Marshall Memo 107

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 17, 2005

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"If we are going to teach our students to read, we need to provide them with opportunities to read."

Doug Williams, high-school principal (see item #1)

"Both higher-achieving students and struggling readers need books on their level that are interesting enough to motivate them to read and learn."

Gina Biancarosa (see item #2)

"It's dynamite, man. I love this job!"

Mr. Jean Howard, second-year teacher in New Ellenton, South Carolina; Howard is part of the Call Me MISTER program (*Education Week*, Oct. 12, 2005, p. 24)

"We cannot practice in a way that leads to embarrassment for students. It's counterproductive."

Charlene Burgeson, director of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (see item #7)

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1. Literacy for Older Students: Five Ineffective Strategies

In this article in the October *Educational Leadership*, two education professors list a number of common upper-grade literacy practices that *don't* work and create barriers to students getting engaged in reading and understanding what they read:

• *Ineffective strategy 1: Don't let students read.* Some schools are doing away with Sustained Silent Reading because they feel pressured to spend time on direct instruction of reading. This is self-defeating, say the authors: students need to "negotiate real texts for real purposes… we cannot think of a single case in which a poor reader became a better reader without having substantial opportunities to read." They quote Doug Williams, a high-school principal who mandated 20 minutes of silent reading a day and saw dramatic improvement in reading achievement: "If we are going to teach our students to read, we need to provide them with opportunities to read."

• *Ineffective strategy 2: Make students read what they don't know about and don't care about.* This is a recipe for boredom, negative attitudes, and low achievement. Teachers need to use a wide variety of texts and media, inundate students with intriguing information about the topic, and make connections between curriculum topics, students' background knowledge, and what is happening in the world.

• *Ineffective strategy 3: Make students read difficult books.* One middle-school official declared, "The test is written at an 8th-grade level, so students have to learn how to read 8th-grade passages!" Although the goal of on-grade reading is laudable, this strategy doesn't work. If material is well beyond students' reading level, they will not learn from it. Teachers need to find books closer to students' reading level and provide focused instruction of reading strategies; then students will gradually accelerate their reading levels.

• *Ineffective strategy 4: Interrogate students about what they read.* Many teachers seem to believe that constantly *testing* comprehension skills is the same as *teaching* comprehension. Not true! There is no evidence that asking students literal comprehension questions after they read a passage creates better readers. Most new textbooks and reading programs include instruction in reading strategies, but teachers also need training to move away from the old quiz-them-on-the-passage approach.

• *Ineffective strategy 5: Buy a computer program and let it do all the work.* These fancy programs can be enticing, but close inspection of a reading lab often reveals students spending their time in a chat room, doing e-mail, and surfing the Net. "Although computers and Web

sites may reinforce skills," the authors write, "they can't provide the specific feedback that students require. Intervention programs need to increase, not decrease, teacher involvement."

In addition, say the authors, all programs must be based on assessment information and give students real instruction in reading comprehension rather than focusing only on isolated skills such as phonics, fluency, or spelling.

So what is to be done? The authors conclude with a list of five areas that need attention in most schools:

- Well-trained literacy specialists;
- Lots of high-quality, diverse, multi-level reading material in all subject areas;
- Literacy assessments of all students to guide appropriate instruction;
- Creating a culture of collaboration and peer coaching;
- Professional development focused on improving teacher knowledge and expertise.

"Learning from What Doesn't Work" by Gay Ivey and Douglas Fisher in *Educational Leadership*, Oct. 2005 (Vol. 63, #2, p. 8-14), no e-link available

2. Fifteen Steps to Improving Literacy Skills in Upper-Grade Students

Another article in the current *Educational Leadership* reports on the findings of a panel that looked at research and best practices in adolescent literacy (recently published as *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High-School Literacy*). The panel recommends that middle and high schools provide a flexible mix of nine elements:

• *Direct, explicit comprehension instruction* – This includes teaching students to summarize, identify text structure and visual clues, call on prior knowledge, and use graphic organizers. Effective teaching includes modeling each strategy, telling students why they should use it in particular situations, giving them lots of practice using it with a wide variety of texts, and gradually withdrawing support until the student can use the strategy independently.

• *Teaching reading in content areas* – This involves teaching comprehension strategies (e.g., outlining) while using informational and content-area texts, and getting science, social studies, and math teachers to teach reading comprehension (such as word identification, visual imagery, self-questioning, and paraphrasing).

• *Improving motivation* – As students move through the grades, many decide they are not good at reading, and the less competent they think they are, the less they read and comprehend. Research suggests that several steps turn this process around:

- Giving students choices in what they read;
- Building independent reading time into the school day;
- Allowing students to choose research and writing topics;
- Having students set literacy goals or decide how to reach their teachers' goals;
- Giving students frequent teacher feedback on their progress toward goals.

• *Cooperative learning* – Students take on reading and writing tasks with a partner or with a small group. Cooperative learning is especially effective for older students (grades 4-12), ELL students, and students with learning disabilities.

• *Tutoring* – Individual attention is the best way to reach struggling students, especially if it focuses on teaching them strategies that will help them read, write, and learn independently.

• *A variety of texts* – Classroom and school libraries should include books with a variety of styles, genres, topics, and content areas that encourage wide and frequent reading. It's particularly important to have age-appropriate books at lower reading levels: "Both higher-achieving students and struggling readers need books on their level that are interesting enough to motivate them to read and learn."

• *Intensive writing* – When students write every day (a total of 2½ hours of writing instruction a week) they develop their comprehension skills, learn more in content areas, and become more critical thinkers. It's particularly important for students to develop writing skills that will help them succeed in high school and beyond, including reading multiple texts and synthesizing them in writing. The best writing instruction includes clear objectives and expectations (e.g., use more figurative language) and chances to share their writing with peers.

• *Effective use of computers* – Research in this area is "young," but some clues are emerging on what works: sound design principles that offer struggling students "individualized instruction, opportunities for targeted practice of skills, and support tackling grade-level texts that they might not otherwise be able to read." The Peabody Literacy Lab is an example of a program that provides instruction in comprehension, decoding and word recognition skills, and monitors students' progress, adjusting activities accordingly.

• *Ongoing formative assessment* – Teaching needs to be continually informed by assessment, which can provide detailed information about students' specific strengths and weaknesses so that teachers can plan and adapt instruction.

In addition to these classroom strategies, the panel suggests the following structural elements to support and enhance the literacy instruction:

• A comprehensible and coordinated literacy program.
• Extended time for literacy (10 hours a week)
• Professional development for teachers
• Ongoing summative assessment of programs and students
• Teacher teams working together
• Effective school leadership

"After Third Grade" by Gina Biancarosa in *Educational Leadership*, Oct. 2005 (Vol. 63, #2, p. 16-22), no e-link available. A full list of the literature supporting the elements discussed in this article is available at http://www.all4ed.org/publications/ReadingNext

3. The Advantages of Daily Classroom Journal Writing

Sacramento high-school English teacher Maureen Wanket has her students write in journals every day. In this September *Educational Leadership* article, she shares her rationale and the lessons she has learned over the last 15 years.

• *Journals provide an opportunity for reflection*. "Journal time is a rare moment of retreat to reflect on the moral aspects of an issue, or to relate what they're learning to their emotional and social lives," says Wanket.

• *Journal writing improves students' essays*. Writing every day improves fluency: "The quality of their academic writing improves because the muscles of original thought and the fluency of ideas have been exercised through daily writing practice – just as when the time comes to run a 10-kilometer race, an athlete is glad he spent time in the gym lifting weights."

• *Journals can reveal trouble*. Wanket can be tipped off to serious student problems by reading journals.

• *Journals help students and teachers bond*. "Through reading their journals," says Wanket, I've learned which students like poetry, which like to tell parakeet jokes, which secretly think they're too skinny."

• *Daily journal writing is an excellent way to begin class*. Wanket's rule is that students must be in their seats and writing in their journals by the time the bell rings. Without her having to say a word, the class settles down and starts thinking about the topic of the day (her prompt for the daily journal).

Wanket has developed eight ground rules that she says help students get the most out of the daily journal-writing routine:

- Write the date by every entry. Wanket tells students that when they are her age, they'll want to know the dates of their middle-school journal entries.
- Use every page. Students must write on the back of pages and skip just one line between entries. This saves paper and means less flipping pages for the teacher.
- Write in pen – any color, as long as it's legible. Students appreciate being able to use different colors.
- Write without ceasing. Spelling doesn't matter, Wanket tells her students, and don't stop to cross words out. "It is amazing what will appear on the page when a student writes without stopping to edit," says Wanket.
- Journal notebooks are only for journal entries. No other schoolwork goes in them.
- Journals are private. Students don't have to read aloud unless they want to – but they often want to.
- Then again, journals are not private. If students are hurting themselves or someone else, or if someone is hurting them, Wanket will take action.
- Journals are graded. "It's important that the students write in journals for an audience, and to earn points toward a grade," says Wanket. "I cope with the task of reading journals by only reading for content, not correcting spelling or grammar, and just writing a few brief responses to each student."

"Building the Habit of Writing" by Maureen O'Leary Wanket in *Educational Leadership*, Sept. 2005 (Vol. 63, #1, p. 74-76), no e-link available

4. More Criticism of the DIBELS Reading Assessment

A recent *Education Week* article on the DIBELS reading assessment (summarized in Marshall Memo 105, #5) sparked two letters. In the first, California advocate Stephen Krashen writes: "If reading researchers Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman are right, and I think they are, the 'skills' children need to pass DIBELS and similar tests are the result of reading. The use of DIBELS and its cousins encourages test preparation in the form of skills training, which is a confusion of cause and effect. In other words, practicing reading nonsense words quickly, in preparation for the DIBELS test, will not contribute very much to helping children learn to read. But the experience of reading comprehensible and interesting texts will result in the ability to read, as well as develop the capacity to read nonsense words quickly… The correlation between DIBELS scores and subsequent reading-test performance is spurious. Both are the result of the experience of real reading."

The second letter is from literacy guru Kenneth Goodman, and he makes four points: (a) because the DIBELS is available on the Web, it's possible for a parent (or even a student) to download the test and practice the actual items before the test is given – a practice that is apparently quite common; (b) the claims by DIBELS developers that it is valid and reliable are not backed up by data; (c) a "quick and easy" test that provides "inadequate, minimal information about performance on bits and pieces of non-reading tasks" should not be used to make important decisions about students; and (d) there is no consistency in how the tests are scored: "it all happens fast, and so how benevolent or not the tester is greatly affects the scores kids achieve. The tester scores on-the-fly, during the minute each subtest takes, and has to watch a stopwatch at the same time. So the test lacks 'inter-rater reliability'." The DIBELS is so flawed and weak, concludes Goodman, that it would never pass review for adoption for the uses being made of it on any level by competent reviewers."

Two letters to *Education Week*, in *Education Week*, Oct. 12, 2005 (Vol. 25, #7, p. 32-33), no e-link available

5. Skepticism on Brain Research

In this strongly-worded article in the current *Education Week*, New Hampshire literacy expert Thomas Newkirk tees off on a current educational fad – brain research. Noting that educators are bombarded these days with claims about the differences between boys' and girls' grey matter and "brain-based learning," he expresses strong doubts. Newkirk is particularly concerned with the claims made by Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens in an article in the November 2004 issue of *Educational Leadership* (summarized in Marshall Memo 62, #6). He says that the claims made in this article – that girls have "stronger neural connectors" that lead to "more sensually detailed memory storage, better listening skills, and better discrimination among the various tones of voice," resulting in "greater use of detail in writing assignments" – are highly speculative.

Newkirk continues: "We have Fact A (stronger neural connectors) and Fact B (greater use of detail), and we are asked to accept that A causes B. But there could be any number of

causes for this lack of detail in boys' writing: indifference, lack of writing practice, lack of reading experience, preference for fast-paced narratives. A truly scientific claim would have to rule out – or at least weigh – these other variables."

What the "brain-based" claims come down to, says Newkirk, is that the size of a person's brain and the blood flow to various parts of the brain determine intellectual capacity. Because girls have 15 percent more blood flow to a certain area of the brain, the argument goes, they will be better at reading. Nonsense, says Newkirk: "Like many other educators, I believe that the problem for boys is not blood flow, but the kind of reading they are asked to do, or the lack of male models for reading. Blood flow does not seem to be nearly the problem for upper-middle-class white boys that it is for poor black ones. In fact, this very stereotype – that reading is unnatural for boys – may play into underachievement."

Newkirk concedes that there are some hard-wired differences. Most boys are slower getting started with literacy and have more learning disabilities than girls. And yes, many of the action steps recommended by brain-based learning advocates make sense: boys (and many girls) need more activity and movement and more exposure to manipulatives in the classroom. "But I don't think we need brain studies to accept this," says Newkirk, "just a good rereading of Rousseau and Dewey. Or better, our own observations."

Newkirk concludes, "Citing 'brain research' can perhaps give presenters the veneer of science; it can make us feel we are in contact with something solid. But I suspect it only makes us look foolish in the eyes of actual scientists. At worst, it overstates differences and looks for causes in all the wrong places."

"'Brain Research' – A Call for Skepticism" by Thomas Newkirk in *Education Week*, Oct. 12, 2005 (Vol. 25, #7, p. 29), no e-link available

6. Does Coffee Make Your Skin Blacker? Tricky Classroom Questions

"No teacher purposefully devalues his or her students," write the authors of this thoughtful article in the September *Educational Leadership*. But they relate four classroom vignettes where teachers' spur-of-the-moment responses may have had that effect:

• *A third-grade class is learning about fluids. Mariana, a Hispanic student, mentions that she likes to drink coffee. "Don't do that," exclaims Jenna, an African-American student. "It will make your skin blacker." The teacher quickly responds, "That's not true. Now, we are talking about fluids…"*

There are two possible reasons that the teacher so quickly brushed Jenna's comment aside: discomfort with its racial overtone and pressure to move and cover the curriculum. "When we discourage students from engaging in public conversations about race and social justice," write the authors, "we lose an important component of education." Children in the classroom would also get a clear message that it's not okay to discuss racially-charged topics. The authors think the teacher could have handled Jenna's comment like this:

"Jenna, you say that coffee will make your skin blacker. Do you think that this is true of all liquids? Will orange juice make your skin more orange?" This approach values the two

girls' points of view, brings those comments back to the lesson topic of fluids by challenging their suppositions, and poses a problem that is relevant for all students to consider.

• *A second-grade class is learning about community and brainstorming a list of people who provide "important services" in their community. Jason, a bright and articulate African-American student, eagerly raises his hand and suggests Pearl, an African-American woman who cleans his family's house and the houses of some of his friends. Jason says that she does a terrific job and is very helpful and nice. The teacher thanks Jason but does not write Pearl's name on the board. She moves on to another student.*

The authors are sure that Jason left the classroom with a diminished view of the value of housekeeping and perhaps of his own racial group. They suggest that the teacher might have asked Jason to explain how housekeeping is an important community service (as she did with other students' suggestions). This would have honored Pearl's work and Jason's perspective.

• *A fourth-grade teacher asks her students what they like best about their neighborhoods. Carlos, a Hispanic student who recently moved to the suburbs from a low-income housing project, says he likes having his own room and a big back yard but misses sharing a room with his cousin and playing on the block with his friends. The teacher thanks Carlos and then explains to the class how fortunate Carlos is to have a community that gives him more space, a safer neighborhood, and good schools.*

Carlos probably leaves the classroom with new doubts about his warm memories of his old neighborhood and urban living in general. He may also be less likely to contribute to class discussions. The teacher could have honored Carlos's views by asking him what life was like in his old neighborhood and how he might re-create the advantages in his new home.

• *A high-school art teacher asks her class to identify a great artist of the 20th century. Paul, a tenth-grade African-American, mentions Romare Bearden and says that his parents have several prints by him. The teacher says that she asked for "*great *artists" and tells Paul to look in his textbook.*

Paul might take away several conclusions from this interchange: that his parents aren't good judges of art; that the textbook has the final word on what is valued artistically; that his own aesthetic sense is not valued. The teacher could have asked Paul to tell about Romare Bearden's work and what makes him "great" and think about the reasons that his work is not featured in the textbook. This would have opened up the whole question of artistic merit and suggested an important concept to students: greatness is subjective and culturally defined.

These four teachers were well-intentioned, conclude the authors, but they were all "culpable of having unknowingly established an invisible filter around classroom interactions that screens out social capital not aligned with their own. We need to recognize social justice issues as they occur and create links between those issues and classroom instruction, thus expanding the parameters of the curriculum."

"Social Justice in the Classroom" by Jacqueline Grennon Brooks and Eustace Thompson in *Educational Leadership*, Sept. 2005 (Vol. 63, #1, p. 48-52), no e-link available

7. The New Phys. Ed.

This article in last Thursday's *New York Times* describes the shift made by Phil Lawler, a long-time Illinois physical education teacher. When he taught middle-school gym classes, his goal used to be making his students into athletes – even the pudgy and uncoordinated ones. Lessons focused on basketball and baseball and drills to make students better. Now Lawler runs the PE4life Academy in Naperville, Illinois and believes that the aim in physical education is health and fitness. The gym at his former school now looks a lot like a well-equipped Bally: treadmills, elliptical machines, stationary bikes with PlayStation consoles that allow students to compete with on-screen opponents, a fitness arcade with Dance Dance Revolution (a musical electronic game in which users stand on a platform and move as directed), and a rock-climbing wall. Students lift weights, balance their diets, and work on building cardiovascular endurance. They wear heart-rate monitors and during aerobic workouts, they work to stay in their target zone (their grade in gym is calculated partly on how long they stay in the zone).

The philosophy behind this kind of physical education program is teaching skills that will be useful beyond gym class. "It's about giving these kids the tools and skills and experience so they can lead a physically active life the rest of their life," says Anne Flannery, PE4life president. Research supports this approach – including helping overweight students shed pounds more quickly. In traditional gym classes where students play football or kickball, reluctant students aren't that involved and there's less movement overall. "In dodge-ball, it's the very child that needs exercise the most who's picked off first," says Flannery. "With the old way, in a game of soccer probably four or five of the most athletic kids touched the ball, and everybody else just stood there." And there's the fact that most sports taught in old-style gym classes are not sustained later on. "After age 24, less than 3 percent of the population uses a team sport as part of their normal physical activity," says Lawler. "So we mastered all those skills, for what?"

One of the factors that keeps many adults from maintaining any kind of exercise routine is their painful memories of gym classes when they were in school. This is especially true of people who don't consider themselves natural athletes. Eliminating the "humiliation factor" is a major goal in the new phys. ed. "We cannot practice in a way that leads to embarrassment for students," says Charlene Burgeson, director of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. "It's counterproductive."

"Putting the Gym Back in Gym Class" by Julie Bosman, *New York Times*, Oct. 13, 2005, no free e-link available

8. The Debate on Classroom Whiteboards in Great Britain

There is great enthusiasm in Great Britain for interactive whiteboards, including a goal set by Prime Minister Tony Blair to put them in every school. Supporters say that the whiteboards increase students' motivation and are especially good for teaching science.

Students can watch an experiment happening in real time and then step by step in a "virtual flip chart."

But the *Guardian* article reports on several concerns about this high-tech phenomenon, among them:

• *Tech-phobic teachers* – "Unless you have an enthusiast," says Mark Beaumont, sales director for an IT company, "the whiteboard will often sit in a box for a year." Training goes beyond learning to turn on the whiteboard: "It's a double learning curve," says Beaumont; "you have to get used to the software, then get used to displaying a huge image in front of the class." He recommends having a full-time staff member in each school to support effective use of whiteboards.

• *Cost creep* – The whiteboards themselves are not cheap, and then schools need to invest in curtains, blinds, loudspeakers, and training.

• *Thieves* – One London borough reported 150 whiteboards stolen in a year. They are attractive because they can be fenced to pubs and clubs for showing big-screen events.

• *Thin research* – The Alliance for Childhood, a frequent critic of the use of technology in schools, says that international studies don't show any correlation between the use of computers and children's academic achievement: "We remain convinced that, at the elementary school level and below, there is little evidence of lasting gains and much evidence of harm from the hours spent in front of screens."

Dale Baxter, a recent graduate of a whiteboarded school summed it up this way: "They are a brilliant tool in schools – but only when the teacher knows how to use them."

"Chalk One Up to the Whiteboard" by Michael Cross, *The Guardian*, Oct. 6, 2005
http://education.guardian.co.uk/elearning/story/0,10577,1585516,00.html (spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, Oct. 13, 2005)

9. Short Items:

a. Advice for first-generation college students – The link below gives you a free download of a book by Kathleen Cushman based on interviews with successful college students who were the first in their families to clear that hurdle. Interviewees answered questions like: How did you put college within your reach, if your family had not gone before you? How did you defy stereotypes and low expectations about your future? How did you advocate for yourself academically? How did you find the information you needed? How did you maintain emotional and social balance?
First in the Family: Advice About College from First-Generation Students; Your High-School Years: http://www.whatkidscando.org/NGP/firstinthefamily.html (free download)

"Advice About College from First-Generation Students" in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, Oct. 13, 2005

b. Student-written "identity texts" – This article suggests that teachers in multilingual classrooms have students write dual-language "identity texts" for their peers or for younger students. Products can be written, spoken, visual, musical, dramatic, or multimodal, and should encourage the use of the student's full repertoire of talents. Check out the Toronto-area Thornwood School's Dual Language Showcase for some examples: http://thornwood.peelschools.org/Dual.

"Affirming Identity in Multilingual Classrooms" by Jim Cummins, Vicki Bismilla, Patricia Chow, Sarah Cohen, Frances Giampapa, Lisa Leoni, Perminder Sandhu, and Padma Sastri in *Educational Leadership*, Sept. 2005 (Vol. 63, #1, p. 38-43), 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 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, provides 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)
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Harper's
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Staff Development
Middle School Journal
NABE News
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
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Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record
Theory Into Practice

E-links will be provided whenever possible.