Marshall Memo 16

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 8, 2003

In this Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"High-quality prekindergarten has been documented to be the single best investment for improving achievement."

Susan Neuman, *Kappan* (see item 7a)

"Traditionally, teaching has been defined by the teacher's performance, rather than by the children's progress."

Susan Neuman, *ibid*.

"Who *discovered* Europe? I mean, we learn about how people from Europe *discovered* North America and South America and Africa before that and Asia, too. But who *discovered* them? Who did it to them? And when?

A 10-year-old student in New York City (see item #2)

"Communities of silence cannot be moral communities. And the most pernicious and pervasive silence in primary school classrooms is the silence surrounding the subject of race. Where there is not silence, there is often a complacent orthodoxy purporting that, since Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., changed the world, everything is just fine.

Lillian Polite and Elizabeth Baird Saenger, *Kappan* (see item #2)

"Unless we address the dysfunctional cultures of many of our high schools, unless we are able to get students and teachers to connect to their schools on a personal level, the performance of public high schools isn't likely to improve significantly. There is a human side of school reform that we ignore at our peril."

Thomas Toch, *Education Week* (see item 4)

"Schools must continuously adjust instruction to promote student learning."

Robert Starratt, *Kappan*, December 2003

1. Eyesight and School Failure

Undetected and uncorrected vision problems are a major cause of school failure, especially among disadvantaged children. Since about 70 percent of classroom learning depends on vision, students who do not see clearly are at a huge disadvantage every day as they try to read, write, and even participate in sports. About 25% of school-age children have undiagnosed vision problems serious enough to affect their achievement in school, and the percentage is much higher for children born into poverty. Research by optometrist Dr. Antonia Orfield at Boston's Mather Elementary School found that 53 percent of the children tested had vision problems that could hinder their ability to read. And a study by New York optometry professor Dr. Rochelle Mozlin found that 52 percent of inner-city high-school students failed a vision screening.

It is easy to see how poor vision can lead to a struggle to learn how to read and cascade into poor academic performance, low teacher expectations, reduced effort, school failure, low self-esteem, and dropping out. It should therefore come as no surprise that about 70 percent of juvenile offenders have undiagnosed vision problems.

Why are these vision problems not picked up by conventional eye tests? Because the traditional doctor's or nurse's wall-chart exam only looks at nearsightedness. Distance vision is important for seeing the chalkboard or television, but an additional, little-given test for close-up vision is necessary to detect problems that affect a child's ability to read a book. The best way to find this is with a computerized instrument called an auto-refractor. The procedure takes less than a minute for each eye, doesn't require drops or an air puff, and immediately tells the amount of nearsightedness, farsightedness, and astigmatism.

To catch vision problems, comprehensive screening need to be done starting in the early grades – and repeated every two years. Most vision problems will only worsen if they are not corrected. The longer we wait, the more frustrated students will become and the steeper will be the downward spiral of school failure.

But correct diagnosis is the easy part. Getting compliance from many children is much more difficult. An unfortunate pattern with many poor families is to avoid going to a doctor until there is a serious or painful problem. The most challenging task is to get children and parents to follow through with the eye examinations and glasses, even when there was little or no cost involved. The cooperation of neighborhood health clinics, teachers, counselors, and principals is vital to making

this happen – right down to driving students to get their glasses, reminding them every day to wear them, and complimenting them when they do ("Those glasses are really cool. You look like a college student with them.").

Here are two letters from students who took part in a program for vision screening and free glasses:

> Thank you for helping me get glasses. It is nice to be able to see without squinting and holding things two inches from my face. Now when I read, my head does not hurt.
>
> Thank you for the voucher to get my classes – they work great! Now I can see what I need to see in class and can read easier too. They also make me feel more businesslike, and they make me feel like I want to do work.

"A Clear Vision for Equity and Opportunity" by Marge Christensen Gould and Herman Gould, O.D., *Phi Delta Kappan*, Decemer 2003 (Vol. 85, #4, p. 324-329). No e-link available.

2. Talking Openly About Race in Elementary Classrooms

The authors of this provocative article in the new *Kappan* are elementary teachers in New York City, one black, the other white. They contend that race is the "elephant in the room" in most elementary school classrooms. Many primary-school children are well aware of issues of race, they contend, but feel "shushed" by parents and teachers (for example, a white child in a predominantly white kindergarten tells his mother that a black classmate's hair "smelled funny", and the mother anxiously tells him, "Everyone is different, and that's fine."). "When teachers avoid the subject…or when they portray its existence as merely a fringe issue, they are sending a very strong message. Although this message may be unintentional, the result can be stifling. But when teachers find ways to address the effects of race in society, we have found that children feel liberated…[a]nd there is more space for them to focus on all kinds of learning. Here are the suggestions put forward in this article:

- *Educate ourselves*. For white teachers, this includes being aware of the privileges and advantages that come from being born white, as well as overcoming the "double narrative" they may carry around: ideals of meritocracy and at the same time deep feelings of superiority.

• *Have courage*. The silence may come more from us than from the children. "We need to trust ourselves, we need to be ready to use our mistakes wisely, and we need to be ready to respond to the children. And they will help us. After the first few times, addressing these issues gets easier – and not addressing them seems unthinkable."

• *Use teachable moments*. Once it's clear that the subject of race is not off limits, "these moments will appear frequently, and the wise teacher will be alert to them and will make use of them, regardless of what the formal subject may be." This includes community events and news stories appropriate to the age level.

• *Don't ask children of color to be spokespeople*. It's unfortunate when white teachers assume that any child of color in the class is ready to be a representative for his or her racial group ("Aisha, what would *you* have to say about this topic?"). If there is a safe and respectful atmosphere in the class, Aisha will feel free to express her opinion when the time is right.

• *Use children's literature*. Reading well-chosen stories aloud and using them as a springboard for discussion is one of the best ways to surface issues of race. "Ideally, these books should not merely inspire but also provoke and disturb and generate new questions for the teacher and students alike."

• *Clarify that "we" and "they" can be any race.* Most children's book authors don't specify when a character is white, assuming that to be white is to be "us," to be "normal." It is the default setting of much literature. By explaining that a character is white, a teacher puts "white" on the same footing as "black" and sets a different tone.

• *Include, don't "welcome."* "Nonwhite children and their parents are too often 'welcomed,' implicitly or explicitly, by members of the majority group. The subtext is that they are 'tolerated' by those in charge. And it is the members of the minority group who feel the condescension, not those doing the 'welcoming.' The discomfort, even fear, of being somehow 'allowed' to be where one doesn't quite belong is palpable." This goes for behind-the-scenes parent activities as well (e.g., volunteering, fundraising, and phone trees).

• *Model concern and activism*. "Children are fascinated with their teachers' own examples. We should never forget the power of the roles we play in children's lives, for good and ill. Personal narratives, experiences, and concerns can be brought into the classroom to good effect, and everyone gains." Of course teachers should not use stories of their own activism (or news stories) in bullying ways.

• *Don't force a happy ending*. Teachers should not "try to tie up messy things into tidy packages with phony resolutions by the end of the class period."

• *Listen*. We need to develop new ways of listening and a willingness to hear uncomfortable or even disturbing remarks from our students. Allowing space for students' comments and questions isn't easy. Nor is sustaining it. But the rewards are rich – both liberating and enduring."

"A Pernicious Silence: Confronting Race in the Elementary Classroom" by Lillian Polite and Elizabeth Baird Saenger, *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2003 (Vol. 85, #4, p. 274-278). No e-link available.

3. Fostering Better Race Relations in Multiracial High Schools

A white student in a multiracial California high school watches a racially-charged film in class and clams up in the discussion afterwards. Asked about this later on, she says, "I was afraid I would sound racist." This student was typical of many who were studied over three years by Heather Lewis-Charp and her colleagues. The study found that most white students "faded into the background" of their schools' dialogue on race. Although these students claimed they were "very comfortable" or "somewhat comfortable" when asked about racial comfort, they were anxious when interacting face to face with non-white peers and teachers. "You have to be careful of what you say and what you do because you never know how people from other races might take it," said one student. "I don't want anyone to hate me for what I'm saying when I don't mean it," said another student. A third said, "When I said once that I didn't know black people get sunburned, I just didn't know. I got totally jumped on."

Lewis-Charp says that it is unrealistic to expect white students to know what they haven't been taught, but the anger expressed by students of color is also understandable: they are constantly being asked to explain themselves to their white peers while they themselves are figuring out how to make their way in a predominantly white culture. The study found that non-white youth talked about race much more with their families – that white students were way behind in "cultural competency." The combination of ignorance and reticence among white students created an undercurrent of resentment – a current with great potential for trouble.

Some white students felt their schools' push to embrace diversity did not include whites. Noting the presence of clubs for various ethnic, racial, and cultural groups in their schools, these students wanted to know why there couldn't be a European American Club. One student said, "You see all the different cultures have

clubs, but there's not a white club, and there never will be because it's like whites being Nazis and stuff like that, and I think it's hypocritical. It's culturally a double standard." Other students noted that a black student could wear a "Black Power" T-shirt, but a white student would not be allowed to wear a "White Power" shirt.

This white backlash and sense of exclusion were recurring themes in the study. "White students were struggling with the implicit invisibility of whiteness and the social taboo against drawing too much attention to it… [M]ost whites in the United States see themselves as *raceless*, preferring to identify as 'Americans' or as 'individuals.' However, white students within highly diverse and multiracial schools have a heightened and more complex understanding of racial issues…[They] had few positive forums to explore or redefine their racial identities. Thus their burgeoning racial identify often left them feeling confused and sometimes angry with others for 'seeing' them strictly in racial terms."

History and social studies classes would seem to be the logical place for such issues to be talked through, but this was not the case for most students. Courses typically covered a narrow range of topics, including slavery, American Indians, the Holocaust, and the civil rights movement. Students were rarely asked to look at historical events from the vantage point of different individuals or groups. The mainstream curriculum failed by make the link between historical events and present-day social inequities. The one exception was the "Facing History and Ourselves" curriculum on the Holocaust.

Lewis-Charp says that the study has three implications for educators in multiracial high schools:

• *Provide safe spaces for dialogues on race*. Poorly-run discussions involving students from different groups can make things worse. Lewis-Charp recommends having students take part in skillfully-led discussion on race and racism with students from their own racial group before coming together in larger and more diverse groups. "In the relative safety of this environment, white youths can be exposed to potentially volatile issues such as white privilege and what it means to be prejudiced." Students should then be better prepared to join in well-facilitated interracial dialogues with clear ground rules for interaction. One structure that works well is having students sit in pairs with one student sitting silently and listening to the other student for a certain amount of time and then trade places. Diaries and journals are another way to engage a class in cross-racial dialogues on race.

• *Integrate multicultural content into the core curriculum*. This honors the history of students of color and helps white students develop the skills they need to interact with diverse peers and colleagues. A richly-integrated curriculum can include doing research on one's own and other groups and families.

• *Provide additional training and support for teachers*. Teaching about race is not easy, and there must be effective staff development. "White teachers need to model risk-taking by admitting that they don't have the solutions to race problems, but they also need to fulfill their social responsibility to support young people as they learn to thoughtfully consider these difficult issues."

"Breaking the Silence: White Students' Perspectives on Race in Multiracial Schools" by Heather Lewis-Charp, *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2003 (Vol. 85, #4, p. 279-285). No e-link available.

4. A Conservative Eye for the Small-Schools Guy

In a thoughtful opinion piece on the back page of the current *Education Week*, Thomas Toch urges progressive advocates of small high schools (including his own funder, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) to take off their ideological blinders and listen to some points from the conservative side of the street. "The small-schools movement," he writes, "could easily become yet another casualty on a school reform landscape that has been needlessly and endlessly polarized by conservative and progressive purists, who carry on like modern-day Hatfields and McCoys."

Toch cites the grim statistics on high-school matriculation (only 18 of every 100 students entering 9th grade eventually earn an associate's or bachelor's degree) and the economic stakes attached to a college degree (the average U.S. college graduate now earns nearly 70 percent more than a high-school graduate). He asserts that huge high schools are breeding grounds of anonymity, apathy, and alienation, which saps students' motivation to learn and teachers' motivation to teach. "Many students and teachers simply do not care because they do not feel cared about. The result is what the school reformer Theodore R. Sizer has famously called a 'conspiracy of the least' in many high school classrooms. Teachers don't press students very hard – they start classes late, finish early, let the conversation drift away from the day's topic – and in return students don't make life difficult for teachers. These classroom compromises take a huge toll on public high schools' productivity."

Although not all large high schools are like this, Toch argues that small schools are more likely to create better learning conditions – a sense of connectedness, the

sense of being known and valued, stronger bonds between students and teachers, and a level of genuine caring and mutual obligation. He cites evidence that small schools have better student and teacher attendance, better student involvement in extracurricular activities, lower teacher turnover, fewer discipline problems, and higher graduation rates. Toch contends that big, comprehensive high schools were designed for another economic era, when secondary schools acted as sorting mechanisms to prepare students for different futures. Today's challenge is to give all students the same demanding curriculum that used to be reserved only for the gifted and privileged. This is very difficult in large high schools.

Toch contends that the best strategy for improving achievement is to "harness the progressive-backed small-schools movement to several conservative-backed solutions:"

- *School choice* – "Students and teachers are more likely to be invested in their work…if students are permitted to select their schools…Students attending schools under choice plans are typically going to work harder because they want to be in the schools they select…Teachers work hard because they have a sense of ownership."
- *School autonomy* – Toch believes that small schools need to have more budget and hiring autonomy, which means being freed from many of the usual school-system and union regulations. Many successful small schools are charters – or have virtual charter powers.
- *Accountability* – Although small schools may be able to conduct richer, higher-quality assessments of student learning, Toch believes that they still need to be accountable to the public for standardized-test scores: "…if public money is being spent to run the schools, taxpayers and parents have a right to know what's happening in them, as they do in charter schools and voucher schools."

Toch concludes by arguing that the small schools movement should make its case somewhat more broadly: "It should be stressing the importance of creating school cultures that motivate students and teachers to care because they feel cared about, not small schools, *per se*. Small schools are a means to a larger end: getting students and teachers to invest in… the missions of their schools as an important step toward lifting achievement and getting a far wider range of students into and through the college pipeline."

"Small Schools, Big Ideas" by Thomas Toch, *Education Week*, December 3, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #14, p.44, 32) http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=14toch.h23

5. Before You Adopt a New Program…

What would convince you to adopt a new program (for example, brain-based instruction, multiple intelligences, Success for All, Core Knowledge, differentiated instruction, phonics)? Some educators demand "scientific evidence" before taking the plunge. For others, the recommendation of a trusted colleague is enough. Others trust the salesman. Others trust their gut. In this article, Mark Goldberg offers the following guidelines:

• *Make sure the program is research-based and works*. A school team made up of an administrator and six or so teachers can do basic research to satisfy themselves that this program is right for their school.

• *Make sure the school team represents the staff*. Don't just put the "usual suspects" on the team. Recruiting well-respected, broadly-representative faculty members will be a key factor in the eventual buy-in for the program.

• *Make sure the principal is enthusiastic*. "A recalcitrant or reluctant principal will make success less likely; an obstructionist principal will often guarantee that a program does not succeed." A smart strategy is to involve the principal from the very beginning.

• *Keep the whole staff informed throughout the process*. The final decision to adopt should not be a surprise to anyone.

• *Make sure the program fits the needs and culture of the school*. "Fit" is important. What's the staff like? What do the parents want? What's the budget? [And what is the problem to which this is the solution?]

• *Make sure the program is supported by staff training*. A sure way to guarantee failure is to mandate a program without the professional development to back it up.

• *Make sure the staff has the materials they need*. Teachers will always have creative adaptations and additions, but they need the basic books, supplies, computer programs, and equipment to implement the program.

• *Make sure most of the staff is enthusiastic*. Seventy percent seems like a reasonable "super-majority" to insist on before going forward. Waiting for a higher level of support gives too much power to the recalcitrants who seem to be present on almost any staff.

"Everything Works" by Mark Goldberg, *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2003 (Vol. 85, #4, p. 304-306). No e-link available.

6. Short Items:

• ***A different kind of cutting in high school*** – Studies show that as many as four out of 100 high-school students are likely to intentionally harm themselves, usually by cutting open their skin with a razor blade. They say it eases their pain, clears their mind, and makes them feel calm. They are clearly acting out extreme emotional distress. School support personnel report a major increase in referrals of self-injury and are groping to find the reasons and the best responses. Nancy Peterson, a psychologist in a high school outside Chicago, said, "You would see them in the hallway or community and say that there is nothing wrong with them." Tracy Alderman, a clinical psychologist in San Diego, said, "The stereotypical self-injurer is bright, sensitive, helpful to other people, the caretakers of their friends and family, good listeners, above-average students, and invisible… Most of these kids feel isolated and alienated, and they want someone to talk to."

The behavior generally begins around age 12 or 13 and can continue for years. See the web-link for details on dealing with self-mutilation and resources for educators.

"Student Self-Harm: Silent School Crisis" by Michelle Galley, *Education Week*, December 3, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #14, p. 1, 14, 15)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=14cutters.h23

• ***The key role of quality pre-kindergarten*** – In this hard-hitting article, Susan Neuman argues that the huge achievement gap that exists when students enter kindergarten (poor children have typically been read to for 25 hours, while their more advantaged peers have had 1,000 hours of reading) cannot be erased by even the most dynamic and effective teaching. What is needed is highly effective prekindergarten programs that have these characteristics:

• *Sufficient time* – Prekindergarten should be full day and full year programs and should also pay closer attention to how they use time, compressing more experiences into the time available.

• *Precise targeting* – Prekindergarten programs should serve students who need them the most. Low levels of maternal education and second-language status have been shown to be the most reliable indicators of disadvantages coming into school.

• *Thoughtful focus* – Prekindergarten programs should include powerful learning activities such as storybook reading (especially with informational books) and should constantly ask the question, "Given the limitations of time, how well does

this type of experience develop the critical knowledge, skills, and dispositions that children need to be successful in school?"

• *Accountability for results* – The question prekindergarten teachers should ask of themselves at the end of the day is not "How did I do?" but "Did the children learn?"

• *Adequate resources* – This includes providing the conditions for successful learning: small class size, skilled and well-trained teachers, decent facilities, good supervision, on-going training, and a focus on continuous improvement.

"From Rhetoric to Reality: The Case for High-Quality Compensatory Prekindergarten Programs" by Susan B. Neuman, *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2003 (Vol. 85, #4, p. 286-291). No e-link available.

• ***The impact of out-of-school time (OST) programs*** – A new study from McREL (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning) zeroed in on the impact of after-school, weekend, vacation, and summer programs on student achievement and drew the following conclusions:

- OST strategies can boost the achievement of low-achieving or at-risk students in reading and math.
- There is no difference in effectiveness between after-school, weekend, and summer programs.
- Early elementary students benefit more from OST strategies to improve reading.
- Older students benefit more from a focus on math.
- OST programs need not focus only on academic activities to boost student achievement.
- One-on-one tutoring for low-achieving or at-risk students in OST programs has strong positive effects on achievement in reading.

The study is available at http://www.mcrel.org/newsroom/OSTsynthesis.asp

• ***Don't know much about history*** – In a lengthy *Kappan* piece, Richard Paxton bemoans the fact that snap public quizzes continually embarrass educators (beginning in 1913!) by portraying U.S. students as woefully ignorant of basic history facts.

Jay Leno: Why did the Berlin Wall fall down?

Student: It was old.

Leon: What did the wall separate?

Student: It separated China.

Leno: Which city?

Student: Berlin.

Leno: And Berlin is where?

Student: Uh, China.

Paxton contends that, such parodies notwithstanding, the basic history knowledge of today's students, while nothing to write home about, is probably no worse today than it was in "the good old days" and may be better.

One nugget in this article: a piece by Bell and McCollum identified five different ways that students' learning of history should be assessed:

- The ability to understand present events in light of the past;
- The ability to sift through a mass of conflicting documents to construct a straightforward and probable account of a series of events;
- The ability to appreciate and comprehend historical narrative;
- The ability to give reflective and discriminating replies to "thought questions" on a given historical situation;
- The ability to answer questions revealing the range of their historical information.

"Don't Know Much About History – Never Did" by Richard Paxton, *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2003 (Vol. 85, #4, p. 265-273). No e-link available.

• ***Bringing Thomas Edison to Life*** – It's not clear how many professional actors and actresses are working in schools to bring historical characters alive for students, but one of them had a nice story on him in the *New York Times* last week. Patrick Garner, 46, works as an understudy in the Broadway show "Gypsy", and has created a 45-minute one-man dramatization of the life of Thomas Edison that he performs in New York-area elementary schools. Mr. Garner was forced to be inventive by hard times in the acting business. He read half a dozen Edison biographies, wrote his 45-minute show ("Thomas Edison: Inventor, Lecturer, and Prankster"), tested it out on his own children, and advertised to local schools via his home computer. During his show, Garner teaches students to chorus Edison's four key mottos:

- Work hard.
- Learn from mistakes.
- Look at problems from a different angle.
- Find something you love in your life and do it for your whole life long.

"The Smell of the Greasepaint, the Roar of Those Third Graders" by Claire Hoffman, *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 2003
http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/03/nyregion/03ACTO.html

• ***Fred Jones part IV*** – Here is this the link for this month's installment of Fred Jones at the *Education World* website. Good reading for teachers!
http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/jones/jones004.shtml

Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, or if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should be covered, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo aims to keep busy principals, teachers, and other educators very well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is your "designated reader," searching through a wide range of publications the week they come out, zeroing in on the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning at the school level, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Target topics include the following:

• *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; 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
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 Week
Educational Leadership
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
New York Times
New Yorker
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine
and occasional books, lectures, and websites.

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