Marshall Memo 498

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 19, 2013

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Always, my worry in schools is for the kids who aren't acting out, but who are suffering greatly and nobody knows it."

Mary Walsh, director of City Connects in Boston, quoted in "Healing Connections" by Del Stover in *American School Board Journal*, September 2013 (Vol. 200, #8, p. 17-19), www.asbj.com.

"Of course teachers care – they just need to overtly transfer this understanding to students."

Russell Quaglia (see item #9)

"From kindergarten to high school graduation, the average American student will have spent more than a year of school learning under the auspices of a substitute teacher."

"Talk About It: Substitute Teachers" in *American School Board Journal*, September 2013 (Vol. 200, #8, p. 10), www.asbj.com.

"If you had had to choose your career path when you were 14, what might you have become? Would you have had the foresight and guidance to choose wisely?"

Claus von Zastrow (see item #4)

"I realized that the big change I should make is to say no up-front to low-value tasks and not commit myself in the first place."

An executive quoted by Julian Birkinshaw and Jordan Cohen (see item #2)

"A medium where only self-motivated, Web-savvy people sign up, and the success rate is 10 percent, doesn't strike me quite yet as a solution to the problems of higher education."

Sebastian Thrun on MOOCs (see item #6)

1. The Road from Mississippi to Harvard

In this moving *New York Times* article, Justin Porter reflects on his journey from a small Mississippi high school to Harvard. As he contemplated his early-acceptance letter, he says he felt "trapped between the two worlds in front of me. One held seemingly unlimited opportunity – full scholarship, career advancement, travel possibilities. But what would I sacrifice in exchange? My mother and I have never been on firm financial ground, and that was not going to magically change… The guilt was invasive; beneath my smile, shame dominated my thoughts. I spent the last few weeks of my senior year worried sick – that if I left she would not have enough to eat, a safe place to live, loving company to listen to her stories." Porter almost deferred Harvard's acceptance, but his mother would hear nothing of it and he enrolled.

Thinking back on his freshman year, he was disappointed with his middling grades and awestruck by the learning experiences – including chatting with Lawrence Summers over pizza and hearing a lecture by Atul Gawande. But he kept thinking about the failure of most top colleges to attract more low-income students like him. "I do not believe that increasing financial aid packages and creating glossy brochures alone will reverse this trend," he says. "The true forces that are keeping us away from elite colleges are cultural: the fear of entering an alien environment, the guilt of leaving loved ones alone to deal with increasing economic pressure, the impulse to work to support oneself and one's family… Maybe I should have stayed in Mississippi where I belonged."

But in the end, he's glad he persisted: "Harvard has forced me to grow and take a candid look at the world, and at myself. Suffice it to say, I would not trade the experience for anything."

"Reflections on the Road to Harvard" by Justin Porter in *The New York Times*, Aug. 4, 2013, http://nyti.ms/165zO8E

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2. Working Smarter

"Our research indicates that knowledge workers spend a great deal of their time – an average of 41% – on discretionary activities that offer little personal satisfaction and could be handled competently by others," say Julian Birkinshaw (London Business School) and Jordan Cohen (PA Consulting Group) in this *Harvard Business Review* article. "There are many reasons why this happens. Most of us feel entangled in a web of commitments from which it can be painful to extricate ourselves; we worry that we're letting our colleagues or employers

down if we stop doing certain tasks." In addition, doing less-important tasks gives a certain feeling of accomplishment, and even unproductive meetings provide social benefits. And underlings are often overworked. "I face the constraint of the working capacity of the people I delegate to," said one executive.

Birkinshaw and Cohen say, "All you have to do is ask the right questions and act on the answers." Here are their steps:

• *What are the low-value tasks?* They recommend looking at all the activities in a typical day and rating them on a sliding scale:

- How valuable is this activity to the organization? Significant; small impact; no impact; negative impact.
- To what extent could I let this go? Top priority; get it done today; if time allows; I can cut this immediately.
- How much personal value do I get from doing it? One of the best parts of my job; I enjoy this activity; it has good and bad points; tiresome; I dislike doing it.
- To what extent could someone else do it on my behalf? Only I can do this; best done by me; if structured properly, someone else could do it; easily handled by someone else; could be dropped entirely.

When executives are asked to do this exercise, most find at least ten hours of activity each week that can be delegated or dropped.

• *What can be dropped, delegated, or redesigned?* Birkinshaw and Cohen recommend sorting the low-value tasks into three categories:

- Quick kills – Things you can stop doing now with no negative effects;
- Off-load opportunities – Tasks that can be delegated with minimal effort;
- Long-term redesign – Work that needs to be restructured or overhauled.

Going through this exercise, one participant in their study said, "I realized that the big change I should make is to say no up-front to low-value tasks and not commit myself in the first place."

• *Where can tasks be off-loaded?* "I overestimated my subordinate's capability at first," said another participant, "but it got easier after a while, and even having a partially done piece of work created energy for me." Interestingly, subordinates appreciated being assigned many of these tasks.

• *What should I do with my freed-up time?* "The goal, of course, is to be not just efficient but effective," say Birkinshaw and Cohen. "So the next step is to determine how to best make use of the time you've saved." Jot down two or three things you should be doing and keep track of how you do on them, they recommend. Observe people doing their work and give them feedback. And go home a little earlier and enjoy your family.

• *How can I lock in this plan?* It's important to share these steps with your boss, say Birkinshaw and Cohen. "Without this step, it's all too easy to slide back into bad habits."

"Make Time for the Work That Matters" by Julian Birkinshaw and Jordan Cohen in *Harvard Business Review*, September 2013 (Vol. 91, #9, p. 115-118), no e-link available

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3. Does a Double Dose of Algebra Help?

In this *American Educational Research Journal* article, Takako Nomi (St. Louis University) and Elaine Allensworth (University of Chicago) try to solve the mystery of why giving low-achieving Chicago ninth graders two periods of algebra produced mixed results:

- Lower-achieving students had improved test scores and slightly higher pass rates.
- Higher-achieving students had improved test scores but lower pass rates.
- Students not affected by the policy had higher test scores and lower pass rates.

The story begins in 1997, when Chicago eliminated all remedial math courses, requiring all ninth graders to take algebra. This produced no improvements in low-performing students' test scores and increased their failure rates. In addition, the mixed-achievement classes that went with the reform were blamed for declining test scores among higher-performing students, who were pulled down by the disruptive peers and absenteeism in mixed classes.

In 2003, Chicago officials tried a new approach, and required entering ninth-graders with math skills below national norms to take two periods of algebra – the regular course and an additional support class. Schools were encouraged to offer the two classes sequentially in the day, with the same students and the same teacher. This resulted in homogeneous grouping in many schools, but the plan was to avoid the usual problems of tracking (lower expectations, more discipline problems, increased absenteeism) by ensuring that low-achieving students got challenging curriculum and high-quality, engaging instruction.

School officials thought students would do better in algebra because of (a) more instructional time; (b) improved instruction; and (c) peer effects in more-homogenous classes. And indeed, having twice as much time allowed teachers more flexibility implementing the curriculum and led them to do less lecturing and increase the number of hands-on activities. Teachers were given two curriculum options – Agile Mind and Cognitive Tutor – and double-dose instructors were provided with professional development workshops three times a year.

The mystery is why this reform didn't help higher-achieving students' pass rate. Nomi and Allensworth point out that teachers tend to raise their expectations when teaching a homogenous group of higher-achieving students. The lowest students in these classes (those who scored just above the national norm) had just moved from being average students in heterogeneous classes to being the worst students in homogeneous classes, and tended to fall behind when things got more difficult. Why? "Students may be more likely to fail in classes with higher-skill peers due to 'fish pond effects,'" say Nomi and Allensworth, " a phenomenon in which teachers assign higher grades to students who look better in their classes relative to their peers… Furthermore, if teachers adjusted course content, pacing, and assignment difficulty upwards in response to the overall improvement in classroom average skills, students who normally would not struggle in Algebra might find it difficult." Observers also noted that teachers in the regular, single-period algebra classes tended to use lectures and have students work independently.

Nomi and Allensworth conclude with a mixed verdict on the perennial homogeneous/heterogeneous grouping debate. Homogenous classes can work for lower-achieving students, they believe, if they are accompanied by rigorous curriculum, high-quality materials, improved

instructional techniques (including more interactive pedagogy), and more time. Homogeneous classes can hurt the lowest stratum of higher-achieving students through the "fish pond effect," which means teachers have to be especially careful not to leave these students behind. Heterogeneous classes have their problems too – teaching toward the middle and not attending to individual needs. Where mixed-achievement groups have worked – for example, in Catholic schools' use of a common academic curriculum – it's because of considerable resources being devoted to low-skill students, extra time, professional development and support for teachers, and strong principal leadership.

"Sorting and Supporting: Why Double-Dose Algebra Led to Better Test Scores but More Course Failures" by Takako Nomi and Elaine Allensworth in *American Educational Research Journal*, August 2013 (Vol. 50, #4, p. 756-788), http://bit.ly/1624mpC; Nomi can be reached at tnomi@slu.edu.

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4. Should All Students Take Algebra II?

In this helpful *American School Board Journal* article, Patte Barth (of the National School Boards Association's Center for Public Education) analyzes the research on whether Algebra II is important for college and career success. A few years ago, the answer seemed clear: the 2004 America Diploma Project and a 2005 ACT analysis strongly endorsed a single core high-school math curriculum that included Algebra II. More recently, the Common Core math standards include that content. Twenty years ago, slightly less than half of students took Algebra II, with African-American and Hispanic students seriously underrepresented. Today, three-quarters of students take the course, the racial achievement gap has virtually disappeared, and high-school graduation rates have gone up for all groups.

But some recent studies have questioned whether this level of math content is necessary for college and/or careers. Barth is skeptical about these skeptics. "If the purpose of high school were solely to prepare new graduates for their immediate next step," she says, "districts might want to think about distinct, career-centered math pathways. But of course, educators, parents, and communities view the purpose of schooling as much more than career prep." She quotes Claus von Zastrow (of Change the Equation): "If you had had to choose your career path when you were 14, what might you have become? Would you have had the foresight and guidance to choose wisely?" Many students, especially those from less-privileged backgrounds, need schools to push and guide them to courses that will open options down the road.

"One thing we can be sure of is that we cannot be sure of the future," says Barth. "The occupations young people enter today may not even exist in 10 years. I would argue that we have a responsibility to take the long view with young people's futures and make sure that they have an academic foundation that enables them to tap back into the education pipeline when they need it. The significance of high-level math and Algebra II content to keeping these options open cannot be overstated."

And there's another dimension, she argues: shouldn't all students be exposed to the elegance of mathematics for the same reasons they are exposed to the beauty of literature and the arts? They may not use all these skills and insights, but on the other hand, they might.

"Research: The Curious Case of Algebra II" by Patte Barth in *American School Board Journal*, September 2013 (Vol. 200, #8, p. 34-35), www.asbj.com; Barth is at pbarth@nsba.org.

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5. The Problem with Using Raw Test Scores to Evaluate Schools

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Michael Petrilli uses the dismal 2013 test results of Democracy Prep, a high-poverty New York City middle school (fewer than 10 percent were proficient on the state's new Common Core-aligned tests) to illustrate the problem with using just test scores – the percent of students scoring proficient and above – to "grade" schools. This school would seem to deserve an F.

But it turns out that Democracy Prep students have been gaining 2-1/2 times as much in math and five times as much in English as other New York City charter schools. "To move our scholars from whatever grade or performance level they enter to be ready for success in the college of their choice and a life of active citizenship takes us at least five years," says Seth Andrew, founder of Democracy Prep. "Given that time, our scholars consistently out-perform wealthy Westchester County on their Regents exams in nearly every subject and our first class of graduates outperformed white students on their SAT's."

"Proficiency rates are *terrible measures* of school effectiveness," concludes Petrilli. It's better to measure a school's "velocity" – how much academic growth the school helps students make each school year. "To be sure," Petrilli continues, "proficiency rates should be reported publicly, and parents should be told whether their children are on track for college or a well-paying career… But using these rates to evaluate schools will end up mislabeling many as failures that might in fact be doing incredible work at helping their students make progress over time… They are being punished for serving students who are coming to them way, way below grade level."

"The Problem with Proficiency" by Michael Petrilli in *The Education Gadfly*, Aug. 15, 2013 (Vol. 13, #31), http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-weekly/

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6. What is the Future of MOOCs?

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article on Massive Open Online Courses, Steve Kolowich reports that "political, regulatory, administrative, and faculty barriers to the unfettered online education that MOOC promoters envisioned have proved high, and it's starting to look like what those companies have to offer universities may be technology tools and services that are more helpful than revolutionary." One telling development is that a bill that was submitted to the California State Senate in March to push public universities to award academic credit to students who passed MOOCs was quietly withdrawn.

The biggest MOOC companies – Udacity, EdX, and Coursera – continue to raise money and expand, but they acknowledge that the future is uncertain. "A medium where only self-motivated, Web-savvy people sign up, and the success rate is 10 percent, doesn't strike me quite yet as a solution to the problems of higher education," says Sebastian Thrun of Udacity. "Credits are the coin of the real," says Russell Poulin at the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, "and if that's where the coins are, these companies are going to drive there." This will put the MOOC companies in direct competition with platforms that have been around for a while, including Blackboard, Desire2Learn, and Instructure, as well as textbook companies like Pearson and McGraw-Hill that have expanded into the online world.

What might the future look like? Ronald Rogers, a psychology professor at San Jose State University, co-taught an introductory statistics course on the Udacity platform last spring. Close to 20,000 people from around the world signed up for the MOOC version, but only 3,000 of them completed the course and earned a certificate from Udacity. Professor Rogers, though, was most interested in the 82 students who were taking the course for credit through San Jose State. For them, it was a regular online course; their written assignments were graded by human beings, they were able to contact Rogers for help, and he could log in to the Udacity platform to see where individual students seemed to be stuck and reach out to them. At the end of the semester, only half of the 82 earned a passing grade – a lower pass rate than students in the face-to-face version of the course – and other online/Udacity courses had similar results. The university decided to put its experiment with Udacity on hold.

"The MOOC 'Disruption' Proves Less Than Revolutionary After All" by Steve Kolowich in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Aug. 16, 2013 (Vol. LIX, #45, p. A6), http://chronicle.texterity.com/chronicle/20130816a?sub_id=0vTVxOksD696#pg6

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7. Eight Ways That PLCs Are Working in Dutch Elementary Schools

In this article in *Elementary School Journal*, Peter Sleegers (University of Twente), Perry de Brok (Eindhoven School of Education), Eric Verbiest Fontys (University of Applied Sciences), Nienke Moolenaar (University of Twente and University of California/San Diego), and Alan Daly (University of California/San Diego) say the basic idea of professional learning communities (PLCs) is that what "teachers do together outside their classrooms can be as important as what they do inside for school improvement, teachers' professional development, and student learning." At their best, PLCs have eight facets under three closely interrelated categories:

• *Personal capacity* – That is, teachers' capacity to actively and reflectively construct knowledge about teaching and student learning. "In a PLC," say the authors, "educators constantly reflect on, assess, critique, and reconstruct their personal knowledge by using available sources of information and knowledge that reside in their environment." There are two facets of personal capacity:

- Active reflection and construction of knowledge;
- Teachers' "currency" – their personal capacity to apply recent knowledge and best

practices within their PLC.

• *Interpersonal capacity* – That is, teachers' ability to work together in teams on shared purposes, taking "individual and collective responsibility for the well-being and learning of others…" This has three facets:

- Shared values and vision about teaching and learning;
- Collective learning, including consultation and research for the group;
- Shared practices among team members to improve student learning.

• *Organizational capacity* – That is, the structures that maintain processes for individual and collective learning and improvement. The three facets are:

- Resources, structures, and systems – time, information, materials, and other resources within the school;
- Relationships and climate of the school – mutual trust, respect, inclusiveness, congeniality, and support among colleagues
- Stimulating and participative leadership – The degree to which school leaders support and stimulate teacher learning, delegate responsibilities, and share leadership.

