Marshall Memo 37

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
May 10, 2004

In this Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"This is a month to celebrate courage."

Anne Lewis on the 50th anniversary this month of the Brown v. Board of Education decision (May 2004 *Phi Delta Kappan,* p. 643)

"The good news is that the achievement gaps between racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. are smaller than they were several decades ago. The bad news is that progress stopped around 1990… [I]t is the failure to go behind the classroom and foster high-quality instructional practices for all students, in all classrooms, in all schools that is strongly implicated in these disappointing results. What we need today is a more determined, high-quality, research-based emphasis on improving what happens in classrooms."

Ronald Ferguson and Jal Mehta (see item #1)

"I believe that a nation that has planted its flag on the moon and is now sending robotic scouts to Mars can figure out how to get good teachers into the schools that need them the most."

Mark Warner, Governor of Virginia (*Washington Post*, May 5, 2004)

"The challenge for teachers is to create an atmosphere where students understand that they will not be 'let off' from thinking or putting in effort, while still maintaining warmth, kindness, and respect in class interactions."

Lynley Anderman, Helen Patrick, and Allison Ryan (see item #4)

"Drill and practice is sometimes employed with struggling readers with the apparent belief that such students were not cognitively capable of handling tasks involving deeper processing. There is ample evidence that the vocabulary of all levels of students is increased when teachers provide 'rich instruction.'"

Karen Wood, Janis Harmon, and Wanda Hedrick (see item 5)

"The only excuse I will accept is your death."

A hard-nosed former New York City principal's stated policy on staff absences, quoted wistfully by a Brooklyn principal who used to teach under him.

1. Separate and Unequal – An Update

In this sweeping article, Harvard professor Ron Ferguson and graduate student Jal Mehta review the history of school desegregation: the *Plessy v. Ferguson* "separate but equal" decision in 1897, the unanimous *Brown* decision striking down separate but equal in May of 1954, the civil rights legislation of the mid-sixties that produced rapid school desegregation in the South, and then the *Milliken v. Bradley* decision on urban-suburban integration plans in 1974, which "effective foreclosed the possibility of meaningful desegregation in the North and West."

Ferguson and Mehta then review federal and state efforts to improve the quality of education for children trapped in inferior, *de facto* segregated schools (Title I, Head Start, and efforts to equalize schools spending) and the research on the educational effects of school integration where it has occurred. Results on black student achievement have been disappointing, and Ferguson and Mehta conclude that the main "suspects" have been tracking and achievement grouping within desegregated schools. "These practices provide means by which students attending the same schools may nevertheless have different instructional experiences."

The authors go on to argue that black students would not necessarily be better off if their schools started teaching all students in heterogeneous classrooms. They cite a study by Thomas Good that documents the ways in which, even in mixed classrooms, low-achieving students often receive different treatment from teachers:

- Waiting less time for low achievers to answer
- Giving low achievers answers or calling on someone else rather than offering clues or repeating or rephrasing questions;
- Rewarding inappropriate behavior or incorrect answers by low achievers;
- Criticizing low achievers more often for failure;
- Praising low achievers less often for success;
- Failing to give feedback to the public responses of low achievers;
- Paying less attention to low achievers or interacting with them less frequently;
- Calling on low achievers less frequently;
- Seating low achievers farther away from the teacher;
- Demanding less from low achievers;
- Interacting with low achievers more privately than publicly and monitoring and structuring their activities more closely;

- Grading tests or assignments in a different manner, in which the high achievers but not the low achievers are given the benefit of the doubt in borderline cases;
- Having less friendly interaction with low achievers, including less smiling;
- Providing briefer and less informative feedback to the questions of low achievers;
- Providing less eye contact and other nonverbal communication of attention to low achievers;
- Using fewer effective but time-consuming instructional methods with low achievers;
- Showing less acceptance and use of low achievers' ideas.

If these classroom conditions apply, "minority students in integrated schools may receive inferior instruction if they are overrepresented among low achievers or among students from whom not much is expected." Ferguson and Metha go on to make this startling argument: "Although circumstances surely exist in which the only way to give students what they need academically is to move them to heterogeneously grouped classrooms, there are also surely situations in which enriching the curriculum and quality of instruction while maintaining the ability-grouped regime is the most academically responsible option." This could work academically, they say, if all groups get an equally rigorous curriculum and high-quality teaching. "[I]f what is taught is the same, classmates' proficiencies seem not to matter… Less time is wasted on material that is too elementary or too advanced, and instruction that serves one student well is more likely to serve others well, too… Furthermore… ability grouping tends to lower self-esteem slightly among the high-achieving group and raise it slightly among the low-achieving group… Ultimately, our conclusion is that how children are grouped for instruction seems less important than how well they are taught."

The authors then turn to the effect of class size. Despite a "stand-off" among researchers, they believe that class sizes larger than the low twenties are unwise, especially in elementary schools, and give credence to research from Tennessee (Project STAR) and Wisconsin (SAGE) showing much lower class sizes in primary grades boost achievement, especially among African-American students, and that these effects are long-lasting.

But the top priority, they conclude, is the quality of instruction. "*Teacher quality matters*," they aver. "In most research that tries to study it, variation in teacher quality accounts for more of the variation in student achievement than any other school input

and even rivals parental background in importance." School districts should work to attract talented individuals to classrooms *and* work to refine teacher training and professional development.

Their overall point: "The good news is that the achievement gaps between racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. are smaller than they were several decades ago. The bad news is that progress stopped around 1990… [I]t is the failure to go behind the classroom and foster high-quality instructional practices for all students, in all classrooms, in all schools that is strongly implicated in these disappointing results. What we need today is a more determined, high-quality, research-based emphasis on improving what happens in classrooms."

"An Unfinished Journey: The Legacy of *Brown* and the Narrowing of the Achievement Gap" by Ronald Ferguson and Jal Mehta in *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2004 (Vol. 85, #9, p. 656-669

2. Using "Value-Added" Information in British Schools

For the last twenty years, British educators have been using "value-added" achievement data to improve instruction and motivate students. "I think the crucial thing about value-added," said Judy Sebba, a Sussex education professor, "is there's no question that it's improved the capacity of the system to judge itself at every level: classroom, school, individual teacher."

Three pieces had to be in place before this occurred: national curriculum standards, national assessments, and unique pupil-identification numbers so that students could be tracked from age 3 to 16. The national government measures the progress of individual students based solely on their prior achievement. It's also possible to control for a range of school-level variables that might affect a students' progress but are outside a school's control (e.g., the proportion of boys in a school or the percent of students living in poverty). The most sophisticated level of analysis takes all this into account and also teachers' level of experience, the student's attendance that year, and other variables. Data can be presented in tables or graphically so that principals, teachers, parents, and students can make sense of it. Schools get five-year reports that make it possible to track student progress and school effectiveness over time and across subjects.

Teachers are invited to analyze the data by department. "So each teacher has to plot their own results," says a school assistant headmaster, "which can be pretty hairy, if they're the only person in the department who's not making progress. But it's

private within the department. The audit has to come back to me, but it doesn't name names. But the department has to deal with it. We've worked quite hard within the school to make it as non-threatening as possible." If a teacher's class is not making expected rates of progress, it's up to that teacher's colleagues to help through peer observation and support.

The achievement information is also used to identify students who are not on track. Extra help is provided, schedules are changed, and struggling students have a conference with a teacher or administrator, look at the data, hammer out an action plan to address weak areas, and get it signed by their parents.

Teachers' attitudes toward student failure have changed markedly. "When I was a young teacher," says Susan Scarsbrook, a head teacher in Lambeth, "if children failed a test, that was the child's fault." Now her teachers pore over test results. "There're not saying these children are stupid. They're saying, 'How is our teaching not being effective?' And that's such a big jump professionally."

Although there has been some controversy about the government's statistics, most educators see value-added analysis, along with the transparent presentation of data, as vastly superior to the previous diet of raw test scores.

"Value Lessons" by Lynn Olson in *Education Week*, May 5, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #34, p. 36-40) http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=34Value.h23

3. Creating a Climate Where Good Teachers Have Maximum Impact

When talented teachers enter professionally-dead schools, their initiatives are often rebuffed and they retreat to their classrooms. They may provide pockets of excellence for the students they teach, but their impact is dissipated and they often become discouraged. What all teachers need is a rich professional community that allows them to work with their colleagues and grow as professionals. Schools like this have far more impact on student learning. Schools that "beat the odds" in high-poverty communities have professional climates with the following qualities:

- *Orchestrating a shared vision for student achievement* – This includes clear, agreed-upon learning goals across the grades to focus and shape teacher learning, and frequent use of a broad range of student performance data to improve teaching. In contrast, less effective schools allow teachers to set their own goals and make isolated decisions about instruction.

- *Fostering teacher participation in professional communities* – This includes an expanded array of professional development opportunities and encouraging teachers

to attend meetings, conferences, and collaborate with colleagues. In contrast, teachers in less effective schools work in isolation, have few opportunities for professional growth and collegiality, and rarely talk about professional topics over lunch. Most sadly, they have little idea what they are missing.

• *Creating structured improvement activities* – This includes creating the time for ongoing, informal learning within the school day and building a highly collaborative environment where working together to solve problems and learning from each other become cultural norms. Teacher participation in shaping professional development is critical.

• *Engendering a caring attitude* – For teachers to deal with everyday challenges, there must be trust. "Teachers, administrators, parents, and students have to feel physically safe as well as safe to air their views when they differ with others. A caring atmosphere fosters that feeling of safety." This includes the physical appearance of the building and genuine outreach to parents and the community.

• *Fostering a deep respect for lifelong learning* – Effective schools bring in guest speakers and consultants and disseminate professional articles and books to supplement their internal professional dialogue. Teachers also take part in learning activities like book clubs, courses, and travel. And they let students know that they are learners too.

The author stresses that all five of these characteristics need to be present because they are linked and interdependent.

"The Relation Between Professional Climate and Student Learning Depends on the Way a School Treats Teachers" by Janet Angelis in *Middle School Journal*, May 2004 (Vol. 35, #5, p. 52-56), no e-link available

4. Getting Middle-School Students to Be Motivated for Mastery

In this thoughtful article, three education professors identify "mastery orientation" in middle-school classrooms as critical to high academic achievement. What does this look like?

- Students engage in challenging tasks rather than procrastinating and looking for ways to avoid work.
- Students choose tasks they are likely to learn from rather than tasks that are the easiest way to get an 'A.'
- Students monitor their own understanding and self-correct rather than finishing without real understanding or memory.

- Students persist even when work is difficult and success is not immediate.
- Students do more than the minimum required and think about learning outside the classroom and after the unit is finished.
- Students get help when they need it, rather than skipping over tasks or copying mindlessly from others.
- Students are positive about school and themselves as learners.

And what produces this kind of mastery orientation? The authors think it does not come from fancy curriculum materials, guest speakers, or "fun" add-on activities. Rather, they believe, it is teachers' beliefs, words, and actions in the classroom every day that foster this mastery orientation in students. What teachers do in the opening weeks of the school year is particularly important: "This is the time when teachers communicate explicitly the reasons for their practices and their expectations for students. They preview the year, establish the purposes for what students will be doing and the meaning of academic tasks and achievement, give explanations, build community in the classroom, set the emotional tone, and establish classroom routines and procedures."

To get the full flavor of how a mastery-oriented classroom takes shape, the authors closely studied two exemplary teachers and described three common characteristics of their classrooms:

• *Active learning* – Both teachers lived the philosophy that learning requires active student involvement and interaction and that making mistakes, self-monitoring, and correcting them is integral to learning. "We're going to practice over and over again," said one teacher to her students. "That's how you get good. And you're going to make mistakes. That's how you learn." The other teacher said, "There are three ways to learn: from seeing, hearing, doing. I will try to use all those ways." Both teachers encouraged student interaction in class, but when students were working in small groups, the conversations had to be on task. Both teachers used student portfolios and got students involved in assessing the work that went into the portfolios.

• *Enthusiasm for content and learning* – Both teachers bubbled with enthusiasm for routine classroom work as well as field trips and special projects, and they never seemed to assume that students wouldn't find the work interesting. "We are going to do some wonderful things…" "You are all going to get excited when I show you…" "I find this fun…" And the teachers reinforced students' expressions of interest and enthusiasm.

• *Positive relationships with students* – The teachers were warm and respectful toward all students, both as people and as learners. They expected all students to participate in class activities, try hard, master academic content, and improve. And they trusted students to do a lot by themselves. This was in contrast to many middle-school teachers' tendency to avoid calling on students who might give wrong answers and rely on a small cadre of students to answer questions and carry class discussions. The two classrooms in the study had what the authors called an "academic press" – a constant demand that students engage in class work and "stay with" the question or problem rather than leaving the thinking to someone else. These successfully balanced academic demands and nurturing, creating a classroom "where students understand that they will not be "let off" from thinking or putting in effort, while still maintaining warmth, kindness, and respect in class interactions." Both teachers didn't hesitate to correct students' mistakes, but they did so in a positive, supportive, and respectful way. When students laughed at the mistakes of others, the teachers squelched it immediately.

"Creating Adaptive Motivational Environments in the Middle Grades" by Lynley Anderman, Helen Patrick, and Allison Ryan in *Middle School Journal*, May 2004 (Vol. 35, #5, p. 33-39), no e-link available

5. Teaching Vocabulary and Concepts to Middle-School Students

A good vocabulary is key to understanding subject-area textbooks and being successful in school. These are recommendations from the research for effective vocabulary and concept instruction:

• *Give students time to read independently at their level*. Students who are not reading on level are unlikely to read in their free time after school. "Learners who are struggling with print, regardless of the cause, need numerous opportunities each class day to read material they can handle with relative ease to enable them to increase their vocabulary incidentally through recreational reading."

• *Provide below grade-level books related to content area topics*. This is an excellent way to get reluctant readers to read more.

• *Provide opportunities for multiple exposures to key terms*. Merely pre-teaching words is not enough; to learn a word, students need more. Here is a sample sequence for new vocabulary in a literature book students are reading together:

- Present the words in the context in which they appear.

- Develop conversational definitions of the words and reflect on how they're used in the passage.
- Have students keep a written record of the words (perhaps in a vocabulary notebook).
- Discuss the words as they are used in the story to deepen understanding.
- Show the relationship among the words; pose questions, challenge students to support their answers.
- Have students work together to practice applying the words in other contexts.
- Extend the activity beyond the classroom. Have students go to other sources, such as the TV news, to see how many vocabulary words could be used to describe what is reported.

• *Teach students how words can be used in different contexts* – This includes showing students how the same word can have different meanings in different situations.

• *Let students choose some of the words to be studied*. This helps them become more independent learners.

• *Teach vocabulary explicitly*. Direct instruction is vital to expanding vocabularies (as well as incidental learning through independent reading).

• *Emphasize structural analysis when teaching words*. This includes prefixes and suffixes and Latin and Greek roots to help students unlock the meaning of unfamiliar words.

• *Avoid drill and practice activities*. Worksheets involving fill-in-the-blanks, seek and find, and matching words and definitions "are inadequate means for developing students' conceptual understanding of important vocabulary… Drill and practice is sometimes employed with struggling readers with the apparent belief that such students are not cognitively capable of handling tasks involving deeper processing. There is ample evidence that the vocabulary of all levels of students is increased when teachers provide 'rich instruction.' Rich instruction means providing a context for the new vocabulary, involving the students in determining the definitions, relating the words to their prior knowledge, and making word study fun and enjoyable."

• *Provide staff development training in effective vocabulary instruction*. Teachers need to be aware of the many strategies that are available!

"Recommendations from Research for Teaching Vocabulary to Diverse Learners" by Karen Wood, Janis Harmon, and Wanda Hedrick in *Middle School Journal*, May 2004 (Vol. 35, #5, p. 57-63), no e-link available

6. Short Items:

a. Mixed expectations – What's wrong with this picture?

- 83 percent of students say they expect to go to college;
- 84 percent of students say their parents expect them to go to college;
- 64 percent of students say their teachers think they will go to college;
- 54 percent of students expect to make the honor roll next year.

"High Expectations for Every Student" by Nancy Flowers, Steven Mertens, and Peter Mulhall in *Middle School Journal*, May 2004 (Vol. 35, #5, p. 64-69), no e-link available

b. Helping new teachers survive and thrive – *Education Digest* reviewed a new book, *Finders and Keepers: Helping New Teachers Survive and Thrive in Our Schools*, by Susan Moore Johnson and the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers (Jossey-Bass 2004). The book followed 50 new teachers through their novice years, cataloging their joys and disappointments. The book emphasizes the critical role of principals and experienced teachers in supporting new teachers. Some tips:

- Conduct an "information rich" hiring process, ensuring a good match between candidate and school.
- Provide new teachers with clear curriculum goals and materials and professional development on how to use them.
- Encourage experienced and novice colleagues to enrich the experience of new teachers.
- Provide professional development to help new teachers grow.

"Education Resource" by Dudley Barlow in *Education Digest*, May 2004 (Vol. 69, #9, p. 55), no e-link available.

c. Warding off "summer slump" – When elementary school students read four or five books over the summer and do a simple writing activity on each book, the reading achievement losses that normally occur are reduced. So says a study in last month's *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*. "From a policy perspective," said Jimmy Kim, the study's author, "this study shows that maybe we need to spend more money to get books into kids' hands. From a school perspective, maybe we need

to think about having all kids read and do a simple writing activity based on their books over the summer."

"Reading Books Is Found to Ward Off 'Summer Slump'" by Debra Viadero in *Education Week*, May 5, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #34, p. 12)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=34Read.h23

d. Should we try to filter the Internet? – The lead article in this month's *Kappan* magazine makes the case for not trying to filter the Internet. Here are the reasons:

- Filtering software does not work.
- Filtering is anti-educational.
- Filtering damages the fabric of knowledge (it's capricious and unpredictable)
- There are better solutions. "Attempting to restrict access to the wider Internet because a student might see a dirty picture is like shutting down libraries because some pervert once exposed himself in the stacks."

"Just Give It to Me Straight: A Case Against Filtering the Internet" by T.A. Callister, Jr. and Nicholas Burbules in *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2004 (Vol. 85, #9, p. 648-655), no e-link available

e. Teacher statistics – A recent National Education Association (NEA) survey shows that the percentage of male teachers is at a 40-year low: just 21 percent of the nation's teachers are men. At the elementary level, the percent of male teachers fell from an all-time high of 18 percent in 1981 to an all-time low of 9 percent today. At the secondary level, the percentage of male teachers declined from 50 percent in 1986 to 35 percent today. Teachers of color make up only 16 percent of the teaching population, and 42 percent of public schools have no minority teachers at all.

"Are Male Teachers on the Road to Extinction?" in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, May 7, 2004 (quoting http://www.nea.org/newsreleases/2004/nr040428.html)

f. Improving a toxic culture – Teachers complaining about a colleague but not sharing it with that person. Staff meetings dominated by the same few people. Parking-lot gripes about the administration, the organization, or certain individuals. These are signs that a school has not agreed upon norms of behavior. Suzanne Bond believes that schools need to develop "a shared covenant that clearly articulates the school's core values and provides standards by which actions will be judged." Well-

defined operating principles, she believes, can help leaders establish standards for how people treat one another and work together in the school.

http://www.principals.org/publications/pl/pl_high_road_0404.cfm (spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, May 7, 2004)

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
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Curriculum/Education Update (ASCD)
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Middle School Journal
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

E-links will be provided whenever possible to give access to the full article. If you would like to suggest additional publications, please be in touch.

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