Marshall Memo 295

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 20, 2009

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Quotes of the Week

"They may think they've got a pretty good jump shot or a pretty good flow, but our kids can't all aspire to be LeBron or Lil Wayne. I want them aspiring to be scientists and engineers, doctors and teachers, not just ballers and rappers. I want them aspiring to be a Supreme Court justice. I want them aspiring to be president of the United States of America."

President Obama, speaking to the NAACP 100th anniversary celebration July 16, 2009

"No one has written your destiny for you. Your destiny is in your hands, and don't you forget that. That's what we have to teach all of our children. No excuses!"

President Obama (*ibid.*)

"How can you perform in school if you're worried about getting beat up and made fun of?"

Stephen Sroka, Case Western Reserve, quoted in "Bullying a Top Concern for New Safe-Schools Chief" by Michele McNeil in *Education Week*, July 15, 2009, p. 15, no free e-link available

"Boys like to read books about trucks, boys who get into trouble, sports, animals, and war. More than girls, they lean toward non-fiction. And don't forget the humor or action in stories."

Mary Ann Zehr (see item #4)

"Our job as parents is not to make everything perfect for our kids."

Paul Donahue, child psychologist (see item #5)

1. Which Works Best for Teaching Reading: Strategies or Content?

In this *Reading Research Quarterly* article, University of Pittsburgh professors Margaret McKeown, Isabel Beck, and Ronette Blake describe their two-year study comparing different ways of teaching reading comprehension to fifth graders in an urban Pennsylvania district:

- *Strategies* – Directly teaching specific procedures such as summarizing, making inferences, and generating questions. Some examples of strategy questions: What would be a good prediction about what might happen next in the story? Reading between the lines, what could you infer from the story? What might a teacher ask on a test to see if you understood important ideas from the story?
- *Content* – Focusing students on the substance of what they are reading and relating each new piece of information to information already given and to their background knowledge. Some examples of content questions: What's this all about? What does this tell us? What's the author telling us now? That's what the author says, but what does he mean by that?
- *Basal* – Working with a standard basal reader and following the teacher's guide (the control group). Some examples of basal questions: Do you agree with Miata's statement that the things she wants to do are just little things? Why or why not? Why did Margie really hate putting her homework and tests into the slot?

According to McKeown, Beck, and Blake, literacy research to date has not made clear which approach produces the best reading comprehension, both in the classroom and in independent reading. While the strategies approach is most commonly touted by researchers, the authors have serious doubts and don't think the theory has been well explained to classroom teachers.

What were the results of the study? All three approaches "provided for adequate comprehension," say the authors, but students taught with the content-focused approach consistently did a little better. These students had a particular advantage with comprehension questions that asked them to recall information from memory versus choosing from multiple-choice options. "The teacher questions asked in the content lessons… seemed to encourage students to express and integrate what they had understood from text, as evidenced in their recall of the text," say McKeown, Beck, and Blake. "Why is this good? The notion is that the

discussion provides a kind of external model of comprehension, that is, going through text, selecting what is important, and connecting those ideas to build an understanding."

What explains the fact that the results of the three approaches were so similar? The authors believe it's because the teachers in each of the three groups were carefully trained in the optimal use of their strategy, and all of them followed the same research-based practice of alternating reading aloud and leading their students in discussions of the text as it unfolded. This gave students with weak decoding skills access to the texts, provided an external model of the comprehension process, gave students access to their peers' thinking, made good use of student-to-student collaboration, allowed the teacher to observe confusion as it occurred and formulate appropriate interventions, and offered ongoing expert guidance to all students.

At the end of their article, McKeown, Beck, and Blake argue that even if the content approach had produced comprehension results identical to the strategy approach (instead of a little better), there would still be an advantage in the content-focused approach. Why would teachers use the indirect strategies approach – pursuing meaning by going through strategies – when an equally effective approach goes directly to meaning? Yes, students should be aware of strategies, say the authors, but they don't need that much explicit instruction. What's needed is an "active stance" versus "deliberate awareness." In fact, argue McKeown, Beck, and Black, "continued attention to deliberate use of strategies may undermine comprehension. This is because comprehension takes significant mental resources, which are limited. So if some resources are devoted to calling up strategies, adequate resources may not be directed toward the actions needed for comprehension because students are being asked to do something in addition to making sense of the text."

The best way to teach reading comprehension, conclude the authors, is getting students to build meaning actively "by attending to important ideas and establishing connections between them… The importance of making connections among ideas is paramount. Focusing on strategies during reading may leave students less aware of the overall process of interacting with text, especially in terms of the need to connect ideas they encounter and integrate those ideas into a coherent whole."

"Rethinking Reading Comprehension Instruction: A Comparison of Instruction for Strategies and Content Approaches" by Margaret McKeown, Isabel Beck, and Ronette Blake in *Reading Research Quarterly*, July/August/September 2009 (Vol. 44, #3, p. 218-253), no e-link available; the authors can be reached at mckeown@pitt.edu, ibeck@pitt.edu, and rgk6@pitt.edu.

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2. Twenty-Five Strategies from a Talented New York City Teacher

In this article in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Hunter College professor David Connor and New York City teacher Christopher Lagares describe a series of classroom strategies that Lagares has used in his inclusive social studies classroom to prepare students for the demanding New York State Regents examinations and for the promise of college beyond:

• *Memorizing major concepts by story, visualization, and choral repetition* – For example, to remember the Bill of Rights, Lagares tells the story of each amendment in a sequence of tableau-like images and describes each in vivid language. As a new image is added, the class retells the story from the beginning in call-and-response style, with students writing the information on a specially prepared worksheet. As they repeat the story, students identify the tenets that each amendment represents.

• *Using student-generated visual symbols* – To help students remember key concepts during lectures, Lagares has them come up with symbols – for example, a head with an open mouth for free speech, a gun for the right to bear arms, a house with an arrow through the front door for protection from unreasonable search and seizure.

• *Using learning stations* – Lagares sets up several "stations" around the classroom, each with a historical document, a series of quotations, a photograph depicting social conditions, a map, and other historical artifacts. Students move around the room in groups of four, analyzing one station's content.

• *Using symbols for document-based questions* – To help students grapple with document-based questions in state assessments (for example, part of an international treaty, a regional map), Lagares teaches them to write six symbols and use them as entry points to analyze the document:

S – Surprising: What surprised you in the text?
***** – Important: What is important in the text?
? – Clarification: What are you unsure about in the text?
T-T – Text-to-text connections: How does this reading relate to other texts we've read?
T-C – Text-to-class connections: How does this text relate to a history lesson or another class?
T-S – Text-to-self connections: How does the text relate to me personally?

• *Grouping students* – Lagares assigns students to groups by interest, by achievement level, and randomly for different class activities, providing scaffolding for individual students who may need it to be successful in their group's assignment.

• *Understanding cartoons* – Students are often stumped by the challenge of deconstructing political cartoons, so he gives them this series of prompts:

- Look at the *whole* picture.
- Divide the cartoon into four parts and examine each part individually.
- Circle and identify the visual symbols, and note what they stand for.
- Describe what action is taking place.
- Read any dialogue, titles, or captions.
- Think of what you already know about this historical time period.
- Write what you think the cartoon is "saying."

• *Using current events* – Lagares connects current news stories to concepts covered, for example, newspaper headlines about bills signed or vetoed by the president with separation of powers and check and balances.

• *Maximizing multiple choice* – Lagares gives students the following steps to improve their performance on tricky questions:

- Read the question first.
- Cover the answers and answer the question from memory or analysis.
- Cross out multiple-choice answers that can't be true.
- Never leave an answer blank (the state exam penalizes students for not attempting a question).
- When in doubt, guess the answer, mark it with a star, move on, and come back to it later.
- Avoid changing answers (usually the first answer they give is the correct one).

• *Using "accountable talk"* – To avoid students meandering from the task when they are working in groups, Lagares has them "interrogate the text" using these prompts:
- Reading an amendment: What is most interesting to you?
- Scanning a treaty: What is most surprising?
- Reading a short biography: What is this person's most valuable contribution to the U.S.?
- When considering a law: What are some serious implications?

For example, all group members underline and use asterisks and their "connection" symbols; when everyone has finished reading the document, the group has a focused discussion based on their text connections and later summarizes it for the whole class. Discussions can be further honed by asking questions like, "What were the top three advantages based on the president's decision?"

• *Using true-or-false comparisons* – Lagares gives quick quizzes (for example, comparing and contrasting Hamilton and Jefferson) by reading a series of statements aloud and having students respond by writing True or False. This reviews previous material and clarifies distinctions.

• *Modifying texts* – Many students struggle with the arcane language of "antique" texts like the Declaration of Independence. Lagares provides a modern-language version parallel to the original and has students match the corresponding parts.

• *Using creative content-specific games* – Students play the Immigration Game, assuming the role of immigrants to help students understand the diversity of people who came to the United States. In this game, students decide on their country of origin, marital status, children, age, home town, criminal status, relatives, and then synthesize the information into a narrative.

• *Using review activities* – The sheer density of the curriculum and the amount of information students are asked to remember requires ongoing review. Here are some ideas that Lagares uses:
- Rewriting lyrics of contemporary songs to include content in the curriculum.
- Using flash cards containing the class study guide.
- Using specialized flash cards for vocabulary (for example, all words dealing with Cold War foreign policy).
- Using a storyboard as a study guide, creating sequential or thematic visuals of important incidents, events, and people.

• *Using fairytales and fables* – To dramatize some curriculum concepts that are remote from students' real-life experience, Lagares invents humorous tales that can amuse and engage

students. For example, tyranny became more vivid with the story of *Her Majesty Queen Yuckabella*.

Lagares focuses on a number of areas to prepare students for success in college and beyond:

- *Note taking* – Students are required to take notes, using graphic organizers and shortcuts.
- *Modeling* – "Whenever possible, show students exactly what you mean," write Connor and Lagares. For example, during a lecture, have a colleague model exactly how to take notes.
- *Graphic organizers* – Teachers can help students sort out complex information by setting up graphic organizers that map out information and sort it by level of importance. For example, students can take notes in blank spaces of a grid with national, state, and city on one axis and executive, legislative, and judicial on the other.
- *Difficult vocabulary* – High-school social studies has some heavy-duty words, so Lagares has students circle unfamiliar vocabulary and then zeroes in on five or so challenging terms (for example, ratify, impeach, treaty, null and void) and relates each to a personal experience ("I cancelled the check, making it null and void").
- *Vocabulary strategies* – Lagares gives students tools for figuring out difficult words:
    - Ask yourself, is there a smaller word, for example, in Progressive Era: progress.
    - Use a language other than English, for example, with *incarcerate*, Spanish speakers could think of *carcel* (jail).
    - Use a thesaurus to find synonyms.
    - Use a dictionary and write a comprehensible definition in a personalized dictionary made from a pocket-size address book.
- *Study cards* – Lagares teaches students how to use index cards to organize, memorize, and make connections across the curriculum using mnemonic devices, illustrations or icons, and key words. The whole class brainstorms and negotiates clues and cues and students then come up with their own card system.
- *Study plans* – Lagares blocks out time for students to discuss and map out their study strategies, using calendars to see how long they will need to study for a weekly quiz and for major tests in light of their own study habits and conditions.
- *Interactive graphic organizers and guides* – Lagares has students dramatize important events and concepts in U.S. history with rough illustrations and cartoon sequences.
- *Study unit packets* – Lagares collects the materials for each unit in envelopes, with class-created flash cards, class notes, and checklists of unit topics.
- *Study posses* – Before major tests, students organize themselves into study groups to review information, share tips, clarify tricky areas, and update and expand their collection of index cards.
- *Self-analysis and self-monitoring* – Lagares allocates class time to review the results of in-class tests that parallel high-stakes state tests. Students analyze their errors, look at areas of strength and weakness with study buddies, set goals, and chart their progress.

"Facing High Stakes in High School: 25 Successful Strategies from an Inclusive Social Studies Classroom" by David Connor and Christopher Lagares in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, November/December 2007 (Vol. 40, #2, p. 18-27), no e-link available. Lagares can be reached at christopherlagares@gmail.com.

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3. Another Precinct Heard from on "Value-Added" Assessment of Teachers

This *Education Week* article by Debra Viadero previews a forthcoming paper (*Quarterly Journal of Economics*, February 2010) in which labor economist Jesse Rothstein argues that the "value added" approach to judging teacher effectiveness is built on some shaky assumptions and may be misleading. Specifically, Rothstein's paper points out that for value-added analysis to have validity, students need to be randomly assigned to different teachers' classes – but in many cases that's not what happens. Students are often assigned on the basis of academic achievement, behavior problems (one teacher might be seen as doing better with difficult students), or parent requests. Also, Rothstein points out that each teacher's effectiveness with students varies from year to year, and many teachers may be misclassified as effective or ineffective. Rothstein and other researchers have also found that a strong teacher's effect on students may not be as persistent as has been assumed. In actuality, effects fade when students have less-effective teachers in subsequent years. A clear implication of all this is that schools need to be very cautious about making important job decisions based on one year's value-added data.

"'Value Added' Gauge of Teaching Probed" by Debra Viadero in *Education Week*, July 15, 2009 (Vol. 28, #36, p. 1, 13), available only to subscribers; Jesse Rothstein's paper is available at http://www.princeton.edu/~jrothst/published/rothstein_vam_may152009.pdf.

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4. Getting Boys Reading

"Boys like to read books about trucks, boys who get into trouble, sports, animals, and war," reports Mary Ann Zehr in this *Education Week* article on a conference in which successful authors spoke to a group of educators. "More than girls, they lean toward non-fiction. And don't forget the humor or action in stories." Another theme from the authors and illustrators was the importance of emotional content. "Boys want the gore, the smell, the bugs," said Laura Malone Elliott, author of *Under a War-Torn Sky* about flying B-24s in World War II. "But they are vulnerable. Boys in war are afraid. If you are a writer and are going to write about war, you need to be responsible and write about how they cried and were scared."

A lot is at stake in getting boys to read, says Zehr. Among 9-year-old American students, boys score 7 points lower than girls on the NAEP reading test. The gender gap grows to 8 points at age thirteen, and 11 points at age seventeen (almost the same as the gap in 1971). Other pieces of advice from the conference:

• Work hard on finding the best books. Finding books that boys will like is like shopping for clothes they'll be willing to wear, said Janet Pankau, a Virginia teacher and mother of four boys. "There are ten times more for girls than boys." She also noted the tendency for boys who don't find a book that interests them to fake reading. "They'll sit there during silent reading time and turn the pages," she said.

• Be low-key and indirect when recommending books to boys. "Another guy read this book and liked it," might be an effective approach.

• Don't overwhelm boys with too large a selection of books. Jon Scieszka, author of *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*, said it's easier for boys to choose from a more limited set of books.

• Show boys role models of successful males who enjoy reading. Otherwise, boys may worry that showing too much interest in reading may imply they are less than manly. For female teachers and librarians, it helps to show interest in subject that appeal to boys, for example, knowing how a favorite football team did in a recent game.

• Take advantage of computers to draw boys into books, since they are often more comfortable with this medium.

"Authors Share Tips on Getting Boys to Read" by Mary Ann Zehr in *Education Week*, July 15, 2009 (Vol. 28, #36, p. 9); this article can be purchased at
http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2009/07/15/index.html

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5. Parent Input on Class Placement Decisions

In this article in *EducationNews.org*, AP reporter Spencer Green explores whether parents should have a say in class placement. Last spring, Valerie Gilbert visited her second grade son's school several times, scoped out the third-grade teachers, and made a strong request for him to be placed in one particular class. The school ended up placing her son with a different teacher and he had a terrific year. This year, Gilbert hasn't tried to influence the school's judgment. "I'm learning to be more open-minded," she says.

Paul Donahue, a child psychologist and author based in Scarsdale, New York, thinks many parents are over-protective, shielding their children from certain difficulties (such as a less-than-perfect teacher) and preventing them from developing resilience and becoming stronger individuals. "Parents should worry less about these kinds of decisions," he says. "Our job as parents is not to make everything perfect for our kids… Our kids are capable and they can cope." Obviously, there are some children who do need special advocacy and attention.

Some principals welcome parent input at placement time. Illinois principal Sheila Carter thinks parents can contribute valuable insights. "Who knows the children better than parents?" she asks. But she makes the final decisions. When one parent tried to dictate a class list for her child's class, Carter shut her down. "Now that's a lot of nerve," she said.

"Should Parents Weigh in on Kids' Teachers?" by Spencer Green, AP (spotted in *EducationNews.org*, July 16, 2009; http://ednews.org/articles/should-parents-weigh-in-on-kids-teachers.html.

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6. A CEO's Advice on Giving Feedback and Hiring

In this *Sunday New York Times* business article, Adam Bryant interviews CEO David Novak. Several excerpts:

• "What I think a great leader does, a great coach does, is understand what kind of talent you have and then you help people leverage that talent so they can achieve what they never thought they were capable of. The only way you can do that is to care about the people who work for you. No one's going to care about you unless you care about them."

• "The best way to give feedback is to start with, 'This is what I appreciate about you.' … That makes them very receptive for feedback because at least you're giving them credit for what they've done. Then you say, 'And you can be even more effective if you do this' …If you say 'but', it throws all the appreciation stuff out the window."

• The best interview question? "*How do you stay on top of your game?*... I think the thing that I have found in the highest-potential people …is that they're avid learners. Are they continually trying to better themselves? Are they continuing to look outside for ideas…? The other question I ask myself is, would I want my daughter to work for this person? If I couldn't convince myself that I could learn from this person or be inspired by them, then I won't hire them."

"Corner Office: You Win a Floppy Chicken" – an interview with David Novak by Adam Bryant in the *Sunday New York Times* business section, July 12, 2009; a longer version of this interview is available at
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/12/business/12corner.html?_r=1&scp=6&sq=Adam%20Bryant&st=Search

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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).

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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- Headlines for all issues
- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

Marshall Memo subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
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- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Changing Schools (McREL)
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
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine (online)
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal