

Marshall Memo 196

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

August 13, 2007

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Quotes of the Week

“Virtually all kindergarteners are eager to learn. But by fourth grade, many students need to be bribed. What makes our schools so dystopian that they produce this powerful transformation, almost overnight?”

Barry Schwartz, Swarthmore psychology professor (see item #2)

“Everyone knows cough syrup doesn't cure you, it just treats your symptoms. But all too often, like cough syrup, school improvement plans attempt to treat the symptoms, but not the root causes of low student achievement.”

Bryan Goodwin and Ceri Dean (see item #1)

“It's better than being trapped inside the classroom. You can get out and actually do something that makes things not just good for us but good for all of us – for our community, for all people.”

A Philadelphia fifth grader who participated in a service-learning project (see item #5)

“While I was reading them, I was like, addicted.”

New York City student Thejas Alex on reading the *Cirque du Freak* series by Darren Shan; *New York Times* story by Motoko Rich, June 11, 2007, p. 1

1. Avoiding Three Common Errors in School Improvement Planning

In this article from McREL's *Leadership Insights*, staffers Bryan Goodwin and Ceri Dean focus on solving three problems they see all the time in schools' planning efforts:

- *Mistake #1: Treating the symptoms, not the underlying problem.* "Everyone knows cough syrup doesn't cure you," write Goodwin and Dean, "it just treats your symptoms. But all too often, like cough syrup, school improvement plans attempt to treat the symptoms, but not the root causes of low student achievement." For example, a school's data might show that lots of students aren't proficient in reading – and the school immediately implements a "solution" – expanding the literacy block to 90 minutes a day. But what if the real reason for low achievement is that teachers aren't implementing the school's reading program properly, or are taking the "chicken feed" approach to teaching – throwing out knowledge to students, expecting that some will get it and others won't? Just adding more time for reading wouldn't address problems like these. Schools must dig deeper and find the real causes of low achievement so that solutions hit the target.

- *Mistake #2: Focusing only on tangibles and ignoring intangibles.* The pressure to improve test scores *soon* may lead schools to ignore "softer" school factors that are essential to improving achievement. "Our research and experience in working with schools suggests that addressing soft issues such as culture, environment, attitudes and beliefs, are at the heart of every successful improvement effort," write Goodwin and Dean. They go on to say that in the business world, up to 85 percent of the market value of publicly traded companies is related to intangible assets such as the talents, dispositions, and ideas of employees. Schools will get bigger gains in achievement if they focus on these intangibles.

- *Mistake #3: Biting off more than you can chew.* A common trap in school improvement plans is pursuing multiple goals with several action items for each goal, sometimes with as many as 30-40 action steps for a single year. "That's far too many initiatives for school faculty and staff to keep in their heads or take seriously," say Goodwin and Dean. "As a result, usually very little happens." They recommend identifying one or two meaningful improvement targets and taking a "fractal" approach, which consists of:

- Defining the problem;
- Researching the right solution;
- Beginning to implement the solution;
- Monitoring the effectiveness of the solution in real time;
- Fixing problems early;
- Reflecting on the process to identify what contributed to success.

This is similar to the continuous-improvement process used in Japanese companies like Toyota, which take small, frequent improvement steps and believe that "every defect is a treasure" – that is, making and uncovering mistakes is all part of the process.

“The quick wins that are possible with fractal experiences encourage schools to undertake ever more complex and substantive improvement efforts that have the dramatic effect of transforming the school’s culture,” conclude Goodwin and Dean. “And when they are in the process of doing this, they must not overlook culture. By paying attention to both technical processes as well as issues related to school culture, they will eventually find that their improvement efforts have become comprehensive and systemic.”

“Three School Improvement Mistakes (and How to Avoid Them)” by Bryan Goodwin and Ceri Dean in *Leadership Insights*, McREL, Spring 2007 (Vol. 55, p. 3-4) http://www.mcrel.org/pdf/changingschools/9503NL_07_CS55_02_school_improvement_mistakes.pdf, spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, August 3, 2007

2. Will New York City’s Student Cash Incentives Program Work?

In this *New York Times* op-ed article, Swarthmore College psychology professor Barry Schwartz expresses concern about a New York City pilot program that gives cash rewards of up to \$500 to students with good attendance and test scores. The program is the brainchild of Roland Fryer, a Harvard economics professor, who was recently appointed “chief equality officer” for the city’s schools. Schwartz is willing to concede that achievement may be so desperately poor in some classrooms that it’s worth trying something radically new. But he believes that Fryer’s program rests on two faulty assumptions:

- *First, the more motives you offer people, the more powerful the effect on motivation.* “Give people two reasons to do something, the thinking goes, and they will be more likely to do it, and they’ll do it better, than if they have only one,” explains Schwartz. “Providing some cash won’t disturb the other rewards of learning, rewards that are intrinsic to the process itself. They will only provide a little boost.”

But Schwartz argues that thirty years of psychological research show that this assumption is false. He cites two studies, one on nursery-school children and one on adults. The preschoolers were given a chance to draw with special markers and then some were given “good player” awards and others were not. Later, the same kids were given another chance to draw with the markers. Those who had been given the awards were less likely to draw at all, and when they did draw, they produced lower-quality pictures than those who didn’t receive awards. Why did this happen? “Children draw because drawing is fun and because it leads to a result: a picture,” says Schwartz. “The rewards of drawing are intrinsic to the activity itself. The ‘good player’ award gives children another reason to draw: to earn a reward. And it matters – children want recognition. But the recognition undermines the fun, so that later, in the absence of a chance to earn an award, the children aren’t interested in drawing.”

In the second study, Swiss adults were asked if they were willing to accept a nuclear waste dump in their canton. Although they knew that a dump was potentially dangerous, 50 percent said they were willing to accept one as part of being responsible citizens. After all, the dumps had to go somewhere. But when people were asked if they would accept a nuclear waste dump in return for a cash payment (the equivalent of six weeks’ pay), only 25 percent said they would. “The offer of cash,” says Schwartz, “undermined the motive to be a good citizen...”

[T]he offer of money, in effect, told people that they should consider only their self-interest. And as it turned out, through the lens of self-interest, even six weeks' pay wasn't enough."

• *Second, people respond to incentives and if you want kids to do something, you have to make it worth their while.* Clearly the immediate intrinsic rewards of school learning (e.g., gaining understanding, having mysterious or unfamiliar aspects of the world opened up to you, demonstrating mastery, satisfying curiosity, inhabiting imaginary worlds created by others) and the more distant extrinsic rewards (e.g., getting into college and getting a good job) aren't motivating many students to come to school and do well.

But Schwartz worries that students who are paid to attend school and do well on tests will be even less interested in school than they were with no extrinsic incentives. "If that happens," he writes, "the incentive system will make the learning problem worse in the long run, even if it improves achievement in the short run – unless we're prepared to follow these children through life, giving them a pat on the head, or an M&M or a check every time they learn something new."

"Perhaps worse," Schwartz concludes, "the plan will distract us from investigating the more pertinent set of questions: why don't children get intrinsic satisfaction from learning in school, and how can this failing of education be fixed? Virtually all kindergarteners are eager to learn. But by fourth grade, many students need to be bribed. What makes our schools so dystopian that they produce this powerful transformation, almost overnight?"

"Money for Nothing" by Barry Schwartz on the *New York Times* op-ed page, July 2, 2007 (p. A21), no free e-link available

3. Is Retaining Struggling Students in Kindergarten Effective?

This *JESPAR* article reports on a study by four researchers on the impact of retaining students in kindergarten. The study found that 80 percent of schools practice kindergarten retention and there is a consistent pattern among the 5 percent of kindergarten students who are kept back: they are almost always boys, children from low-SES families, and children who entered kindergarten younger than the typical age.

What's the impact of retention? "Evidence suggests that repeating kindergarten rarely leads to cognitive benefits in literacy or mathematics performance," report the researchers. "On average, kindergarten repeaters continue to perform below their peers in terms of literacy skills both at the end of kindergarten and at the end of first grade (effect size [ES] = -0.20 and -0.24, respectively). In mathematics, the performance differentials are smaller but remain statistically significant." The only children who benefited from retention were Native Americans, students of mixed race, and students from higher-SES backgrounds.

The researchers summarize other studies on the negative social and affective consequences of early retention, including "unhealthy personal and socio-emotional adjustment, poor classroom behavior, and negative attitudes toward school"; in addition, retention is associated with a greater likelihood of dropping out of high school and lower adult earnings.

So what is to be done? The authors make a strong pitch for universal, high-quality, free preschool that will address the cognitive deficits of students who are mostly likely to be retained once they enter kindergarten. They recommend a campaign to make low-SES parents more aware of the importance of pre-school cognitive development to their children's future school success.

Finally, they acknowledge that their study doesn't address the key issue of what schools can do to boost the achievement of students who enter school far behind their peers, restating the dilemma that schools and parents face: "The promotion of academically weak children without subsequent remedial assistance may be risky; the retention of slow or inattentive learners who simply relive the same instructional experience is likely to be ineffective (if not detrimental). Adequate, targeted resources and a school's commitment to enhancing the educational experience for those most in need are certainly essential for meeting the challenge of the starting-gate inequalities."

"The Differential Effects of Repeating Kindergarten" by David Burkam, Laura LoGerfo, Doug Ready, and Valerie Lee in the *Journal of Education for Students Place At Risk*, Summer 2007 (Vol. 12, #2, p. 103-136), no e-link available; Burkam can be reached at dtburkam@umich.edu.

4. Key Factors in Early Reading Instruction

In this essay in *Reading Research Quarterly*, Irene Gaskins and Linda Labbo review a comprehensive 2006 book, *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, and share their own perspectives. Some highlights:

- The National Reading Panel (NRP) report overemphasized the benefits of phonics instruction and failed to note that the benefits of phonics may not be the same for all beginning readers. "[A]lthough phonemic awareness and decoding instruction appear to be necessary and are often cited as the keys that will open the door to reading for those who are at risk for difficulty in learning to read," say Gaskins and Labbo, "the research regarding the impact of such instruction is discouraging." Research suggests that phonics interventions account for only 4% of the variance in reading achievement (Hammill and Swanson, 2006). Educators need to devote most of their attention to the other 96% of factors that drive higher reading achievement. There are no short-cuts!

- Excellent kindergarten and first-grade teachers are a major part of that 96%. Gaskins and Labbo say that not enough attention has been paid to good teaching, which is by far the most important factor in student achievement. Teaching is more important than materials, they say, and teacher preparation and ongoing support are crucial to closing the achievement gap. Summing up the research, they write, "It appears that what teachers know and can put into practice with respect to quality teacher-child conversations, differentiated yet explicit instruction, caring learning environments, management that results in time on task, and other aspects of excellent pedagogy adds up to the... difference that is most crucial."

- Effective early interventions have the best chance of overcoming the deficits with which some students enter school. However, excellent primary-grade instruction is not enough;

it needs to be sustained in the middle and upper grades or disadvantaged students will fall behind their more advantaged peers.

- “Success in beginning reading,” write Gaskins and Labbo, “is the result of a balanced program, one that includes systematic phonics and a whole lot more” – a program that is intense, early, direct, and differentiated. “Programs that make a difference... are developed by knowledgeable teachers who use texts and assessments as tools to match instruction to the multiple learning differences children bring to school.”

- Teachers should differentiate the texts to which students are exposed. In particular, primary-grade teachers should give more emphasis to informational texts.

- More attention needs to be paid to the potential of computer-based multimedia programs, which show promise of helping at-risk first graders with phonological awareness, sight-word recognition, and writing.

- The classroom tasks that students are asked to perform day in and day out are crucial to improving literacy achievement. These need to be geared to students’ reading levels and scaffolded appropriately until students can perform them independently. Here are some key tasks:

- Listening to a picture book read aloud and commenting on the connections between the pictures and words in the book;
- Discussing a story that was read aloud;
- Supplying a rhyming word for a word supplied by the teacher;
- Identifying two spoken words that begin with the same sound;
- Segmenting a spoken word into phonemes;
- Decoding an unknown word;
- Reading and understanding a text read independently;
- Responding in writing to a text that was read independently.

- More research is needed to identify the variables that make the biggest difference to achievement, conclude the authors. They hope that in a few years we will have the research base to construct a literacy program with the right mix of factors – “a balanced, multidimensional intervention that is systematic and congruent across the years. Such an intervention needs to begin in the early years prior to formal schooling, continue throughout the elementary school years, and be characterized throughout by high-quality instruction by knowledgeable teachers.”

“Diverse Perspectives on Helping Young Children Build Important Foundational Language and Print Skills” by Irene Gaskins and Linda Labbo in *Reading Research Quarterly*, July/August/September 2007 (Vol. 42, #3, p. 438-451), no e-link available. (This is an essay review of the book *Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (Vol. 2), edited by David Dickinson and Susan Neuman, 2006, Guilford Press.)

5. The Impact of a Service-Learning Project on Fifth Graders

In this thoughtful article in the *Journal of Experiential Education*, Philadelphia literacy leader Elizabeth Soslau and La Salle University professor Deborah Yost report on an action-research project involving two 5th-grade classrooms in an urban middle school. Both classes were taught by the same teachers; one received the standard curriculum, the other supplemented the curriculum with a service-learning project in which students learned first-hand what it's like to be confined to a wheelchair, helped spread the word about handicapped access to area businesses, and designed a wheelchair ramp for a local playground.

Based on students' journal entries, benchmark test scores, attendance records, and suspension incidents, these were the findings of the project:

- Students in the service-learning class made stronger real-world connections to what they were learning in school than students in the control group.
- The service-learning class made slightly better academic progress as measured by the benchmark tests.
- Service-learning students had better school attendance (94.04% versus 92.25% in the control group).
- Suspensions were much lower in the service-learning group – 13 suspensions over nine months as compared to 28 suspensions in the control group, with fewer repeat offenders.

In short, the service-learning project, small as it was, seemed to produce better student motivation, achievement, attendance, and behavior. One student remarked, "It's better than being trapped inside the classroom. You can get out and actually do something that makes things not just good for us but good for all of us – for our community, for all people."

"Urban Service-Learning: An Authentic Teaching Strategy to Deliver a Standards-Driven Curriculum" by Elizabeth Soslau and Deborah Yost in the *Journal of Experiential Education*, Summer 2007 (Vol. 30, #1, p. 36-53), no e-link available

6. Stamping Out Clichés in Student Writing

In this *Newsweek* "My Turn" column, Alabama bioethics professor Gregory Pence vents about the constant stream of clichés he sees in his students' writing, on TV, and in print. Here are some of the worst offenders, some followed by his quips:

- *It goes without saying...* ("Then why write it?" Pence scribbles in the margin.)
- *It's not for me to say...* (Pence's retort: "Then why continue writing?")
- *Who can say?* ("You! That's who! That's the point of writing an essay!")
- *That's playing God.* (Many students seem to feel that this rhetorical hammer ends all discussion.)
- *Opening Pandora's box...*
- *Sliding down the slippery slope...*
- *Mass exodus...* (Can there be a small exodus?)
- *This bores me to tears.* (If something brings him to tears, it's certainly not boring.)
- *It boggles the mind.* (What does this mean?)
- *It's raining cats and dogs.* (Should I call the Humane Society?)

- *He literally won by a landslide.* (If so, should geologists help us understand how?)
- *The criminal was caught in broad daylight.* (Could he have been caught in narrow daylight?)
- *A bone of contention...* (I imagine two animals fighting over a bone from a carcass... But do writers want to convey that image?)
- *The foreseeable future...* (versus the unforeseeable future?)
- *Foregone conclusion...* (versus a non-foregone conclusion?)
- *Pushing the envelope...*
- *Thinking outside the box...* (This has become such a cliché that it's now *inside* the box.)
- *Take a leadership role...* (These days, can't anyone just lead?)
- *The long arm of the law...* (versus the short one)
- *Selling like hotcakes...* (Isn't there anything else that sells well?)
- *A whirlwind tour...* (How about a quick tour?)

Pence concludes with this tongue-in-cheek paragraph: "Beyond a shadow of doubt, I'd like to leave no stone unturned in grinding such writing to a halt, saving each and every student's essay in the nick of time. But I have a sneaking suspicion that, from time immemorial, that has been an errand of mercy and easier said than done."

"Let's Think Outside the Box of Bad Clichés" by Gregory Pence in *Newsweek*, August 6, 2007 (p. 17)

7. Short Items:

a. A masterful graphic presentation – If you'd like to see a tour de force of animated graphic display, check out this 20-minute video of a lecture by Swedish researcher Hans Rosling on Third-world development. The talk is not about education, but Rosling is using some extraordinary presentation techniques that might well be applicable to our work. The talk is at <http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/view/id/92>, and the really good stuff starts about five minutes in.

From the website of TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, 2006. For more information, see: <http://www.ted.com/index.php/pages/view/id/5>

b. TeacherTube – On this website, which is patterned after YouTube, educators post videos of lessons, hints for using programs like Excel and PowerPoint, and inspirational videos about making a difference in the classroom. Topics range from adding polynomials to photosynthesis to the math and physics of golf. There are also instructional videos for students. Check it out at <http://www.teachertube.com>.

Spotted in "News to Use" in *Middle Ground*, August 2007 (Vol. 11, #1, p. 9)

c. Translation software – Certain districts, schools, and other organizations (see the list in the link below) have free access to automatic WebSphere translation software developed by

IBM to make the Internet more accessible to Spanish speakers and translate e-mails and other documents. For more information on this program, ¡TraduceloAhora! (Translate Now!), visit <http://www.traduceloahora.org/en/home.html>.

Spotted in “News to Use” in *Middle Ground*, August 2007 (Vol. 11, #1, p. 8)

d. Online author audio clips – This website contains short audio clips in which scores of award-winning authors and illustrators talk about the pronunciation and origins of their names. See <http://www.teachingbooks.net/pronunciations.cgi>.

Spotted in “News to Use” in *Middle Ground*, August 2007 (Vol. 11, #1, p. 8)

e. Healthy schools website – The Healthy Schools Campaign and School Health Corporation have just released “The Quick and Easy Guide to School Wellness”, a free multimedia site for promoting healthy eating and exercise among students. Check it out at <http://healthyschoolscampaign.org/campaign/wellness/index.php>.

Spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, July 27, 2007

f. Diabetes website – The National Diabetes Education Program now has a free website designed to provide vital information on diabetes to school administrators, nurses, teachers, coaches, bus drivers, and lunchroom staff. Check it out at <http://www.ndep.nih.gov>.

Spotted in “News to Use” in *Middle Ground*, August 2007 (Vol. 11, #1, p. 9)

g. A new book about a successful Maryland school – This excerpt from Linda Perlstein’s new book, *Tested: One American School Struggles to Make the Grade*, tells part of the story of a year in the life of a successful school. See <http://lindaperlstein.com/tested-read.html>.

Spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, July 27, 2007

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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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- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs
Atlantic Monthly
Catalyst Chicago
Chronicle of Higher Education
CommonWealth Magazine
Daily EdNews
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
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
TESOL Quarterly
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools