

Marshall Memo 9

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 20, 2003

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Quote of the Week

“The best middle school teachers set high expectations and stick with them. They point out the good things a student does as much as – or more than – the bad ones. They can tell a child is having a cruddy day just by the cant of his shoulders. They hand back work promptly. (If not, kids bristle at the hypocrisy.) They explain why the right answer is right, and why it matters. They indulge questions about how banks work when the lesson is actually on the specific formulas for principal and interest, instead of staying, ‘Does anyone have any real questions?’” Linda Perlstein, *Not Much Just Chillin’: The Hidden Lives of Middle Schoolers* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux)

Factoids of the Week

- Number of Florida high-school students who take physical-education courses online: 1,204 (Florida Virtual School, Orlando)
- Minimum number of facts and rules with which a computer must be programmed to have common sense: 200,000,000 (Cycorp, Austin, Texas)

(Harper’s Index, *Harper’s Magazine*, November 2003 (Vol. 307, #1842, p. 13))

1. Helping Students Learn the Language of Power

Linda Christensen, who is language arts coordinator in the Portland Public Schools, writes about the challenge that urban teachers face correcting their students’ non-standard English without seeming to disrespect their culture and families. “Sure they can write great slam poetry,” she writes. “A few can write essays, but they are

often riddled with convention errors. Failing to learn these skills handcuffs students. Their lack of fluency with the language of power will follow them like the stench of poverty long after students leave school – silencing them by making them hesitant to speak in public meetings or write their outrage over public policy because they ‘talk wrong.’”

How can teachers nurture students’ writing and at the same time help them learn Standard English? First, Christensen says, by affirming what they do right. Too many students clam up because they are afraid of their teachers’ hyper-critical red pen. “You’re wrong. Wrong again. Ten points off for that comma splice. Where is the past tense?” But obviously giving only positive feedback to an error-filled paper is a dereliction of duty. So how does a teacher handle this without overwhelming and turning off the student? Here are Christensen’s recommendations:

- Do a scientific analysis of the kinds of errors students are making and keep each student’s error chart in a computer.
- Be selective about which errors to correct (capitalization, for example), and start with those areas.
- Show students their error charts for each composition and make them accountable for self-correcting before turning in a final draft. Christensen says this gets students doing the work of correcting rather than the teacher, and it takes less time than marking – and remarking – the same errors on paper after paper. She also says it is more effective; she sees fewer errors as the year progresses.
- When there is a pattern of errors in a class (punctuating dialogue, for example), teach a mini-lesson to improve skills in that area.
- When errors in writing are part of a student’s home language, the teacher needs to be clear that the usage isn’t “wrong” but that each language has its own way of making plurals or using verb tenses and students need to learn how to code switch. “Students need to explicitly learn the differences between their home language and Standard English,” says Christensen.
- Read books by authors who exemplify different genres – for example, Lucille Clifton, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Lois Yamanaka – and draw attention to their language patterns.
- Form a teacher study group to analyze students’ errors and plan strategies to improve their writing.

“The Politics of Correction” by Linda Christensen, *Rethinking Schools*, Fall 2003, (Vol. 18, #1, p. 20-24) http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/18_01/corr181.shtml

2. First-Year Teaching Without Tears

Robert Kirk, reflecting on his first year teaching high-school mathematics in Concord, North Carolina, attributes his smooth start in the profession to five factors:

- *A strong mentor program* – A seasoned teacher worked with him to share good ideas and alert him to “potential land mines.” The district provided monthly checklists (like those used by airline pilots) to make sure that mechanics, policies, procedures, and programs were covered.
- *A strong mentor* – She modeled what he needed to know about dealing with his students and showed genuine concern by frequently checking in with him. Her general knowledge of the profession, subject matter expertise, and sense of humor were all crucial.
- *A supportive department* – Colleagues were proactive, not reactive. Rather than saying, “Hey, if you need anything, just ask”, teachers handed him diskettes and folders crammed with lesson plans, pacing guides, worksheets, transparencies, etc. and said “Feel free to adapt it, adopt it, or chuck it.” In addition there was a lot of informal advice, great jokes, good food, and camaraderie.
- *A supportive administration* – He was grateful for the energy, intellect, ability to listen, and strong sense of purpose in his school’s administrators.
- *Supportive parents* – At the beginning of each semester, he called all parent to introduce himself, and was met with support and gratitude.

“No Tears Here: Surviving the First Year of Teaching” by Robert Kirk, *Education Week*, October 15, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #7, p. 37)

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=07kirk.h23>

3. Three Keys to Making Service Learning Work

Going out and doing community service is laudable (working in homeless shelters, answering telephones, dancing in ballets, etc.), and in Maryland service is a graduation requirement. But advocates say that if service learning stands alone, it will have little impact on student achievement. “Quality makes a huge difference,” says Shelley Billig, a researcher at RMC Research Corp. in Portsmouth, New Hampshire,

“You can’t leave it to chance.” She says there must be three components for service learning program to have a real impact on students:

- *Preparation*: a solid curriculum base in the classroom (for example, a civics class does a unit on homelessness with a discussion of government policies, mental-health issues, and proposed solutions to the problem).
- *Action*: hands-on, real-world experience (students spend time working in a homeless shelter and meeting people who are grappling with the issues).
- *Reflection*: back in the classroom, students discuss what they have learned (they write about their preconceived ideas of homelessness, what they would do if they were in that situation, and how they would work to solve the problem).

According to Billig, students who have this three-part experience are more engaged in school, score higher on tests, feel as if they can make a difference in the world, and retain what they’ve learned. This was particularly true of younger children. A study in Michigan found that well-crafted service learning brought significant gains for students in grades 3-6.

“Maryland Service Learning: Classroom Link Weak?” by Michelle Galley, *Education Week*, October 15, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #7, p. 6, 7)

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=07Mdservice.h23>

4. New York City Goes Against the Grain

A front-page article in the current *Education Week* reports on the controversy surrounding the progressive literacy and math curriculums recently adopted by the New York City public schools (which are quite different from the more back-to-basics, structured, and scripted programs being used by most other big-city school systems). Criticism has come from both sides: some call New York’s curriculum “fuzzy”, while the teachers’ union objects to what it calls a “cookie-cutter approach”.

Deputy Chancellor Diana Lam and other officials defend their choices. “I think that the critics think this curriculum is too rigorous and maybe poor children can’t do this,” said Lam. “We did not want to settle for anything but a rich and rigorous curriculum for our students.” Maria Diaz, principal of P.S. 72 in East Harlem, says that the new curriculum puts New York children closer to the path their peers in more privileged communities are taking. She hopes that the curriculum and teacher training that accompany it will bring her students closer to proficiency. “It’s not Brooklyn or Queens, it’s not uptown versus downtown,” she said.

Others emphasized that teacher training is the key. “What a struggling reader needs is more meaningful time reading a book with the support of a skilled teacher,” said Adele Schroeter, principal of P.S. 59 in Queens. “It’s harder to find research that says the program makes the difference than studies that show it’s professional development and teacher knowledge that make the difference.”

The union criticism that the curriculum is too prescriptive has focused on components that need to be included in every day’s instruction and specific classroom layouts and furniture arrangements, including the so-called “rocking chair rule” for read-aloud time. Clearly some teachers are pushing back and do not like being told how to teach core subjects and arrange their rooms.

Since the original adoption, steps have been taken to fill in some missing pieces in both math and literacy. Joanna Uhry, a Fordham University professor, was an early critic of New York’s approach, but has since become more positive. “They are taking the best of ‘whole language’ – the writing process, a student-centered approach – and the best of good phonics instruction.”

“N.Y.C. Hangs Tough Over Maverick Curriculum” by Kathleen Kennedy Manzo, *Education Week*, October 15, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #7, p. 1, 14, 15)
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=07NYCCurric.h23>

5. More on Urban Districts Missing the Boat on Teacher Hiring

Too many high-quality prospective teachers lose patience with the long urban-district hiring process and accept jobs in other districts that hire earlier. In this *Education Week* commentary article, Michelle Rhee and Jessica Levin summarize the recommendations of their New Teacher Project study on urban districts capturing top-notch teachers:

- Require resigning or retiring teachers to notify the district far earlier – by March 15th at the latest – and remove disincentives for early notification.
- Move up and expedite transfer processes, and work toward enabling principals and their schools to consider internal and external candidates equally.
- Move up school-level budget projections and implement initiatives to protect the hardest-to-staff schools from budget fluctuations.
- Revamp the human-resources department’s practices to increase the hiring role of schools and to create efficient and effective HR systems.

“Hiring Too Late... And Other Mistakes That Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms” by Michelle Rhee and Jessica Levin, *Ed. Week*, Oct. 15, 2003 (Vol.

XXIII, #7, p. 48, 37) <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=07rhee.h23> The full report is available at www.tntp.org

6. Quick Items

- *The accessible teacher* - "Every teacher should have a cellphone that is kept on till 10 p.m.," said Ryan Martinez, 16, a junior at YES College Preparatory School in Houston, Texas. In fact, his charter school has had such a policy in place for the last six years. Teachers are issued cellphones so students can call them in the evenings and on weekends, with off-limits hours agreed upon by each class and its teachers. Ryan added, "You don't call them for every little thing. That would be uncouth."

"Students' Technology Views Solicited" by Andrew Trotter, *Education Week*, October 15, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #7, p. 1, 16, 17)
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=07Kidspeak.h23>

- *The impact of home Internet access* – Does having access to the Internet at home make a difference for disadvantaged students? Michigan State University's HomeNetToo project gave 90 low-income families computers, Internet access, and in-home technical support for 16 months and tracked the results. Researchers found that the more time children spent online, the higher their grades and performance on reading tests – and computer use did not lead to social or psychological problems (as an earlier study had suggested). It appears that reading text-heavy Web pages accounts for the improvement. Although many of these families had access to the Internet at local libraries and community centers, unlimited home access was much better for children's school achievement.

"Net Gains: Internet Access Boosts Academic Achievement" by Thomas Sexton, *Psychology Today*, November/December 2003, (Vol. 36, #6, p. 24) For more on the study, check <http://www.msu.edu/user/jackso67/homenettoo/main.html>

- *Do violin lessons help?* – A Hong Kong study of 90 boys (ages 6-15) found that consistent music training was linked to better verbal (but not visual) memories – and the advantages seemed to last even after they stopped taking lessons. Half the boys in the Chinese University of Hong Kong study took individual violin lessons and played in the school's string orchestra; the other half had no musical training. When tested for verbal memory, the musicians did significantly better. And a follow-up study a year later found that the advantage of the musically-trained students endured – although the gains of those who had dropped music lessons leveled off. Researchers

theorize that the gains come from the involvement of the brain's left temporal lobe in both verbal and musical tasks.

"Fine Tuning the Brain: Music Lessons May Strengthen Verbal Skills" by Thomas Sexton, *Psychology Today*, November/December 2003 (Vol. 36, #6, p. 24). You can download the full study from <http://www.apa.org/journals/neu.html>

- **Book reviews** – *Education Week's* October 15th issue has capsule reviews of 14 books on bullying, teachers, and literacy. You can check them out at: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=07Books.h23>

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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 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 the “designated reader”, searching through a wide range of publications as soon as they come out, zeroing in on the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning, 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; time management.
- *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; supervision and evaluation of teachers; 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 for teaching reading, writing, and math; parent involvement.
- *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.
- *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
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Update (ASCD)
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Harvard School of Education Ed. Magazine
New York Times
New Yorker
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Rethinking Schools
Teacher Magazine
and occasional books, lectures, and websites.

If one of the summaries is of particular interest, subscribers are encouraged to read the full article. E-links will be provided whenever possible. If you would like to suggest additional publications, please be in touch.

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The Marshall Memo is published weekly (with occasional breaks), usually on Monday. Major support from Research for Better Teaching and New Leaders for New Schools makes it possible to offer individual subscriptions at \$50 a year. To subscribe, please contact Kim Marshall at kim.marshall8@verizon.net or at 222 Clark Road, Brookline, MA 02445 (617-566-4353).