Marshall Memo 23

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 2, 2004

In this Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Schools are not the source of children's antisocial behavior, and they cannot completely eliminate it. But schools do have substantial power to prevent it in some children and greatly reduce it in others."

Hill Walker, Elizabeth Ramsey, and Frank Gresham (see item #1)

"Early intervention is crucial for preventing antisocial behavior. The longer children go without intervention, the more bridges (to adults and peers) they burn and the more committed to acting out they become… And if they reach just 8 years old without such interventions, their bad behavior is likely to be a lifelong condition – infecting the climate of dozens of classrooms along the way… While high schools can, and should, do what they can to help antisocial students control themselves, elementary schools can, and should, actually help antisocial children to become socially competent."

Walker, Ramsey and Gresham (*ibid*.)

"Everyone without the 'gifted' label has the *de facto* label of 'not gifted'… The result of all this is that most students have needlessly low self-concepts and schools have low expectations. Few students or teachers can defy those identities and expectations."

Carol Corbett Burris, *Education Week*, Jan. 28, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #20, p. 20, 32)

1. Heading Off Disruptive Behavior in the Early Grades

In this powerful excerpt from a recent book(*Antisocial Behavior in School: Evidence-Based Practices*), three researchers from the Pacific Northwest examine the phenomenon of "antisocial" children, examine what makes their behavior so "toxic" when they enter school, and argue that early intervention by educators can pay huge dividends for troubled kids – and the ability of teachers to do an effective job teaching all their students.

Antisocial students' problems originate outside school, and once they enter the classroom, their behavior usually gets worse. In fact, many teachers find that conventional classroom management techniques backfire with these students. As they move through the grades, antisocial children become more and more troubled and troubling and they become increasingly difficult to manage.

One principle that research describes with antisocial children is the Matching Law. It states that the frequency that we see a particular behavior in a child matches how frequently it is reinforced. "For example," the authors write, "if aggressive behavior is reinforced once every three times it occurs (e.g., by a parent giving in to a temper tantrum) and pro-social behavior is reinforced once every 15 times it occurs (e.g., by a parent praising a polite request), then the Matching Law would predict that, on average, aggressive behavior will be chosen five times more frequently than pro-social behavior."

The implication of this is clear: antisocial behavior is environmental or learned and – at least among young children – can be unlearned. The way in which parents (and later, teachers) respond to aggressive, defiant, and other bad behavior is extremely important.

Children who enter school with antisocial behavior patterns were almost always made that way by chaotic home environments characterized by poverty, divorce, drug and alcohol problems, and physical abuse. "These stressors disrupt normal parenting practices, making family life chaotic, unpredictable, and hostile. These disrupted parenting practices, in turn, lead family members to interact with each other in negative, aggressive ways and to attempt to control each others' behavior through coercive means such as excessive yelling, threats, intimidation, and physical force. In this environment, children learn that the way to get what they want is through what psychologists term 'coercive' behavior: For parents, coercion means threatening, yelling, intimidating, and even hitting to force children to behave… For

children, coercive tactics include disobeying, whining, yelling, throwing tantrums, threatening parents, and even hitting – all in order to avoid doing what the parents want. In homes where such coercive behavior is common, children become well-acquainted with how hostile behavior escalates – and which of their behaviors ultimately secure adult surrender. This is the fertile ground in which antisocial behavior is bred. The negative effects tend to flow across generations much like inherited traits."

The authors contrast this pattern to appropriate discipline of children. "This is accomplished through the clear communication of behavioral expectations, setting limits, monitoring and supervising children's behavior carefully, and providing positive attention and rewards or privileges for conforming to those expectations. It also means using such strategies as ignoring, mildly reprimanding, redirecting, and/or removing privileges when they do not. These strategies allow parents to maintain authority without relying on the coercion described above and without becoming extremely hostile or giving in to children's attempts to use coercion."

Children who enter school with antisocial behavior patterns have enormous difficulty conforming to the new expectations that classrooms impose on them: learning to share, negotiate disagreements, deal with conflicts, participate in competitive activities, build friendships, and win social acceptance from others. Antisocial children are more twice as likely as others to get into unprovoked verbal or physical aggression, to lash back at peers or teachers when confronted, and to continue aggressive behavior once it has begun. Initial whining and non-compliance escalates during the elementary years to hitting, fighting, bullying, and stealing. And during adolescence it often morphs into robbery, assault, lying, stealing, fraud, and burglary.

Throughout this escalation, coercion remains at the heart of antisocial behavior. "As children grow older, they learn that the more noxious and painful they can make their behavior to others, the more likely they are to accomplish their goals – whether that goal is to avoid taking out the trash or escape a set of difficult mathematics problems. An important key to preventing this escalation (and therefore avoiding years of difficult behavior) is for adults to avoid surrendering in the face of coercive tactics used by the child."

It's clear from this account why early intervention is so important. But early intervention in schools, the authors report, is rare. Surveys show that between 2 and 6 percent of American children have some form of conduct disorder. These are the

children who will disrupt their classrooms and overwhelm their teachers, and eventually get into more serious trouble. But school systems typically identify slightly less than one percent of their students as having emotional or behavioral problems. And the tendency is for schools to identify these children quite late in their school careers. This disparity suggests that large numbers of students who need supports and services for emotional disturbance are not being referred, evaluated, or served under special education. Only in adolescence, when their problems have become much more severe, are they finally identified and served.

The good news is that there is substantial knowledge about how to head off this progression to serious difficulties – if interventions are made early in children's school careers. How can schools do this?

• *First, by being academically effective* – "The fact is, academic achievement and good behavior reinforce each other: "Experiencing some success academically is related to decreases in acting out; conversely, learning positive behaviors is related to doing better academically. "

• *Second, through good classroom management* – Schools can reduce the downstream aggressive behavior of young boys by good classroom management in the elementary grades. One study showed that boys who entered school with a tendency toward aggressive behavior had odds of 3 to 1 of being highly aggressive in middle school if they were in orderly classrooms, and a 59 to 1 chance if they had been assigned to chaotic classrooms. This and other studies suggest that "poor classroom management is a huge, but preventable, factor in the development of antisocial behavior – and conversely that effective classroom management can have an enormous long-term positive effect on behavior."

The authors recommend three levels of intervention to head off antisocial behavior at the pass. The strategy is to start with an inexpensive schoolwide intervention and then add on more intensive interventions for the most troubled youngsters.

• *Schoolwide intervention* – The first layer of intervention is a "universal" program of schoolwide and classroom procedures and social skills training. This is akin to a polio vaccination – it affects all children, even those who don't need it. A good schoolwide intervention includes:

- a consistently enforced schoolwide behavior code (they recommend EBS – Effective Behavior Support)
- social skills training (they recommend Second Step)

- appropriately-delivered adult praise for positive behavior;
- individual and group reinforcements and penalties;
- time-out

"No single technique applied in isolation will have an enduring impact," the authors write. "Used together, however, they are effective – especially for antisocial students age 8 and younger."

Schoolwide programs accomplish three things: (a) they improve the behavior of all students – and most students, even if they aren't troublemakers, still need some practice being well-behaved; (b) universal interventions have the greatest impact on students who are on the margins – just beginning to become aggressive or defiant; and (c) the universal programs are a foundation for more intensive work for antisocial children.

• *Selected interventions* – Once an effective universal discipline program is in place and the school is reasonably orderly, the antisocial students "pop up like corks in water." These students have selected themselves as needing more powerful "selected" interventions. These usually, but not always, involve counseling, parent outreach, etc.

• *Intensive intervention* – The vast majority of antisocial students will benefit greatly from the first two layers of intervention. But schools can expect a very small percentage of antisocial students (about 1-5 percent of the total youth population) to require more intensive intervention involving support from mental health, juvenile justice, and social service agencies. They mention First Step and MST (Multisystemic Therapy) as effective programs for early elementary grades. Most public schools cannot run programs like these, and will need to send these extreme cases to alternative settings.

Essential at the second and third stage is an effective early screening and identification of potentially antisocial students. The authors recommend a "multiple-gating" approach, starting by screening all students (e.g., teachers nominating students who are having difficulty in the classroom and playground) and becoming progressively more precise as the process zeros in on the most troubled students.

These programs, the research shows, "have the potential to prevent countless acts of aggression and positively influence both school and family functioning. Disruptive behavior will decrease and teaching time will increase, allowing all children to learn more. Office discipline referrals will decrease, freeing up school staff to address other school needs like supporting instruction. Effective programs do

require an upfront investment of time and energy, but over the school year, and certainly over the school career, they more than 'pay for themselves' in terms of teaching time won back."

"Heading Off Disruptive Behavior" by Hill Walker, Elizabeth Ramsey, and Frank Gresham, *American Educator,* Winter 2003/2004 (Vol. 27 #4 p. 6-21, 45)
http://www.aft.org/american_educator/winter03-04/early_intervention.html

2. Avoiding No-Win Confrontations with Defiant Students

The authors of the preceding article focus in this piece on the dynamic that occurs every day between a difficult student and an impatient teacher. An example:

- A student is in a highly agitated state (which may not be noticeable).
- The teacher assigns a task to the student (or a group of students).
- The student refuses to perform the task.
- The teacher confronts the student about his or her refusal.
- The student questions, argues with, or defies the teacher.
- The teacher reprimands the student and demands compliance.
- The student explodes at the teacher; the situation escalates out of control.

If the student "wins", the teacher's ability to manage the classroom is seriously compromised. But if the teacher "wins", the victory is likely to be short-lived and be very costly in the long run.

Standard methods for dealing with antisocial students are ineffective because, the authors say, these students "come to school well versed in the 'science' of coercion, having had extensive practice at home. When teachers issue an instruction with which these students do not want to comply, they escalate their noncompliance to higher and higher intensity levels until the instruction is withdrawn. This is called the behavior escalation game and it is a game teachers cannot win and should not play."

The authors provide some general rules for avoiding these kinds of fruitless escalations:

• Use only as many commands and directives as you need in order to teach and manage the classroom.

• Use more initiating commands ("Mike, read this passage out of your book aloud to the class.") versus terminating commands ("Don, stop talking to Frank right now!").

• Give only one command at a time.

• Be specific and direct; get students' attention, establish eye contact, and describe what you want in a firm voice using clear, explicit, laconic "alpha" command language (as opposed to vaguer, more verbose "beta" language).

• Allow a reasonable time (at least 10 seconds) for the student to respond.

• Do not repeat the command or nag. Try another consequence or approach.

• Give commands while standing near the student, not from a distance. This is particularly important with antisocial students.

• Do not initiate contact with a student when he or she appears to be agitated.

• Do not allow yourself to become engaged through a series of questions and answers initiated by an agitated student.

• Do not attempt to force a student's hand. Don't hover, wait, glare, give verbal reprimands, or use social intimidation, and don't touch, grab, or shake a student. If you need help, call for it.

"How Disruptive Students Escalate Hostility and Disorder – and How Teachers Can Avoid It" by Hill Walker, Elizabeth Ramsey, and Frank Gresham, *American Educator*, Winter 2003/2004 (Vol. 27 #4 p. 22-27, 47)
http://www.aft.org/american_educator/winter03-04/disruptive.html

3. Students Think They Get It – But They Don't!

Often students think they "get" something in the classroom or in their homework reading and ease off in their level of mental effort (stop listening, reading, working, or participating – in other words, check out) because they think they're all set. But when it comes time to show their mastery (on a test, for example), they find they didn't really understand or remember it after all. The question is, how do we know when we really know something? Sometimes this is easy. We know that George Washington was the first president of the U.S., and we know that we *don't* know the names of two novels by Anthony Trollope. But there is a lot in between these two clear extremes, for example, thinking we know how to drive somewhere and then finding that we don't know all the turns and get lost.

One way this happens is when we are familiar with something. This can fool our minds into thinking we know more than we do. Familiarity is different from recollection, but they can easily blur together in students' minds, giving them the *feeling* that they know something at a deeper level. Another way of being misled about our level of mastery is if we have partial knowledge – we know part of it, and assume we know all of it.

To combat the spurious feeling of knowing, the author recommends several classroom strategies:

• Make it clear to students that the standard of knowing is the ability to explain it to others.

• Require students to articulate what they know in writing or orally, thereby making what they know and don't know explicit, and therefore easier to evaluate, and easier to build on or revise. It's not enough to ask the class if everyone understands (silence) or call on one student.

• Begin each day (or selected days) with a written self test.

• Ask students to do self tests at home or in preparing for exams. Study buddies are great for this.

• Help students prepare for examinations with teacher-created study guides that tell them critical questions and key elements to the unit.

"Ask the Cognitive Scientist: Why Students Think They Understand – When They Don't" by Daniel Willingham, *American Educator*, Winter 2003/2004 (Vol. 27 #4 p. 38-41, 48) http://www.aft.org/american_educator/winter03-04/cognitive.html

4. Leaders Need to Be Careful Whom They Confide In

This article from a business journal is directly applicable to school leadership. A leader is often the most isolated and protected person in an organization, and it's difficult to do the job without talking to someone about what you're experiencing. As a result, most leaders develop a close relationship with a trusted colleague and share their thoughts and fears with this confidant. Many leader-confidant relationships work well, with the confidant acting in the best interests of the boss and not abusing their position.

But almost as many confidants do abuse their access to the leader's innermost thoughts. They can cause untold damage for their bosses and the organization as a whole. There are three types of destructive confidants:

- *Reflectors* mirror the boss, constantly reassuring him or her that they are the "fairest in the land."
- *Insulators* buffer the leader from the rest of the organization, keeping vital information from getting in or out.
- *Usurpers* cleverly ingratiate themselves to the boss while taking on more and more power themselves.

The problem is that the boss may be the last one to know if the confidant is not serving him or her well. Here are five signs to watch for:

1. *People complain that you're inaccessible*. It may be that your own personality keeps people from approaching you, but if this is true, you need to address that problem directly rather than relying on a confidant to buffer you from other people in the organization.
2. *You feel that no one but your confidant understands you*. It's natural for a leader to have a few trusted advisers, but if you rely exclusively on and overvalue the opinions of a particular individual, you are in serious danger. You need to seek out other people who "get" you.
3. *Your confidant discourages you from seeking other counsel*. If an advisor tries to keep other people from getting close to you and feeds your distrust and suspicion of others, it may be a sign that he or she is trying to wrest power from you. Show them the door quickly.
4. *Your adviser starts to call the shots*. "Svengali-like confidants are dangerous to you and your reputation. Find someone who can genuinely listen to you and can offer you constructive criticism."
5. *Your confidant praises you to the heavens*. "If your confidant lays it on thick and is afraid to tell you the unvarnished truth, you may already have trouble on your hands." You should look around for a trusted adviser who gives you the brutal facts and doesn't feel compelled to inflate your ego.

"Worse Than Enemies: The CEO's Destructive Confidant" by Kerry Sulkowicz, *Harvard Business Review*, February 2004 (Vol. 82 #2 p. 65-71)

5. The Dalmatian, Its Spots, and Educational Research

In this commentary piece on the back page of the current *Education Week*, Siegfried Englemann (one of the creators of Direct Instruction) points to a telling flaw in some education research (including the National Reading Panel's 2000 report). Here is a non-educational example of this illogic:

If a dog is a Dalmatian, it has spots.

Therefore, if a dog has spots, it is a Dalmatian.

The parallel in educational research goes like this:

If a beginning-reading program is highly effective, it has various features: phonics, phonemic awareness, and so on.

Therefore, if a program has these features, it will be highly effective.

The flaw is obvious. There is a lot more to a Dalmatian than having spots, and there is a lot more to programs that boost reading achievement than having certain characteristics. In the case of reading, these might include:

- the amount of new material introduced in each lesson;
- the nature of the reviews that children receive;
- the ways the program tests mastery;
- the number of times something is presented in a structured context before it occurs in other contexts;
- the way the material is sequenced;
- the way the program is field-tested.

So a program may have some of the "effectiveness" factors, but lack other key ingredients and be ineffective. Yet, says Englemann, all-too many educational researchers [and vendors] use this kind of logic to push particular approaches. Here's another example of this flawed logic:

> There are different types of phonemic-awareness activities.
>
> There's oral blending, rhyming, alliteration, segmentation, phoneme insertion, and phoneme deletion.
>
> Therefore, any combination of these activity types would meet the requirement of phonemic awareness, and the best versions of phonemic awareness would have all types.

Englemann worries that some states take these "research based" recommendations and use them as adoption criteria for new programs, preventing school people from buying a real Dalmatian because it doesn't meet all the criteria. For example, a "standard" might say that the program has to have "the full range of phonemic-awareness exercises (including activities that are ill-suited for beginning at-risk students, like phoneme deletion). If effective program X does not have *all of them*, it fails to meet a 'research based' standard, even though it is highly effective and there is no evidence that the adopted programs are effective."

The solution, Englemann says, is "to excise this medieval logic and to be more straightforward about identifying *specific programs that work*, without pretending that the analysts are able to identify the full set of variables that make the program effective… If the goal is to identify programs that are effective, why not take the most direct route and simply identify them without the questionable analyses?"

Englemann also worries that many teachers do their own mixing and matching of program components, compromising the original integrity of the program as

designed and tested. "How many years," he asks, "would it take for an average teacher to 'discover' or 'create' an excellent combination (given that it would be hard to try out more than one or two combinations a year in a classroom)? What kinds of records would be needed to make this enterprise systematic? How does this pursuit fit in with the district-adopted program and practices? Where does the teacher get the funds and the time that may be necessary to evaluate the results?" And what will happen to the teacher's students while all this experimenting is going on?

Instead, Englemann says that schools and districts should adopt research-proven programs and implement them with integrity.

