Marshall Memo 71

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 24, 2005

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"The literal bottom line is that an investment of $15,166 in preschool resulted in a return to society of $258,888, most of it - $177,473 – from crime savings."
Michael Holzman in *Education Week*, Jan. 19, 2005, p. 33

"When students do not know these words, it does more than mar their comprehension. It can make them feel like outsiders in their own society."
David and Meredith Liben on key vocabulary (see item #1)

"If students believe that luck brings success, then they view learning as out of their control rather than as strategic and effortful."
Marlene Schommer-Aikins, Orpha Duel, and Rosetta Hutter (see item #2)

"Have a friendly, face-to-face talk with a person you like every four to six hours."
Edward Hallowell's advice on combating stress in the workplace (see item #5)

"At a minimum, you need to appreciate your boss's goals and pressures. Without this information, you are flying blind, and problems are inevitable… Some superiors spell out their expectations very explicitly. But most do not. Ultimately, the burden falls on the subordinate to find out what the boss's expectations are.
John Gabarro and John Kotter (see item #7)

"The truth of the matter is you can earn a tremendous amount of money as an exotic dancer, if that's your desire."
William Fried, management consultant (see item #8a)

1. General Knowledge and Vocabulary Development in Harlem

In this intriguing article, David and Meredith Liben, co-founders of an elementary school in Harlem, describe the process stimulated by their students' disappointing performance on standardized reading tests. The Libens' staff at the Family Academy was convinced that there was something about the mandated tests that was preventing their students from showing their true reading ability. To solve this mystery, the Family Academy staff looked closely at the tests themselves, made several interesting discoveries, and began to take action on some of them:

• There were very few "detail" questions in the tests – questions where the answer was *right there* in the text. In contrast to earlier generations of reading tests, today's tests have mostly inferential or "figure it out" questions.

• Students, however, believed that answers were always explicitly stated in the text, and if they had trouble finding an answer, they thought they needed to go back to the passage and look more carefully because it was there somewhere. This misconception kept students from being successful with inferential questions, which made up most of the tests. So the Family Academy began to explicitly teach its students the difference between "right there" and "figure it out" questions and help them do better at the latter.

• As teachers and students pored over test questions, they realized that inferential questions came in many flavors: kids were being asked to make inferences about 15-20 different things, including a sequence of events, a character's thoughts or motivation, the setting, a prediction, an author's purpose, the meaning of an unknown word, etc.

• The staff realized that they weren't asking students anything approaching this variety of questions in classrooms. "Too often," the Libens write, "we teachers ask the kinds of questions *we* are most interested in rather than seeking to ask a wide and intentional variety of questions." This left their students ill prepared for a test that fired 50 or so questions at them in rapid succession. So the Family Academy began to integrate a greater variety of question types into daily lessons.

• The Family Academy team noticed that students' understanding of many books (*Maniac Magee*, for example) was hampered by the fact that they didn't know certain key words (for example *trestle*, *trolley*, and *motorman*). Students seemed fatalistic about this, "as if unknown words were an inevitable obstacle to comprehension." Not knowing these words prevented students from grasping the

meaning and getting to the point where they could answer challenging "figure it out" questions.

• The Family Academy analyzed the words that stumped students and found that many were "domain" words from the sciences and humanities. "Educated adults are expected to be familiar with thousands of these words from a wide range of disciplines," write the Libens. "Authors assume knowledge of these words and often do not offer many context clues to their meanings."

The Family Academy decided it could not leave the acquisition of these words to chance, so, influenced by the "core knowledge" sequence developed by E.D. Hirsch and his colleagues, the school put together a cumulative science and social studies curriculum – dubbed the General Knowledge Curriculum (GKC) – that built through the elementary grades. "Our goal," they said, "is to make 'not knowing' intolerable – to drive out that fatalistic resignation we saw when students tried reading *Maniac Magee*."

The school introduced the "domain" words and concepts mostly through reading. For each topic in the GKC, they developed a unit with background information for teachers, reading passages with questions for students, a list of vocabulary words, word games, follow-up independent reading, field trips, websites, videos, writing assignments, quizzes, and other activities to extend the concepts. The school developed 100 or these units for use almost every day, which left room for teachers to add new units on current topics that interested them and their students. This content-rich curriculum led to a big increase in teachers' visits to the school library (staffed with a professional children's librarian) for help with books, videos, and research projects.

To shape the GKC program, Family Academy zeroed in on several research findings about vocabulary acquisition:

- Vocabulary is best learned in context.
- Words are learned through repeated exposure.
- Active learning of words is most effective.
- Students learn more words when the context is challenging.

So students were introduced to concepts and words in a variety of readings, videos, field trips, discussions and then encountered them again in read-alouds, quizzes, games, etc.

How did students respond? "What struck us most clearly," write the Libens, "was that nearly all the teachers reported that the children really liked the GKC.

Teachers felt that, because of the rich content and wide variety of topics, the students knew they were learning about the world and felt good about it… GKC changed the culture of the school; knowing something about the world became a mark of prestige for students and teachers alike."

"The result," they found, "is that the students know more words, understand more references in their reading, and so read better and are more likely to read independently. More independent reading will enable them to comprehend more references, and so on. We and our students entered this circle of learning in order to move them out of the vicious cycle of trying, not understanding, and giving up."

Family Academy staff noticed another type of word that was giving students difficulty in reading passages: "non-domain" vocabulary such as *fascinated*, *kit and caboodle*, and *plentiful*. "The non-domain words are part of the daily discourse of educated people," the Libens note. "When students do not know these words, it does more than mar their comprehension. It can make them feel like outsiders in their own society."

So Family Academy developed an aggressive word study program starting in kindergarten. In the upper grades (3-6), they refined the program to focus on three types of vocabulary: descriptive, academic, and literary. The school's main strategy for developing vocabulary is homogenous literature groups that meet daily to study, discuss, and enjoy a chosen book. For each chapter, teachers highlight certain words and introduce them in context, discuss them, and review them. Students are accountable for knowing these words in quizzes and for using them correctly when they write. To get at the academic type of vocabulary, Family Academy decided to use the *Wordly Wise* program starting in third grade. And in fifth grade, one teacher gives an introductory Latin class to help with roots of many academic words. Throughout the school year, there are challenges, puns, puzzles, word games, riddles, and word origins, for example, a "word of the day" display with challenge questions such as "What three-letter word is the same as its last letter?" (*Why*.) Playing with words became part of the culture of the school.

The capstone of all this was an independent reading program that pushed students to read one book a week on their own. There were no extrinsic rewards (reading should be its own reward, the staff believed), but students were praised if they met the goal and chided if they did not. The Libens say that within a year, independent reading had become part of the culture of the school and two-thirds of the students were reading at least one book a week.

"Learning to Read in Order to Learn: Building a Program for Upper-Elementary Students" by David Liben and Meredith Liben in *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 2005 (Vol. 86, #5, p. 401-406), no e-link available, but the school's curriculum is available online at http://www.eFAME.org.

2. The Impact of Middle School Students' Beliefs About Math Learning

A person's belief system about intelligence and learning (e.g., are we born smart or can we get smart through hard work?) has been shown to have a direct effect on the academic performance of high-school and college students. In this *Elementary School Journal* article, three Kansas researchers report on a study of whether middle-school students' performance in mathematics is affected by epistemological beliefs.

The article starts by reporting on a key finding by Carol Dweck and her colleagues (1983, 1988): "[S]ome children believe that ability to learn is fixed at birth and that the purpose of an academic task is simply to document their intelligence. When faced with a difficult task, these children tend to display helpless behavior. In contrast, other children believe that the ability to learn is improvable over time and with experience and that the purpose of an academic task is to improve their intelligence. When faced with a difficult task, these children tend to try different strategies and persist in their efforts to learn."

The Kansas researchers cite other research demonstrating the effect of beliefs on students' behavior. For example, if a student believes that what is being taught is a bunch of isolated facts, this is the thought process that ensues:

Belief about learning:	→	**Internal standard:**	→	**Study strategy:**
Knowledge is	→	*Memorizing and*	→	*Mindless*
isolated facts.	→	*repeating facts.*	→	*repetition.*

The Kansas study then expanded the idea of students' beliefs about learning to four types and wrote a questionnaire for placing students on each of these continua:

- Knowledge is isolated facts. ←=====→ Knowledge is integrated concepts.
- Knowledge is fixed and certain. ←=====→ Knowledge changes all the time.
- We learn quickly or not at all. ←=====→ We learn slowly through hard work.
- Ability to learn is fixed at birth. ←=====→ Ability to learn is improvable.

As they studied 1,269 students from two Midwestern middle schools, the researchers found that many students held a belief that has not been identified in high-school and college students: that studying is not a strategic enterprise but a chance event. Students who thought this way tended to study aimlessly. If they got a

good grade after haphazard studying, their belief in this approach was reinforced – success was due to good luck. The researchers draw the link to attribution theory: "If students believe that luck brings success, then they view learning as out of their control rather than as strategic and effortful."

The Kansas study concluded that two beliefs had an especially negative impact on middle school students' math performance:

- Speed is everything: if I can't solve math problems quickly, it means I'm not "good at math;"
- Fixed ability: being "good at math" is inborn and won't change no matter how hard I work.

Students with this belief system race through math problems, don't take the time to think problems through carefully, believe that math is of little use in their lives – and get poor grades.

What are the implications of these findings for teachers? The researchers believe that:

• All teachers (not just math teachers) should be conscious of the way they talk about ability and effort and encourage students to believe that achievement is the product of effective effort, not luck.

• Teachers should stress that some problems take time to solve, and if students can't finish them quickly, it doesn't mean they're not smart.

• Teachers should be sure to give the help and encouragement some students need to finish assignments successfully, so they don't draw the wrong conclusion about their own ability – and reinforce a negative belief system.

• It also helps (especially in math) if teachers make the problems intrinsically interesting and fun, linking them to students' interests in sports, music, and popular culture whenever possible.

"Epistemological Beliefs, Mathematical Problem Solving Beliefs, and Academic Performance of Middle School Students" by Marlene Schommer-Aikins, Orpha Duel, and Rosetta Hutter in *Elementary School Journal*, January 2005 (Vol. 105, #3, p. 289-304), no e-link available

3. Preaching the Gospel of High Achievement

In this *Education Week* commentary piece, Hugh Price, the former CEO of the National Urban League, suggests ways to spread the "gospel of achievement" among disadvantaged youth. "Youngsters will respond affirmatively to the message that 'achievement matters,'" he says, "if it is conveyed with imagination and persistence."

He suggests that groups like the Urban League, NAACP affiliates, sororities and fraternities, civic groups, schools, libraries, local education funds, Chambers of Commerce, Rotary Clubs, local corporate offices, United Ways, foundations, and public officials should all be involved in putting on events to stoke the collective commitment of students, families, and community groups to high achievement and "quicken the pace of progress" in our schools. Here are some ideas:

- *Parades* – Price suggests high-profile Achievement Day parades through the heart of town to celebrate the accomplishments of students who pass high-stakes state examinations.
- *Ceremonies* – Churches and other community organizations should have high-profile rituals to recognize and celebrate high achievement.
- *Inductions* – Students who win admission to honor societies should be formally inducted and be able to meet other members from their area.
- *Back-to-school events* – Communities should have rallies, assemblies, and block parties to tout the importance of achievement at the beginning of the school year.
- *Role models* – Schools should bring in recent alumni, business people, credible celebrities, and community leaders to speak at school assemblies on the importance of doing well in school.
- *Literacy boosters* – Youth development agencies, libraries, churches, community organizations and other grassroots groups should run programs to turn children on to reading and learning.
- *Festivals* – Neighborhoods should put on events focused on literacy, math, and other academic skills so that kids can showcase their scholastic interests and prowess.
- *Prizes* – Students who earn "best in class" or other significant school awards should be presented with prizes (even modest cash awards) and be eligible to compete for prizes at a state or national level.
- *Advertising campaigns* – Companies that market goods in the area should join in an advertising campaign to *sell* the idea of high achievement. Students need to be persuaded through every possible channel to *buy* the idea of hard work and high achievement in school.

Price believes all this would pay off for schools: "The more motivated children are to learn, the easier it is for educators to empower them to achieve."

"Winning Hearts and Minds" by Hugh Price in *Education Week*, Jan. 19, 2005 (Vol. 24, #19, p. 47, 35) http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/01/19/19price.h24.html

4. Cross-Age Peer Tutoring by Phone

This article describes how eighth graders in a Virginia middle school help kindergarten and first graders in a nearby elementary school as "pilots" and "copilots." Twice a week, the pilots telephone their copilots at home and read to them. Both students have the same book in front of them and the primary-grade student follows along as the eighth grader reads.

A lot of preparation goes into the program, which has become an annual routine: eighth graders are briefed on the art of reading aloud, issued a bell to signal page turns, and given the times when their copilots' parents say it's all right to call. Pilots and copilots meet before the program begins, read together, and get a photo of the two of them together to take home. Teachers coordinate matching sets of books at the "just right" level for the younger children. As the program progresses, copilots' completed calls are recorded with an airplane sticker on a colorful wall chart in their classroom. If any of the eighth graders report that a book is too hard or too easy, teachers make adjustments.

At the end of the program, the copilots meet with their reading mentors again, listen to an actual flight attendant read a book and talk about her work, are presented with a gift-wrapped book (purchased by the eighth graders) and a set of "wings," and eat an airplane-shaped cake together. The school is incredibly pleased with the results. "The program gives the middle school students an opportunity to be kind and responsible," writes the author, "as well as a chance to really make a difference. Both the pilots and copilots truly earn their wings through the project."

"Pilots and Copilots for Better Reading" by Alice Herring in *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 2005 (Vol. 86, #5, p. 407, 413), no e-link available

5. How Leaders Can Deal with ADT (Attention Deficit Trait)

Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist who has studied the effects of stress in the workplace, has thoughtful advice for leaders who are constantly under the gun. "Frenzied executives who fidget through meetings, lose track of their appointments, and jab at the 'close door' button on the elevator aren't crazy," he writes, "just crazed." They suffer from a newly recognized neurological phenomenon that he calls attention deficit trait, or ADT. This isn't an illness; it's a response to the hyperkinetic

environment in which we live – and it's all too common among harried leaders. Here is Hallowell's advice for controlling ADT:

- *In general*:
  - Get adequate sleep.
  - Watch what you eat. Avoid simple, sugary carbohydrates and steer toward complex carbohydrates (vegetables, whole grains, fruit), eat more protein, and moderate alcohol intake.
  - Exercise at least 30 minutes at least every other day.
  - Take a daily multivitamin and an omega-3 fatty acid supplement.
- *At work*:
  - Do all you can to create a trusting, connected work environment.
  - Have a friendly, face-to-face talk with a person you like every four to six hours.
  - Break large tasks into smaller ones.
  - Keep a section of your work space or desk clear at all times.
  - Each day, reserve some "think time" that's free from appointments, e-mail, and phone calls.
  - Set aside e-mail until you've completed at least one or two more important tasks.
  - Before you leave work each day, create a short list of 3-5 items you will attend to the next day.
  - Try to act on, file, or toss every document you touch.
  - Don't let papers accumulate.
  - Pay attention to the times of day when you feel that you are at your best; do your most important work then, and save the rote work for other times.
  - Do whatever you need to do to work in a more focused way: add background music, walk around, etc.
  - Ask a colleague or an assistant to help you stop talking on the telephone, e-mailing, or working too late.
- *When you feel overwhelmed*:
  - Slow down.
  - Do an easy, rote task such as resetting your watch, writing a note about a neutral topic (such as a description of your house), reading a few dictionary definitions, or doing a short crossword puzzle.
  - Move around: go up and down a flight of stairs or walk briskly.

- Ask for help, delegate a task, or brainstorm with a colleague. In short, do not worry alone.

"Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform" by Edward Hallowell in *Harvard Business Review*, January 2005 (Vol. 83, #1, p. 54-62), no e-link available

6. Qualities of a Great Leader

In this sidebar within a longer article on the qualities of CEO-bound managers, a consultant who specializes in management transitions lists the qualities that separate "elite" from "good" candidates for corporate leadership positions. How many of these apply to education?

• *Management savvy*:
- Avoids jumping in personally to solve problems others can handle;
- Makes the right judgments about what to expend energy on;
- Maintains control of the key decisions and a full pipeline of talented people;
- Makes people feel appreciated and maintains their loyalty.

• *Political intelligence*:
- Isn't labeled "political;"
- Recognizes how relationships are likely to affect success;
- Motivates peers and subordinates to go out of their way to help;
- Doesn't seem self-serving.

• *Personal style*:
- Makes success look effortless;
- Allows others' performance to be recognized too;
- Manages energy to stay on the "rested edge" and to avoid the "ragged edge;"
- Knows when to hold back and when to let go;
- Enables peers to improve their performance;
- Stays grounded and makes sure basic needs are met while mastering new concepts.

"Almost Ready: How Leaders Move Up" by Dan Ciampa in *Harvard Business Review*, January 2005 (Vol. 83, #1, p. 46-53), no e-link available

7. Managing Your Boss

In this reprint of a widely-read 1980 *Harvard Business Review* article, two management professors give advice on "managing up" – handling your boss. Here are

some highlights that may apply to the world of education:

• At a minimum, you need to appreciate your boss's goals and pressures. Without this information, you are flying blind, and problems are inevitable.

• Bosses, like everyone else, are imperfect and fallible. They don't have unlimited time, encyclopedic knowledge, or extrasensory perception; nor are they evil enemies.

• Some superiors spell out their expectations very explicitly. But most do not. Ultimately, the burden falls on the subordinate to find out what the boss's expectations are.

In a sidebar, Gabarro and Kotter offer the following checklist for managing your boss:

• *Make sure you understand your boss and his or her context, including*:

- Goals and objectives;
- Pressures;
- Strengths, weaknesses, blind spots;
- Preferred work style.

• *Assess yourself and your needs, including*:

- Strengths and weaknesses;
- Personal style;
- Predisposition toward dependence on authority figures.

• *Develop and maintain a relationship that*:

- Fits both your needs and styles;
- Is characterized by mutual expectations;
- Keeps your boss informed;
- Is based on dependability and honesty;
- Selectively uses your boss's time and resources.

"Managing Your Boss" by John Gabarro and John Kotter in *Harvard Business Review*, January 2005 (Vol. 83, #1, p. 92-99), no e-link available

8. Short Items:

a. Exotic career options – A Palo Alto middle school recently brought in management consultant William Fried for the third year to give eighth graders his popular talk, "The Secret of a Happy Life." Fried believes in encouraging students to experiment with a variety of interests until they discover something they enjoy and excel in. "He really focused on finding what you really love to do," said 13-year-old

Mariah Cannon, one of the students who attended the talk.

But when a student in the assembly asked Fried why he had included "exotic dancing" on his list of 140 potential careers, Fried got himself in *lots* of hot water. He said that stripping and exotic dancing can pay $250,000 or more a year, depending on one's bust size. "For every two inches up there," he reportedly told students, "you should get another $50,000 on your salary."

In an interview later, Fried said, "It's sick, but it's true. The truth of the matter is you can earn a tremendous amount of money as an exotic dancer, if that's your desire." [These words made *Newsweek's* quotes-and-cartoons page this week.]

After the assembly, Joseph DiSalvo, the school's principal, was upset: "It's totally inappropriate. It's not OK by me." He said that students took advantage of the fact that a substitute teacher was supervising the talk: "A couple of students egged him on and he took it hook, line and sinker," said DiSalvo.

When word got out, parents were also irate, and the information on stripping wasn't the only thing that had them upset. One mother said she was outraged when her son announced that he was forgoing college for a field he loves: fishing.

Fried, 64, said he didn't think he offended any of the students: "Eighth-grade kids are not dumb," he said. "They are pretty worldly."

The school is deciding whether Fried will be invited back next year.

CNN, January 14, 2005 (spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, January 20, 2005)
http://www.cnn.com/2005/EDUCATION/01/14/students.stripping.ap/index.html

b. Anthony Alvarado on professional development – In a brief interview in *Education Update,* former New York and San Diego superintendent Anthony Alvarado shared some words of wisdom:

• Kids learn from teachers. If you want to improve student achievement, you have to improve teachers.

• Professional development has to be focused on putting knowledge into practice immediately. Knowledge and practice are not the same thing. Strategies can fade when not put into practice right away.

• Principals have to know teaching inside and out. It's not enough to know if a kid can or can't do something; you need to know how they are learning. Assessments always lead back to instruction.

• At the heart of performance-based practice is the notion that if you try something and it doesn't work, you try something else. Practice needs to constantly

consider results, re-plan with those results in mind, practice, get feedback and then tweak instruction some more.

• Honest feedback, along with modeling and practice, are central to internalizing improvements and breaking habitual behaviors that do not lead to learning.

"Banking on Teachers" in *Education Update*, January 2005 (Vol. 47, #1, p. 1), no e-link available

c. Doug Reeves on testing – In the same issue of *Education Update*, Douglas Reeves says the number one thing he hears from teachers these days is that we are over-tested. "We are," says Reeves, "but let's draw the distinction." He thinks schools are overdoing tests that are evaluative and summative – tests whose results arrive too late to be helpful this year, and that we are not giving *enough* assessments designed to improve teaching and learning – those given in classrooms and scored by teachers. Asked to identify the best assessment available, Reeves said, "The ones I did in 7th grade math on Thursdays, because they would improve learning and teaching and student performance on Fridays." Reeves says teachers should give more short-term, 10- to 15-item assessments that they review immediately and use right away to help students improve.

"Today's Test, Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning" in *Education Update*, January 2005 (Vol. 47, #1, p. 6), no e-link available

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 aims to keep busy principals and other educators very well-informed on important research and ideas in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 35 years of experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, coach of principals, and writer, acts as "designated reader." Kim searches through 39 publications the week they come out, chooses the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning, and summarizes them in a brief e-mail. Some ideas will be familiar, reinforcing what readers already know; others will be new and genuinely thought-provoking.

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Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
CommonWealth Magazine
District Administrator
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update (ASCD)
Education Week
Educational Leadership
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Harvard Education Letter
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Journal of Staff Development
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NASSP Bulletin
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