

Marshall Memo 239

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

June 16, 2008

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Quotes of the Week

“They burp out loud, poke each other, giggle over the opposite sex, and have uncanny ways of finding double meanings in just about everything.”

Christopher Paslay, a Philadelphia high-school teacher, on ninth graders (see item #7)

“[I]t is important to keep in mind that the primary objective of discipline is to help children learn from their mistakes.”

Rhonda Armistead (see item #4)

“We are here to teach them how to do school.”

Teresa Rodriguez, Roxbury Preparatory Charter School, Boston, quoted in “What About College?” by Laura Pappano, *CommonWealth*, 2008 (Vol. 13, #3, p. 50)

“While I believe technology is extremely cool, the most powerful tool we have to help students realize their true potential is love.”

Peter Reynolds, founder and CEO of an educational media company, FableVision, in “Six Essentials to Foster Creativity and Innovation in the Classroom”, *District Administrator*, June 2008 (Vol. 44, #7, p. 29), no e-link available

“Everything I’ve been doing my whole life has been for someone else.”

Jessica, 27 years old, as she struggles to find herself (see item #3)

“What is needed is *on-the-job* learning for *all* teachers.”

Jay McTighe (see item #1)

1. Jay McTighe on Three Roles Teachers Can Play in their Teams

In this article in *The Learning Principal*, author/speaker Jay McTighe suggests that members of professional learning communities should play three roles:

- *Role #1: Critical friend* – When it comes to planning units and lessons, too many teachers “go it alone,” says McTighe. Working in isolation, teachers “sometimes get too close to their work and have difficulty seeing weaknesses.” The antidote is regularly getting comments from colleagues on draft assessments and curriculum unit plans. “Honest, specific, and descriptive feedback from peers can be invaluable to beginners,” says McTighe, “and support even effective teachers in moving from good to great.”

For example, an elementary school’s fourth-grade team might give copies of its upcoming interdisciplinary unit on the rain forest to the fifth-grade team in exchange for the fifth-grade teachers’ poetry unit. When the two teams meet to discuss feedback, the fifth-grade teachers might suggest some essential questions for the rain-forest unit that they could revisit when the fourth graders move up next year, and the fourth-grade teachers might suggest engaging learning activities for the poetry unit.

“The culture in many schools does not invite collegial feedback,” writes McTighe, which means that peer review needs to be introduced with care. Two practices might be helpful: (a) Start by doing a critical review of a unit or assessment from another school; (b) Then ask for volunteers within the school to submit a unit or lesson for review and discuss the role of reviewers and unit creators in a fishbowl setting; (c) Agree on a protocol for peer-review feedback so the comments are based on standards and not taken personally.

- *Role #2: Analyst of interim assessments of student work* – McTighe says it’s vital for teachers to be actively involved in looking at the impact of their teaching on students during the year and planning ways to modify classroom practices to bring about improvements. For example, a high school’s English teachers might score writing assessments (given three times a year) using a common rubric, working in pairs to improve inter-rater reliability, identify anchor papers, and decide which areas need emphasis; then celebrate gains and share instructional strategies to bring about further improvements before the next assessment. Ideally, says McTighe, teacher teams should be looking at multiple sources of student data – a “photo album” of evidence, including conventional tests along with student work from other types of assessments.

Here are some questions that teacher teams might ask at each of four phases of looking at interim student assessment data:

- **Describe:**

- What knowledge and skills are assessed?
- What kinds of thinking are required? Recall, interpretation, evaluation?
- Are these the results we expected? Were there any surprises? Anomalies?
- In what areas did students perform best? What were weak areas?
- Were there improvements? Declines? What caused them?
- What misconceptions were revealed?

- **Evaluate:**

- By what criteria are we evaluating student work?
- Are these the most important criteria?
- How good is “good enough”? What’s the standard?

- **Interpret:**

- What does this work reveal about student learning and performance?
- What patterns are evident?
- What questions does this work raise?
- Is this work consistent with other achievement data?
- Are there different possible explanations for these results?

- **Identify improvement actions:**

- What teacher actions would improve learning and performance?
- What student actions would improve learning and performance?
- What changes in curriculum, schedule, grouping would improve learning and performance?

Athletic coaches and drama and band teachers routinely go through this process, says McTighe. In the academic realm, this process keeps teachers focused on broader learning goals and avoids fixating on standardized test scores only.

• *Role #3: Continuous learner* – “What is needed is *on-the-job* learning for *all* teachers,” writes McTighe – the whole staff continuously exploring research and best practices as they apply to their own students and their own subject matter. A principal might begin by choosing five good articles on research-based instructional practices and asking each teacher to read one and prepare to discuss it in a staff meeting. At the meeting, teachers could use a “jigsaw” process to share their impressions on the five articles (each group would have someone representing each article), thus broadening their knowledge by drawing on their peers. After this initial round, the principal might begin to delegate selection of articles, giving teachers increasing responsibility and initiative for professional learning. The most robust form of professional learning is action research – ongoing, collaborative inquiry on new methods, judged by student learning results. Here are some examples of teacher research projects, the results of which might be presented to colleagues in faculty meetings:

- Shadow a student – Spend an entire school day following one student through the schedule, considering questions like: Is the schoolwork engaging? Do the learners see purpose in what they are learning? Are they exploring big ideas? What are your impressions of their school experiences?

- The best and the worst – Reprise John Goodlad’s classic study, *A Place Called School*, by asking students which courses were most engaging, most worthwhile, most and least challenging – and why.
- Questioning strategies – Examine the questions you ask students. What percent require factual recall? Application? Synthesis or evaluation? What are the results of asking different types of questions? What happens when you use various follow-up strategies (e.g., wait-time, probes, devil’s advocate)? Visiting the classrooms of one or more colleagues, note how their questioning strategies differ from yours.
- Survey graduates – Contact recent high-school graduates and ask them to describe how well their K-12 schooling prepared them. In what ways were they prepared for future study and the world of work? In what ways might their schools have prepared them better?
- Study student understanding of goals and priorities – What do students say when asked, *Why are you doing what you are doing? How does yesterday’s lesson relate to today’s? What do you predict we will be doing tomorrow? What is your long-term goal for this unit? How will your learning be judged?* Compare their answers to those of students in another class.
- Test variations on a curriculum unit – Using two classes (one as a control), teach two versions of the same unit. In one class immerse students in examining essential questions on provocative issues or problems, teaching the basics only as needed. In the control class, cover the basics using a textbook. Does student engagement differ between the two classes? Are there differences in learning from a common assessment at the end of the unit?
- Grading and reporting inquiry – Survey students and parents on current grading practices and report cards. Do they clearly understand grades? Are grades consistent among teachers? Are they fair? Do they accurately communicate student performance, progress, and work habits?

“Making the Most of Professional Learning Communities” by Jay McTighe in *The Learning Principal*, May 2008 (Vol. 3, #8, p. 1, 4-7), no e-link available; the author can be reached at jmctigh@aol.com.

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2. Helping English Language Learners Navigate U.S. Group Dynamics

“Hidden rules of speaking exist in any language and culture,” says Northwestern College (Minnesota) ESL professor Feng-Ling Margaret Johnson in this thoughtful article in *Essential Teacher*. “Native speakers of a language know their own system subconsciously... When ESOL students are not aware of these different cultural styles of discussion, they can become frustrated participating in cooperative groups, literature circles, or formal meetings. Their natural tendency is to follow their native rules of speaking instead of the rules of speaking in the target language, but this can quickly lead to misunderstanding and breakdowns

in communication. Even worse, some may be perceived as rude, aggressive, passive, or disengaged.”

Johnson has noticed that there are subtle signals that adults and children use when they take turns in conversation. Here are three cultural styles, each with a sports analogy (Steinbach, 1996):

- *American* – Basketball is the sport that most resembles the U.S. conversational style, says Johnson. “Native speakers of North American English do not take prescribed turns based on age, gender, or rank. The ball (i.e., a speaking turn) is passed around and is up for grabs to whoever chooses to participate. The assumption is that one will speak if he or she wishes; if one doesn’t speak, it is because he or she chooses not to. The pace is relatively fast, and one may take a turn from a current speaker when the latter hesitates, pauses, drops in intonation, or is at the end of a phrase.”

- *Latin American, African, and Middle Eastern* – Rugby best resembles the style of these cultures’ conversation, says Johnson. “Speakers are more tolerant of frequent interruptions, rapid turn-taking, and overlapping speech. Speakers also tend to be physically closer and more frequently touch one another. An individual who subconsciously follows this style of speaking in a group [in Asia or the U.S.] may be perceived as impatient, overly imposing, or even rude.”

- *Asian* – Bowling is the best analogy for this style: people speak in a specified order, one person speaks at a time, and there are silent pauses between turns. Johnson, who is Chinese-American, found that when she first took part in meetings in the U.S., she unconsciously held back to allow older or more experienced colleagues to speak first, waited for pauses in the conversation to make her points, and hesitated to contribute until asked for her opinion. As a result, she hardly ever got a word in edgewise! What’s more, Johnson was seen by her colleagues as being passive and uninterested.

Observing American conversational dynamics, Johnson has noticed that people use a variety of verbal cues to inject their ideas:

- Before proceeding to make a statement:
 - *This may be off the wall, but I wonder if...*
 - *Just a suggestion. It may be terrible, but I’ll throw it out...*
 - *From my experience...*
- To clarify a point:
 - *Are you saying that...?*
- To cut in:
 - *May I interrupt you for a moment?*
- To follow up on another person’s statement:
 - *To piggyback on what Robert just said...*
- To assent:
 - *I completely agree...*
- To push back:
 - *I really can’t agree with you on that...*

- To indicate awareness of a digression from the discussion:
 - *By the way...*
 - *Incidentally...*
- To give up a turn:
 - *That's all I have to say.*

“Unfamiliarity with these lexical cues or inability to apply them in real-life situations,” says Johnson, “contributes to non-native English speakers’ inability to enter and exit a discussion without appearing abrupt or out of context.”

Johnson has also noticed a variety of kinesthetic signals that Americans use to smooth conversational dynamics, including:

- To enter a discussion:
 - Slightly raising their hands;
 - Making sustained eye contact with the person who is speaking;
 - Leaning forward a little.
- To hold off someone who shows signs of wanting to grab the floor:
 - Raising a hand, palm forward.
- To interrupt someone who is speaking:
 - Raising a finger and waiting.
- To show a willingness to give up a turn:
 - Looking at a participant (to nonverbally give the next turn to that person);
 - Leaning back slightly in his or her seat.

How can teachers help English language learners pick up these unwritten rules and participate more effectively in groups? Johnson suggests a discovery-based approach – getting students to reflect on how their native culture deals with specific situations, and how American conversational norms differ, for example:

- How do you show you are finished speaking?
- How do you interrupt someone who is speaking?
- How do you jump into a discussion to make your point?

Johnson also suggests having students take notes during a discussion, or watch a videotape, and then analyze to see what rules American speakers follow.

Finally, she suggests having students role-play different situations to get the feel of applying American dynamics and being full partners in group dynamics. “Students who tend toward the bowling style of conversation will need to not only overcome their tendency to wait for long pauses but also practice appropriate ways to engage in conversation,” says Johnson. “Students who follow the rugby style, on the other hand, will need to overcome their tendency to dominate turns.”

“Learning the Language of Meetings” by Feng-Ling Margaret Johnson (with Jessica Peterson) in *Essential Teacher*, June 2008 (Vol. 5, #2, p. 22-23), no e-link available

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3. Helping Young People Find Purpose

This *Education Week* article reports on a new book by Stanford psychologist William Damon, *The Path to Purpose: Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life* (Free Press 2008). Damon and his graduate students surveyed and interviewed a diverse group of 1,200 12-26 year-olds over a five-year period and grouped them into four categories:

- The disengaged (25%) – No life purpose or inclination to find one;
- The dreamers (25%) – Thinking about doing great things but haven't yet taken practical steps to pursue their dreams;
- The dabblers (31%) – Have tried a number of potentially purposeful pursuits but haven't committed to any of them yet;
- The purposeful (20%) – Have dedicated themselves to something meaningful and sustained their commitment over time.

Jessica, 27, is somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. An accomplished athlete working in academe, she has turned down job offers and decided to travel to find herself, saying, "Everything I've been doing my whole life has been for someone else."

Damon's findings parallel other data on the Millennium generation's holding pattern between adolescence and adulthood: deferring marriage, returning to live with parents after college, "failure to launch," the Odyssey years. There are a number of reasons for this shift, say the researchers: rapid societal change, the "defrocking" of heroes by the media, the 9/11 attacks, and other trends. Commenting on Damon's study, Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner says, "My own impression is that, particularly in the 21st century, many young people have extreme difficulty in 'identifying' [in the psychological sense] with their elders, and this makes the spark to which Damon refers more elusive."

Damon's book recommends that schools, parents, and communities listen carefully to the interests that children express, fan the embers, and talk about how school skills and content can be harnessed to a purposeful life. Damon says that adults also need to share stories about how they found their own callings. And he castigates schools for focusing too much on high-stakes tests and narrowing the curriculum in ways that alienate too many students. Tufts professor Richard Lerner agrees with Damon's approach, saying, "Imagine what we could do if we were intentional about this."

"Majority of Youths Found to Lack Direction in Life" by Debra Viadero in *Education Week*, June 11, 2008 (Vol. 27, # 41, p. 1, 12),

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/06/11/41purpose_ep.h27.html

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4. Zero-Tolerance Discipline Policies – Problems and Alternatives

In this *Education Week* article, North Carolina school psychologist Rhonda Armistead argues that zero-tolerance policies are seriously hampering school administrators' ability to deal flexibly and intelligently with discipline problems, and are also hurting schools' public image through press accounts like these: a first grader being disciplined for "sexual

harassment” after smacking a classmate’s bottom on the playground; the same punishment being meted out for possession of a butter knife and possession of a switchblade.

What’s more, says Armistead, zero-tolerance policies don’t work. She quotes American Bar Association and American Psychological Association findings that such policies are linked to declines in academic achievement, increases in student misconduct, higher suspensions and expulsion rates, more frequent referrals to the juvenile-justice system, increased dropouts, and poorer student attitudes toward adults. School climate suffers, says Armistead, and school staff spend too much time on discipline. Based on the data, she writes, “It is time for zero-tolerance policies to be re-evaluated and revised.”

Armistead hastens to add that she is not against disciplining students. “Schools should never tolerate behavior that disrupts, disrespects, threatens, or harms others,” she says. “Bullying is not just ‘kids being kids.’ Smacking a classmate’s bottom, even without sexual intent, is not appropriate playground behavior.” She believes in dealing with small incidents quickly and decisively as a way of creating a safe climate and preventing more serious infractions.

“But it is important to keep in mind,” Armistead continues, “that the primary objective of discipline is to help children learn from their mistakes. Discipline should teach students appropriate decision-making and behavior, as well as a rational relationship between actions and consequences.” Schools need to be crystal clear about behavioral expectations, she says, and then embed explicit social-skills instruction in the curriculum – as well as training teachers to take advantage of teachable moments, using modeling, guided practice, and critical feedback to help students develop lifelong patterns of considerate, safe behavior and good decision-making. The key is teaching the right lesson. For the first grader who smacked his classmate’s behind, the lesson is, “We don’t hit in play or in anger,” and the right follow-up question is, “How else can you get a friend’s attention?”

The most important thing, Armistead believes, is identifying and addressing the underlying causes of student misbehavior. Special-education teachers think in terms of a “functional behavioral assessment,” and this could be applied to all students, trying to understand the motivation and reasoning behind the behavior, the child’s developmental level, the particular circumstances, and how the misconduct helps the student get or avoid something. The goal should be to find the disciplinary action or consequence most likely to prevent the misconduct from happening again.

“Discipline and punishment are not synonymous,” concludes Armistead, “and we need to separate the two. If not, we simply will build more and bigger woodsheds, at a cost measured in wasted public dollars, missed learning opportunities, and, for some, the lost potential of children’s lives.”

“Zero Tolerance: The School Woodshed” by Rhonda Armistead in *Education Week*, June 11, 2008 (Vol. 27, # 41, p. 24-26),

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/06/11/41armistead_ep.h27.html

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5. Delaware's New System for Evaluating Principals

This *Education Week* article reports on Delaware's recently developed approach to evaluating school leaders and district-level administrators who deal with instruction. The Delaware Performance Appraisal System (DPAS II) has been pilot-tested over the last two years and is now slated for statewide implementation in all regular public and charter schools. The system aims to evaluate leadership characteristics connected to student achievement, dividing them into five domains:

- *Vision and goals* – Using data; implementing, promoting, and communicating a vision and goals for the school;
- *Culture of learning* – Advocating, monitoring, sustaining, and maintaining a culture of learning;
- *Management* – Solving problems or concerns; managing resources; complying with policies; protecting the welfare and safety of students and staff;
- *Professional responsibilities* – Maintaining professional relationships; promoting family and community involvement; demonstrating fairness; growing and developing professionally;
- *Student improvement* – Showing, measuring, and reflecting on student improvement; implementing strategies for student improvement.

Under Delaware's system, each administrator meets with his or her immediate boss at the beginning of the school year, reviews data on the school, sets measurable goals, and agrees on how progress will be measured at the end of the year. The boss makes periodic visits and walk-throughs during the year and gives mid-year feedback on how things seem to be going. Toward the end of the year, an online survey is filled out by the boss, the administrator, and everyone he or she supervises. Anonymous results from teachers and others become part of the final evaluation conference with the boss. Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory ratings are given in each of the five areas, and principals are then given an overall rating of Effective, Needs Improvement, or Ineffective. Any areas for improvement trigger an improvement plan to address problem areas.

“Delaware Rolling Out New Evaluations for Principals” by Lesli Maxwell in *Education Week*, June 11, 2008 (Vol. 27, # 41, p. 10), available to subscribers only

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6. Young Teacher Leaders Hit the Wall

In this *Teachers College Record* article, a team of six Harvard researchers report on their interviews with young teacher leaders, almost all of whom had frustrating experiences trying to change the instructional practices of their colleagues. A shorter article by two of the authors appeared in the September 2007 *Educational Leadership* (summarized in Marshall Memo 202, #3), covering much of the same ground. But the new *TC Record* article ends on a more somber note. Any time young teacher leaders tried to change instructional practices in the name of accountability, say the authors, other teachers resisted – and expressed their

resentment at the special recognition the relatively inexperienced teacher leaders received. The researchers concluded that if school leaders want to use teacher leaders as part of accountability-based school reform efforts, they are going to have to find ways to deal with push-back from other teachers.

[One idea is having teacher leaders look at interim assessment results with grade-level teams, which can lead to more productive conversations than critiquing classroom methods. Veteran teachers can often become reflective and consider classroom changes when they look with their colleagues at concrete evidence of what their students did and did not learn.]

“Angling for Access, Bartering for Change: How Second-Stage Teachers Experience Differentiated Roles in Schools” by Morgaen Donaldson, Susan Moore Johnson, Cheryl Kirkpatrick, Will Marinell, Jennifer Steele, and Stacy Agee Szczesiul in *Teachers College Record*, May 2008 (Vol. 110, #5, p. 1088-1114), no e-link available

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7. Combat Pay for Teaching Ninth Graders?

In this letter to *Education Week*, Philadelphia high-school teacher Christopher Paslay says he finds ninth graders “innocent and endearing,” which is why he has taught at this level for eleven years. But he says that many of his colleagues see these students in a different light: “Ninth graders have notoriously high levels of energy and can be incredibly immature,” he writes. “They burp out loud, poke each other, giggle over the opposite sex, and have uncanny ways of finding double meanings in just about everything.” This is why many experienced teachers choose to work with older students – “those who have already survived the first years of high school, those who are focused, mature, and have gotten most of the ants out of their pants.”

What will it take to get the best teachers working with the most challenging high-school class? Smaller classes, says Paslay, and extra pay. “High school freshmen are a lovable yet tough group to handle,” he says, “and educators should be compensated for the extra effort.”

“Pay More to Those Who Teach 9th Graders” by Christopher Paslay in *Education Week*, June 11, 2008 (Vol. 27, # 41, p. 26), available to subscribers only

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8. Short Item:

Comics-making website – This website by Bill Zimmerman allows students to create their own comic strips using a variety of characters and open-ended speech balloons. The site may be especially helpful for English language learners: <http://www.makebeliefscomix.com>.

Recommended by Tamara Kirson, a lead ESOL instructor at City College of New York, in *Essential Teacher*, June 2008 (Vol. 5, #2, p. 42)

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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).

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- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Atlantic Monthly
Catalyst Chicago
CommonWealth Magazine
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
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
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Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine (online)
Teachers College Record
TESOL Quarterly
The Language Educator
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal