

Marshall Memo 5

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 22, 2003

In this Issue:

1. Summer reading loss accounts for most of the achievement gap.
2. The annual Kappa/Gallup poll reports American attitudes toward public schools.
3. Good initial assessments of students' skill, knowledge, and feelings are essential.

Quote of the Week

"The data available consistently portray summer reading setback as the most potent explanation for the widening of the reading achievement gap between rich and poor children across the span of the elementary years." (see #1)

1. Summer Reading Loss

In a powerful article in the current *Kappan*, Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen present the research on summer reading loss and propose specific steps that schools need to take. The research shows that children from low-income homes start school about a year behind their more affluent peers. While they are in school, all students make comparable gains, but poorer students lose ground every summer vacation, while the reading proficiency of more affluent children holds steady or improves. The substantially-wider achievement gap that has opened up by sixth grade (a difference of 2-3 years) is largely explained by the accumulation of the ground that poorer students lose each summer.

Is compulsory summer school for poorer students the answer? Allington and McGill-Franzen think this would be expensive, discriminatory, and probably ineffective. Instead, they point to during-the-school-year activities that affect summer reading loss.

Hundreds of studies have shown that the best readers read the most and poor readers read the least. This is the key to improving fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. But how can we increase voluntary reading among students who don't read well and hate to read? There are significant barriers: (a) many less-affluent children struggle with the texts they are given in school, feel incompetent as readers,

and would much rather play computer games or watch TV; (b) most of these children depend on school for most of their reading matter, but many schools serving high-poverty communities have smaller, older, and less diverse school and classroom library collections than other schools – and are closed during the summer; (c) poorer children have access to fewer books in their communities (in one worst-case scenario, more than 16,000 books could be purchased in a wealthier community and 55 books in a poorer one); (d) poorer children have less reading matter available in their homes because their parents cannot afford to make these discretionary purchases. The deck seems to be stacked against less successful, less-affluent children reading outside school hours.

Allington and McGill-Franzen note that some economically-disadvantaged children make strong progress in reading every summer. What’s their secret? One key factor is a positive attitude toward reading and a belief that they were successful readers. “Greater success in school reading... is central to enhancing out-of-school voluntary reading.” The authors suggest a two-pronged approach: improve classroom instruction during the year to build a sense of self-efficacy and genuine interest about reading, and at the same time address the problem of poor children’s access to reading matter over the summer. Their key points:

- Reading strategies need to be explicitly taught in the classroom. Expert instruction is key.
- Every teacher needs to promote extensive reading of books and other material at the “just right” level of difficulty (not too hard, not too easy). The focus needs to be on getting all children reading books accurately, fluently, and with understanding. Extensive classroom and school libraries are essential to this.
- Students should be given a lot of choice in what they read. If they are allowed to pursue their personal interests from a wide range of material on different subjects and different levels of difficulty, children build internal motivation to read when they are not in school.
- Students must have easy – literally fingertip – access to a wide variety of high—quality, appropriately-difficult reading matter every weekend and vacation during the year and over the summer vacation.

“The Impact of Summer Setback on the Reading Achievement Gap” by Richard L. Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen, *Phi Delta Kappan*, Sept. 2003 (Vol. 85, #1, p. 68-75)

2. Phil Delta/Gallup Poll

Every September, *Kappan* publishes a poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. Here is the executive summary of this year's poll (which sampled 1,011 adults in May and June, 2003):

- The public has a high regard for the public schools, wants improvements to come through those schools, and has little interest in the alternatives.

- The public sees itself as uninformed on the No Child Left Behind Act, with 69% saying they do not know enough to say whether they have a favorable or unfavorable impression;

- Responses to specific questions on the substance of NCLB suggest that the more people learn about the law, the less they will like it. Respondents opposed:

- using a fixed standard, instead of improvement, to judge a school;
- basing the judgment of a school on a single annual test;
- only looking at English and math to judge student and school performance;
- emphasizing English and math to the possible detriment of other subjects;
- focusing on sanctions rather than on helping schools that need to improve;
- judging special education students by the same standard as others;
- relying so heavily on standardized testing that it may produce unwise teaching to the test.

- The public cares about getting and keeping good teachers, thinks teacher salaries are too low, and supports higher salaries for teaching in more challenging schools.

- People continue to believe that closing the achievement gap between white students and black and Hispanic students is important, but blame the gap on factors outside schools.

- People are not convinced that narrowing the achievement gap means spending more money on low-achieving students.

- Most people oppose vouchers and don't want their state adopt them, despite the 2002 U.S. Supreme Court decision that voucher plans do not violate the U.S. Constitution.

"The 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools" by Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, *Phi Delta Kappan*, Sept. 2003 (Vol. 85, #1, p. 41-56)

3. The Importance of Initial Inventories

Teachers getting a handle on achievement levels – and what makes every student different – is crucial for the first six weeks of the school year. This includes skill levels and content knowledge – and also each student’s interests and emotional life. In the area of reading skills and academic content, there are several quick assessments (e.g., running records, D.R.A., Scholastic Reading Inventory), but it’s also good to use informal inventories to probe for student misconceptions and gaps in knowledge. “You just can’t make assumptions about what kids know, understand, and are able to do,” says Cheryl Dobbertin, a New York high-school English teacher “Plenty of students struggle – and hide it well – while others have gifts that have never been discovered.” A good inventory can also save a lot of time; there’s no point reviewing material most students already know.

Getting an initial sense of each child’s writing level is crucial. One idea for a prompt is asking students for guidance on the ways they learn best and the best ways to teach them. Scoring writing with an analytic rubric can yield teaching insights at the individual student level and for the whole class. Another very helpful initial inventory is making a brief tape recording (or video) of a student reading. Listening to this at the end of the year (side by side with another recording) is a wonderful way of showing progress to children (and parents).

At the “advanced” level, there is nothing like a home visit to learn about a child’s larger world – and enlist the family in learning for the entire year.

“Different Starting Points: Initial Efforts to Understand Student Abilities, Interests Essential” by Rick Allen, *ASCD Education Update*, August 2003 (Vol. 45, #5, p. 1-8)

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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 educators very well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, will act as your “designated reader”, looking through a wide range of publications as soon as they come out and sending a brief weekly e-mail summarizing a few select articles. Items will be chosen based on their relevance and usefulness to improving teaching and learning. Target topics include the following (those covered in this issue are underlined):

- *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; time management.
- *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/economic achievement gap; the innate-ability/intelligence/effective effort debate.
- *Effective teaching* – What produces high levels of student achievement; supervision and evaluation of teachers; 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 for teaching reading, writing, and math; parent involvement.
- *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.
- *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development.
- *And...* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

If one of the summaries is of particular interest, subscribers are encouraged to read the full

article. E-links will be provided whenever possible.

Publications covered:

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Update (ASCD)
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Harvard School of Education Ed. Magazine
New York Times
New Yorker
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Review of Educational Research
Rethinking Schools
Teacher Magazine
Occasional books, lectures, and websites.

If you would like to suggest additional publications, please be in touch.

Subscriptions:

The Marshall Memo is published weekly (with occasional breaks), usually on Monday. Major support from Research for Better Teaching and New Leaders for New Schools makes it possible to offer individual subscriptions at \$50 a year. To subscribe, please contact Kim Marshall at kim.marshall8@verizon.net or at 222 Clark Road, Brookline, MA 02445 (617-566-4353).