"The Dalmatian and Its Spots" by Siegfried Englemann, *Education Week*, January 28, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #20, p. 48, 34, 35)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=20engelmann.h23

6. Short Items:

• ***Cheating on Regents tests*** – An article in the *New York Post* last week reported that some New York City teachers "scrub" the essays their students write for the high-stakes Regents tests – they revise the papers of students who are close to passing. "I'm sorry if it's shocking for laymen to hear," said an anonymous Manhattan teacher. "Scrubbing is something we have to do to help kids get their asses out of high school." Chester Finn, in a scathing commentary on the practice, said there are three possible responses to the pressure teachers feel to get their students up to par on challenging state tests: "One is to do the job. Another is to take a pass, not get the job done, and criticize the test. A third is to cheat. Generally we would characterize these responses, respectively, as the correct response, passing the buck, and unethical." Apparently, Finn says, it did not occur to these New York City teachers that teaching their students how to write a proficient essay was an option.

"Teachers Cheat" by Carl Campanile, *New York Post*, January 26, 2004 , quoted in *The Education Gadfly*, January 29, 2004 (Vol. 4, #4)

• ***Reading books with elder tutors*** – This article describe in great detail a program that paired eighth-grade students with elders in the community and got them corresponding through response journals as they read works of literature (books like *A Child Called It* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*). The article emphasized the importance of a warm, emotional component to reading, and concluded, "If lifetime of literate participation involves emotional as well as cognitive involvement,

then it makes sense to provide instructional opportunities that, like these elder-adolescent partnerships, dissolve the accustomed distinction between heart and mind."

"Expanding the Web of Meaning: Thought and Emotion in an Intergenerational Reading and Writing Program" by Anne DiPardo and Pat Schnack, *Reading Research Quarterly*, January/February/March 2004 (Vol. 39, # 1, p. 14-37) No e-link available.

• ***Watch those units!*** – In this vivid and delightfully-written article in *American Educator*, Chatham, NY teacher Steve Silverman shows how he motivates his high-school students to remember units (feet, pounds, degrees) in their papers and tests. He uses the true story of an Air Canada Boeing 767 running out of fuel over Canada and barely escaping disaster. Can you guess why?

"Mayday at 41,000 Feet – Watch Those Units!" by Steve Silverman, *American Educator*, Winter 2003-2004 (Vol. 27 #4 p. 42-44)
http://www.aft.org/american_educator/winter03-04/mayday.html

• ***Ambivalence about spelling*** – Despite the belief among some educators and parents that teaching spelling is a waste of time in an era of instant spell-checking software, despite the desire of some teachers to focus on creativity, and despite the idea that spelling is an innate ability (either you have it or you don't), spelling is making something of a comeback in schools. Key characteristics associated with good spelling are a deeper understanding of language, extensive vocabularies, and practice. Middle and high-school teachers can't take solid groundwork for granted and need to keep working on spelling through graduation. Janet Karman, a Massachusetts high-school English teacher, expects final drafts of papers to have perfect spelling. More than three errors means a drop of two-thirds of a grade (e.g., from B to C+). "I try to walk that line, not wanting kids to be constrained, but knowing you lose credibility if you can't spell, you can't speak well, you can't write well," she said. John King, co-director of Roxbury Preparatory Charter School, said that spelling is important for his middle-school students because, like it or not, "people make judgments, especially about our kids who are urban students of color." Urban minority students who misspell or misuse words may be labeled as poorly educated or unintelligent, said King.

[Speaking of spelling, the movie "Spellbound" is wonderful, and it just came out on video/DVD. The engaging and moving documentary follows eight 8th-graders from around the U.S. who made it to the national spelling bee in Washington, D.C.]

"Spelling Making a Comeback in Schools," Laura Pappano, *Boston Globe*, Jan. 25, 2004
http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/mcas/articles/2004/01/25/spelling_making_a_comeback_in_school/

Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, or if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should be covered, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo aims to keep busy principals, teachers, and other educators very well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is your "designated reader," searching through a wide range of publications the week they come out, zeroing in on the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning at the school level, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Target topics include the following:

• *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; supervision and evaluation of teachers; time management.

• *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; professional development of teachers; teacher leadership and career ladders; multiple intelligences and brain research.

• *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in sight; teaching for understanding; new ideas in reading, writing, and math.

• *Assessment* – Aligned formative and summative assessments; using data and student work for continuous improvement; graphic display of student achievement data; standardized testing and the debate on standards.

• *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/economic achievement gap; the innate-ability/intelligence/effective effort debate; safety-net programs.

• *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development; parent involvement; and community partnerships.

• *And…* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Curriculum/Education Update (ASCD)
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Middle School Journal
New York Times
New Yorker
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

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