"Toward Conceptual Clarity: A Multidimensional, Multilevel Model of Professional Learning Communities in Dutch Elementary Schools" by Peter Sleegers, Perry de Brok, Eric Verbiest, Nienke Moolenaar, and Alan Daly in *Elementary School Journal*, September 2013 (Vol. 114, #1, p. 119-137), http://bit.ly/1dnHUP1

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8. What Makes Professional Development Ripple Through a School?

In this article in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Min Sun (Virginia Tech), William Penuel (University of Colorado/Boulder), Kenneth Frank and Peter Youngs (Michigan State University), and Alix Gallagher (SRI International) report on their three-year study of how and when professional development diffuses, spreading effective practices from one teacher to another. Their study showed that the key is effective PD that has these characteristics:

- It goes beyond one-shot presentations and is sustained over time.
- The content is anchored in the standards, content, curriculum, and assessments being used by teachers.
- It involves teachers in analyzing students' work and group discussion.

"When interactions involve activities that give rise to deep, critical reflection on practice," say the authors, "peers' knowledge and instructional expertise can be a major source of professional growth for teachers… This expertise diffuses when teachers interact and collaborate with each other to address commonly identified classroom problems." Teacher leaders are particularly important in facilitating this process.

Their surprising finding: the spillover effect of good PD is almost as powerful and lasting as the impact of the PD itself. "Within schools," they conclude, "to promote spillover effects, principals can purposefully motivate teachers to participate in such professional development. Professional development designed to promote both participants' own instruction

and their helping behaviors can develop 'already-to-go' teachers to become 'experts' who have sufficient knowledge to help other teachers, and it can develop 'experts' into 'go-to' teachers in the school who have collaborative skills to better disseminate their expertise. Both kinds of teachers can potentially become teacher leaders, such as teacher mentors, instructional coaches, or other team leaders."

"Shaping Professional Development to Promote Diffusion of Instructional Expertise Among Teachers" by Min Sun, William Penuel, Kenneth Frank, Alix Gallagher, and Peter Youngs in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, September 2013 (Vol. 35, #3, p 344-369),

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9. The Importance of Students Feeling "Known"

"Feeling valued as a member of the school community means believing that people genuinely care about who you are as an individual," says consultant Russell Quaglia in this interview with Lawrence Hardy in *American School Board Journal*. "The percentage is low because teachers do not show students that they care about them in ways that are perceptible to students… Of course teachers care – they just need to overtly transfer this understanding to students. They need to know students' names, and their hopes and dreams, and they need to show connections between their lives and the curriculum. Teachers need to care if students are absent from school – and ask how they are doing when they return."

Quaglia goes on to say that fun, creativity, and excitement are totally compatible with the quest for high test scores. "The problem is that when schools become so concerned about raising test scores, they forget about the factors that motivate students to learn," he says. And it's also vital that teachers help students develop a concrete plan to fulfill their dreams.

"Q&A with Russell Quaglia, Expert on Student Engagement" by Lawrence Hardy in *American School Board Journal*, September 2013 (Vol. 200, #8, p. 8-9), www.asbj.com

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10. Daniel Pink's Three Drivers Applied to Schools

In this sidebar in *Teaching Children Mathematics*, consultant Robyn Silbey draws on Daniel Pink's work to urge school leaders to support:

• *Autonomy* – "Help teachers make choices that will earn them the freedom to control their schedule, instruction, planning, and data analysis," says Silbey.

• *Mastery* – "Make teachers feel good about their successes," she urges. This can be verbal praise given privately or in front of students or colleagues or in handwritten notes or e-mails specifically describing effective practices.

• *Purpose* – Help teachers see the progress students have made and how specific instructional practices made it happen.

"Leading Teachers to Meet Today's Challenges" by Robyn Silbey in *Teaching Children Mathematics*, August 2013 (Vol. 20, #1, p. 7), www.nctm.org; Silbey can be reached at rsilbey@hotmail.com.

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11. Short Item:

Graphite: Consumer information on classroom tech products – The Graphite website provides free information and teacher reviews on widely used curriculum resources in all major subject areas. Worth a look: http://www.graphite.org.

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 42 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 64 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 50 issues a year).

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief/Public Education NewsBlast
Better Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
ED Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
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Education Week
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Elementary School Journal
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Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Journal
NJEA Review
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Wharton Leadership Digest