Marshall Memo 50

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 23, 2004

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Go into any inner-city neighborhood and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach kids to learn. They know that parents have to parent, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white."

Barack Obama, keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention

"Too many of our children have come to believe that it's easier to become a black professional athlete than a doctor or lawyer. Reality check: according to the 2000 census, there were more than 31,000 black physicians and surgeons, 33,000 black lawyers and 5,000 black dentists. Guess how many black athletes are playing professional basketball, football and baseball *combined*. About 1,400. In fact, there are more board-certified black cardiologists than there are black professional basketball players."

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The New York Times* Op Ed page, August 1, 2004

"Within the professional culture of teaching, it is commonly believed that if something is taught (which usually means explained or demonstrated), it is automatically learned. If it is not learned, then the problem lies in the inadequacy of the student's ability, motivation, or persistence, not in the ineffectiveness of the instruction."

Graham Nuthall (see item #1)

"Teachers often feel that learning outcomes are unpredictable, mysterious and uncontrollable."

Kennedy (1999b) quoted in item #1

"At the heart of the problem that teachers face in the classroom is knowing what is going on in the minds of the students."

Graham Nuthall (*ibid*.)

"You are reporting data, but aren't you creating another way to tell me how dumb my kid is?"

A parent in Poway, California commenting on the district's data-sharing
(in *American School Board Journal*, September 2004, p. 54)

1. The Link Between Teachers' Teaching and Students' Learning

In this thought-provoking article, New Zealand professor Graham Nuthall asserts that educational research has failed to draw a clear connection between what teachers do in their classrooms and what students learn. It is no surprise that most teachers view research somewhat casually, which drives researchers crazy: "When teachers read research reports, they consider them primarily a source of useful ideas about things they might try when circumstances permit… Researchers, on the other hand, believe their research should shape practice directly… not just as something to provide suggestions or provoke thought, but as proof that teachers should use the method in their classrooms."

Because researchers have not provided a compelling theory of action about how classroom activities lead to improved student learning, "[t]eachers often feel that learning outcomes are unpredictable, mysterious and uncontrollable" (Kennedy 1999b). "Teachers," says Nuthall, "are not explicitly concerned with student learning as they manage student participation in classroom activities. Their main concerns are about student behavior and motivation, about managing activities and resources, and about completing activities within the time available… Within the professional culture of teaching, it is commonly believed that if something is taught (which usually means explained or demonstrated), it is automatically learned. If it is not learned, then the problem lies in the inadequacy of the student's ability, motivation, or persistence, not in the ineffectiveness of the instruction."

The bulk of the article is taken up with Nuthall's critique of four types of research that have been done on teacher effects:

- *Studies of exemplary teachers* – Picking teachers who are considered effective (by their principals or colleagues), this type of research examines what such teachers do on a daily basis. But Nuthall believes that a teacher's reputation, no matter how well founded, is not a reliable indicator of effectiveness in promoting student learning. In addition, he says that there is no way of knowing if what the teacher does in the classroom is what causes improved student learning: "There are probably many things that teachers do and say in classrooms that have no effect on student learning, and there is no way that an observer in the classroom can distinguish them from the things that have a significant effect without knowing what to look for in advance."
- *Correlational and experimental studies* – Studies that look at inputs (instruction) and outputs (student learning results) appear to be a better way to measure teacher effectiveness. But Nuthall believes that such studies do not capture the interactive and

contextual nature of teaching and cannot be applied outside the setting in which they were conducted. He also notes that every student experiences a classroom differently, so to get valid data, we would need to study the reactions of every child to instruction.

• *Experimental studies* – Another approach to pinning down the teaching-learning link is to design careful experiments in which teachers teach in a specified manner and then students' learning is measured. But Nuthall believes that such studies cannot be generalized beyond the experimental sites and fall far short of the kind of data needed to explain teaching and learning in a convincing fashion.

• *Teacher action research and the development of craft knowledge* – Nuthall says that such studies can provide valuable insights on teaching and learning, but they need to be replicated many times before they form a solid theory on which classroom inputs reliably lead to student learning.

Nuthall describes two classrooms in which close monitoring of what students were muttering to themselves and saying to students sitting next to them revealed the amount of confusion, misunderstanding, and off-task behavior that goes on even in a classroom in which competent and well-intentioned instruction appears to be going on. Nuthall has come to believe that it is virtually impossible for teachers to keep track of what most of their students are thinking and learning. He concludes: "At the heart of the problem that teachers face in the classroom is knowing what is going on in the minds of the students… I believe that the professional knowledge base that is most needed to improve the quality of teaching and teacher education is knowledge about the ways in which classroom activities, including teaching, affect the changes taking place in the minds of students: what students know and believe and what they can do with their knowledge."

What does Nuthall suggest to build solid theories on what works? His ideal model for disentangling the complexities of the teaching-learning connection involves the following elements:

- Before-and-after data on *each student's* knowledge and skills (i.e., a value-added approach);
- Collecting continuous data during classes on what each student is experiencing (using numerous ceiling-mounted zoom-lens cameras and student-worn microphones);
- Continuous data on classroom activities and what the teacher is doing;

- Analysis linking classroom activities, student experiences, and learning processes;
- Looking at individual learning experiences before (carefully) drawing generalizations;
- Linking any explanatory theories to relevant evidence from the classroom.

"Relating Classroom Teaching to Student Learning: A Critical Analysis of Why Research Has Failed to Bridge the Theory-Practice Gap" by Graham Nuthall, *Harvard Educational Review*, Fall 2004 (Vol. 74, #3, p. 273-306), no e-link available

2. This Kid Won't Believe Me! The Story of a Stubborn Phonics Learner

Laura Hurley, an elementary school teacher in Tenino, Washington, tells the story of a third grader named Isaac who was having difficulty reading words ending in *tion*; he couldn't grasp that *tion* makes the /shun/ sound. Isaac had learned his basic phonics well and knew that *sh* makes the *shhh* sound – and he didn't see *sh* at the beginning of *tion*.

His teacher patiently explained how *tion* was pronounced, wrote it on the board, and asked him to say it after her, which he did. She then wrote it again and pointed to it, and Isaac said "tih-on." Hurley tried again, this time telling Isaac that some English words came from other languages, in this case Latin, and that in Latin, *ti* makes the /sh/ sound. He nodded. Again Hurley pointed to *tion* and had Isaac pronounce it after her: /shun/. Then she wrote it again and pointed to it. He said "tih-on."

Not about to give up, the teacher tried again. She gave examples of words that ended in *tion*, like vacation, and tried to bring that word alive for Isaac, stirring up positive associations about a summer vacation. Isaac nodded and repeated after her that *tion* sounded /shun/. But the next day, when the teachedr pointed to *tion*, Isaac was back to "tih-on." Hurley began to wonder if the boy had short-term memory problems. Maybe she was asking him to do something that was beyond his cognitive capacity. He'd learned all the basic phonics rules; why was this one so hard for him? Maybe he needed more visuals. Hurley wrote "shun = tion" on a whiteboard and had Isaac read it with her: "Shun equals tion." But when it was his turn to read alone, Isaac said, "Shun equals tih-on." Hurley tried again. Same result. She began to lose it, repeating the correct pronunciation with a more vehemence. Same result.

"Why do you keep saying tih-on?" she asked in desperation.

"Because it doesn't have an *sh*. *Sh* spells /sh/," he said.

A light suddenly went on in the teacher's head. "*You don't believe me*!" she said. He smiled: "*Sh* spells /sh/," he said.

Hurley grabbed his hand: "Come on. Let's go see what everyone else thinks. Let's see if anyone else agrees with me. OK?" Isaac nodded. They found a teacher working at the copy machine: "How would you say this?" asked Hurley and pointed to *tion* on the little whiteboard. "Shun," said the teacher, and explained to Isaac about foreign words in English. Next they went to the office and asked the secretary how to pronounce *tion*. "Shun," she said. "But there's no *sh*," said Hurley. The secretary explained. They found a teacher working on a project in the hall and asked him. "Shun," he said and told Isaac that there were some crazy words in English. In the library, they found a fifth-grade teacher and the librarian and asked the question again. Same answer (both bending over to explain to Isaac how the English language worked). As Hurley set off to find another witness, Isaac said, "OK, OK. I get it. It's shun. We don't need to ask anyone else."

It was four days before Hurley saw the boy again. When he sat down at her table, she wrote *tion* on the white board and pointed to it. "Shun," said Isaac, and smiled.

Reflecting on this incident, Hurley writes: "I think of the students in my reading groups who, through the years, have acted as if they were tied into their chairs with bright lights in their eyes, valiantly resisting my attempts to brainwash them with advanced phonics concepts. They had steadfastly resisted abandoning their belief in the sound-symbol correspondence they knew to be true. It wasn't, as I had thought all this time, that they were having difficulty memorizing advanced phonics concepts. I just needed to find a way to convince them of the truth of what I was trying to teach them. Isaac needed to find a way to accept what to him was a form of heresy. Five busy adult willing to take a moment away from what they were doing to personally explain it to him was a powerful lesson. Their individual attention helped him to take the risk of reframing his entire worldview as it related to the decoding rules of the English language. Now I can teach him *acious*, the many sounds of *ou*, and all four sounds of *y*. Now, maybe he'll believe me."

"The Doubtful Decoder" by Laura Hurley in *Reading Today*, August/September 2004 (Vol. 22, #1, p. 10), no e-link available

3. Boys – Reluctant Readers

In reading, boys lag significantly behind girls, and this is not just an American phenomenon: the 2001 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study done in 2001 found fourth-grade boys way behind girls in all 30 countries studied. Why the disparity? Here are some details of this male-female achievement gap, drawn in part from Jeffrey Wilhelm's book, *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men* (Heinemann, 2002):

- Boys take longer to learn to read than girls because they develop more slowly.
- Boys' learning style is more active and competitive, which works against boys in many classrooms.
- Girls talk more than boys from an early age (they use 30% more words a day) and become more adept with language.
- Girls' comprehension of narrative and expository texts is better than boys.
- Boys value reading less than girls do and read less than girls;
- Boys tend to see reading as a feminine activity and therefore steer away from it.
- A study of young teenage boys (average age 14) revealed these feelings about reading: boring/no fun (39.3%), no time/too busy (29.8%), like other activities better (11.1%), can't get into the stories (7.7%), I'm not good at it (4.3%).

Reading authorities have the following suggestions for closing the gap:

- Clear, structured instruction; short bursts of intense work;
- Hands-on learning;
- Specific goals; praise;
- Perhaps single-sex classes for teens (fear of what girls might think about their ability leads some adolescent boys to avoid risk-taking in reading classes);
- Use of humor;
- Planning programs aimed just at boys;
- Doing classroom books talks focusing on non-fiction;
- Buying American Library Association Read posters featuring males;
- Getting coaches to participate in a "Guys Read" program;
- Getting fathers involved in a Dads' reading modeling and encouragement program;
- Having athletes and other male role models read to younger children;
- Getting more magazines, comic books, and newspapers in the library;
- Actively recruiting boys to work in the library;

- Surveying boys about their reading preferences and using these suggestions when ordering;
- Putting books where boys are: next to the computers, copy machine, and study tables.

The selection of reading material is crucial. Boys tend not to be as vocal as girls about their reading preferences, and those selecting books for elementary schools tend to be female teachers and mothers who may lean more toward books that are more appealing to girls, including fiction and books with female characters. Boys lean more toward the following types of books, which can be equally effective in building literacy skills:

- Informational texts, magazines, newspaper articles, and websites;
- Books about sports, hobbies, bugs, snakes, and other areas of interest;
- Graphic novels, comic books, and humor books;
- Series of books (boys enjoy collecting);
- De-emphasizing fiction and stories about girls;
- Science fiction and fantasy books;
- Within the boundaries of taste, catering to boys' love of books that are gross (e.g., *The Adventures of Captain Underpants, The Day My Butt Went Psycho, Hands-on Grossology, The Dirty Cowboy,* and *I Have to Go*);
- Recommended books for young guys (the website http://www.guysread.com has more suggested books for all ages):
    - *The Carrot Seed* by Ruth Krauss
    - *Go, Dog, Go*! by Philip Eastman
    - *The Stupids Die* by Harry Allard
    - *Grimm's Fairy Tales*
- Books for early readers:
    - *Be a Perfect Person in Just Three Days* by Stephen Manes
    - *Flat Stanley* by Jeff Brown
    - *The Hoboken Chicken Emergency* by Daniel Pinkwater
    - *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* by Alvin Schwartz
    - *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* by Louis Sachar
    - *The Twits* by Roald Dahl
- Books for older guys:
    - *Oddballs* by William Sleator
    - *Tangerine* by Edward Bloor

  - *Watchman* by Alan Moore
  - *Holes* by Louis Sachar
  - *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen
  - Time Warp Trio series by Jon Scieszka
  - Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling
  - Redwall series by Brian Jacques
  - *Maniac McGee* by Jerry Spinelli
  - *Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket
  - *Monster* by Walter Deal Myers
  - *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card
  - *The Giver* by Lois Lowry
  - *Rats* by Paul Zindel
  - *Rats Saw* God by Rob Thomas
  - *Ironman* by Chris Crutcher
- Recommended nonfiction authors:
  - Russell Freedman
  - David Macaulay
  - Jim Murphy
  - Seymor Simor

"Boys and Books" by Jane McFann in *Reading Today*, August/September 2004 (Vol. 22, #1, p. 20-21), no e-link available

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 aims to keep busy principals and other educators very well-informed on important research and ideas in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is your "designated reader," searching through 37 publications the week they come out, choosing the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Some ideas will be familiar, reinforcing what readers already know, but others will be new and genuinely thought-provoking. Target topics include:

• *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 Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Journal of Staff Development
Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

E-links will be provided whenever possible.

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