Marshall Memo 963

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 28, 2022

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1. A critique of journalists' coverage of the "science of reading" debate
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Quotes of the Week

"When a student laughs, it is much like sorbet for the palate. Laughter cleanses the brain and reduces stress."

Lisa Dieker, Molly Greer, and Amanda Lannan (see item #5)

"What we ingest from online sources can harm our mood and mental health, and we can pass our anxiety, depression, and stress on to others."

Christine Porath (see item #3)

"Our brains work hard to ensure the integrity of our worldview: we seek out information to confirm what we already know, and are dismissive or avoidant of facts that are hostile to our core beliefs."

Brian Resnick (see item #4)

"There is considerable common ground among literacy educators that reading should be deliberately taught, and specifically that most students benefit from explicit instruction in decoding."

Maren Aukerman (see item #1)

"To shield our children from life's inevitable perplexities is to leave them at the mercy of their ignorance and to deny them the wonder that is the basis of everything we know."

Donald Thomas in "The Torpedo's Touch" in *Harvard Educational Review*, May 1985 (Vol. 55, #2, pp. 220-222)

"I don't know what they learned, but they'll never forget it."

Donald Thomas (*ibid.*), defending a dynamic but opaque lesson to skeptical supervisors

1. A Critique of Journalists' Coverage of the "Science of Reading" Debate

In this *Literacy Research Association* article, Maren Aukerman (University of Calgary) takes a critical look at recent reporting on early literacy instruction in U.S. schools. The narrative in many newspaper, magazine, and online articles, says Aukerman, relies on four propositions:

- Science has proved there is just one way to teach reading effectively to all students: a systematic, highly structured approach to phonics.
- Most teachers, encouraged by flawed teacher-education programs, are using balanced literacy, which is less effective.
- Balanced literacy classrooms use very little phonics and encourage students to guess at words (three-cueing).
- Balanced literacy and teacher educators are thus to blame for large numbers of children not learning to read well.

Each of these statements is misleading, says Aukerman, giving an inaccurate understanding of what's involved in effective reading instruction for primary-grade children – and what's happening in schools.

It's certainly true that phonics plays an important part in learning to read; we've known that for decades, says Aukerman. But she believes the story being told by many education reporters is not accurate. Her article, she says, is "a call to action for reporters; they have the responsibility and opportunity to decrease divisive rhetoric that has increasingly come to dominate discourse about early literacy instruction." She also hopes her article will help educators navigate the stormy waters of the current "science of reading" debate.

Aukerman focuses her critique on a May 22, 2022 *New York Times* article that was highly critical of Lucy Calkins of Columbia University. The article said Calkins had signaled a "major retreat" in agreeing to introduce more phonics in her *Units of Study* literacy curriculum. The *Times* piece, says Aukerman, contains four errors that are often repeated in other journalists' treatment of the issue:

• *Lack of journalistic due diligence* – The *Times* quoted five people who were sharply critical of Calkins while including no positive or nuanced opinions. "A curriculum as popular as Calkins's program does not get that way without strengths that stakeholders find meaningful," says Aukerman. "That needs acknowledgement." In addition, Calkins was referred to dismissively as a "guru" and quoted selectively, including the statement, "All of us are imperfect." Reporting on any controversy, says Aukerman, needs to include a representative range of perspectives.

• *A straw-man argument* – The *Times* said, "Some children seem to turn magically into readers… That has helped fuel a mistaken belief that reading is as natural as speaking." The source of this belief is not named, says Aukerman, and there's no evidence that Calkins thinks it's true. The origin of the naturalistic theory was probably a 1976 essay by Ken and Yetta Goodman, but few literacy researchers today believe that learning to read is as natural as learning to speak.

"In reality," says Aukerman, "there is considerable common ground among literacy educators that reading should be deliberately taught, and specifically that most students benefit from explicit instruction in decoding. Where perspectives vary, they are not characterized by absolutes such as 'let students figure out reading by themselves,' or 'phonics is a waste.'" The phonics-versus-whole-language dichotomy being reported in articles like the one in the *Times* is a false one, says Aukerman.

A more important distinction, she believes, is between *popular science of reading* (as reported in the press and picked up by some parents, educators, and policymakers) and *research-based science of reading* (from academic journals like *Reading Research Quarterly*, which recently devoted two issues to a comprehensive treatment of the subject).

• *Overemphasizing phonics* – The *Times* article acknowledged that "research points to a broad set of skills necessary to become a literate person – including phonics, vocabulary, and knowledge of current events, history, art, sports, and nature." But there's much more, says Aukerman: dexterity in decoding, comprehension, using texts for real-life purposes, and critical reading, not to mention writing, oral language, developing English as a second language, children bringing their racial and cultural backgrounds to reading, and motivation to become a lifelong reader.

The *popular science of reading*, says Aukerman, focuses almost exclusively on phonics. Emily Hanford's 2019 American Public Media report mentioned phonics 86 times and had only one reference to other aspects of literacy. Aukerman hammers home the omissions: "Developing children's ability to understand, to imagine, and to think critically about text? Ignored. Developing their capacity to discuss and make reasoned text-based arguments? Ignored. Developing their reading motivation, which is associated with better comprehension? Ignored. In crowding out so much else that is vital, such reporting works counter to the goal of moving the fuller body of reading research into classroom practice."

• *A logical fallacy* – The *Times* article juxtaposed two ideas: (a) the Calkins literacy curriculum is widely used, and (b) even before the pandemic, only one-third of American fourth and eighth graders were reading on grade level. The implication was that the Calkins curriculum (and balanced literacy) *caused* children's underperformance and are therefore guilty of harming generations of American children. But, says Aukerman, no evidence was cited to back up that causal link. In fact:

- 2020 NAEP reading scores, while still very concerning, were 12 points higher than in pre-Calkins 1971. "If test results indicate a crisis," says Aukerman, "it long predates Calkins and cannot fairly be attributed to her."

- Studies have found that in classrooms without systematic phonics, children show no word reading or comprehension disadvantages compared to those in phonics-intensive classrooms.
- In fact, students from classrooms with less phonics emphasis read more fluently than those in phonics-intensive programs, probably because the former have more practice reading real texts.

Aukerman says she will follow up with two more articles on this subject.

"The Science of Reading and the Media: Is Reporting Biased?" by Maren Aukerman in *Literacy Research Association*, November 23, 2022; Aukerman can be reached at maren.aukerman@ucalgary.ca.

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2. Helping Teens Assess and Avoid Risky Behaviors

In this *BBC Future* article, science writer David Robson reports on recent insights about people's ability to assess risks wisely. "These skills that underlie our destiny can be taught," says Leeds University psychologist Joshua Weller. "They can be nurtured and developed through lots of different methods."

Babies have little innate sense of basic dangers; they don't hesitate to crawl off a changing table or bed. Children learn to recognize hazards from experience, and also vicariously – watching how others react. An intriguing study showed that when children were shown pictures of several animals paired with a human face that was either smiling or frightened, the children had fearful reactions to the animal paired with the frightened face, and that negative impression of the animal's image and name lasted for months.

"Simply recognizing a danger is often not enough to keep a child safe, however," says Robson, "since their developing brains may not be quick enough to react to the problem at hand. Research shows that we don't learn to fully integrate our senses – such as sight and hearing – until we are around 10 years old." A child may not be able to judge the speed of an approaching car, or may be distracted by something else and not pay attention. That's why routines are important for young children – look both ways several times, heed the crossing sign – so they'll perform them without reminders.

Teens' risk-taking presents another set of challenges, since adolescent brain development increases sensitivity to dopamine signaling associated with pleasure. It was previously believed that teens were more impulsive than younger children because they were seeking bigger dopamine rewards, but recent studies show that teenagers are actually quite cautious. When they make risky choices, it's usually because they're increasingly unsupervised by adults and therefore exposed to more temptations – fast driving, alcohol and drugs, unprotected sex, shoplifting, peer pressure – which leads many to overcome their innate wariness.

It's not just teens who throw caution to the wind, says Robson; there are wide variations in risk appraisal at all ages, including adults who make foolish decisions. The key

variable is what psychologists call *decision-making competence*, which researchers believe has three components:

• *Awareness of cognitive biases* – In one study, psychologists told subjects that a condom had a 95 percent success rate, then told them that a different condom had a 5 percent failure rate. Many people felt more confident with the first statement, despite the fact that both presented the same statistical information. The erroneous perception revealed *framing bias*, leading to an inaccurate analysis of statistical information.

• *Following basic logic* – Researchers asked people to guess their chances of dying within the next year, and then within the next ten years. A surprising number of subjects said the probability was the same in both timeframes, even though a person's chances of dying accumulate over time. Those people showed a general inability to think clearly about probabilities.

• *Understanding of common risks* – Subjects were asked for their sense of the danger in a number of everyday situations, and their confidence in their opinion. "This is important," says Robson, "since it's often our inability to judge our own abilities that puts us in the most dangerous situations."

Researchers scored people on each of these three dimensions of decision-making competence and found a strong correlation between low scores and, with adolescents, rule-breaking in school and higher rates of drug use and delinquent behavior, and with adults, a higher rate of missing a flight, catching an STD, or filing for bankruptcy. These correlations had nothing to do with people's IQ: "Decision-making competence is not just a measure of raw brainpower," says Robson, "but specifically how well someone is able to appraise situations."

These findings, he says, "suggest that parents and teachers may need a sophisticated approach to guiding pre-teens and adolescents through life's risks. Rather than simply imposing strict rules that eliminate the child's exposure to risk, it could be more useful – in the long run – to help them hone their decision-making and thinking skills." In addition to the three dimensions described above, teens benefit from a multi-pronged approach, including:

- Developing self-control and emotional regulation to counteract impulsivity;
- Metacognitive practices such as imagining the consequences of one's actions;
- Critical thinking, including looking for evidence that contradicts one's assumptions;
- Mindfulness exercises;
- In history classes, examining historical events in terms of the decisions faced by people – for example, whether steel workers should go on strike for higher wages.

A study found that the last strategy increased students' academic performance in history as well as their scores on decision-making competence.

"How to Teach Children About Risk" by David Robson in *BBC Future*, November 9, 2022

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3. Dealing with Uncivil Behavior

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Christine Porath (Georgetown University) reports on the worldwide rise of incivility in workplaces, including planes, hospitals, and schools. "It's never been so bad!" said an official at the Cleveland Clinic, citing mean comments, screaming tirades, and racist insults.

Porath has been studying incivility and its effects for more than two decades – intentional undermining, ignoring, mocking, teasing, belittling, verbally attacking, everything up to, but not including, physical violence. She's found that there has indeed been an increase: in 2005, a little under half of people in a worldwide sample said they'd been treated rudely at work at least once a month; in 2022, 76 percent reported having that experience. In addition, 78 percent said they witnessed incivility at work at least once a month, and 70 percent said they'd seen it at least two or three times a month.

What's behind these troubling statistics? Porath's research points to several contributing factors:

- Stress – Many people blamed less self-care, sleep, and exercise linked to the pandemic, the economy, war, divisive politics, and the changing nature of work.
- Negative emotions – A survey of 70,000 people found that those who named anger as their top emotion more than doubled over a few months in 2020.
- Weakened ties – Studies show a decline in many people's sense of community, defined as a group of individuals who share a mutual concern for one another's welfare.
- Invisibility – "The feeling of lacking community is exacerbated when people don't feel valued, appreciated or heard," says Porath – for example, a boss ignoring a colleague who says hello.
- Technology – Our devices can lead us to ignore people right in front of us, and being able to communicate at a distance can foster rudeness and put-downs.
- The Internet – "What we ingest from online sources," says Porath, "can harm our mood and mental health, and we can pass our anxiety, depression, and stress on to others."
- Lack of self-awareness – One of the biggest takeaways from her research, she says, is that a lot of incivility stems from cluelessness, not malice. One researcher found that 95 percent of people think they're self-aware but only 10-15 percent actually are.

"We may have good intentions and work hard to be patient and tolerant," Porath concludes, "but our tone, nonverbal signals, or actions may come across differently to the people we interact with and those who witness the interactions."

Unfortunately, she continues, incivility spreads like the common cold in workplaces, communities, and at home, quickly having a mental and physical impact. "Merely being exposed to rude words reduces our ability to process and recall information," she reports. "Witnessing rudeness and triggers of incivility – such as reading a nasty comment on social media or listening to an argumentative interview – takes a cognitive toll, interfering with our working memory and decreasing our performance."

To help organizations prevent these behaviors and move toward a more peaceful and respectful culture, Porath has developed the *Cycle of Civility* framework. Here are its four

components:

• *Hiring* – Intentionally recruit and choose people who are equipped to handle incivility, she advises. A possible interview question: *Tell me about a time when you've had to deal with stress or conflict at work. What did you do?* Ask follow-up questions and pay attention to the person's tone, demeanor, and way of speaking – and whether they will be receptive to learning the organization's values and how to uphold them on a day-to-day basis.

• *Coaching* – Set expectations for how people interact with each other, help employees develop the skills of empathy (including understanding why someone might be uncivil), and spell out what will happen when norms are violated. A Massachusetts health care network introduced a patient and visitor code of conduct and helped employees use a template for uncivil behavior – for example, "Either you stop yelling at me, or it's going to make it harder for me to give your mother her meds."

• *Scoring* – "One of the most compelling ways to show how much civility matters to your organization," says Porath, "is to recognize and reward it. Gestures of appreciation, for example, can help reduce burnout, promote retention, and aid mental health and well-being." A stock advising company gave each employee an allotment of "gold" to give to colleagues in recognition of any action that promoted civility.

• *Practice* – There needs to be training in de-escalation, how to bring down the temperature in a tense conversation, skillfully handle an uncivil person, and recognize stress and burnout in oneself, along with a repertoire of ways to deal with it. "Thriving outside of work helps you thrive at work," concludes Porath, "by increasing your emotional reserves and instilling a sense of growth and learning… Encourage your employees and colleagues to have lives outside of work, to fill their buckets with people and activities that bring them joy and meaning."

"Frontline Work When Everyone Is Angry" by Christine Porath in *Harvard Business Review*, November 9, 2022

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4. Arguing 101

In this *Vox* article, Brian Resnick says it's difficult to persuade a person who has strong opinions because "our brains work hard to ensure the integrity of our worldview: we seek out information to confirm what we already know, and are dismissive or avoidant of facts that are hostile to our core beliefs." However, says Resnick, psychologists working on this issue have come up with two ways of having more-productive debates:

• *Reframe your position in terms of your opponent's values*. An argument you find convincing is unlikely to get through to someone who believes the opposite; they'll dismiss it or won't even hear it. A better strategy, Resnick says, is to state your position in terms of values the other person embraces and seek common ground. For a liberal to convince a conservative, arguments should be framed around conservative values like group loyalty, moral purity, and respect for authority. For a conservative to persuade a liberal, arguments should be framed around liberal values like equality, fairness, and protection of the vulnerable.

This is based on the *moral foundations theory* – that people have stable, gut-level beliefs that influence their worldview and prevent them from hearing arguments coming from a different "moral tribe." As Stanford University psychologist/sociologist Robb Willer puts it, "You're essentially trying to convince somebody who speaks French of some position while speaking German to them. And that doesn't resonate." By reframing an argument in ways that are respectful of the other person's worldview, it's possible to nudge them to at least consider another point of view. if not completely sway them. At the very least, the temperature of the argument will become less contentious.

