Marshall Memo 96

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 18, 2005

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"If you give kids the formula to write an essay, you're taking away the very thinking that a writer engages in."
Nancy Patterson, Michigan professor, on the five-paragraph essay (see item #1)

"They come up with things I never would have dreamed of. They have made my own, personal understanding of math so much deeper."
Malinda Evans, Albuquerque fifth-grade teacher on peer tutoring (see item #2)

"You studied a language in high school? How would you like to learn algebra in that language?"
Deborah Short, Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington (*ibid*.)

"When vision problems go undetected, children almost invariably have trouble reading and doing their schoolwork. They often display fatigue, fidgeting, and frustrations in the classroom – traits that can lead to a misdiagnosis of dyslexia or other learning disabilities."
American Optometric Association (see item #3)

"I feel, like, not scared, because it's going to be the same. Well, different work, but the same teacher. She's a nice teacher. I love Ms. Cohen."
Zachary, a kindergarten student, on looping with his teacher (see item #4)

"That's just the way things are."
Seventh-grade students on gender inequities in their school (see item #5)

1. Prisoners of the Five-Paragraph Essay

In last Wednesday's *New York Times* education column, Michael Winerip tells a troubling story: Becky Karnes, a Michigan high-school English teacher, comes back from a summer writing course all fired up with new ideas for improving writing instruction – but says she can't use any of the ideas because she has to drill her students on the five-paragraph essay for the state test. "There's no time to do creative writing and develop authentic voice," says Karnes. "That would take weeks and weeks. There are three essays on the state test and we start prepping right at the start of the year. We have to teach to the state test… and we know if we teach them the five-paragraph essay formula, they'll pass that test."

Those who create state tests say it's a mistake for schools to teach one way to write an essay. But teachers cling to the formula and its spreads like kudzu, says Nancy Patterson, a Grand Valley, Michigan professor who teaches writing courses. "A lot, particularly the younger ones, have been raised on the five-paragraph formula, and are insecure about their own writing," she said. "They drink up what we do here, but then go back to teach to the test. It shuts them down. It narrows the curriculum. If you give kids the formula to write an essay, you're taking away the very thinking that a writer engages in. Kids are less apt to develop a writer's thinking skills."

Many English teachers have developed a standard five-paragraph template with blanks to fill in:

- Topic sentence: ___
- Literary example: ___
- Historical example: ___
- Current event: ___
- Concluding sentence: ___

Patterson concedes that a formulaic approach to writing might help some struggling students pass the state test. "But it turns into a prison," she says. "It stops you from finding a kid's potential."

What's to be done? In her writing classes, Patterson has teachers write every day. She has them draw maps of their neighborhoods, then write a story about something that happened there. They envision a character they'd like to create, make a paper doll of it, then pair up with another student and together write a story with the two characters interacting. "You're teaching them narrative – how to tell stories that are dear to them," says Patterson. She has them read essays that start a hundred

different ways: with a quote, a question, a simple declaration of a problem, a run-on sentence, a word or two.

"Study Great Ideas, but Teach to the Test" by Michael Winerip in *New York Times*, July 13, 2005 http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/13/education/13education.html

2. Bridging the Math Language Gap with English-Language Learners

Here's a common assumption: math is a universal language and even students who are not yet proficient in English can excel. Not true, say many educators who have wrestled with teaching arcane mathematical terms to English-language learners. Numbers and operations are universal, but many of the terms used in math classes almost never come up in everyday conversation, for example, "quotient" and "exponent." In addition, some words are used differently in math classes than they are elsewhere, for example, "table" and "difference" (with the latter, many students assume that they are being asked to describe the different characteristics of two numbers rather than subtract them). Students who have studied math in other countries may find that familiar symbols, expressions, and methods are different in the U.S.

The challenge of teaching a solid mathematical vocabulary to English-language learners is trickier in classrooms where some of the students are fluent in English. For example, Malinda Evans's fifth-grade classroom in a working-class area of Albuquerque, New Mexico has nine students who are proficient in English and eleven who are not. Evans is highly systematic in the way she teaches mathematical terms, and does so in a way that supports the language development of all students. Among the tricks she has developed:

- She insists that all students use standard English verbs, for example, "I added two and two" rather than "I plused two and two."
- She uses an overhead projector, writing out terms as she pronounces them.
- She avoids lengthy definitions.
- She points out similarities in the roots of words in the two languages, for example, equilateral triangles can be remembered as *igual* and *lado* in Spanish (equal and side).
- She encourages students who are proficient in English to help classmates, using whatever approach will get the point across.

"They come up with things I never would have dreamed of," said Evans. "They have made my own, personal understanding of math so much deeper."

National attention is being focused on scaffolding the mathematical vocabulary of English-language learners. This summer, the National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics is drafting a "road map" to help teachers and administrators address the math language needs of students who are learning English. "I like to ask people: 'You studied a language in high school? How would you like to learn algebra in that

language?'" says Deborah Short of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington. "Well, that's what thousands of kids are doing, every day… Language is a big piece of mathematics."

"Math: the Not-So-Universal Language" by Sean Cavanagh in *Education Week*, July 13, 2005 (Vol. 24, #42, p. 1, 22) http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/07/13/42math.h24.html

3. Vision Problems: A Hidden Source of School Failure

The standard vision screening performed by school nurses and doctors – reading letters and numbers on a wall chart – fails to pick up vision problems that can cripple a child's ability to read well and begin a downward spiral of classroom failure, low self-esteem, behavioral problems, and poor performance on standardized tests. Vision is a much more complex process than reading a wall chart: it involves over 20 visual abilities and more than 65 percent of all the pathways to the brain. Failing to diagnose vision problems has a direct impact on student achievement: according to Dr. Lynn Hellerstein, a recent three-year study of 540 children found that those who had difficulties with visual perception and eye movement did not perform well on reading tests.

How many students are affected? The American Public Health Association says: "Twenty-five percent of students in grades K-6 have visual problems that are serious enough to impede learning." The American Optometric Association says, "When vision problems go undetected, children almost invariably have trouble reading and doing their schoolwork. They often display fatigue, fidgeting, and frustrations in the classroom – traits that can lead to a misdiagnosis of dyslexia or other learning disabilities." The Vision Council of America adds, "It is estimated that 80% of children with a learning disability have an undiagnosed vision problem."

Unfortunately, teachers and parents are quick to assume that children who are having difficulty learning to read are "lazy," "not trying hard enough," "AD(H)D," or "learning disabled." And children often don't report symptoms because they think everyone sees the same way they do (see the e-link below for a chart showing the way the printed page looks to a child with vision problems).

The bottom line: what all students need when they enter school (and at regular intervals during their school years) is a complete eye and vision evaluation by an eye doctor – followed by vision therapy or eyeglasses for those found to have vision problems.

"An Overlooked Basic: Early Testing for Vision Problems" from the College of Optometrists in Vision Development (http://www.visionforlearning.org)
(spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, July 13, 2005)

4. Looping Benefits

Looping (teachers keeping the same group of students for two or more years) is on the rise, according to this *New York Times* article. Most looping occurs in elementary schools, but some middle schools are also trying it. Proponents point to several benefits:

- Teachers get to know their students extremely well – their strengths and weaknesses.
- Teachers have more time to get to know parents.
- Children know the teachers' expectations and methods.
- Mutual familiarity saves a lot of time at the beginning of the school year.

The real payoff of looping comes in the fall of the second year. Leslie Cohen, a kindergarten teacher in Ardsley, New York, has always felt that the first six to eight weeks of the school year are chaotic and stressful for kids, with not a lot of learning taking place. With looping, she says, "we can basically pick up where we left off."

Research on looping, while not extensive, is positive. East Cleveland, a predominantly poor, African-American school district in Ohio, experimented with looping from 1993-1997, keeping elementary students with their teachers for three years. Looped students scored an average of 25 percentage points higher on standardized tests of reading, language arts, and math than non-looped students. Frederick Hampton, a professor who oversaw the research, said, "It had occurred to me over a number of years that children, particularly from inner-city areas, need a different model of school, a more family-oriented model, in order to be successful, something that would allow them to see familiar faces, familiar teachers."

Despite the great results, East Cleveland stopped looping when the district reorganized in 1997. Hampton believes that more districts don't adopt looping because they have one concept of what "school" should be like and can't deviate from it. It's also challenging for teachers, who have to learn the curriculum for two or more grade levels. And if parents are less than thrilled with their child's teacher, they might object to a second year. But many teachers are already experienced at more than one grade level, and parents can be given the option of non-looped class.

Leslie Cohen, for one, is a looping fan. "Right now, I love it," she says. I love the connection I feel with the class. I think both for myself and for the parents, there's been a palpable sense of commitment. I'm really, really excited to start the school year again with them." Zachary, one of her students, has the same feeling. Asked about going to first grade, he said, "I feel, like, not scared, because it's going to be the same. Well, different work, but the same teacher. She's a nice teacher. I love Ms. Cohen."

"Goodbye, Class. See You Again in the Fall" by Alan Finder in *New York Times*, July 11, 2005, available for $3.95 at http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F6071EFD3F540C728DDDAE0894DD404482&incamp=archive:search

5. What Kind of Difference Does Gender Equity Make?

In a lengthy study reported in the July issue of *Teachers College Record*, three researchers hypothesize that gender equity in the classroom (i.e., teachers treating boys and girls fairly and equally) would result in: (a) boys and girls' "gender ideologies" being less stereotypical (i.e., boys being less boisterous and more academically proficient, girls being less shy and more assertive in getting help); (b) better psychological health for both sexes; and (c) better academic achievement all around.

