Marshall Memo 424

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 20, 2012

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"An orchestra is a model for an ideal global society – a symbol. You have to create harmony. Everyone has to listen to each other, this large, complex group of people with different personalities that has to communicate. You have to have discipline."

Gustavo Dudamel, Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra conductor, quoted in "Dude Is a Rock Star" by Chris Lee in *Newsweek*, Feb. 13, 2012 (p. 53) http://bit.ly/z01pZS

"Fame has two sides for me. One is when fame is an inspiration for other people. The other is when fame is an inspiration for you. What that means? In the second case, it becomes an ego thing. 'I'm the best and everybody knows me.' In the first, you see the children calling you, and your image is an inspiration for them to accomplish things. For me, that's amazing. You feel like things are going the right way."

Gustavo Dudamel (*ibid*.)

"We make much of the collapse of English into the squawk of the tweet and the text. To read Dickens, now more than ever, is to experience its opposite: to be caught up in an abundant tumble of words – and in language juicy with the flux of life."

Simon Schama in "A Dickens for Our Times", in *Newsweek*, Feb. 13, 2012 (p. 58)

"A flawed and not terribly happy man grew a modest talent into something vastly greater than himself."

Cullen Murphy in "Learning His Lines", a review of *Hergé, Son of Tintin* by Benoit Peeters (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012) in *The New York Times*, Jan. 22, 2012

1. Tennessee Struggles to Get Teacher Evaluation Right

In this front-page article in today's *New York Times*, Jenny Anderson reports on a Nashville principal's classroom evaluation visit using Tennessee's new statewide system. The principal arrives unannounced and spends 60 minutes observing and taking notes. "It was a good lesson," says the principal afterward – but he gives the lowest score on a 5-4-3-2-1 rubric because the teacher didn't get students working in groups – even though the principal has seen her group students effectively in the past. "It's not an accurate reflection of her as a teacher," he says.

Tennessee's new evaluation system requires six visits like this for non-tenured teachers each year, four for tenured teachers. Each observation focuses on one of four areas: instruction, professionalism, classroom environment, and planning. Principals do pre-observation conferences, observe full lessons, fill out a rubric, and conduct post-observation conferences. The full evaluation rubric has 116 subcategories and data input takes 4-6 hours per teacher.

An additional element in Tennessee's system is that student test-score gains count for half of each teacher's evaluation. Teachers in non-tested subjects (physical education, for example) are evaluated on how their students do in math and reading. Most student-achievement data won't be available until mid-way through the next school year.

Tennessee education officials defend the new system, saying it's sparking rich conversations about instruction and improving classroom teaching. Principals acknowledge that the observations and rubrics have led to more precise discussions about instruction, and one physical education teacher is quoted as saying that he's working math and reading lessons into his classes.

But many principals have concerns. "It's one thing to be observing – I love that, it's my primary role," says Troy Kilzer, a high-school principal in Chester County. "But you know when a good lesson is being taught without looking at a rubric." He, like many other principals, is staggering under the additional workload, and as a result, is getting into classrooms less frequently and not giving teachers as much informal feedback and coaching.

Daniel Weisberg of the New Teacher Project defends Tennessee's system. "You have to start the process somewhere," he says. "If you don't solve the problem of teacher quality, you will continue to have an achievement gap." But Grover Whitehurst of the Brookings Institution has his doubts: "There's a lot we don't know about how to evaluate teachers reliably and how to use that information to improve instruction and learning." Stephen Henry, president

of the Metropolitan Nashville Education Association, agrees. His assessment of Tennessee's system: "It has been counterproductive to the intent – a noble intent – of an evaluation system."

[Viewed from Massachusetts, which is also working to create an effective teacher-evaluation system, it's easy to spot the flaws in Tennessee's system: (a) requiring multiple, full-lesson observations with pre- and post-observation conferences and comprehensive analysis creates an impossible workload for principals, reducing the frequency and authenticity of classroom visits; (b) requiring rubric analysis of individual lessons is inherently unfair to teachers – no single lesson can contain all the elements of good teaching; (c) scoring a teacher on a rubric during a classroom visit is cumbersome and distracts the principal from being a good observer; (d) overly complex rubrics muddy the waters by immersing principals and teachers in too much detail, making it more difficult to give a clear message about what's working and what needs to be improved; and (e) using test scores to evaluate teachers, especially teachers in non-tested subjects, has major pedagogical, ethical, and practical problems.