• *Listen*. Rather than bombarding a person with facts, ask open-ended questions, pay attention to what they say, then ask more questions. "Overall," says Resnick, "it's a task designed to point out our common humanity, which then opens the door to reducing prejudice and changing opinions." People want to be heard, and they're more likely to reconsider a position when they come to a conclusion themselves. An example: a door-to-door canvasser encountered a woman who was ambivalent about transgender issues. Asked about times when she had been on the receiving end of discrimination, she remembered some – and her position softened. When the canvasser pointed out that a transgender nondiscrimination law would help those who felt discriminated against in other situations, the woman said, "Oh, okay, that makes a lot of sense."

"Most People Are Bad at Arguing. These 2 Techniques Will Make You Better" by Brian Resnick in *Vox*, November 26, 2022; Resnick can be reached at brian@vox.com.

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5. Using Universal Design for Learning with Middle-School Math

In this article in *Middle School Journal*, Lisa Dieker (University of Central Florida), Molly Greer (Oldham County Schools, KY), and Amanda Lannan (University of Kentucky) suggest seven ways to make mathematics more accessible to diverse groups of middle-school students, especially those with language-based needs.

• *Using more senses* – Conventional lessons tend to focus on what students see and hear. "Based on our experiences," say Dieker, Greer, and Lannan, "middle-school classrooms often overtax these two senses for students with disabilities, so we suggest stimulating other areas of the brain…" For example, a teacher might ask students to walk in a square to create a kinesthetic experience of a geometry fact. They suggest this website with 22 examples of math in everyday life for ideas on how students can imagine what a concept looks like, smells like, tastes like, feels like, and sounds like.

• *Tapping social media* – The brain loves novelty, say the authors, and math facts and concepts can be found in movies, YouTube videos, Twitter, TikTok, and elsewhere online. Students might be challenged to find an example of a concept in social media. The authors suggest Math in the Movies, Blabberize, and Voki. Google Translate and closed captioning can make ideas accessible to more students.

• *Three layers* – Dieker, Greer, and Lannan suggest that teachers challenge themselves to use at least three ways to show a concept – for example, when learning about equations,

playing an online game about balance or having students balance on one foot to experience being out of balance. Two possible websites: https://mathsciencemusic.org and https://hippocampus.org.

• *Laughter* – "When a student laughs," say Dieker, Greer, and Lannan, "it is much like sorbet for the palate. Laughter cleanses the brain and reduces stress," lowering blood pressure, heart rate, and overall anxiety. This is especially helpful for students who feel uneasy in math classes and have language-based issues.

• *Movement* – "When students connect their body with mathematical terms," say the authors, "this activity creates new neural pathways, helping to engrain that word, phrase, or concept." They suggest https://mathandmovement.com and https://www.gonoodle.com.

• *Choice* – When students can choose among different ways to show their learning, they get more engaged, reinforcing skills and knowledge. The authors suggest giving limited choices at first and then expanding the options. Some possible websites: http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php and https://slidesmania.com/tag/choice-boards/

• *Exhibition* – They encourage having each student make a video (five minutes or less, using Flipgrid, YouTube, or Teacher Tube) demonstrating their understanding of a concept, and then having them present to classmates. "The strength of this activity," say Dieker, Greer, and Lannan, "is that all students get to see and hear the key concepts in the class multiple times. For students with language-based needs, this repetition of ideas from their peers provides access to language at a novice level of thinking, which may make more sense to them."

"Seven Equity Ideas for Students with Language-Based Needs in Mathematics" by Lisa Dieker, Molly Greer, and Amanda Lannan in *Middle School Journal*, November 2022 (Vol. 55, #5, pp. 33-39); the authors can be reached at lisa.dieker@ucf.edu, megreer28@gmail.com, and amanda.lannan@uky.edu.

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6. Alternatives to Socratic Seminars

In this *Edutopia* article, New Jersey teacher Samantha Shane says she likes using Socratic seminars with her high-school ELA classes, but students have pushed back, saying this format feels like "a forced, fake discussion" in which they have to talk over each other and contribute even if it isn't on the topic – and some students shut down because of the pressure to participate. Shane has come up with three alternative discussion formats that she uses to address key standards:

• *Thoughts, questions, and epiphanies* – After the class reads a chapter of an informational text or book (for example, *Frankenstein*) or watches a video, she writes Thoughts, Questions, Epiphanies on the board and has students brainstorm in groups, which encourages stronger contributions and deeper thinking. She then asks students to contribute to lists of each on the board and leads a whole-group discussion. With *Frankenstein*, one thought: *Victor Frankenstein did wrong;* a question: *Who is responsible for the monster?* an epiphany: *This relates to what we're studying in biology about cloning.*

• *Mind mapping* – Shane provides a central idea and asks students to visually extend it (after thinking individually about their own mind map) – or alternatively, she writes up different concepts, ideas, and topics and has students discuss and draw connections among them. "I provide students an example template with a category they know well," says Shane, "such as food, TV shows, or music. I scaffold as the year progresses with characters in our novel and with figurative language, and eventually, by the end of the year, students make a mind map to reflect on how everything connects."

• *Harkness discussion* – Student sit in a circle, taking ownership for the discussion, creating questions and group norms, facilitating, and keeping track of participation. Shane doesn't participate, having prepped students on creating higher-order questions, shown a video of a Harkness discussion, and conducted dry runs. As the discussion concludes, students reflect and agree on a score for the entire class, using a checklist of criteria. Shane has found that as long as she keeps things low-stakes (a formative grade only), students are "extremely honest and fair" in their self-assessment, even citing those who over- and under-participated.

Discussions take time and planning, Shane concludes, and they're not always successful. When her own discussions don't go as planned, she calls a time-out and everyone free-writes on the topic being studied, brainstorms new questions, does research, or reviews expectations. "Some classes take longer to fall into the habits of strong discussers," she says, as she strives for discussions with total, high-quality participation.

"3 Great Discussion Models for High-School English" by Samantha Shane in *Edutopia*, November 14, 2022

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7. Phonemic Skill Instruction by Teachers, Computers, and Parents

In this *Reading Research Quarterly* article, Marianne Rice, Florina Erbeli, Christopher Thompson, and Melissa Fogarty (Texas A&M University), and Mary Rose Sallese (University of Alabama/Birmingham) report on their study of the impact of phonemic awareness instruction in three different modes. Their conclusion: classroom teaching of phonemic awareness was moderately effective (0.63) at improving students' phonemic skills (there were no significant differences for group size, duration, phonemic skills taught, use of letters, and students' grade level, at-risk, or EL status). They also found that students working on phonemic awareness with a computer program and/or with a parent (guided by the teacher) could serve as an effective supplement to classroom work. "However," the researchers add, "it is imperative all students have access to effective, teacher-led phonemic awareness instruction to better the chances of becoming successful readers."

"Phonemic Awareness: A Meta-Analysis for Planning Effective Instruction" by Marianne Rice, Florina Erbeli, Christopher Thompson, Melissa Fogarty, and Mary Rose Sallese in *Reading Research Quarterly*, October/November 2022 (Vol. 57, #4, pp. 1259-1289); Rice can be reached at marianne.rice@tamu.edu.

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly publication keeps principals, teachers, instructional coaches, superintendents, and other educators well-informed on current K-12 research and ideas. Kim Marshall, drawing on 53 years as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than 150 articles each week, and selects 8-10 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 Tuesday (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's also a podcast and HTML version.

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Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
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Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
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Time
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