# Marshall Memo 113

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 28, 2005

## In This Issue:



## Quotes of the Week

"Not everything that can be counted counts; and not everything that counts can be counted."

George Gallup, the pollster, quoted in *Education Next,* Winter 2005, p. 9

"I'm just curious."

Albert Einstein, when asked to explain his success (see item #4)

"People want to be led by someone 'real.'"

Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones (see item #2)

"Authentic leaders remain focused on where they are going but never lose sight of where they came from."

*Ibid.*

"[T]he human brain is specifically designed to misunderstand Darwinism."

Richard Dawkins (see item #3)

"People who advocate more vocational education in our high schools miss the most fundamental fact of the new world we are living in: today, the best vocational education is academic education."

Jeffrey Mirel in *Education Next,* Winter 2005, p. 21

## 1. "Acting White" – Is It an Urban Legend?

In this cover article in the winter issue of *Education Next*, Harvard economist Roland Fryer takes a critical look at the widely-debated phenomenon of "acting white," which he defines as "a set of social interactions in which minority adolescents who get good grades in school enjoy less social popularity than white students who do well academically… [and] deliberately underachieve in order to avoid social sanctions." Fryer's main finding, based on a clever research strategy, is that negative peer pressure directed at black and Hispanic students who work hard and do well in school is definitely a factor in racially-integrated public schools, but hardly exists in private schools and in predominantly African-American public schools.

Before Fryer's study, there were two research explanations of the "acting white" phenomenon:

• *Oppositional culture* – Based on a 1986 study of a Washington, D.C. high school by Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, and echoed in a late 1990s study in suburban Shaker Heights, Ohio by Ron Ferguson, this theory says that: (a) white society provides blacks with inferior schooling; (b) blacks are not rewarded after graduation because of a racist job ceiling; (c) many whites don't believe that black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement; (d) this leads many black Americans to doubt their own intellectual ability and define academic success as white people's prerogative; and (e) some blacks begin to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating whites by striving for academic success.

• *Self-sabotage* – John McWhorter contrasted African Americans' youth culture with that of immigrants (including blacks from the Caribbean and Africa) and argued that African-Americans have sabotaged themselves through victimology.

Fryer finds both of these studies unconvincing, but he is also wary of rebuttals of the "acting white" theory published in the late 1990s, one by James Ainsworth-Darnell and Douglas Downey, the other by Phillip Cook and Jens Ludwig. These studies, says Fryer, relied on self-reports by adolescents of their personal popularity, which are vulnerable to bragging and exaggeration, and missed some important differences between different types of high schools.

To get a more definitive answer, Fryer used a massive database from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Adhealth), which interviewed a representative sample of 90,000 students in grades 7-12 in 175 schools across the country. The Adhealth study asked each student to list up to five male and five female friends, which allowed Fryer to check up on whether friendships were reciprocated – a more indirect and reliable way of gauging popularity. "Students listed as a friend by many peers who are themselves popular,"

explains Fryer, "rise to the top of the social hierarchy. Those who are listed by only a few peers, who in turn have few admitted friends, stand out as the marginal members of the community."

Fryer then matched the popularity of students of all races with their grade-point average (GPA) and a measure of how hard they worked (this to try to detect social opprobrium directed at "grinds" who had their noses in books but didn't succeed in getting good grades). Overall, Fryer found that there were marked differences in the popularity of white, black, and Hispanic students with higher grades. The popularity indexes of students in the three racial groups were virtually identical at low GPA levels, but starting at about 2.0 (on a 4-point scale), the three groups diverged: white students' popularity climbed steeply right up to 4.0, while black students' popularity was almost flat, declining slightly between 3.5 and 4.0, and Hispanic students' popularity plummeted as grades went up. These trends were most pronounced among black male students, whose popularity declined more steeply than that of black females as grades rose.

But these were national figures. When Fryer broke down the data by type of school, he found that there was no "acting white" phenomenon among students in public schools with more than 80 percent black and Hispanic students, nor were there differences in private schools. "Most studies of academic achievement find little or no benefit of attending a private school for white students," writes Fryer, "but quite large benefits for African-Americans. It may be that blacks attending private schools have quite a different peer group."

But the "acting white" phenomenon was definitely an issue for black and Hispanic students attending integrated schools. Why the difference? To find out, Fryer looked at the degree of cross-racial friendships in different schools and found that negative peer pressure on black academic achievement was much more pronounced in schools with more cross-racial friendships. "Black males in such schools fare the worst," reports Fryer, "penalized seven times as harshly as my estimate of the average effect of acting white on all black students!" Students in schools with a greater degree of social self-segregation paid little or no price in popularity if their grades were higher.

The issue, then, appears to be one of loyalty – the perception in integrated settings that black students, particularly males, who befriend white students and do well academically are somehow "betraying" their own race. "Anthropologists have long observed that social groups seek to preserve their identity, an activity that accelerates when threats to internal cohesion intensify," says Fryer. "Within a group, the more successful individuals can be expected to enhance the power and cohesion of the group as long as their loyalty is not in question. But if the group risks losing its most successful members to outsiders, then the group will seek to prevent the outflow. Cohesive yet threatened groups – the Amish, for example – are known for limiting their children's education for fear that too much contact with the outside world risks the community's survival… Over the long run, the group faces the danger that its most successful members will no longer identify with its interests, and the group identity will itself erode. To forestall such erosion, groups may try to reinforce their identity by penalizing

members for differentiating themselves from the group. The penalties are likely to increase whenever the threats to group cohesion intensify."

Fryer concludes that the group-loyalty explanation of "acting white" is more convincing than oppositional culture and self-sabotage. It explains why negative peer pressure on high achievement is an issue in integrated schools but not in private and predominantly black schools. "As long as distressed communities provide minorities with their identities," he writes, "the social costs of breaking free will remain high. To increase the likelihood that more can do so, society must find ways for those high achievers to thrive in settings where adverse social pressures are less intense. The integrated school, by itself, apparently cannot achieve that end."

"'Acting White' – The Social Price Paid by the Best and Brightest Minority Students" by Roland Fryer in *Education Next,* Winter 2005 (Vol. 6, #1, p. 52-59), available at: http://www.educationnext.org/20061/52.html

## 2. Can an Authentic Leader Be a Chameleon?

In this provocative article in the December *Harvard Business Review*, British professors Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones address a leadership paradox: "People want to be led by someone 'real'" – people instinctively recognize fraudulent behavior and have grown increasingly dissatisfied with "sleek, ersatz, airbrushed leadership." Yet a leader's "authentic" self may not be the best match with every audience. So leaders have to calibrate their persona to those with whom they are dealing at any given moment.

Doesn't this make them inauthentic? No, say Goffee and Jones. "Authenticity has often been thought of as the opposite of artifice – something that is straightforward, sincere, and uncomplicated. But that conception of authenticity is not only simplistic, it is also wrongheaded. Managers who assume that their authenticity stems from an uncontrolled expression of their inner selves will never become authentic leaders. Great leaders understand that their reputation for authenticity needs to be painstakingly earned and carefully managed." Authenticity, they argue, is "largely defined by what other people see in you and, as such, can to a great extent be controlled by you. If authenticity were purely an innate quality there would be little you could do to manage it and, therefore, little you could do to make yourself more effective as a leader."

Goffee and Jones hasten to add that they are not saying that leaders should be phony. "[Authenticity] accurately reflects aspects of the leader's inner self, so it can't be an act," they write. "But great leaders seem to know which personality traits they should reveal to whom and when. They are like chameleons, capable of adapting to the demands of the situations they face and the people they lead, yet they do not lose their identities in the process. Authentic leaders remain focused on where they are going but never lose sight of where they came from."

Establishing your authenticity as a leader, say Goffee and Jones, means finding common ground with each group of people you work with. Albert Einstein made this sound simple when he said, "I speak to everyone in the same way, whether he is the garbage man or the president of the university." But for leaders it's challenging to relate in an authentic way to

different people at different times – presenting different faces to different audiences. "All the world's a stage," wrote Shakespeare, "and one man in his time plays many parts." Jean Tomlin, one of the most influential black businesswomen in Britain, explains: "I want to be me, but I am channeling parts of me to context. What you get is a segment of me. It is not a fabrication or a façade – just the bits that are relevant for that situation."

So how can successful leaders present fragments of themselves without seeming inauthentic? Goffee and Jones have the following suggestions:

• *Get to know yourself and your origins.* This means exploring your autobiography and getting in touch with the anchors of your identity – the people, places, and events that shaped you. Use these roots to relate to the people around you who have had similar experiences. But know that not everyone will relate to certain aspects of your background; you have to be sensitive in what you share with whom.

• *Reach out to others to find their authentic anchors.* One senior executive in a U.S. chemical company always begins conversations with new team members with the same question: "Tell me, how did you come to be the kind of person you are now?" According to Goffee and Jones, this man has "an almost insatiable interest in the complex factors that reveal where his direct reports come from because he understands that they (and the organization) will be more likely to succeed if they feel comfortable with their origins."

• *Focus on three or four simple, powerful goals that have a close connection to your core principles.*

• *Make sure your words are consistent with your deeds.* This means living the mission of the organization every minute of every day.

• *Make sure you have people around you who will give you honest feedback.* As Bill Burns, the head of Roche Pharmaceuticals, said, "You have to keep your feet on the ground when others want to put you on a pedestal. After a while on a pedestal, you stop hearing the truth. It's filtered by the henchmen, and they read you so well they know what you want to hear. You end up as the queen bee in the hive, with no relationships with the worker bees."

• *Recognize which aspects of your authentic self particular groups of followers are looking for.* Some leaders, especially those who had a great deal of mobility in their early lives, are intuitively good at this. But Goffee and Jones believe that others can cultivate this skill. One way is to step out of one's routines and comfort zone, take risks, and seek new adventures.

"Managing Authenticity: The Paradox of Great Leadership" by Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones in *Harvard Business Review*, December 2005 (Vol. 83, #12, p. 86-94), no e-link available

## 3. Are We Hard-Wired to be Creationists?

In this fascinating article in the new *Atlantic Monthly*, Yale psychology professor Paul Bloom argues that the reason the theory of evolution is getting so little traction is that humans are deeply, innately predisposed to see purpose, intention, and design in the world around them. Bloom cites the work of Fordham anthropologist Stewart Guthrie, who in his book *Faces in the Clouds* describes how people attribute human characteristics to bicycles, bottles, clouds,

fire, leaves, rain, volcanoes, and wind. "We are hypersensitive to signs of agency," writes Bloom, "so much so that we see intention where only artifice or accident exists… People have a terrible eye for randomness."

This is why, after 9/11, some people saw the face of Satan in the smoke billowing from the World Trade Center, and before that, why many claimed to see the face of Mother Teresa in a muffin. In November 2004, someone posted a ten-year-old grilled cheese sandwich on eBay that looked a lot like the Virgin Mary, and it sold for $28,000. In the same vein, people claim to hear messages in radio static and in records played backwards.

Biology is a particularly fertile area for reading in intentional design. "We are not being unreasonable," writes Bloom, "when we observe that the eye seems to be crafted for seeing, or that the leaf insect seems colored with the goal of looking very much like a leaf." He quotes the evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins: "Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose." Dawkins suggested that anyone before Darwin who did not believe in God was simply not paying attention.

But Darwin's theory changed all that. Bloom says that Darwin's greatest insight was that "one could explain complex and adaptive design without positing a divine designer." The theory of evolution is rock-solid, Bloom believes. It can be simulated on a computer and even observed first-hand in the adaptations of modern viruses to the vaccines we use to try to kill them. The theory of natural selection, says Bloom, is "one of our species' finest accomplishments; it is an intellectually satisfying and empirically supported account of our own existence."

"But almost nobody believes it," he notes ruefully. A third of college undergraduates believe that the Garden of Eden was where the first human beings appeared. And even many people who say they agree with Darwin's theory distort it in various ways, often seeing evolution as a mysterious force driving species toward perfection. It almost seems that "the human brain is specifically designed to misunderstand Darwinism" (Dawkins).

So what's the problem with Darwin? asks Bloom. The problem is that natural selection makes no intuitive sense! "It's like quantum physics," he says. "We may intellectually grasp it, but it will never feel right to us. When we see a complex structure, we see it as the product of beliefs and goals and desires. Our social mode of understanding leaves it difficult for us to make sense of it any other way. Our gut feeling is that design requires a designer – a fact that is understandably exploited by those who argue against Darwin."

Bloom describes the creationist beliefs in young children. "Four-year-olds insist that everything has a purpose," he writes, "including lions ('to go in zoos') and clouds ('for raining'). When asked to explain why a bunch of rocks are pointy, adults prefer a physical explanation, while children choose a functional one, such as 'so that animals could scratch on them when they get itchy.' And when asked about the origin of animals and people, children tend to prefer explanations that involve an intentional creator, even if the adults raising them do not. Creationism – and belief in God – is bred in the bone."

Bloom ends his essay with this statement, which poses an interesting challenge to educators whose job it is to teach the theory of evolution to high-school students: "Religious

teachings certainly shape many of the specific beliefs we hold; nobody is born with the idea that the birthplace of humanity was the Garden of Eden, or that the soul enters the body at the moment of conception… These ideas are learned. But the universal themes of religions are not learned. They emerge as accidental by-products of our mental systems. They are part of human nature."

"Is God an Accident?" by Paul Bloom in *Atlantic Monthly*, December 2005 (Vol. 296, #5, p. 105-111), no e-link available

## 4. What's Best for "Gifted" Students?

In a long article in last Sunday's *New York Times Magazine*, author Ann Hulbert cast a skeptical eye on those who, over the last 75 years, have worked overtime to identify and nurture the talents of very high-achieving ("gifted") students. She is especially dubious about the claims of some advocates that the enormous potential of these children is being wasted because they aren't getting enough attention and acceleration.

Hulbert cites evidence that "hothouse" treatment of "gifted" children rarely produces highly-productive adults (there was not a single Nobel prize among a cohort of extremely high-achieving students identified in California in the 1960s and 70s when they grew up). She wonders if hyper-tracking of these children may actually stifle the mysterious process that leads to adult accomplishment. Hulbert notes that what stands out in studies of the childhoods of adults who *do* achieve spectacular success in life is "an animus toward school, a tolerance for solitude and families with lots of books. What also stands out is families with 'wobble' – which means stress and, often, risk-taking parents with strong opinions – rather than bastions of supportiveness where a child's giftedness is ever in self-conscious focus."

When Albert Einstein, an indifferent student through much of his schooling, was asked why he was so successful, he replied, "I'm just curious." How is the curiosity of a "gifted" person best cultivated? In Einstein's case, he couldn't be mentored, refused to listen to his teachers, and went his own way.

Hulbert concludes: "No one would recommend throwing more obstacles in highly gifted children's way. But as experts sound the alarm about the brilliant minds that aren't being found or are being frustrated, it is some solace to think that the real geniuses aren't necessarily being denied. They are biding their time and will take us by surprise."

"The Prodigy Puzzle" by Ann Hulbert in *New York Times Magazine*, November 20, 2005, p. 63-71, 78, 104, 107), no free e-link available

## 5. What Gets Parents Involved?

This study by a group of Vanderbilt University researchers points out a simple truth: if parents are to become productively involved in their children's education, they need to feel *invited*. How does that happen? The authors describe three ways:

• *General invitations from the school's climate* – "Overall," the researchers write, "school climate sets a strong contextual foundation for involvement, and school principals have

a critical role in creating and maintaining a positive, welcoming climate. These practices appear especially important in schools serving families of children at higher risk for poor educational outcomes." One of the most important elements was communicating that all parents have a role in children's school success – and that what they do makes a difference to their children's school achievement. It's also important for parents to know what the school's grade-level learning goals are.

• *Invitations from the teacher* – Studies have shown that teachers' attitudes toward parents and consistent teacher contacts play a significant role in whether parents decide to become involved. Teachers' actions make a particularly big difference in how much homework is done and in boosting students' performance. A key result of effective outreach is increasing trust between parents and teachers, which in turn promotes deeper involvement. Trust is built when teachers learn about parents' goals, perspectives on their child's learning, family circumstances, and culture.

• *Invitations from students* – Outreach from children, whether implicit (expressing frustration with schoolwork) or explicit (carrying a message to attend a school event or help with homework in a particular way), makes a big difference in parental involvement.

The researchers found that school-initiated invitations to parents were effective across different income levels – but that low-SES parents responded best when schools took into account possible barriers to their involvement (e.g., transportation, child care needs, and demanding and inflexible work hours) and were explicit about the most useful role they could play in their children's school success.

"Why Do Parents Become Involved? Research Findings and Implications" by Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey, Joan Walker, Howard Sandler, Darlene Whetsel, Christa Green, Andrew Wilkins, and Kristen Closson in *Elementary School Journal*, November 2005 (Vol. 106, #2, pl 105-130), no e-link available

## 6. Combating Summer Learning Loss

This *Elementary School Journal* study of the Teach Baltimore Summer Academy sheds some light on the key variables in summer-school programs aimed at preventing low-SES students from losing ground during July and August. The researchers believe that the accumulation of learning loss each summer may be the main reason that the achievement gap grows wider and wider as they move through the grades.

The authors subscribe to the "faucet" theory of summer learning loss: when school is "turned off" for the summer, lower-SES students suffer from the lack of school input and fall behind. But simply opening a summer school is not enough to stop summer loss. After all, hitting the books in July and August goes against the American notion that summer is supposed to be a *vacation.* Something more is needed for a summer school program to make a difference.

The authors think that too little attention has been paid to the interaction between summer programs and parents. "The success of the neighborhood summer school program in this study," they write, "depended on both the dedication of parents and the quality of the

program itself. Without the parents and program working together, children suffered summer learning losses and neither parents nor schools working independently made much of a difference. To counteract the summer achievement slide, our results suggest that children need both the structured learning opportunities and resources offered through a formal school-based setting and the commitment of parents to make sure that they attend and get the most out of the program."

The study noted the following successful components in the Teach Baltimore Summer Academy:

- Voluntary and non-punitive in nature;
- Small-group or individualized instruction;
- Early intervention during the primary grades;
- Parent involvement and participation;
- Careful monitoring of instruction and student attendance;
- Sufficiently long duration;
- Advanced planning and tight organization;
- High academic expectations and academic focus;
- Tight alignment with the curriculum taught during the school year;
- Energized, fresh teachers.

"Families, Schools, and Summer Learning" by Geoffrey Borman, James Benson, and Laura Overman in *Elementary School Journal*, November 2005 (Vol. 106, #2, p. 131-150), no e-link available

## 7. Japanese Ideas of Improving Teaching

In his editorial page column last Monday, *New York Times* reporter Brent Staples praised *The Teaching Gap*, the classic 1999 book by James Stigler and James Hiebert comparing Japanese, German, and American math teaching. Our schools, says Staples, have much to learn from Japanese "lesson study" – the way elementary teachers "focus on refining methods that improve student understanding… step by step, laying out successful strategies for teaching specific lessons."

Staples also contrasts Japanese and American beliefs about teaching and learning. Many Americans think that great teachers are born, not made, while Japanese see teaching as a craft painstakingly developed over a lifetime. With respect to learning Staples writes, "Faced with lagging test scores and pressure from the federal government, some school officials have embraced the dangerous but all-too-common view that millions of children are incapable of high-level learning. This would be seen as heresy in Japan. But it is fundamental to the American system, which was designed in the 19th century to provide rigorous education for only about a fifth of the students, while channeling the rest into farm and factory jobs that no longer exist."

"Why the United States Should Look to Japan for Better Schools" by Brent Staples in *New York Times*, Nov. 21, 2005, no free e-link available

## 8. Training for Effective Teams

This article in the National Staff Development Council's November/December *Tools for Schools* summarizes effective ways of training teacher teams. Professional learning communities "don't just happen because a principal sets aside time for teachers to meet and slaps a new label on that meeting," writes author Joan Richardson. "That's especially the case when teachers have been accustomed to working in isolation." Richardson says that training and support should focus on guiding each team through these phases:

• *Forming* – the testing stage, characterized by politeness, impersonality, watchfulness, and guardedness. Group members often have high anxiety about how they fit in, and depend on some authority or facilitator to create structure. At this stage, the group is a "pseudo-community," where members are afraid of conflict and don't get much done. "Pseudo-community is like early dating," says consultant Ann Delehant. "This is the stage where all women love football."

• *Storming* – the infighting stage, characterized by conflicts over control, confronting each other, opting out, difficulties, and feeling stuck. In the storming phase, group members rebel against each other and against authority. Storming behaviors are "each individual's response to being influenced by the group and by the work that is required to achieve the assigned tasks."

• *Norming* – the getting organized stage, characterized by developing skills, establishing procedures, giving feedback, and confronting issues. "At this point, members have overcome their feelings of resistance and begin to feel like a cohesive group… They are confronting issues represented by their work, not other individuals."

• *Performing* – the ultimate goal, characterized by mature closeness, resourcefulness, flexibility, openness, effectiveness, closeness, and supportiveness. "If group members persist, they reach the most productive stage – they become a team rather than just a group of individuals."

"Transforming Your Group Into a Team" by Joan Richardson in *Tools for Schools*, November/December, 2005 (Vol. 9, #2, p. 1-7), no e-link available, but a survey tool, "What state is your team in?" created by Don Clark, is available free at http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/leader.html.



***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 43 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through scores of 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 were 50 issues in 2004-05).

### *Subscriptions:*

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- How to change access e-mail or password

### *Publications covered*

*Those read this week are underlined.*

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
CommonWealth Magazine
District Administration
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update (ASCD)
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Harper's
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record
Theory Into Practice

*E-links will be provided whenever possible.*