A much better approach is being used in a number of schools: (a) frequent, short, unannounced classroom visits (usually 2-3 classrooms a day, with a goal of ten visits per teacher per year) with face-to-face feedback conversations after each one; (b) saving rubrics for end-of-year summative evaluation, putting together the pieces of the puzzle from multiple classroom visits and conversations, as well as teachers' work with their colleagues and other contributions to the mission; (c) during classroom visits, focusing on the overall quality of teaching, the instructional task, and student learning, then formulating one or two important areas of improvement or commendation; (d) using a simple rubric that gives detailed feedback on the main domains of teaching – for example, planning and preparation, classroom management, delivery of instruction, monitoring/assessment/follow-up, parent and community outreach, and professional responsibilities; and (e) getting teacher teams to choose research-based local assessments to measure student learning gains from September to June and present them to their principal at the end of each year. K.M.]

"States Try to Fix Quirks in Teacher Evaluation" by Jenny Anderson in *The New York Times*, Feb. 20, 2012 (p. 1, 13), http://nyti.ms/yM2v0v

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2. How Can We Accelerate the Improvement of U.S. Schools?

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Gates Foundation group leader Stacey Childress puts it bluntly: "The United States must recognize that its long-term growth depends on dramatically increasing the quality of its K-12 education system." How bad are things now? Dismal, she says, citing NAEP and PISA data. "Over the past 30 years, nearly every labor-intensive service industry in the U.S. has seen dramatic increases in productivity, while public education has become roughly half as productive – spending twice the money per student to achieve the same results." And while we stagnate, other countries are pulling ahead: "In 1990

the U.S. was first in the world in the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds with college degrees," she says. "Today it is 10th and dropping."

Meanwhile, the demand for college-educated people is growing. According to the U.S. Department of Education, in six years 45% of jobs will require a college degree. "By 2018," says Childress, "if today's college graduate rates hold as steady as they have for decades, the U.S. will be short at least 3 million college-educated workers for the projected 101 million jobs that will require a degree."

What's the key to turning this around? The quality of instruction, says Childress, citing several studies on the impact of high-quality classroom experiences, especially for disadvantaged students. If African-American and Hispanic students have four consecutive years of highly effective teaching, the achievement gap virtually disappears. But efforts to improve teaching are moving far too slowly. New York City has made important progress, but at the current rate, it would take 40 years for 80% of students to reach proficiency in math and reading. "For the U.S. to remain competitive," says Childress, "its students must go further faster."

Why aren't schools on a steeper improvement curve? Childress believes it's because we have been slow to use technology *to do things differently*. But a few schools have begun to develop hybrid approaches that harness the power of teachers and technology – what each does best – in highly effective ways. "A new generation of sophisticated adaptive courseware and schools that blend the best of teacher- and computer-delivered instruction are making personalized-learning approaches feasible and affordable," says Childress, "not as a replacement for teachers but as a way to give them the tools they need to become dramatically more effective."

DreamBox Learning is one such program, delivering K-3 math lessons that allow students to work independently and give their teachers a dashboard of diagnostic information on what students are mastering, what they're missing, and why. Reasoning Mind is a similar program for grade 3-7 students, and Khan Academies has short, free video lessons for students of all ages. Rocketship Education charter schools are using similar approaches with 2,500 students in San Jose, California. And the School of One in New York City assigns each student a unique daily schedule based on academic strengths and needs and is getting impressive results so far.

Teachers who are working with these programs report that they are freed from whole-group classroom management, have more time for individualized and small-group instruction and critical-thinking projects – and their students are doing far better.

"Such programs offer promise," Childress concludes, "but they are just a start… We must give our teachers and students the breakthrough tools they need so that the next generation of Americans will be better prepared to take advantage of those jobs and contribute to a stronger economy."

"Rethinking School" by Stacey Childress in *Harvard Business Review*, March 2012 (Vol. 90, #3, p. 77-79), www.hbr.org.

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3. A Low-Tech Intervention: Collaborative Reasoning

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Jie Zhang (Western Kentucky University/ Bowling Green) and Katherine Dougherty Stahl (New York University) bemoan the fact that so many teachers preside over fast-paced, low-level question-and-answer classroom "discussions", rarely giving students the chance to formulate their own questions and express extended ideas about complex issues. This is especially detrimental to language development of ELLs.

Collaborative Reasoning is an intriguing solution – small-group, peer-led discussions aimed at promoting intellectual and personal engagement. Here's how it works. The whole class reads a text that raises an unresolved issue with multiple, competing points of view. Topics might include friendship, family obligations, justice, fairness, duty, equality, honesty, winning and losing, or the environment. Students then break into groups of 5-8 and discuss a provocative question raised by the text – for example, "Should Stone Fox let little Willy win the race?" (from *Stone Fox* by Gardiner, 1980) and "Are zoos good places for animals?" (from *A Trip to the Zoo* by Reznitskaya and Clark, 2004).

"Students are expected to take positions on the *big question*, support the positions with reasons and evidence, carefully listen, evaluate, respond to one another's arguments, and challenge one another when they disagree," say Zhang and Stahl. "The purpose is for students to cooperatively search for resolutions and develop thoughtful opinions on the topic." Students learn how to manage their own discussions without hand-raising, with the teacher facilitating and scaffolding from the side – for example, modeling, thinking out loud, prompting, clarifying, challenging, reminding, summarizing and refocusing, encouraging, and fostering independence.

Zhang and Stahl say that two decades of research have shown Collaborative Reasoning to be an effective way to get all types of students talking more, improving their thinking, and developing important social skills. It's especially helpful for English learners, who are often marginalized in conventional class discussions.

Collaborative Reasoning requires careful planning and preparation, say the authors. Here are their suggestions:

- Choose a complex text with ample evidence for both sides of an interesting issue.
- Read it carefully and come up with a big question that requires high-level thinking and judgment.
- Prepare an argument outline of the possible positions, reasons, and supporting evidence.
- When students first try small-group discussions, be aware that there may be some awkward pauses, especially among ELLs who are uncertain about how to express their views. Patience and support are important, with the teacher gradually relinquishing control as students become more confident and proficient.
- Have students debrief afterward.

"Collaborative Reasoning: Language-Rich Discussions for English Learners" by Jie Zhang and Katherine Dougherty Stahl in *The Reading Teacher*, December 2011/January 2012 (Vol. 65, #4, p. 257-260), http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/TRTR.01040/abstract; the authors can be reached at jie.zhang@wku.edu and kay.stahl@nyu.edu.

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4. Pennsylvania Students Write a Weekly Letter to Their Parents

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Pennsylvania teachers Terry Newman and Sarah Bizzarri describe how their fifth-grade team got students into a regular routine of writing a letter home about what they learned and how they behaved that week. When teachers introduced Friday letters at the beginning of the year, students immediately liked the idea and said they wanted their letters to tell their parents about all core subjects.

Teachers wanted the letters to take no more than 30 minutes of classroom time. At the outset, they modeled the process:

- They thought aloud about what happened that week, brainstorming ideas with students and recording them;
- They had students number the ideas in the order in which they might be sequenced;
- They wrote an initial draft of the letter on chart paper, continuing to think aloud.
- They read the chart-paper letter aloud.

Once students got the hang of the format, teachers used a shared-writing process: students generated the ideas themselves, decided on the sequence, and directed teachers as they wrote on chart paper.

Finally, students wrote their Friday letters independently, some with the help of an outline (Dear ---, This week at school I learned ----. My behavior during this past week was ----. One thing I really liked this week was ----. Love, ----).

From that point on, teachers made a point of providing as little assistance as possible. "Aside from some peer collaboration during the writing of the Friday Letter," say Newman and Bizzarri, "the students brainstormed, organized, and drafted the letters independently. We sent the letters home 'student perfect,' meaning the best the student could do without teacher assistance. Student perfect enabled the students, parents, and teacher to better assess student progress over the course of the year. Student perfect also provided a clearer picture of what the student can do independently as a writer."

In addition to providing an authentic writing task each week, the Friday Letters were an excellent way of communicating with parents about the curriculum and students' progress. Teachers were pleasantly surprised by students' willingness to talk about their behavior in the letters. "Students who did struggle with behavior issues took such pride when they were able to write to their parents stating that they had a great week," say Newman and Bizzarri.

Finding the time to write the letters at the end of a busy week was always challenging. But seeing students' enthusiasm, parents' appreciation, and the way the letters clarified the week's accomplishments, teachers made the time for something that had become a top priority.

"Friday Letters: Connecting Students, Teachers, and Families Through Writing" by Terry Newman and Sarah Bizzarri in *The Reading Teacher*, December 2011/January 2012 (Vol. 65, #4, p. 275-280), http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/TRTR.01037/abstract; the authors can be reached at tlaanewman@comcast.net and sarahabizzarri@gmail.com.

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5. Using the Arts to Leverage Academic Achievement

(Originally titled "All Students Are Artists")

In this thoughtful *Educational Leadership* article, Boston Arts Academy principal Linda Nathan describes a science teacher venting about a student: "I've had it with Darren. I've moved his seat right next to my desk. I've spent extra time with him after school. I've called home. I've put him on a contract. I've talked to the counselor. In my 30 years of teaching, he's one of the most frustrating students I've ever taught!" Nathan suggested that they watch the boy in his ballet class, and what they saw was astonishing: "This uncontrollable, impulsive, and often mean-spirited young man was beautiful here," says Nathan. "He moved fluidly, with grace and poise. He was at the front of the class, and other students followed his movements. Darren picked up nuances so adeptly and quickly that the teacher often used him to show corrections to the rest of the class. He seemed completely secure in his body – happy and free."

The teacher talked with Darren about how to transfer these qualities to science class, and together they came up with a solution: Darren would be allowed to get up and move around the classroom. From then on, Darren rarely sat down during 90-minute science blocks. As long as his body was in motion, his mind could focus – and he did much better academically.

Nathan presents another case study: Alejandro, a gifted singer who could master complex scores, was sullen and uncommunicative in English and fatalistic about academic achievement. "I don't ever do better," he said to a counselor. "Just worse." In a summer remediation program, a teacher suggested that Alejandro look at reading texts like musical scores, breaking down paragraphs and chapters as a singer breaks down stanzas and notes.

By the end of the summer, Alejandro's reading had improved, he'd written a five-page essay, and he had read a book on his own. Teachers created a buddy system that got Alejandro checking in with other students about assignments and projects, and he passed all his subjects. Nathan observes, "He is beginning to recognize that the practice skills that come naturally to him in music can be transferred to other areas. Moreover, he has learned that success begets more success."

"Art makes my head hurt because there isn't one right answer," Nathan's students sometimes complain. Nathan sums up: "Persistence, patience, practice, working in an ensemble, empathy, and learning to take criticism are all habits learned in the study of the arts. In music, a continuum of growth is expected. One doesn't fail – one gets better. A musician can always improve. In dance, the willingness to fall and recover is a common movement motif that also applies in the academic classroom. As educators, we constantly work to help our

students take risks and stretch and then come back to the center and be in control when necessary."

"All Students Are Artists" by Linda Nathan in *Educational Leadership*, February 2012 (Vol. 69, #5, p. 48-51), www.ascd.org; Nathan can be reached at lnathan@bostonartsacademy.org.

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6. Dealing with Testing Hysteria

In this *Education Horizons* article, California teacher Anna Martin describes the frenzy her school goes through each year before standardized testing – intense test prep, trying to push the "bubble" students over the top, and arguing about the efficacy of teaching to the test. "The hoops we end up jumping through are enough to drive us crazy," says Martin. She believes that standardized testing can be kept in perspective by following these guidelines:

• *Plan the whole year*. Work backwards from testing dates and create a detailed calendar so the required content units (and test preparation) fits comfortably before testing time, without a last-minute rush. The calendar should also include non-traditional assessments and fun culminating projects, especially after state testing is finished.

• *Reduce anxiety and increase confidence*. The goal is for students to feel in control when they open up their test booklets. It helps to pick a few test-taking strategies, model the thinking behind them – for example, how to eliminate incorrect answers in multiple-choice items, and give students a chance to practice the strategies in a non-stressful environment. Another helpful activity is having students write their own test questions and try them out on each other. And test preparation can be fun – using cooperative groups or having students go to the four corners of the room according to their answer choices, and music.

• *Teach relaxation techniques*. There are many tips that students can learn, including tracing the sign for infinity with their fingertips, tapping the right and left sides of their body with the opposing hand, chewing mint gum, and taking short mental breaks during testing. Students can also visualize successful performance on a test through guided meditation. Special-needs students need to have all accommodations in place and be familiar with them. Finally, it's helpful if the teacher is calm, which is easier if you've looked over testing procedures and are comfortable with them.

• *Assess learning holistically before, during, and after testing*. "Do you have a dream of creating a class museum for all the history topics studied that year or having students write a newspaper, design a dream house, or conduct an experiment that requires feedback?" asks Martin. "Do you want students to produce a play, read in literature circles, or teach a lesson to the class?" She believes that testing time, and the weeks afterward, are perfect for these higher-level activities and assessments. Students should get the clear message that there are many ways to demonstrate learning.

"Four Tips for Surviving Standardized Testing" by Anna Martin in *Educational Horizons*, February/March 2012 (Vol. 90, p. 25-27), http://www.edhorizons.org

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7. A Different Way to Group Students by Achievement

(Originally titled "Clustered for Success")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Arizona district administrator Dina Brulles and consultant Susan Winebrenner recommend a middle ground for class placement of students identified as gifted. They note the disadvantages of homogeneous grouping (which can be seen as elitist) and mainstreaming (these students can sometimes be unhelpful as role models for classmates since their thinking is more intuitive and they may resent being used as peer tutors). In addition, say the authors, "When teachers have only one or two students from a special population, they may overlook them, especially when the students appear to be doing well."

Brulles and Winebrenner believe "cluster" grouping is a better approach, creating a critical mass of the highest-achieving students and not putting them in the same classroom as the lowest-achievers. The first step is dividing students into five tiers:

- Students identified as gifted – This includes students not fluent in English, some who are academically nonproductive, and those who are "twice exceptional" – they have gifted traits and also special needs;
- High average students – Highly competent and productive students who achieve well;
- Average – Students in the middle range of grade-level expectations
- Low average – Students who can achieve at grade level with some support;
- Far below average – Students who struggle in most areas and are well below proficiency.

To create three classes of 30 students at a single grade level, the following cluster grouping would then be used:

Classroom	Gifted	High average	Average	Low average	Far below average
A	6	0	12	12	0
B	0	6	12	6	6
C	0	6	12	6	6

The Classroom A teacher at each grade level would be one with training in gifted education, and instruction in those classes would use pre-assessments to check for what students already know, use curriculum compacting where appropriate, and be highly differentiated. "For an approach like this to be successful," say Brulles and Winebrenner, "students must recognize that they are not doing *more* work than others, just *different* work. Students must also understand that their recorded grade will not be lower than it would have been had they completed the regular class work instead of the more challenging work they tackled.

"Clustered for Success" by Dina Brulles and Susan Winebrenner in *Educational Leadership*, February 2012 (Vol. 69, #5, p. 41-45), www.ascd.org; the authors can be reached at dbrulles@pvschools.net and susan@susanwinebrenner.com.

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8. Robert Marzano on Using Writing to Support Understanding

(Originally titled "Writing to Learn")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, researcher/author Robert Marzano suggests a five-step process for using writing as a learning tool in content classrooms. "Although formulaic," he says, "it does ensure that students adequately encode, revise, aggregate, and review important information that has been the focus of instruction."

• *Record* – Immediately after an instructional experience (for example, a video clip on heredity), students write a summary in their notebooks of what they've learned. In this phase, students use complete sentences but there's no emphasis on correct spelling and usage.

• *Compare* – Students pair up and compare what they're written, looking for commonalities and differences. The teacher circulates, answering questions and clearing up misconceptions.

• *Revise* – Based on what they learned in the previous step, students create a more complete and polished version of their summary. This might be done as homework.

• *Combine* – Students collaborate to mesh their summaries, formulating one or more generalizations supported with specific evidence, and present their product to the class. For example, in a health class, students might say, "Proper diet is a balancing act between the amount of energy you expend in a day and the amount of calories you take in."

• *Review* – Students work alone or in groups to review the summaries and generalizations.

"Writing to Learn" by Robert Marzano in *Educational Leadership*, February 2012 (Vol. 69, #5, p. 82-83), www.ascd.org

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9. Short Items:

a. MOMA website – The Museum of Modern Art's website has lessons and guides for educators: http://www.moma.org/modernteachers.

"Talk with Your Hands" in *Educational Horizons*, February/March 2012 (Vol. 90, p. 4)

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b. Virtual visits to the world's art museums – The Google Art Project allows students to take virtual tours of great art museums around the world: http://www.googleartproject.com.

"Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, February 2012 (Vol. 7, #2, p. 61)

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c. Virtual math manipulatives in English, French, and Spanish – The National Library of Virtual Manipulatives at Utah State University has interactive web-based manipulatives and concept tutorials for mathematics: http://nlvm.usu.edu/en/nav/vlibrary.html

"Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, February 2012 (Vol. 7, #2, p. 61)

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d. An iPad foreign-language flashcard system – MemoryLifter is a free, virtual flashcard system, now available on iPads: http://www.memorylifter.com. It has flashcard options in Spanish, French, Arabic, Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, and Russian.

"Tech Talk" in *The Language Educator*, February 2012 (Vol. 7, #2, p. 14)

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e. Free clipart for students and teachers – This website by the Educational Technology Clearinghouse has more than 65,000 pieces of clipart: http://etc.usf.edu/clipart

"Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, February 2012 (Vol. 7, #2, p. 61)

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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.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 41 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

Subscriptions:

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Better Evidence-Based Education
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
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Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice