NETWORK NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE MINORITY STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT NETWORK

Literacy Across the Curriculum: Using the Think-Aloud Strategy

Recent test results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003) are again confirming that gaps exist in the reading and mathematics achievement of African American, Latino and Latina, Native American, and low-income students compared to their white, Asian, and economically advantaged counterparts. In *What Doesn't Meet the Eye: Understanding and Addressing Racial Disparities in High-Achieving Suburban Schools,* Harvard researcher Ronald F. Ferguson, Ph.D., (2002) reported on a survey taken with 34,000 students from the Minority Student Achievement Network. These students were from middle- and upper-income suburban districts. Ferguson found "racial and ethnic disparities in self-reported understanding of lessons and readings [that] call attention to the fact that gaps in standardized test scores and school grades reflect real disparities in academic knowledge and skill." He suggested that "to help raise achievement and close gaps, schools should endeavor to identify and address specific skill and knowledge deficits that underlie comprehension problems for individuals in particular racial and ethnic groups and respond in targeted ways."

In addressing this problem, teachers need to explicitly teach students how to understand content-area texts. One proven instructional technique that can be used across the curriculum to teach students how to construct meaning from their reading is the think-aloud (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

School districts struggle to address reading skills and literacy among students. Strategies often are focused on early elementary grades, with the expectation that students learn to read by Grade 3. Research in the past few decades, however, has caused educators to expand their focus. High-stakes competency testing has caused educators and curriculum specialists to rethink what is meant by reading and literacy skills in upper grades. Work in the area of constructivist theory has added to the definition of literacy. Beyond decoding and general comprehension skills, literacy also encompasses gaining meaning across various content areas and includes various forms of communication skills and strategies. As a result, we have a widening view of what literacy means at the adolescent level and a widening variation of student developmental characteristics influenced in large measure by environmental factors. This outcome may well signal a more complicated array of strategies for teachers to use to teach literacy skills to adolescents and signal progress toward developing a K–12 aligned theory of literacy.

This issue of *Network News* focuses on adolescent literacy, a topic receiving increasing attention as schools address ways to close the achievement gap. It also showcases the Minority Student Achievement speech given by Evanston Township High School student Ariel Rogers at the fourth annual student conference. Finally, congratulations to Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, one of the MSAN member districts, which earned an award for its Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate program through the *American School Board Journal's* 2004 Magna Awards competition. ■

During a think-aloud, the person verbalizes all the steps that are going through his or her mind while working though a task. Using this strategy, teachers can help students to understand complex expository texts.

To demonstrate the think-aloud, the teacher explains the mental processes he or she uses when reading. The teacher reads a text aloud to the students and models for students the kinds of thinking that occur. This modeling demonstrates how readers can monitor their comprehension, how they can refocus when they become distracted or confused, and how they can construct understanding when they encounter difficult or unfamiliar words or ideas.

For example, while reading about nuclear energy on the *Why? Files* Web site (Tenenbaum, 2003), a teacher might pause and say, "I wonder what a fission reaction is? Hmm . . . I see some key words here that can help me out: *nucleus, unstable atoms, smaller atoms,* and *release energy.* I think that a fission reaction occurs when something large and unstable breaks into smaller pieces, releasing energy." Using this verbalizing, the teacher demonstrates for students that readers actively construct meaning using information on the page as well as in their head.

At another point in the text, the teacher might make a connection to a previous experience by saying, "Oh, I remember learning about fission reactions when I read a book about the atomic bomb being built in Los Alamos, New Mexico." In this way, the teacher demonstrates to students that readers make connections between the text and their previous experiences.

The students can be asked to practice think-alouds, which will encourage them to become aware of their own reading processes and help them focus on the meaning of the text.

When first practicing a think-aloud, the teacher can use interesting material that is not too complex. Activities that teachers could use for practicing think-alouds might be to have students write their thoughts, while reading, in a journal or work in pairs with each partner telling the other the thinking process that is occurring while they are reading. After the students have practiced the strategy with the less complex material, the teacher might continue practicing, using more difficult texts. The goal is to have the students construct meaning by questioning the text; noticing when they are stuck; and making connections between what they are reading and their past experiences, other things they have read, and other parts of the text they are reading.

Using the think-aloud strategy across the curriculum can contribute to increasing students' comprehension, improve their overall learning, and ultimately impact the achievement gaps. ■

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Additional Reading

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Minority Student Achievement Speech

By Ariel Rogers

From their earliest presence in North America, Africans and African Americans have contributed literature, art, agricultural skills, foods, clothing styles, music and language to the American culture. During Black History Month, we celebrated the achievements of some of these great contributors: Harriet Tubman, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, George Washington Carver, W.E.B. Dubois—just to name a few. According to the calendar, Black History Month is over, and it will be another 11 months before we celebrate the successes of blacks in America. But my question is, why stop the celebration? On my calendar, every month is Black History Month because I believe it is imperative that we continue to honor not only heroes of the past but also contributors of the present to ensure minority achievement in the future. That is why we are here today: to applaud you for your efforts and achievements.

Just this past week, a white student said, "Why do you need to make such a big deal about black people getting good grades? White people get good grades all the time, and we don't get anything." Proportionally, white students do well. Test scores are higher as well as numbers in honors and AP classes. There is a huge gap between the academic achievements of white students and minority students; it is for this reason that we acknowledge students of color who achieve great things.

It seems that a black student in today's media-driven society must battle both stereotypes and negative influences in order to excel. In honors classes, we are clearly the odd man or woman out. We get encouragement from our teachers and counselors, but there is always that vibe from the rest of the students that suggests that we aren't expected to do well. Instead, we are projected to be the ones who sit in the back corner of the class, never speak up or ask questions, and set the low end of the curve on a test. Expectations are minimal. Our abilities are doubted.

Unfortunately, this pressure is doubled sided, for we may be ridiculed by the 50 Cent/Li'l Kim wannabes if we show too much pride in our schoolwork. If we work hard for our grades and cooperate in class, our blackness is questioned and we are looked at as "acting white." As black students, we have to fight both battles if we want to achieve. But by making positive steps towards educational achievement, we not only begin to break down stereotypes and walls of bigotry that confine us, but we also serve as role models for our peers.

We are living proof that black people can succeed. We instill confidence in others, for it is fear that keeps more students of color from taking challenging classes. The fear of failure has handicapped black minds. Too often, we see young black intelligence wasted and restrained due to peer pressures and desires to fit in. But why don't we flip the script? Why don't we be the ones to pressure our peers? We've achieved great things, but in order for minority success to continue, we must encourage others to follow. We just have to get more students to hop on the bandwagon.

By continuing to achieve great things and by encouraging other students of color to put forth disciplined efforts in their students, we can dispel racist myths and lift the burden of perceived racial inferiority. Achievement is colorblind. I think we all know that, but we need to "drop that knowledge" on others who believe success only applies to those who meet the criteria for the "lighter" end of the color spectrum.

We are part of an academic revolution. We attend one of the best schools in the nation. Actually, there are over 26,000 public high schools in the United States. The Fall 2003 issue of *Newsweek* magazine lists ETHS as the 65th best school in the country. Let me break that down. That places us in the top 0.25 percent—that is the top quarter of 1 percent. So ETHS is not only a great school, it is the best, making us the best of the best. So keep on keeping on because (and I quote): "In the end, you are measured not by how much you undertake, but by what you accomplish." Thank you. ■

— Ariel Rogers is a student at Evanston Township High School. She delivered this speech in conjunction with the fourth annual MSAN student conference, held October 1–2, 2003, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Chapel Hill-Carrboro Earns National Award for Blue Ribbon Mentor Advocate

American School Board Journal Announces Magna Award 2004 Winners

Alexandria, Va. (March 15, 2004) — Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools in Chapel Hill, N.C., has been selected as one of 23 winners in the *American School Board Journal's* Magna Awards 2004 program.

Chapel Hill-Carrboro was cited for Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate, part of a multifaceted plan that has helped close the achievement gap in one of North Carolina's wealthiest and highest-achieving school districts.

Serving 65 students beginning in the fourth grade, the program provides students with volunteer mentors and an array of other support services. All of the participating students come from at-risk backgrounds, including two-thirds from single-parent homes. Mentors work one-on-one with students for at least two hours a week. They encourage parents to get more involved, help students get tutoring if they need it, and provide cultural enrichment experiences.

"We have a long-term impact and involvement in our kids' lives, and we're really able to follow them and make sure they are successful," said Graig Meyer, the district's mentoring specialist.

The Magna Awards, presented for the 10th year with the support of Sodexho School Services, recognize districts across the country for outstanding programs that advance student learning and encourage community involvement in schools.

For more information about the Chapel Hill-Carrboro program, contact Graig Meyer, mentoring specialist, at (919) 918-2170, or by e-mail at gmeyer@chccs.k12.nc.us. The district's Web site is www.chccs.k12.nc.us. ■

MSAN Suggested Reading List

Cone, J. K. (2003, May/June 2003). The construction of low achievement: A study of one detracked senior English class. *Harvard Education Letter: Research Online.* Retrieved April 13, 2004, from http://www.edletter.org/past/issues/2003-mj/teacher.shtml

(*Harvard Education Letter: Research Online* features a teacher research column in which practitioners discuss classroom research designed to improve classroom and school practice.)

The author discusses research that she conducted in her English classes in a highly diverse California high school, which has implemented a detracking reform effort for the past several years. She focused her work on a heterogeneous senior writing class in 2001–02, consisting of students demonstrating a pro-work ethic and an achievement gap. Her research centered on two questions: Why were some seniors ill-prepared for serious reading and writing work after extensive detracking, and what school factors contributed to these students' low achievement? She describes her findings, including how school and teachers contributed to these students' low achievement identities, how students themselves worked to build a negative identity, how students and teachers reinforce negative classroom behaviors, and how some students rose above their negative school label through contact with higher achieving students. She concludes by describing the changes she made in 2002–03 to reverse the negative identity of her students and discussing some implications for educators.

—*Reviewed by Marie Sheils-Djouadi, Arlington Public Schools*

Hilliard, A. G., III. (1995). Mathematics excellence for cultural 'minority' students: What is the problem? In I. M Carl (Ed.), *Prospects for school mathematics* (pp. 99-114). Reston, VA: National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

The author's thesis is that there is no problem for cultural "minority" students in learning mathematics inherent in the students, regardless of the political and political-economic categories to which students are assigned (e.g., "race," socioeconomic status, or other categories). In fact, the author reminds the reader that all cultural/ethnic groups have had a part in creating mathematics. He cites a several examples of teachers who have found a way to unleash the capability of cultural "minority" students to high achievement in mathematics. According to Hilliard, the sources of the problem are the quality of teaching to which students are exposed, the quality of staff development to which teachers are exposed, and the technology gap, which limits access to sophisticated software capable of "democratizing mathematics achievement." Specifics suggestions, based on practice, are detailed by the author for staff development and assessment practice.

—*Reviewed by Marie Sheils-Djouadi, Arlington Public Schools*

McDonald, J. P. (2002, October). Teachers studying student work: Why and how? *Phi Delta Kappan, 84*(2), 120-127.

The author examines three traditions of studying student work, giving specific examples of each tradition. The protocols of the first tradition assist in laying aside presumptions about student capacities, which can lead to premature judgments about student deficits. The second tradition sees actual student work in conjunction with actual standards and teacher conversation about how students can learn the difficult material required by standards. The third tradition is built on the belief that the school itself must be seen as a learning community, which can enable it to collectively judge the effects of teaching and apply any corrective action necessary as a result of the collective judgment. The author concludes that not any one of these traditions should be ignored; all three should be considered as complementary and therefore important to follow in studying student work.

—*Reviewed by Marie Sheils-Djouadi, Arlington Public Schools*

Hilliard, A., III. (1991, September). Do we have the will to educate all children? *Educational Leadership, 49*(1), 31-36.

The author's thesis is that with a "will to excellence," education can be restructured so that the full potential of all children can be reached. The examples of two known mathematics teachers who have accomplished this goal, Jamie Escalante and Abdulalim Shabazz, demonstrate a belief system that mathematics excellence is accessible to all students, given a teacher's hard work and belief in students' abilities to succeed. To accomplish this goal, "deep restructuring" of our educational aims and practices must occur. Such restructuring must include a belief in the capabilities of all students and of our teachers, their need for intellectual nourishment and "professional socialization."

—*Reviewed by Marie Sheils-Djouadi, Arlington Public Schools*