The study (which was carried out in a small seventh-grade classroom in a private school) found that the hypothesis was mostly borne out, but with a couple of twists: in terms of academic achievement, the impact of gender-fair teachers was positive for girls and neutral for boys. In terms of psychological health, the impact of gender equity was positive for boys (less risk-taking) and inconsistent for girls.

"Why does gender ideology matter so much?" ask the authors toward the end of their article. When unchallenged, they believe, the "conventional wisdom" about how boys and girls "naturally are" can lead both sexes down blind alleys. If girls believe that they are naturally shy and need very little in the way of support and guidance, they will underperform academically and set themselves up for adverse psychological effects later on. If boys believe that they are naturally more boisterous and less talented academically, and yet continue to carry around a sense of entitlement (despite my current poor performance, things will be "all right" for me in the future), they are headed for trouble – especially if they are less economically advantaged. "We were struck," write the authors, "by this seeming blind faith in the future and had the distinct feeling that these boys may later confront unexpected closed doors."

The authors conclude by sharing their discouragement at how readily boys and girls in the study accepted gender inequities, saying "that's just the way things are." The authors advocate for a more robust definition of gender equity – one that looks less at process and more at results.

"We've Come a Long Way – Maybe: New Challenges for Gender Equity in Education" by Renee Spencer, Michelle Porche, and Deborah Tolman in *Teachers College Record*, July 2005 (Vol. 105, #9, . 1774-1807), e-link for subscribers only: http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=11564

6. Science Assessment Suggestions

A panel of university and K-12 experts suggests the following basic skills that should be part of science tests being designed for No Child Left Behind assessments:

- Define concepts and describe how they relate to other areas of science.
- Design and conduct experiments.
- Pose questions about science that can be answered through investigations.
- Conduct measurements.

- Use data and graphs to organize and display information.
- Make predictions, using knowledge of scientific principles and relationships.
- Construct explanations, based on scientific evidence.

"NRC Weighs In on States' Science Assessments" by Sean Cavanagh in *Education Week*, July 13, 2005 (Vol. 24, #42, p. 5)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/07/13/42science.h24.html

7. Short Items:

a. Preventing dating violence – According to a nationwide survey commissioned by New York City-based clothing manufacturer Liz Claiborne, Inc., 57 percent of teenagers know friends who have experienced physical, sexual, or verbal abuse in dating relationships, and only 33 percent of those who had been in or known about abusive relationships said they reported the incidents. Claiborne has sponsored a dating violence prevention curriculum that will be piloted in ten high schools this year. Developed by Education Development Center (EDC) in Massachusetts, the *Love Is Not Abuse* program teaches students to recognize, respond to, and seek help for victims suffering relationship abuse. For information on the survey and the curriculum, go to http://www.loveisnotabuse.com .

"Lessons in Love" by Jessica Tonn in *Education Week*, July 13, 2005 (Vol. 24, #42, p. 3)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/07/13/42take.h24.html

b. Mentoring advice – MENTOR has just released a comprehensive tool kit containing step-by-step instructions for an effective mentoring program: design and planning, management, operations, and evaluation. It also contains a CD with more than 160 tools and templates that can be customized to suit individual program needs. Available free at: http://www.mentoring.org/program_staff/eeptoolkit/index.php

Spotted in *PEN Weekly Newsblast*, July 13, 2005

c. Support material for ELL students – The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has just launched a website to support the success of English-language learners. The website includes: best instructional practices for teaching reading and content; strategies for appropriate placement and assessment of English-language learners; a toolkit on effective outreach to Hispanic families; bilingual (Spanish-English) information for parents on how to help their children succeed in school; and research-based information on effective school interventions for ELL students. The website's rather curious name – Colorin Colorado – comes from the popular and playful ending phrase to virtually all children's stories and fairy tales in Spanish-speaking countries;

there is no literal translation, but it is similar to "and lived happily ever after." See http://www.colorincolorado.org .

Spotted in *PEN Weekly Newsblast*, July 13, 2005

d. Live zoo cameras on line – Webcams have been set up to follow the movements of animals at three sites. Check out the elephants at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. at http://nationalzoo.si.edu/Animals/AsianElephants/default.cfm and the cheetahs at http://nationalzoo.si.edu/Animals/AfricanSavanna/.
At the Monterey Aquarium in California, you can watch the sharks at http://www.montereybayaquarium.org/efc/efc_smm/smm_cam.asp?bhcp=1.
And at the San Diego Zoo, you can follow the movements of the ever-popular pandas at http://www.sandiegozoo.org/zoo/ex_panda_station.html.

Spotted in *ASCD SmartBrief*, July 13, 2005

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 best practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 35 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 39 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, provide e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the memo to subscribers every Monday (with occasional breaks; there were 50 issues in 2003-04).

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

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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)
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Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Harper's
Harvard Business Review
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Newsweek
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Reading Today
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Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record

E-links will be provided whenever possible.