." Conversely, when teachers praise effort and teach strategies, girls are more likely to ask for help and less likely to believe that making a mistake is the result of a lack of innate ability.

"Encouraging Girls to Pursue Math and Science" by Tracey Huebner in *Educational Leadership*, September 2009 (Vol. 67, #1, p. 90-91); the full article is available for purchase at http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership.aspx; Huebner can be reached at thuebne@wested.org.

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## 5. Merit Pay in Portugal: Is It Working?

In this Institute for the Study of Labor discussion paper, University of London researcher Pedro Martins reports on a study of a 2007 teacher merit pay initiative in Portugal, examining its impact on the achievement of high-school students on national exams. The reform created two salary scales (a departure from the previous unitary scale based on seniority and academic credentials) and allowed teachers to boost their salary by as much as 25 percent and receive a one-time bonus. Teachers who earned a place on the higher salary scale were also required to play a greater role in the management and curriculum leadership of their schools.

There were three criteria for earning higher pay and elevated status: (a) Higher student achievement; (b) Positive feedback from parents; and (c) The teacher's attendance record, participation in training sessions, management and pedagogical duties, and involvement in research projects. Only a certain number of merit-pay boosts were allocated to each school.

What was the impact? "Our results consistently indicate that the increased focus on individual teacher performance caused a significant decline in student achievement," says Martins, "particularly in terms of national exams." This seems to have been caused by a reduction of collaboration among teachers, an increase in teaching to the test, and grade inflation.

"While our results are negative in terms of the value of the specific reform examined here," Martins concludes, "our findings also indicate that teachers respond to incentives in a predictable way. In this context, we believe that future research should move from the question of whether performance-related pay has any effects to the narrower question of which specific performance-related pay setups generate the best results for students."

"Individual Teacher Incentives, Student Achievement, and Grade Inflation" by Pedro Martins, March 2009. Discussion Paper #4051, Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA), Bonn, Germany, spotted in *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 2009 (p. 17), available at http://ftp.iza.org/dp4051.pdf

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## 6. Online Curriculum Resources

(Originally titled "The Change Agents")

"Instead of requiring our students to check their Web 2.0 technologies at the schoolhouse door," say Cheryl Lemke and Ed Coughlin in this *Educational Leadership* article, "we should teach them how to use these tools for learning." In a sidebar, they share several websites that might be particularly helpful:

• *Biovisions*, a Harvard biology website: http://multimedia.mcb.harvard.edu. Video clips and animations, including a spectacular eight-minute animation, "The Inner Life of a Cell."

• *MIT Open Courseware*: Free course syllabi, lecture notes, assignments, exams, and audio and video lectures: http://ocw.mit.edu. For sample lectures by dynamic physics professor Walter Lewin, see: http://ocw.mit.edu/OcwWeb/web/courses/instructors/lewin/lewin.htm.

• *Connexions*, a Rice University site for viewing and sharing educational material, with more than 12,000 learning modules, including one on African message drums that could be used in units on music, percussion, communication, history, or world cultures: http://cnx.org.

• *WISE*: Web-based Inquiry Science Environment from Berkeley for grades 5-12, with one-week units on real-world evidence and current science controversies, including global climate change, hybrid cars, genetics, and recycling: http://www.wise.berkeley.edu.

• *Birdjam*: Bird species, habitats, and songs: http://www.learnbirdsongs.com, created by a nature photographer and writer.

"The Change Agents" by Cheryl Lemke and Ed Coughlin in *Educational Leadership*, September 2009 (Vol. 67, #1, p. 54-59); the full article is available for purchase at http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership.aspx
Lemke can be reached at lemke@metiri.com, Coughlin at ecoughlin@metiri.com.

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## 7. Short Item:

***Quest Atlantis*** – This free interactive strategy game from the Indiana University School of Education, at http://www.QuestAtlantis.org, is for students 9-16.

Spotted in "Why Educators Should Care About Games" by Sasha Barab, Melissa Gresalfi, and Anna Arici in *Educational Leadership*, September 2009 (Vol. 67, #1, p. 76-80), full article available for purchase at http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership.aspx

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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 37 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).

### *Subscriptions:*

Individual subscriptions are $50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

### *Website:*

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

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

Marshall Memo subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

### *Publications covered*

*Those read this week are underlined.*

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Changing Schools (McREL)
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
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
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
Teacher Magazine (online)
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal