Marshall Memo 195

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 23, 2007

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"In English, I'm frustrated by my classmates who spout all sorts of theories, with no evidence. I want to yell, 'Pay attention to each word!'"

A college student writing to his high-school English teacher (see item #1)

"Districts wind up with a host of unrelated programs piled on each other, each with its own funding stream. This lack of coherence is rampant."

Allen Grossman, Harvard Business School professor (see item #3)

"High school is only 720 days, so you have to start the process in preschool and carry it all the way through."

Jerry Weast, Montgomery County Schools superintendent (*ibid.*)

"I go to the classrooms. I go to the classrooms to observe the kids, but I am really observing the teachers. I talk to the kids and tell them what I like that they are doing (and maybe some things they need to work on) but I am not really talking to the kids. I am talking to the teacher."

A South African principal on her frequent classroom visits (see item #4)

"In our school we do teamwork. We make things work. We change. We try everything."

Another South African principal (*ibid.*)

"The community respects the school because the school respects the community. The distance between the learners and the educators is small because the distance between the school and the community is small."

A third South African principal (*ibid.*)

1. A High-School English Unit on How Language Reveals Character

In this thoughtful article in the *Harvard Educational Review*, veteran teacher Margaret Metzger describes a curriculum unit, *How Language Reveals Character*, that she teaches her Brookline, Massachusetts students, many of whom are immigrants. "As a high-school teacher," she writes, "I know that adolescents are relentlessly fascinated with themselves and with one another. We teachers can use high-school students' interest in the language of the people around them to motivate them to think more critically about language. By demonstrating the relationships between language and character, teachers can move students from noticing their own and others' language to examining how authors intentionally use the language of their characters to reveal additional information about each character." Here is a summary of her blow-by-blow description of this two-week unit.

• ***Introducing the concept*** – On the first day, Metzger asks students to notice what they can tell from the way other people dress. "Look around this classroom and find the person who dresses most differently from you," she says. "Can you imagine yourself in those clothes? Although your parents or a situation may force you to dress for a special occasion, such as a funeral or a prom, you usually dress to project a desired image of yourself. Every day you make conscious decisions about clothing. Other people correctly understand the language of your clothes."

Metzger then applies the concept to spoken words, arguing, "We all reveal ourselves through language." There are surface differences, like accent, slang, volume, and grammar, she says. "You notice the difference between how your elderly aunt speaks and how your favorite rapper speaks." Language patterns can be situational. Elementary students are told, "Use your indoor voice." We quickly adapt the way we talk when we answer the phone – noncommittal at first, then intimate (with a boyfriend) or curt (with a telemarketer).

"Yet we are less aware of the unconscious revelations in our own language," she continues. "The way we speak in many situations seems so natural to us that we aren't even aware of other options… [O]ur listeners draw conclusions from our language even if they can't consciously articulate the basis for their conclusions." Detectives pay close attention to the clues that language reveals – and they can tell a lot from the way fiction and non-fiction authors write. "Your job as a reader," says Metzger, "is to pay attention not only to the content but also to the style."

She then imitates a very deliberate, slow-spoken friend and asks students to guess what he is like: *Is he athletic? How do you know? Is his desktop orderly? How do you know? What*

is his relationship with his teenage children? What clothes does he wear? Does he work alone or in groups? Students make good guesses on each question. Metzger then imitates another friend, this one gabby and scattered, and asks, *Is this person lively or lethargic? How do you know? Does she have a linear, mathematical mind? How do you know? Is she self-confident? Is she creative? Is she fun? Is she helpful in meetings?* Again, students are good at drawing conclusions from a brief imitation of a particular personality.

• ***Demonstrating the concept*** – Metzger then has students read verbatim transcripts of three different high-school students telling the story of Cinderella in their own words. One narrator is imaginative, creative, and interested in literary sources. Another is bored with the story and imposes his own issues – curfews, girls, humor – and uses teenage slang. Another is funny, charismatic, and empathetic, imagining herself in the story, imitating the language, and elaborating on the personalities of the Cinderella characters. Metzger says her students are always "spellbound" with this exercise. "Regardless of age or ability, they love hearing different versions of the story. Speculations about the speakers' personalities are often enthusiastic and usually accurate."

