Marshall Memo 999

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 21, 2023

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Quotes of the Week

"Intrinsically, teachers hold more power in a student-teacher relationship, and it is their responsibility to handle that power in a respectful and just manner."

Secondary-school student researchers (quoted in item #1)

"We have so many students who do not feel they are good at mathematics and do not like it."

Jennifer Bay-Williams (see item #2)

"Mastery happens small step by small step."

Adam Gopnik in *The Real Work: On the Mystery of Mastery* (Liveright, 2023), reviewed by Adam Thirlwell in *The New York Times Book Review*, July 23, 2023

"Let your life speak. Describe the environment in which you were raised and the impact it has had."

Dartmouth College's application essay prompt (see item #4)

"Just because GPT-4 can write a sonnet does not mean we are going to stop having students practice creative writing."

Adam Tyner (see item #7)

"People have no hesitation about going to the gym and suffering, you know, muscle pain in the service of being stronger and looking a way that they want to look. And they wake up the next day and they say, 'Oh my God, that's so painful. I'm so achy.' That's not traumatic."

Richard Friedman (quoted in item #3)

"In giving greater weight to claims of individual hurt and victimization, have we inadvertently raised a generation that has fewer tools to manage hardship and transform adversity into agency?"

Jill Filipovic (see item #3)

1. The Reciprocal Nature of Good Student-Teacher Relationships

In this article in *American Journal of Education*, Jerusha Connor (Villanova University) and co-authors report on a study involving 84 middle- and high-school students in four parts of the U.S. before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Students generated, discussed, and fine-tuned answers to these questions:

- What do teachers do to make strong student-teacher relationships?
- What do students do to make strong student-teacher relationships?

The research team, consisting of four adults, one graduate student, and seven secondary-school students, gained insights on the two-way nature of student-teacher relationships revolving around teacher power, student responsibility, safe classrooms, and reciprocity.

In some areas, students' suggestions for their teachers and their classmates converged, in others they diverged. Here's the full list:

• Areas where suggestions for teachers and students were exactly the same:
  - Promote a safe learning environment.
  - Respect students' unique identities.
  - Show patience for students/Show patience for teachers.
  - Take responsibility for your actions/Be accountable;
  - Be open to critical feedback.
  - Be open to hearing other perspectives.
  - Show consideration for students'/teachers' lives outside of school.

• Areas where suggestions for teachers and students were analogous:
  - Grade fairly and without bias/Respect teachers' grading decisions.
  - Use power responsibly/Call out teachers' abuse of power.
  - Offer academic support/Ask for help.
  - Encourage questions/Ask purposeful questions.
  - Show interest in students' lives outside of school/Make teachers aware of things happening with you outside of school.

• Suggestions just for teachers:
  - Keep students' personal information private.
  - Avoid favoritism.
  - Respect students' boundaries and privacy.
  - Be available to students outside of class time.
  - Create a balance between a formal and informal relationship.
  - Share decision-making with students.

- Create an interactive environment.
- Show flexibility with expectations.
- Act in a friendly way with students.
- Create an inviting classroom environment.
- Communicate clear and consistent expectations.
- Share about your own personal life.
- Show care for students' well-being, not just their grades and academic performance.
- Advocate for students within the school.
- Give students opportunities to improve their work.

Suggestions just for students:

- Accept that teachers make mistakes.
- Show appreciation for what teachers do.
- Show active, engaged listening.
- Address issues directly with the teacher.
- Be open to different learning styles.
- Don't take advantage of teachers who show flexibility.
- Participate in classroom activities.
- Own up to your mistakes.
- Follow instructions.
- Use technology responsibly.
- Show up on time.
- Stand up for yourself respectfully.
- Show that you care about school.
- Connect with teachers outside of class.
- Respect the teacher's authority.
- Respect teachers' expertise.
- Show respect for substitutes.
- Respect teachers' time constraints.

As students identified these areas for building positive student-teacher relationships, say Conner et al., they "sometimes offered counterstories of teachers who shamed them or their peers, favored other students, or acted in unprofessional or even 'creepy' ways in the classroom… These examples help illuminate how student-teacher relationships can generate negative social capital, with possible adverse consequences for students' engagement and learning."

In the final pages of the article, the student members of the research team were given an opportunity to make their own observations. Some excerpts:

"It is crucial that teachers know that students acknowledge their role in building positive student-teacher relationships. However, teachers must first understand that the innate and necessary power imbalance between them and their students requires that they take initiative in the actions that begin constructing positive student-teacher relationships…

Intrinsically, teachers hold more power in a student-teacher relationship, and it is their responsibility to handle that power in a respectful and just manner…

“Equally, it is not the responsibility of students to take on the burden of educating their teachers on promoting antiracism, supporting inclusion, or creating physical and emotional safety in the classroom. Treating students unequally, disrespecting students’ boundaries, and compromising students’ trust are harmful abuses of power that must be avoided for a positive student-teacher relationship to exist. As youth researchers, we believe that this theme is widely overlooked in the current research, perhaps due to relevant literature too often failing to consider the power dynamics in student-teacher relationships…

“Our findings showed that although teachers initiate a student-teacher relationship, student responses are necessary for a student-teacher relationship to flourish. This mutuality aids in helping teachers present themselves as trusted allies to students, promoting a safe classroom environment and positive power balance. With this trust, students feel inclusivity and protection, which subsequently means students feel comfortable enough to offer positive feedback to teachers. This can foster a feedback loop improving a student-teacher relationship. Conversely, negative actions by teachers can eliminate this trust instantly. It is key to note that growing this trust can take a while, but it takes seconds to break.”

“What Students and Teachers Do to Build Positive Reciprocal Relationships: A Study Co-Led by Youth and Adult Researchers” by Jerusha Conner, Michael Goldstein, Jayanth Mammen, José Hernandez, Kate Phillippo, Denise Pope, and Shannon Davidson in *American Journal of Education*, August 2023 (Vol. 129, #4, pp. 449-479); Conner can be reached at jerusha.conner@villanova.edu.

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2. Fostering a Positive Mathematics Identity in Students

“We have so many students who do not feel they are good at mathematics and do not like it,” says Jennifer Bay-Williams (University of Louisville) in this *Mathematics Teacher* article. She urges teachers to commit to this goal for 2023-24: *Each student develops a positive math identity* – i.e., “dispositions and deeply held beliefs… about their ability to participate and perform effectively in mathematical contexts and to use mathematics in powerful ways across the contexts of their lives” (Aguirre et al., 2013). Bay-Williams suggests several strategies:

• At the beginning of the school year, ask students to assess how they think of themselves as “doers of mathematics” and adopt a personal goal for moving in the “right” direction:

Not good at math -- Good at math

Pain -- Enjoyment

Students might also create a “mathography” – a story or visual of their personal journey with math through previous grades and life experiences – including their strengths and what they already do well.

• Before each math lesson, ask students to think about which specific practices of successful math students they're using, and then check in again at the end of the lesson:

- Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.
- Reason abstractly and quantitatively.
- Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others.
- Model with mathematics.
- Use appropriate tools strategically.
- Attend to precision.
- Look for and make use of structure.
- Look for and express regularity in repeated reasoning.

(These come from the Standards of Mathematical Practice for what doing mathematics well looks like.)

• Make math classes authentic and meaningful by using cognitively demanding tasks and giving enough time for students to solve them. Good resources are available at National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and in a soon-to-be-published book on antiracist teaching practices from TODOS.

• Give students "me time" to individually process and reason before they are asked to share with classmates. Communicate that student thinking matters, not just getting the right answer; it's not enough to have students "show your work" – they need to illustrate the strategy they used and why.

• Refrain from using mathematics teaching practices that have been shown to raise students' stress level and turn them off the subject:

- Activities that emphasize competition and speed;
- Overemphasizing algorithms;
- Unstructured discussions;
- Small-group work with insufficient guidance.

"Checking Math IDs to Launch the School Year" by Jennifer Bay-Williams in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, August 2023 (Vol. 116, #8, pp. 566-569; Bay-Williams can be reached at j.baywilliams@louisville.edu.

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3. Building Resilience in a Trauma-Sensitive Culture

In this article in *The Atlantic*, Jill Filipovic wonders if our well-intentioned efforts to avoid psychological harm – including "trigger warnings" alerting students to content that might upset them – have gone too far. In some colleges, for example, there have been complaints about classroom comments or teachers holding unpopular beliefs. These students "saw themselves as fragile," says Filipovic, "and seemed to believe that coming into contact with offensive or challenging information was psychologically detrimental. In asking for more-robust warnings about potentially upsetting classroom material, the students seemed to be saying: *This could hurt us, and this institution owes us protection from distress*."

Of course there's actual trauma, says Filipovic, but "in giving greater weight to claims

of individual hurt and victimization, have we inadvertently raised a generation that has fewer tools to manage hardship and transform adversity into agency?" Michael Ungar (Dalhousie University) says, "If everything is traumatic and we have no capacity to cope with these moments, what does that say about our capacity to cope when something more extreme happens? Resilience is partly about putting in place the resources for the next stressor."

Current statistics on young people in the U.S. seem contradictory. On the one hand, bullying in high schools has decreased in certain respects, today's teens are less likely to drink and use illicit drugs, child poverty is down, and high-school graduation rates are at an all-time high, with significantly more girls graduating than boys. On the other hand, the mental health of teens is much worse than it was in 2010, with the suicide rate for children 10-14 tripling, and for girls in that age group, quadrupling. In 2021, 57 percent of high-school girls reported "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness," up from 36 percent in 2011, and teen girls report troubling rates of sexual violence, bullying, and concern for their own physical safety at school.

What explains this deterioration of teens' mental health? Researchers point to several developments. For starters, there's a marked decline in the time teenagers spend in person with their friends, which began before 2020 but was amped up during the pandemic. Many teens are on their cellphones "almost constantly" and live in a social media bubble of like-minded peers that "tends to privilege the loudest, most aggrieved voices," says Filipovic. "This kind of insularity can encourage teenagers to understand distressing experiences as traumatizing."

Studies of U.S. soldiers show that those who were catastrophizers before experiencing combat are more likely to suffer from PTSD. The same may be true of teenagers in the current era, says Filipovic: "A person's sense of themselves as either capable of persevering through hardship or unable to manage it can be self-fulfilling." If an adolescent has come to believe that when traumatic events occur, they are helpless victims, they are much more likely to be rattled by a whole range of events, from truly traumatic to less harmful. A truism among mental health practitioners is that perception is reality, and these feelings are very real for many teens.

Research on PTSD from combat has also found that some soldiers exposed to traumatic events actually turn suffering into a source of strength, and a year later are stronger physically and psychologically than they were beforehand. "But that empowering message," says Filipovic, "has yet to take hold in society."

Richard Friedman, formerly a mental health coordinator at Cornell, compares building resilience to vigorous strength training. "People have no hesitation about going to the gym and suffering, you know, muscle pain in the service of being stronger and looking a way that they want to look," he says. "And they wake up the next day and they say, 'Oh my God, that's so painful. I'm so achy.' That's not traumatic. And yet when you bring that to the emotional world, it's suddenly very adverse."

The problem with applying the no-pain-no-gain philosophy to our emotional lives is that it places a heavier burden on some than others. The strength training metaphor bothers Michael Ungar: "Chronic exposure to a stressor like racism, misogyny, being constantly stigmatized or excluded, ableism – all of those factors do wear us down; they make us more

susceptible to feelings that will be very overwhelming." It's hard for some people to persevere when it feels like everyone around them is telling them they can't.

Clinical psychologist Tyffani Monford Dent calls this the "resilience trap," quite prevalent among African-American women. They have long been praised for their toughness and resilience, but that doesn't solve structural problems. According to Dent, young people aren't rejecting the concept of inner strength; they're rejecting the demand that they navigate systemic injustice with just individual grit. When they talk about harm and trauma, they aren't being weak, they're saying, *Yes, I'm vulnerable, and that's human*. They're being more "transparent about what they need to feel comfortable, to feel safe, to feel valued in this world," says Dent. "Is that a bad thing?"

There's a distinction between buffering oneself from trauma-triggering events and going through life avoiding challenging and upsetting situations, says Filipovic. "If we want to replace our culture of trauma with a culture of resilience, we'll have to relearn how to support one another – something we've lost as our society has moved toward viewing 'wellness' as an individual pursuit, a state of mind accessed via self-work. Retreating inward, and tying our identities to all of the ways in which we've been hurt, may actually make our inner worlds harder places to inhabit."

"To help people build resilience," Filipovic concludes, "we need to provide material aid to meet basic needs. We need to repair broken community ties so fewer among us feel like they're struggling alone. And we need to encourage the cultivation of a sense of purpose beyond the self. We also know what stands in the way of resilience: avoiding difficult ideas and imperfect people, catastrophizing, isolating ourselves inside our own heads."

"The Resilience Gap" by Jill Filipovic in *The Atlantic*, September 2023 (Vol. 332, #2, pp. 9-12)

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4. College Application Essays Shift Their Focus

In this *New York Times* article, Anemona Hartocollis and Colbi Edmonds say that although the U.S. Supreme Court has banned race-based affirmative action in college admissions, it left the door open for evidence of an applicant's unique life experience. As a result, what colleges ask for in application essays is changing. Previously, applicants were asked about books read, summer jobs, and volunteering; now they're encouraged to write about their identity. Some examples:

- Johns Hopkins University – "Tell us about an aspect of your identity or a life experience that has shaped you."
- Duke University – "Feel free to tell us any ways in which you're different and how that has affected you."
- Dartmouth College – "Let your life speak. Describe the environment in which you were raised and the impact it has had."
- Barnard College – "Tell us about when, where, or with whom you feel your most authentic, powerful self."

- Harvard University – "How will the life experiences that shape who you are today enable you to contribute to Harvard?"
- University of Virginia – The essay invites applicants to write about their connection to the university as children of graduates or "descendants of ancestors who labored at the university, as well as those with other relationships."
- The Common App – Among the seven essay choices are items asking about identity, obstacles overcome, and choices made by different student populations.

Edward Blum, the activist who brought the successful suit against affirmative action to the Supreme Court on behalf of Students for Fair Admissions, said the group would be on the lookout for essay topics that are "nothing more than a back-channel subterfuge for divulging a student's race or ethnicity." Colleges are treading carefully as they reword essay prompts. Explaining what is allowed in its application, Johns Hopkins University said applicants can mention their race but the information "will be considered by the university based solely on how it has affected your life and your experiences as an individual."

"Colleges Want Applicants to Open Up in Essays After Affirmative Action Ban" by Anemona Hartocollis and Colbi Edmonds in *The New York Times*, August 15, 2023

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5. Trade-Offs in Elementary and Secondary School Start Times

In this article in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Kevin Bastian and Sarah Fuller (University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill) report on two studies they conducted on the impact of morning start times on elementary students' sleep, engagement, and academic achievement. One study was of public noncharter schools across North Carolina, the other looked at data from an urban district that shifted to earlier elementary start times to accommodate later start times for secondary schools.

Bastian and Fuller note solid research on the benefits of later start times for secondary schools. Here's what they found for elementary students with earlier school start times:

- Fifth graders reported getting less sleep than their counterparts in later-starting schools.
- There was a slight increase in absences when elementary schools shifted to earlier start times, more pronounced with low-SES students and those in rural communities.
- On average, the shift had little impact on academic achievement in most schools.
- However, math test scores were significantly higher in early-starting schools, especially for disadvantaged students, students of color, and students in rural communities.
- Reading test scores showed little change with earlier start times, but there were modest increases for students of color, economically disadvantaged students, and those in rural communities.

"Overall," conclude Bastian and Fuller, "our study does not identify when elementary schools should start. However, if a school level needs to start earlier, our study, combined with other sleep, health, and education research, suggests that it may be advisable for elementary schools to start earlier to accommodate later secondary school start times."

"Early Birds in Elementary School? School Start Times and Outcomes for Younger Students" by Kevin Bastian and Sarah Fuller in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, September 2023 (Vol. 45, #3, pp. 399-421); the authors can be reached at kbastian@email.unc.edu and Sarah.fuller@unc.edu.

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6. Are Excused and Unexcused Student Absences Equally Informative?

In this article in *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, Cassandra Henderson and John Fantuzzo (University of Pennsylvania) say that when using data on chronic student absenteeism – an important early indicator of problems – many educators assume that excused and unexcused absences are equally important. This is based on the belief that the less time students spend in school, the less likely they are to be successful.

But in a study of K-3 attendance data in the Philadelphia schools, Henderson and Fantuzzo found that only *unexcused* absences signal that a student is at risk, "whereas excused absences provide no diagnostic accuracy and actually dampen the ability of unexcused absences to determine students' achievement risk status when used in conjunction with them."

The authors give the example of two students, each with 20 days out of school. The first student's absences were due to a particularly bad illness. His parents were in touch with the teacher and the school office, provided doctor's notes, and tried to keep him up to date with the class's work. The second student was not in school due to illness, transportation problems, and his parents' work schedules, and the school didn't receive notification of the absences. Clearly the impact on these students' academic achievement and sense of efficacy was very different, even though they had the same number of absences.

Intervening with students who are chronically absent is a vital part of a school's strategy for rescuing students from failure, conclude Henderson and Fantuzzo, but educators need to zero in on the most important indicator – unexcused absences. Using data combining excused and unexcused absences will produce "undue numbers of false positives and false negatives in terms of educational risk status," they say, "which represents a threat to both the well-being of vulnerable students and the prudent allocation of scarce school resources."

"Challenging the Core Assumption of Chronic Absenteeism: Are Excused and Unexcused Absences Equally Useful in Determining Academic Risk Status?" by Cassandra Henderson and John Fantuzzo in *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, July-September 2023 (Vol. 28, #3, pp. 259-293); the authors can be reached at chende@upenn.edu and johnf@upenn.edu.

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7. Will ChatGPT Make It Unnecessary to Teach Coding?

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Adam Tyner says there's widespread fear that large language bots will make human coders obsolete. Does this mean that schools should eliminate coding from the curriculum? Tyner interviewed experts across several fields and got a

reassuring message: "Coding jobs appear to be much less immediately threatened than many others… [In fact] these skills will only become more valuable in the future." Here's why:

• A computer's ability to perform a function doesn't mean students shouldn't learn it. Math is an obvious example: students still need to learn how and why basic operations work. Poetry is another: "Just because GPT-4 can write a sonnet," says Tyner, "does not mean we are going to stop having students practice creative writing."

• Ever since computers were invented, there have been ways for humans to interact with them, some code-based and some more user-friendly. "Coding is, in fact, nothing more than one method of giving a computer a customizable and precise set of instructions," says Tyner. Coders learn how to interact with computers in ways that are clear, functional, specific, and replicable – an intrinsically valuable and transferable set of thinking skills.

• Even when AI bots can write code, we'll still need the ability to be explicit about the steps, making them transparent, reviewable, and replicable. Someone needs to understand the underlying code, fix problems, and see how it can be improved.

• Being able to code allows people to "interact with computers in their own highly analytic language," says Tyner. "As computers grow in importance due to AI, humans will presumably need to interact with them even more, and sometimes that will include using code."

• The code written by AI bots often has errors, and this will continue to be true even as large language models improve. "If you cannot see inside the black box," says Tyner, "you will not be able to guide or correct the chatbots' work."

Tyner concludes with reassurance – and a suggestion: "Rather than scale back coding requirements, reformers should be thinking about how to fine-tune them, perhaps in tandem with math education, which itself is due for some reform. Teaching coding and math together – which is how actual mathematicians do their jobs – would be one reform that could improve student outcomes while streamlining some requirements."

"Why AI Hasn't Made Coding Skills Obsolete" by Adam Tyner in *Education Gadfly*, August 17, 2023

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8. The Predictive Validity of a Commercial Teacher Screening Tool

In this article in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Olivia Chi (Boston University) and Matthew Lenard (Harvard University) note research findings on substantial variations in teachers' impact on students' long-range outcomes – which points to the importance of hiring and retaining effective teachers. However, say Chi and Lenard, schools' screening, interviewing, and hiring process is sometimes rushed and "information-poor." That's why many school districts are turning to commercial screening tools that use online questions to generate "big data" which, the companies claim, can identify the most-effective teachers from a pool of applicants.

Chi and Lenard report on their study of one example of such products – TeacherFit from Frontline Education – in the Wake County Public School District in North Carolina. The

researchers' goal was to see how the teachers selected with TeacherFit performed once they were hired. Here's what they found:

- There was a small positive correlation between TeacherFit scores and principals' evaluations of those teachers.
- There was no significant relationship between TeacherFit scores and teachers' impact on their students' test scores.
- Teachers with higher TeacherFit scores were more likely to leave their hiring schools after the first year.

"These results," conclude Chi and Lenard, "suggest that the TeacherFit commercial screening tool is not necessarily a substitute for [high-quality] screening processes that are conducted by human resources officials… [which] appear to be stronger predictors of desirable teacher outcomes, and investing in these screening systems may have higher payoffs than investing in commercial screening tools that may be cheaper and easier to implement."

"Can a Commercial Screening Tool Help Select Better Teachers?" by Olivia Chi and Matthew Lenard in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, September 2023 (Vol. 45, #3, pp. 530-539); Chi can be reached at ochi@bu.edu. For a curated collection of Memo summaries about interviewing and hiring, see here.

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 48 years' experience 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 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 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTMI version as well.

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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
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 Ed (formerly Ed. Magazine)
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
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
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
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education