Marshall Memo 177

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 19, 2007

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Who's doing the work here?"

Charlotte Danielson, teacher evaluation expert, on the division of labor between principal and teacher in the conventional evaluation process
(personal communication at the Anaheim ASCD convention, March 18, 2007)

"This is just the best group. People are always helping each other. We're not just a group that has fun at lunch. We all want our kids to do well and we all want to improve our practice. What we do helps us build relationships with each other."

Michigan teacher Heidi Wise (see item #1)

"I've seen veteran teachers who are very hesitant to share, like they have a copyright on their ideas. But I think professional people feel comfortable being open. Your work is not a secret. If you have something that helps kids, it's your professional duty to share that with your colleagues so you can help more kids."

Michigan teacher Richard Standen (*ibid.*)

"[It's] unmentioned in curriculum, under-taught in classrooms, and rarely, if ever, assessed."

Daniel Moirao, Susan Morris, and Harvey Silver on note-taking (see item #4)

"If I didn't self-harm, I'd probably kill myself."

An English girl (see item #5)

"More adults than ever are in therapy or being diagnosed with mental health, personality or learning disorders. If people don't learn how to deal with stress as a teenager, how can they be expected to deal with stress as an adult? Perhaps it's time we looked at prevention at 15 rather than cure at 35."

Joanne Kenrick (*ibid.*)

1. "Professional Learning Communities" in a Michigan District

In this helpful article in *The Learning Principal* (a recent publication from the National Staff Development Council), Joan Richardson reports on the process used by the Carman-Ainsworth Community School District in Michigan to launch "professional learning communities." As of this year, the district has supplanted traditional inservice meetings with 75-minute team meetings every Wednesday morning. This negotiated block of time is made possible by staff coming in 15 minutes earlier than usual and students coming in an hour later. In elementary schools, teachers meet in grade-level teams; in middle schools they meet by subject area, and at the high school they meet by course or subject.

As the district began to consider this shift three years ago, the high school's newly-hired principal, Steve Tunnicliff, decided to ease his staff of 90 teachers into the process by convening a series of voluntary after-school forums to discuss issues of concern. Attendance at these meetings ranged from 15 to 40 teachers and successfully resolved some "low-hanging fruit" problems, including the addition of a third lunch and a new attendance policy. Meanwhile, Tunnicliff gave all staff members copies of articles about professional learning communities to pave the way for the changes that were coming.

When professional learning community meetings were launched the following year, teachers at the high school began to meet regularly in more than 30 teams, mostly with colleagues who were teaching the same course (e.g., Algebra I). Each team was asked to identify the essential learning outcomes of the course, set SMART goals for student achievement (specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound), design several common interim assessments that all members of the team would give, and look together at the results. Team members submit notes on each meeting to administrators, who comment on the reports and also drop in on meetings to see how things are going and offer support.

Each team also creates a "data center" where the course goals, interim assessments, and student results are gathered. The principal is quite particular about alignment and accountability. "For teachers to say they had an average score of 82 on an assessment, that's just meaningless," says Tunnicliff. "You want to know if what students learned is related to those essential outcomes." Every month, each department's teams convene to look at student outcome data across the grades. Interestingly, the high school has dropped department chair positions in favor of a more collegial, results-oriented structure with team members taking turns chairing the weekly meetings.

One outcome of the new process is that students with special needs take the same interim assessments as regular-education students. “Before PLCs [professional learning communities], we didn’t have a set curriculum for the special-education students,” says teacher Kevin Nelms, who is part of the Algebra I team. “We pretty much would pick and choose what we thought was most important for them to learn. Because of the PLC, I have a better grasp of what they should know and the pace they should be going. Their attitudes have changed quite a bit. They know they’re getting the same information, albeit a bit slower. When they take the same test as other students, they feel a better sense of accomplishment. If I’d had access to something like this from day one, it would have been phenomenal.”

When it was first introduced, the new scheme was greeted with skepticism by some teachers. “Initially, I thought it was just another thing that I had to do, like how you feel when you hear about new graduation requirements,” said algebra teacher Heidi Wise. But most teachers ended up embracing the collegial structure. Two years into the program, Wise said, “This is just the best group. People are always helping each other. We’re not just a group that has fun at lunch. We all want our kids to do well and we all want to improve our practice. What we do helps us build relationships with each other.” English teacher Michael Stewart agrees: “I always said I needed more time to work with other teachers. I wish we’d done this a long time ago.” Math teacher Richard Standen added, “I’ve seen veteran teachers who are very hesitant to share, like they have a copyright on their ideas. But I think professional people feel comfortable being open. Your work is not a secret. If you have something that helps kids, it’s your professional duty to share that with your colleagues so you can help more kids.”

Tunnicliff says that in the last two years, he and his fellow principals have noticed teachers moving steadily through several phases. At first, teachers tended to blame low interim assessment scores on students not studying hard enough or not following directions. Next, they zeroed in on poorly-written test questions and worked to improve their interim assessments. Then teams began to notice differences in achievement between subgroups of students and between teachers. Eventually, teams were working on how they could improve teaching to get better results.

This is the heart of the matter, says Tunnicliff as he reflects on the culture shift the school has gone through over the last three years. “It’s still so new to them that they’re spending so much of their time collecting and analyzing that they might miss the whole purpose of the discussion. We’ll know we’re there when most of the time is spent in discussion about how to change their practice.”

“Dynamic Groups: Teachers Harness the Power of Professional Learning Communities” by Joan Richardson in *The Learning Principal*, March 2007 (Vol. 2, # 6, p. 1, 6, 7), no e-link available

2. An Illinois High School Shifts the Conversation to Results

In this ASCD conference workshop on March 17, 2007, Kevin O’Mara and Jennifer Buteyn, principal and assistant principal of Ridgewood High School in Illinois, described their journey from traditional “dog and pony” teacher evaluations to a new system that focuses on

student learning. O'Mara said he became disillusioned with judging teachers on "snapshot" observations and wanted to shift the conversation to the all-important question: You taught it, but did the students learn it?

The essence of the new system, laboriously negotiated with the teachers' union, is that each teacher sets two SMART goals a year – one for their own students' achievement, the second for their teacher team's achievement. An example of the former: In my economics class, the class average will improve from 58 percent (last year's) to 75 percent. An example of the latter: All students in the grade will score at least 75% on the required research paper. Administrators have four conversations with each teacher in the course of the year on how things are going, and administrators make classroom visits to monitor progress.

Despite a lot of talk and reading about "professional learning communities" in advance, teachers were leery of the new process at first; "What will happen if I don't make my SMART goal?" O'Mara and Buteyn reassured teachers that the collaborative process is the heart of the matter and will produce real improvements in teaching and learning. Teachers have relaxed, they said, and the dynamic has shifted to how teachers and administrators can collectively improve results.

Workshop by Kevin O'Mara and Jennifer Buteyn from Ridgewood High School at the ASCD convention, Anaheim, CA, March 17, 2007. They can be reached at komara@ridgenet.org and jbuteyn@ridgenet.org.

3. Marilyn Burns on "Peeling the Onion" with Struggling Math Students

In this highly substantive one-hour workshop at the ASCD conference on March 18, 2007, math guru Marilyn Burns described her recent work doing one-on-one math interviews with struggling students. She said she is finding these diagnostic sessions enormously helpful in "peeling the onion" and getting insights into why so many students are having difficulty with math.

Focusing on third-grade multiplication, she said that teachers' challenge is getting students proficient in three closely interrelated areas:

- Computation – being able to find answers efficiently;
- Problem-solving – knowing when to compute and why;
- Number sense – developing intuition and understanding of how our number system works so they can think and reason flexibly and see numbers as useful.

Take a problem like

$$\begin{array}{r} 683 \\ \times\ 4 \\ \hline \end{array}$$

Burns explained that we can teach the standard algorithm:
4 times 3 is 12, put down the 2, carry the 1.
4 times 8 is 32, plus 1 is 33, put down the 3, carry the 3.
4 times 6 is 24, plus three is 27.
So the answer is 2,732.

Yes, the standard algorithm is quite quick and efficient once you've memorized it, said Burns, but most students learn it without understanding what they're doing, which leaves them at sea when they get to more difficult problems. Struggling students have difficulty memorizing the algorithm, and they're lost from the start. In a sense, algorithms were invented so you can do math without thinking ("Ours is not to reason why, just invert and multiply"). That's what computers do – mechanically apply algorithms to numbers. This is what has led constructivist math programs to teach students ways to solve the problem that help them understand the place value of the numbers, for example:

600 x 4 = 2400
80 x 4 = 320
3 x 4 = 12
2,732

But this approach can be equally mechanical for students. In her math interviews, Burns finds students who are mechanically implementing the new approach with no more understanding than if they were using the traditional approach. So how can we get students to understand what is really going on when they multiply two numbers together? Burns says teachers should consider a number of questions when they are working with students on this kind of arithmetic:

- What's the goal? (*Understanding plus skills*, said Burns.)
- What am I really trying to teach?
- What do students need to understand to be successful?
- What is the role of paper and pencil work? (to make your thinking visible, says Burns, and to give the teacher a way of seeing your thought process and helping you).

Burns clearly believes in a hybrid of traditional and "constructivist" methods to teaching computation. She recommends the following steps, which gradually release responsibility from the teacher to the students:

- The teacher models and represents the skill and asks for students' ideas on how to solve a problem.
- Help students to understand the meaning of the operation – what's really going on.
- Represent the operation with equations – math symbols are useful.
- Have students, before they tackle a harder multiplication problem, do an estimate and write it in a "thought balloon" up to the right of the problem. When they have finished computing, they compare their answer to their estimate to see if they're in the ballpark.
- Elicit strategies for figuring out answers – versus just teaching an algorithm.
- Use pencil and paper to keep track of your thinking, because it's hard to keep it all in your head.
- Students think-pair-share orally and the teacher listens to and responds to their efforts.
- Encourage efficiency – move toward strategies that work well.
- Students think-pair-share and then write down their answers.
- Students practice individually.
- Provide plenty of practice – students won't remember unless we do.

In her individual math interviews with students, Burns gives the child a pencil and a blank piece of paper, asks questions, watches the child's responses, and keeps the paper (she showed us a number of these on an overhead projector). These questions focus on multiplication:

- A warm-up question: Show me a multiplication problem you know. [e.g., 3 x 4]
- What does that mean? [looking for whether the child understands that it's three groups of four or four groups of three]
- A question about the commutative property, e.g., is 3 x 4 the same as 4 x 3 ?
- What's 7 x 8 ? [often students say "I haven't learned that yet" and have no way to figure it out; many students she interviews are hampered by not knowing their multiplication facts]
- Show the student equal rows of grids [often they do better with this scaffolding]
- n x n =
- n x 10 =
- n x numbers up to 19 =
- n x multiples of 10 =
- n x numbers up to 99 =
- n x 100
- 2-digit x 2-digit numbers

Burns highly recommends that teachers do one-on-one math interviews like this with their struggling students; great insights about students' knowledge and misunderstandings emerge from them. These insights can inform instructional strategies that can get at students' weaknesses and misunderstandings.

After the workshop, I asked Burns what she thought of the recent YouTube clip lambasting the "constructivist" math approach to computation ("Math Education: An Inconvenient Truth" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tr1qee-bTZI). She said that M.J. McDermott, the Seattle newscaster who did the clip, accurately describes Everyday Math's and TERC Investigations' methods for teaching multiplication and division – but presents a one-sided critique. Burns is intrigued with the idea of filming a response.

Mathematics workshop by Marilyn Burns at the ASCD convention, Anaheim, CA, March 18, 2007

4. Five Ways to Help Failing Students Succeed

In this workshop at the ASCD convention in Anaheim on March 18, 2007, researcher/consultants Daniel Moirao and Susan Morris presented their analysis (and that of Harvey Silver, who was delayed by the snowstorm in New England) of five underlying causes of student failure – and what educators can do about them:

• *Cause #1: Students not having learned the hidden skills of academic literacy* – These include:

- Collecting and organizing ideas and information through note-taking (a skill that is "unmentioned in curriculum, under-taught in classrooms, and rarely, if ever, assessed," said the presenters);
- Making sense of abstract terms and academic content vocabulary;
- Reading and interpreting visual displays of information;
- Drawing conclusions, making inferences, hypotheses, and conjectures and testing them;
- Independently conducting comparisons;
- Analyzing the demands of a variety of higher-order thinking questions;
- Constructing plans to address questions and tasks;
- Using criteria and guidelines to evaluate work in progress;
- Controlling or altering mood and impulsivity;
- Writing clear, well-formed, coherent explanations in all content areas;
- Writing comfortably in three nonfiction genres: argument, problem/solution, and comparative;
- Writing about two or more texts, e.g., a table and an article; a poem and a story.

• *Cause #2: Insufficient exposure to classroom strategies that engage and shape thinking* – Moirao, Morris, and Silver draw on the research of Robert Marzano et al. on effective teaching strategies that benefit all students but are especially helpful to the learning of high-risk students:

- Identifying similarities and differences;
- Summarizing and note-taking;
- Reinforcing effort and providing recognition;
- Homework and practice;
- Non-linguistic representation;
- Cooperative learning;
- Setting objectives and getting feedback;
- Generating and testing hypotheses;
- Questions, cues, and advance organizers.

• *Cause #3: Lack of motivation* – The presenters described four different learning styles/orientations – Mastery, Interpersonal, Understanding, and Self-Expressive – and said that struggling students are much more heavily represented in the Interpersonal style (65% of students-at-risk versus 35% of the general population) and Self-Expressive (24% versus 15%) and are under-represented in the Mastery and Understanding styles (which are the areas to which most teaching is geared). The presenters said that to motivate at-risk students, teachers need to be aware of their students' learning styles and:

- Teach *to* the differences by adapting instruction to individual learners (building on an awareness of what each high-risk student does well and not so well);
- Teach with differences in mind by planning whole-class lessons *adapted* to learning differences;
- Teach students *about* their own learning-style differences and those of others.

• Cau*se #4: Not being exposed to sophisticated curriculum unit design and differentiated instruction* – Building on the previous point, the presenters suggested that high-risk students benefit disproportionately from good backwards design of curriculum and thoughtful differentiation that gives them "hooks" to the curriculum and differentiated access to success every day.

• *Cause #5: Lack of professional learning community* – The presenters identified some of the key characteristics of teacher teamwork, which particularly benefits high-risk students:

- Focus: The school choosing a common goal and remaining focused on it over time;
- Collaboration: Creating forums in which teachers and administrators work together as a team;
- Reflection: Using assessments and data to develop and revise plans;
- Adaptability: Support for teachers to apply what they learn in their classrooms.

Moirao, Morris, and Silver concluded with a pitch for the power of a representative Instructional Learning Team that meets regularly to share data and plan strategies that improve achievement for all students by addressing each of the five causes of student failure.

"Why Students Fail – and What We Can Do About It" by Daniel Moirao and Susan Morris (and Harvey Silver, in absentia) at the ASCD convention, Anaheim, CA, March 18, 2007

5. Ideas from the U.K. on Combating Self-Harm

In this chilling article in the (London) *Times Educational Supplement Magazine*, teacher/author Joanna Kenrick tells what she learned interviewing U.K. teenagers for her novel, *Red Tears*.

A 2006 survey found that one in 15 English teenagers has self-harmed; among 15-16-year-old girls, it's closer to one in 10. What drives them to do it? Some have been abused or live in unstable families and are consumed by negative emotions. Many are driven to it by academic pressure (Britain has a fierce regimen of high-stakes tests), bullying, and the Internet (which can give kids ideas as well as reassuring them that they are not alone). There is also evidence of teenagers self-harming to attract attention and seem "goth" or "cool."

But how does cutting or burning or scratching themselves help? "Self-harmers don't hurt themselves to fulfill some sick desire," theorizes Kenrick. "Most do it because it's the only thing that helps them get through the bad times. It externalizes the internal pain… [It] brings momentary relief from the external pressures of life – pressures from parents, friends, and teachers." A second theory is that the pain may release brain chemicals that give a "buzz" similar to smoking or drinking, clearing a path through internal confusion and inducing a feeling of calm, of being in control. And like drug addiction, this cycle can be addictive. Kenrick spoke to some teenagers who said they needed to inflict greater and greater pain to get the same effect.

A third theory is that self-harmers have become dissociated and emotionally numb and harming jolts them into feeling something, feeling alive. A fourth theory is that tending to their wounds afterward gives young people a feeling of being able to look after themselves.

Are self-harmers suicidal? Although some are, especially those who have harmed themselves repeatedly, Kenrick thinks that most are not. "Almost all of the self-harmers I spoke to said that their self-harm was nothing to do with suicide. Suicide ends life; self-harm prolongs it, and most self-harmers want to live. 'If I didn't self-harm, I'd probably kill myself,' said one girl."

Are there tell-tale signs of self-harm? In a sidebar within this article, Hannah Frankel lists the following:

- Being withdrawn, depressed, or secretive, and spending a lot of time alone;
- Lacking energy;
- Wearing inappropriate clothes, such as long sleeves in hot weather;
- Avoiding activities that expose skin, such as physical education and swimming.

Frankel has the following suggestions for adults who suspect a child may be self-harming:

- Recommend counseling;
- Focus on the underlying problems;
- Suggest distraction methods such as using a red felt-tip to mark where they might cut; hitting a punching bag; rubbing an ice-cube across the skin; putting elastic bands on wrists and flicking them; exercise; writing down negative feelings and then ripping up the paper.

Kenrick concludes with an appeal for teachers and parents to pay more attention to warning signs and intervene more aggressively. "More adults than ever are in therapy or being diagnosed with mental health, personality or learning disorders," she writes. "If people don't learn how to deal with stress as a teenager, how can they be expected to deal with stress as an adult? Perhaps it's time we looked at prevention at 15 rather than cure at 35."

"'If I Didn't Self-Harm, I'd Probably Kill Myself'" by Joanna Kenrick in *TES Magazine,* February 16, 2007 (p. 20-23), no e-link available

6. Advice on Applying for Grants

In this *Education Update* article, Eric Gill warns that although some educators assume there are "fistfuls of low-hanging dollars ripe for the picking to any school superintendent or principal who learns how to write a decent grant proposal," it's actually not that easy. His pointers:

• *Outcomes* – The key words among most grant-makers nowadays are "accountability" and "measurable results." The people who make decisions on grants are highly selective and "don't suffer weak proposals lightly."

• *Authenticity* – Grant-makers are looking for passion for worthwhile ideas. "I think there are a lot of people just trying to chase the money rather than trying to make a difference in the lives of children," says Raymond McNulty, a veteran educator who advises schools on

grant-writing. "The approach needs to shift from finding money to help education to finding ideas and then seeking the money."

• *An initial pilot* – It's a good idea to test out a good idea with district money to show genuine local interest and build an initial track record with which to approach funders. "The schools really have to have some skin in it first before they go looking for money," says McNulty. "That helps gain support for grants based on actual successes, rather than expectations."

• *Doing your homework* – Grant proposals must be focused and geared toward the funder's criteria and areas of interest. "Foundations, philanthropics, and corporations refuse hundreds of grants each year simply because the applicant has no knowledge of the organization's guidelines," says grant expert Stephen Wilensky. So it's vital to check out the funder and compile a checklist based on the organization's mission statement, success stories, submission requirements, examples of successful proposals, and ability to follow through (which includes contacting other schools that have received grants from the organization and asking them hard questions). It may be wise to hire a consultant or professional grant writer – but always read over their material carefully.

• *Baseline data* – Present detailed information on the current situation up front. "Sometimes, it's best to expose all your weaknesses to the foundation – and you've got to be able to do that publicly," says McNulty.

• *Partnerships* – It's wise to collaborate with another organization (a university or a social service agency, for example) before applying for a grant, both for technical assistance and for depth of impact. Establishing a 501 (c)(3) is also a good idea.

• *Built to last* – It's essential to convince the funder that the project will last after the funding runs out. "The grant money should help you take it to scale," says McNulty, "but the money will eventually go away and it's all about sustainability in the end." From the days of John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Henry Ford, right up to current philanthropists like Bill Gates, the people behind the money tend to be high achievers with grand ideas and pragmatic management styles. They want long-term results!

A sidebar to this article provides a series of helpful websites on grants:

• Charity Navigator – http://www.charitynavigator.org - Rates charities on organizational efficiency and capacity.

• Foundation Center – http://www.foundationcenter.org - A comprehensive database of U.S. grant makers.

• Grants Alert – http://www.grantsalert.com - Resources for educators seeking funds.

• Grants.gov – http://www.grants.gov - A guide to $400 billion in federal grants.

• NASCO – http://www.nasconet.org - The site of the National Association of State Charity Officials, which oversees U.S. charitable organizations in the U.S.

• Nonprofit Guides – http://www.npguides.org - Web-based grant-writing tools.

"Courting Grants: The Enticement of Grant Money Challenges School Leaders" by Eric Gill in *Education Update*, March 2007 (Vol. 49, #3, p. 4-7), http://www.ascd.org/educationupdate

7. How Some Students Are Using MySpace, FaceBook, etc.

In this brief *Education Week* article, Maryland boarding school dean Anne Macleod Weeks describes what she and her colleagues believed were thoughtful initiatives to warn students about the dangers of online social networks (MySpace, Facebook, etc.), monitor inappropriate postings, and integrate these networks into English, Spanish, and even chemistry projects. She was confident that the school "knew what was out there."

But then she found out that her students were using MySpace.com, Facebook, RateMyProfessor, Campusdirt.com, and a variety of other sites and blogs to make decisions about which college to attend. One African-American girl who had been admitted to a New England college with a generous scholarship decided not to accept after looking up the school's students on Facebook and deciding she "just wouldn't fit in." She found very few black students, and those she found "were just sitting in their rooms in the pictures, some drinking. There were not pictures of them out in the city, being active, having fun." Another student's college choice was influenced by online photos of students in a Washington, D.C. college "dressed in goofy outfits on the Metro. There was nothing to suggest they had anything better to do in their free time – and yet they're in a great city!"

There were some positive "hits" from the online world. One student learned more about a small Midwestern college's zoology program by visiting a student's blog and decided to apply for early admission.

Weeks decided that she and other adults at her school were pretty out of the loop – and that the joke might be on them. Students, she said, were making important life decisions based on sites completely beyond the school's or parents' control – "through friends, and friends of friends, and the whole online world they continue to help propagate."

"About Face: The Other Side of Social Networking" by Anne Macleod Weeks in *Education Week*, March 14, 2007 (Vol. 26, #27, p. 35), no free e-link available

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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 36 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 (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 School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs
Atlantic Monthly
Catalyst Chicago
CommonWealth Magazine
Daily EdNews
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
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Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
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Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record
TESOL Quarterly
Theory Into Practice
Times Educational Supplement, Magazine