Metzger suggests a hook to this activity at the very beginning of the unit: having students pair off, each telling their partner the Cinderella story for two minutes while he or she transcribes, or telling the first line of the story. Students put the papers aside until the day the three Cinderella transcripts are introduced, when they get back with their partner, look at what they wrote, and see what they can tell from the way each told the story. "This story takes place far, far away," began a new immigrant. "This is the story of a little girl whose father dies," said a girl whose father had died the year before. "Cinderella was an orphan girl who had to work and work all the time," began a freshman girl who was overburdened with the care of six younger siblings. Metzger finds that students are "uncannily accurate" in scoping out the details of character based on the Cinderella language.

• ***Moving students to literature*** – Students then apply these "close-reading" skills to real literature, where the use of language is more subtle and complex. Metzger writes a series of opening lines from works of literature on the board and asks students to rewrite each sentence, changing the personality of the speaker by changing the word choice or word placement but keeping the same basic message. "Remember, you are trying to create another speaker, another personality, using the same basic content," she tells them. Here are some of the openings that students work with:

- "Call me Ishmael" from *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. Students play around with this: "Hi! My name is Ishmael. My friends call me that and so can you" or "Yo, my name is Ishmael."
- "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" from *Genesis* 1:1. Metzger points out that simply taking out the second "the" can ruin the rhythm because the word "earth" now holds a different weight than "heavens", making the sentence flop at the end.

- "Early one June morning, in 1872, I murdered my father – an act that made a deep impression on me at the time" from the short story "An Imperfect Conflagration" by Ambrose Bierce.
- "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth" from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain.
- And the closing lines of *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway, which come just after the character's lover has died in childbirth (Metzger tells students that Hemingway went through 32 drafts before he was satisfied with these sentences): "But after I had got them out and shut the door and turned off the light it wasn't any good. It was like saying goodbye to a statue. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain."

The unit ends with Shakespeare. "He created whole worlds, subtle and nuanced, through speech," says Metzger. "Even though Shakespeare's characters speak in iambic pentameter, each one speaks differently. Some characters are eloquent; some, gross; some, reflective; some, morose; some, silly. King Lear, full of rage and regret, never sounds like Puck, pesky and adorable… Shakespeare could create any personality through language." Metzger has students look closely at the language choices embedded in the time-honored soliloquy from *Hamlet*:

To be or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles?
and by opposing, end them.

"What kind of person, in the midst of considering suicide, would talk like this?" Metzger asks her students. "What does Hamlet's language reveal about his character? He could say, 'I wonder whether to kill myself today' or 'The question is whether to be or not to be.'" Why does Shakespeare have him use the words he does?

• ***Optional assignments*** – One extension of this unit is asking students to write emulations, imitating the style and voice of a particular author. Students read a short selection, jot down what they notice about the sentence structure, vocabulary, patterns, tone, and punctuation, and then try writing new material in that author's style. Another extension is looking at the first time the main character speaks in a book and noticing how the author conveys that character's individuality. Books include *A Clockwork Orange, Angela's Ashes, The Catcher in the Rye, The Poisonwood Bible, The Remains of the Day, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, One Hundred Years of Solitude, Walden, The Canterbury Tales, Bartleby the Scrivener*, and any book by Faulkner.

A third extension is having students write a dialogue (for example, between a frazzled mother and her spoiled six-year-old son) with each character speaking differently based on age,

gender, maturity, and intent. A fourth extension is having students read Ursula Le Guin's graduation speech at Bryn Mawr (from *Dancing on the Edge of the World*), which explains gender differences in language – "mother tongue" and "father tongue" – and then having students write an analytical paper first in father tongue, then in mother tongue. A fifth extension is having students read Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, an autobiographical description of immigrating from Poland to Canada at the age of 13 and grieving the loss of her first language. Metzger says that when they read this passage, her immigrant students "find an articulate expression of their own grief" and are able to explain to their classmates what it's like not to be able to express humor, how English words do not hold the same connotations as the words in their first language, and how they lose some of their identity as they work to master a new language.

• ***Moving students to writing*** – In the final segment of the unit, Metzger gives her students two writing assignments. First, they must compare how Odysseus speaks to two different people in *The Odyssey*. Students choose and copy the speeches, mark them up and re-read, and then compare their overall impressions of his distinctive style in the two speeches, explaining why and how his speech patterns change. One student compared Odysseus's ornate, polite, flirtatious speech to Naussika, a young princess, with his crude, direct speech to one of his sailors.

The second assignment is writing autobiographies in terms of language and reading them aloud to classmates. To avoid panic, Metzger shares some of the opening lines students have used in previous years:

- As I grew up, words started to bother me. I hated when people said "I'm so sorry" when they learned about my dead father and sister. I didn't want them to say anything.
- In sixth grade, something took over the whole grade's speech, one word: *it*. For each person *it* meant the dirtiest and funniest thing they could think of. Lunch tables would erupt in laughter at its utterance. When the charm wore off, I learned to swear.
- In the cruel world of elementary school, having a speech defect is a horrible vulnerability.
- I used to be afraid to talk.
- When I was growing up, my mother always said a phrase to me in Burmese, which basically translates as, "Don't say everything that's on your mind. Hold your tongue in check." She did not want me to socialize too much for fear I would get myself in trouble through gossip. My mother trusted no one. I, on the contrary, trusted almost everyone I met and immediately shared with them personal information."

Metzger hears from former students that this unit has far-reaching impact. One student said she noticed far more when she read *Song of Solomon* in junior English. A senior reading Dante's "Inferno" noticed what the sinners reveal through their language. In a social studies class, students noticed that The Pledge of Allegiance contains four references to unity

("United," "the Republic," "one nation," and "indivisible") and correctly guessed that the Pledge was written after the Civil War, when national unity was a major concern. And a former student wrote from college, "In English, I'm frustrated by my classmates who spout all sorts of theories, with no evidence. I want to yell, 'Pay attention to each word!'"

Students also found joy in their newfound linguistic perceptiveness. When Metzger asked a former student to critique a draft of this article, the young woman complained that it was too dry. "You missed how much fun it was to learn this," she complained. "How much we laughed in class, how thrilled we were with our new knowledge, how we talked about language and character after class, with other friends, and in the cafeteria. We went around dissecting the language of our other teachers. This was the most exciting idea I ever learned in four years of English."

"Teaching How Language Reveals Character" by Margaret Metzger in *Harvard Educational Review*, Summer 2007 (Vol. 77, #2, p. 187-203 (no e-link available)

2. Including Children with Autism in Regular Classrooms

(Originally titled "Achieving with Autism")

In this helpful article in *Education Update*, John Franklin punctures several myths about autistic children:

- *They are always savants or geniuses*. Some are, but autism syndrome is distinct from savant syndrome.
- *They are anti-social*. Some are socially impaired, but with help, children with autism can communicate and relate appropriately.
- *They are mentally retarded*. Actually, they may learn as quickly as other children, but may have difficulty expressing what they know.
- *They can't make eye contact*. This is often not true – but they may have trouble following someone's expressed intentions.
- *They are incapable of learning*. Not true! Autistic children can learn as well as many mainstream children.
- *They can't express love*. "What people need to understand about autistic students is that they can feel and learn – they just don't always know how to interact appropriately with others," says Lynn Koegel of the Autism Center at the University of California at Santa Barbara. "They often feel isolated and usually haven't learned how to express themselves."

Franklin goes on to give advice to teachers who have children with autism in their classrooms. Taking these steps, he says, will help integrate the child successfully into a regular classroom and minimize problems and disruptions:

• *Talk with the autistic child's parents before the beginning of the year*. It's a good idea to bring the child into the classroom to establish routines.

• *Don't seat an autistic child at the front of the classroom*. Proximity to the teacher's voice and having other students right behind can be unsettling.

• *Understand that an autistic child may want to wear extra clothing*. Autistic children sometimes feel lost without constant contact. Heavy clothing can help them feel more secure and reduce disruptive outbursts.

• *Follow regular routines for classroom transitions*. Playing a chime or soft music can help signal the shift from one activity to another, which helps autistic children cope.

• *Have a quiet corner for the autistic student*. It's best if this area doesn't have visual stimuli that might cause sensory overload.

• *Pair autistic children with a "buddy."* Ideally this is a child who has an autistic sibling and can relate to an autistic classmate and alert the teacher if he or she becomes agitated.

• *Be prepared for outbursts*. Back-up help should be on call and routines established for the occasional melt-down.

• *Talk to other students about the autistic child's condition*. The autistic child's parents should be consulted and basic information shared. Classmates will be more understanding if they know something about the child's condition, and a surprising number of children will already know something about autism.

"Achieving with Autism" by John Franklin in *Education Update*, July 2007 (Vol. 49, #7, p. 1, 3, 5, 7, 8), no e-link available

3. Helping Districts Focus on their Core Mission and Theory of Action

This *Education Week* article reports on four years of activity in the Public Education Leadership Project, in which Harvard's graduate schools of business and education have worked closely with nine school districts. The project has found that many school districts have ambitious vision and mission statements – for example, *Ensuring that each student achieves his or her potential by supporting high-quality teaching and learning and comprehensive academic programs, working in conjunction with the entire community* – but no theory of action or strategy for achieving those goals. The result is a lot of sound and fury, accomplishing little. "Districts wind up with a host of unrelated programs piled on each other, each with its own funding stream," says Allen Grossman of the Harvard Business School. "This lack of coherence is rampant."

"The challenge," says Grossman's colleague Stacey Childress, "becomes, once you recognize that there's this disconnect between what your big vision says and all this activity, what do you do about it?"

The answer, say the project's leaders, is to: (a) focus on the "instructional core" – teaching and learning in classrooms; (b) set concrete performance objectives and intermediate milestones to see if you're making progress; and (c) be clear about your theory of action – the actions that you believe will get you to your objectives. For example, a district's theory of action might be that the best way to improve student achievement is to improve teachers' instructional practices. The district would then focus on finding the best ways to improve instructional practices – and avoid distracting activities that don't focus on this central strategy.

The project's leaders also preach that districts need to align all their resources around their core mission and theory of action, including the culture ("how we do things around here"), the way decisions are made, accountability mechanisms, compensation arrangements, training programs, resource allocation, technology, data management, stakeholder relationships, union contracts, and funding sources.

One of the participants in the Harvard project is Montgomery County, a 138,000-student district in Maryland. Superintendent Jerry Weast describes how he and his colleagues started with the skills and knowledge students needed to succeed in Advanced Placement English and calculus classes and mapped curriculum expectations backwards to kindergarten. The results have been impressive: the district has significantly narrowed the gap in the proportion of fifth graders from different economic groups enrolled in higher-level math courses and has made strides in the number of African-American students scoring 3-5 on at least one AP exam (16 percent versus the national average of 3 percent). "You can't get this done by focusing only on high school," says Weast. "High school is only 720 days, so you have to start the process in preschool and carry it all the way through."

Another participating district is New York City, which is implementing Children First Intensive Training, a program that has teams in each of the city's 1,400 schools identifying 10-20 students who are not doing well, figuring out how to help them, and tracking their progress during the school year.

"Project Distills Lessons of 'Coherent' District-Level Reforms" by Lynn Olson in *Education Week*, July 18, 2007 (Vol. 26, #43, p. 12-13)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/07/18/43pelp.h26.html

4. Effective Schools in South Africa

In this article in *Reading Research Quarterly*, a research team reports on seven unusually effective, high-poverty schools in South Africa. Although the researchers were well aware of American and British effective-schools research dating back to George Weber's study in 1971, they took a fresh look at these high-achieving schools (most of which had class sizes of 45-60 students) and came up with a list of key factors with striking similarities to Western research.

• *A safe, orderly, and positive learning environment* – "Our sense of these schools," write the researchers, "was not one of oppression, but of firmness and clear expectations for appropriate behavior on the part of students and teachers." Some schools were in extremely dangerous neighborhoods and needed locked gates topped with barbed-wire, but they still maintained a humane, psychologically safe environment in which students and staff could focus on teaching and learning.

• *Strong leadership guiding the school* – Emanating almost entirely from the principal and a leadership team, this included organizational and financial skills, community relations, instructional leadership, and shared decision-making. "[O]ur data showed that the principals in these high-performing schools guided the business, academic, and human aspects of the schools in very systematic and democratic ways," write the researchers. One principal visited

her classrooms frequently and indirectly shaped teaching. She said, "I go to the classrooms. I go to the classrooms to observe the kids, but I am really observing the teachers. I talk to the kids and tell them what I like that they are doing (and maybe some things they need to work on) but I am not really talking to the kids. I am talking to the teacher." This principal also collects students' writing books, reviews their work, and writes a letter back to the whole class commenting on their work – again, with the teacher as the primary audience.

• *Excellent teachers* – Competent, committed, caring, and collaborative. One principal said, "In some schools one teacher comes up with an idea and the other teachers don't want to do it. In our school we do teamwork. We make things work. We change. We try everything."

• *Shared competence, pride, and purpose* – The effective schools saw their work in the broader context of their country's struggle for equity. They cared deeply about the reputation of the school; connections to local language and culture (dancing, singing, and storytelling); clean and orderly facilities; confident and competent students who took pride in their school; a symbiotic relationship with parents and the community (a frequent statement in these schools was "This is an equal partnership" and "It is through working together that we are what we are"; one principal said, "The community respects the school because the school respects the community. The distance between the learners and the educators is small because the distance between the school and the community is small"); and purpose shaped by each school's unique history.

• *School and community involvement* – Teachers explicitly taught parents how to dig for information about school by asking questions like: "What did you do at school today?" and "Did you write something? Show me. What was it about? Tell me."

"South African Schools That Promote Literacy Learning with Students from Low-Income Communities" by Misty Sailors, James Hoffman, and Bertus Matthee in *Reading Research Quarterly*, July/August/September 2007 (Vol. 42, #3, p. 364-387), no e-link available

5. Summer Learning Loss

Two recent studies have confirmed the gap-widening effect of summer vacation. The first, "The Learning Season: The Untapped Power of Summer to Advance Student Achievement" by Beth Miller (commissioned by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation), found that during the school year, low- and high-income students progress at similar rates, as measured by standardized tests, but during the summer, more-advantaged students continue to make learning gains while less-advantaged students level off or decline. Miller says that the learning "faucet" is turned on for all students during the school year but is turned off for poorer students over the summer while their more fortunate peers drink in learning in academic camps, household bookshelves, libraries, bookstores, and family interaction. Miller quotes a study that found that summer-camp attendance was 42.5% of high-income and 5.4% of low-income children. (This study is at http://www.nmefdn.org/uploads/Learning_Season_FR.pdf.)

The second study, "Lasting Consequences of Summer Learning Gap" by Karl Alexander, Doris Entwisle, and Linda Steffel Olson in the April 2007 *American Sociological*

Review, tracked 325 Baltimore students and found that during the summer, high-SES students gained a cumulative 47 reading test-score points while lower-SES students lost 2 points. (This article can be purchased at http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/asoca/asr/2007/00000072/00000002/art00002.)

Spotted in *Education Gadfly*, July 19, 2007

6. Criteria for High-School Computer Reading Programs

This *Education Week* article describes several districts' experience with interactive computer programs designed to teach reading to struggling high-school students. "For years, I taught regular English in a classroom with no TV, no computer, just books, and I'd assign 'Romeo and Juliet' and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and they didn't understand it," said Shari Valenz, a Paterson, NJ teacher. She's now a fan of READ 180, a Scholastic computer reading program.

The article goes on to list some key features to look for when shopping for these types of programs:

- Is it based on research on good reading instruction?
- Does it get students to pay attention to what they're supposed to be learning?
- Does it give teachers information on students' progress on specific skills and overall proficiency?
- Does it suggest suitable class work and homework to follow up on learning needs?
- Does it give teachers feedback to help adjust their instruction?
- Is there evidence that the program makes a difference for students?

"Computer Software Helping Students' Reading" by Kathleen Kennedy Manzo in *Education Week*, July 18, 2007 (Vol. 26, #43, p. 11)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/07/18/43software.h26.html

7. Short Items:

a. Parent involvement study – The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) has just published a study by Chris Ferguson, "Reaching Out to Diverse Populations: What Can Schools Do to Foster Family-School Connections", with detailed advice on outreach and strategies to get hard-to-reach parents more involved in their children's education. It's available at: http://www.sedl.org/connections/research-briefs.html.

Spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, July 20, 2007

b. Hurricane Katrina documentary and curriculum – Spike Lee's documentary, "When the Levees Broke", and a curriculum guide geared to high-school classrooms are available on request at http://www.teachingthelevees.com.

Spotted in *American School Board Journal*, August 2007 (Vol. 194, #8, p. 25)

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 effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 37 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 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred 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 evening (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

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- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs
Atlantic Monthly
Catalyst Chicago
Chronicle of Higher Education
CommonWealth Magazine
Daily EdNews
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
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Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
TESOL Quarterly
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools