Marshall Memo 1015

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 11, 2023

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"What democracy most needs now is an attentive citizenry – human beings capable of looking up from their screens, together."

Graham Burnett, Alyssa Loh, and Peter Schmidt (see item #2)

"During a time of immense technological change, war, and political division, nothing is more important than having the intellectual confidence to challenge what you see, hear, and read with thoughtful questions… Too often, we think that skills solve problems, but, in fact, problem-solving starts by asking the right question first."

Nao Matsukata in a letter to *The New York Times*, December 7, 2023

"Words are cheap indeed, but neither history nor humanity has contrived a better means of coming together to address injustice or to explore the meaning of truth (mine, yours, ours). What's good? What's right? What do you think? Talk to me."

John Bowe (see item #1)

"By the time they get to middle school, certainly by early high school, kids are already word wizards in their own way. They are making new languages, coining new terms, inventing lyrics on the spot. Word study is a way of leveraging that mastery and curiosity and bridging it to a more-academic register."

Zaretta Hammond in "Teaching Word Consciousness," an interview with Anthony Rebora in *Educational Leadership*, Dec. 2023/Jan. 2024 (Vol. 81, #4, pp. 14-18)

"Teaching vocabulary in the abstract doesn't work; new words won't stick unless encountered repeatedly in meaningful contexts. Students won't fully understand a word like *medieval*

unless they're also acquiring knowledge about history."

Natalie Wexler in "Developing Knowledgeable Readers" in *Educational Leadership*, December 2023/January 2024 (Vol. 81, #4, pp. 20-26)

"Dozens of studies suggest that happiness in childhood, and then later in adolescence, is driven by internal feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness – and independent play, purposeful work, and important roles in classrooms and families are vital, early forms of practice."

Youki Terada and Stephen Merrill (see item #4)

"Teaching is fluid and complex and spools out in real time; it resists every effort to reduce it to a single strategy or program that works for all kids, in all contexts."

Youki Terada and Stephen Merrill (*ibid*.)

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1. Giving Students an Operating System for Their Adult Lives

In this *New York Times* article, author/teacher John Bowe says that in our K-12 schools, students spend most of their time "learning to solve problems on paper, then graduate into a world of real-life speech, where professional and personal success often depends on making decisions in groups of people with diverse viewpoints." The solution, says Bowe, is explicitly teaching students to speak publicly with sensitivity to their listeners – what the ancient Greeks called the art of rhetoric.

Studies show that the average American speaks between 10,000 and 20,000 words a day. Starting in middle school, says Bowe, teachers should systematically develop students' public speaking skills. This can be done as a stand-alone course or woven into content classes – for example, students delivering one oral social studies report each semester. Another resource: the Toastmasters Youth Leadership Program; its curriculum includes eight 1-to-2-hour sessions. "Few subjects are more straightforward to teach," says Bowe; "it's the soccer of academic subjects… a technical, learnable skill."

The key is students putting themselves in the shoes of their audience and building the skills of empathy and persuasion: analyzing the audience, organizing ideas, honing delivery, and observing and critiquing classmates' presentations. Researchers have found that this kind of practice has a positive impact on students' mental health. One study at George Mason University showed a reduction in students' loneliness and improvements in their sense of belonging and well-being.

There's also an equity dimension, says Bowe: "Speech proficiency harnesses the energy of neurodiverse, non-readerly, non-writerly kids, conferring them with the power to compete against their more traditionally advantaged peers." Britain's Labour party leader Keir Starmer believes that teaching these skills can smash his country's "class ceiling."

"Words are cheap indeed," Bowe concludes, "but neither history nor humanity has contrived a better means of coming together to address injustice or to explore the meaning of truth (mine, yours, ours). What's good? What's right? What do you think? Talk to me."

"Learn to Disagree and Argue Politely with Others" by John Bowe in *The New York Times*, December 6, 2023

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2. How Can We Capture Students' Attention in a Tech-Saturated World?

In this *New York Times* article, Graham Burnett, Alyssa Loh, and Peter Schmidt (Friends of Attention) say the age-old problem of students *not paying attention* has gotten much worse. "High-school and college teachers," they say, "overwhelmingly report that students' capacity for sustained or deep attention has sharply decreased, significantly impeding the forms of study – reading, looking at art, round-table discussions – once deemed central to the liberal arts."

A lot of this, say Burnett, Loh, and Schmidt, comes from cellphones and social media, "whose extractive profit models amount to the systematic fracking of human beings: pumping vast quantities of high-pressure media content into our faces to force up a spume of the vaporous and intimate stuff called attention, which now trades on the open market. Increasingly powerful systems seek to ensure that our attention is never truly ours."

It's time to wage war on these insidious forces in classrooms, say the authors: "We must flip the script on teachers' perennial complaint. Instead of fretting that students' flagging attention doesn't serve education, we must make attention itself the *thing being taught*… What democracy most needs now is an attentive citizenry – human beings capable of looking up from their screens, together."

A number of grassroots projects have sprung up to promote this cause, including the Center for Humane Technology, the Slow Reading Club, and the Strother School of Radical Attention. A common theme is to help people get beyond their blinkered, personalized digital world and engage with others in a shared world.

Here's one lesson plan: students go outside (with their cellphones turned off) and jot notes on everything they see, then back in the classroom share what they wrote. "The results are very close to miraculous," say Burnett, Loh, and Schmidt: "A common ground is rediscovered in the weave of collective attention. What I saw, you heard; the breeze that you felt passed my corner as well. A joint song of place unfolds, and with it a giddy, collective sense that the world is ours. The first-person plural becomes real, and the dynamics of attention are revealed as the choreography of our individual beings in shared time and space… In no time it becomes clear that attention – giving it and getting it – constitutes social life."

"Fight the Powerful Forces Stealing Our Attention" by Graham Burnett, Alyssa Loh, and Peter Schmidt in *The New York Times*, November 27, 2023

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3. Helping Young Adolescents Stay Safe When They're Online

In this *School Library Journal* article, Louisiana librarian Amanda Jones (2021 School Librarian of the Year) describes how she raised students' consciousness about their online activity (social media, YouTube, and gaming systems with Internet connectivity). Although almost all of her middle-school students are under 13, most have social media accounts, some without parental permission, some cleverly working around parental controls. Students confide that their parents don't know about a lot of the inappropriate and upsetting comments and images they're seeing online.

Jones started the lesson by displaying two prompts:

- *Share something inappropriate you've seen online.*
- *What are several steps you can take to protect yourself online?*

She asked students to reflect for a moment and then write their responses on sticky notes (without their names). Students put their sticky notes on large posters at the front of the library, and Jones read aloud *Nerdy Birdy Tweets*, a book by Aaron Reynolds about friendship and oversharing online.

She then asked students if using Instagram and Snapchat was dangerous for people their age. Everyone said yes. Students then looked at their sticky notes. Responses to the first prompt included fat shaming, racist comments, kids and adults ganging up on one student and harassing them over and over, an adult asking for their address, people sending pictures that were "bad," and KYS (kids explained to Jones that this means Kill Yourself). In each of the 27 classes at Jones's school, some students said they'd received this last message.

In response to the second prompt, students showed that, at least collectively, they knew what to do: *Tell an adult. Take a break from social media. Block and mute the person. Don't give out personal information. Never post your picture*. "Amazing answers," says Jones. "But when pressed about whether they always follow their own advice, unsurprisingly, students admitted they do not. Most confessed to giving out personal information, posting pictures, and engaging with people who posted cruel or inappropriate comments instead of muting and blocking." Why? The desire to save face and seem cool, and perhaps the fear of having their devices taken away by parents.

The conversations that followed were "extended, deep, and earnest," says Jones. "It was almost as if they had been waiting for an adult to ask them these questions. The discussion was honest and difficult – and eye-opening for me and their other teachers. The trauma these kids can face while simply playing a game online or chatting with friends on social media did not escape me. I wonder how this generation will be as adults navigating the Internet. Will some become more empathetic after having faced such toxic behaviors at such a young age, or will they continue the pattern as they grow older?"

The lesson closed with students writing down their biggest takeaways, and Jones posted them outside the library as an ongoing reminder about responsible digital citizenship.

"The Dangers in Their Hands" by Amanda Jones in *School Library Journal*, December 2023 (Vol. 69, #12, pp. 12-13)

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4. Key Research Insights from 2023

In this *Edutopia* article, Youki Terada and Stephen Merrill list what they consider the ten most important K-12 research findings of the year:

• *Artificial intelligence* – Tools like ChatGPT can save teachers huge amounts of time by generating lesson and unit plans, assessments, clear explanations of concepts for students at different grade levels, and e-mails to parents. AI output isn't error-free – it sometimes makes stuff up – but used thoughtfully, it's a boon to frontline educators.

• *Assessments* – Frequent, low-stakes, engaging tests and quizzes are very helpful to student learning. "When properly designed and stripped of dread," say Terada and Merrill, they can dramatically improve long-term memory.

• *Teacher tone* – Students are quick to pick up on anxiety, anger, or panic in a teacher's voice, one study found, leading them to clam up or act out. Teacher directions – *I'm waiting for people to quiet down. It's time to tidy up all of your belongings* – given in a warm and supportive tone, versus a strident and controlling tone, produce very different reactions.

• *Brain synchronicity* – A 2023 study confirmed previous research on brain waves mirroring among students and between students and teachers during effective instruction. "Together," say Terada and Merrill, "these studies underscore the importance of scholarly expertise and direct instruction, but also hint at the downstream power of peer-to-peer and social learning."

• *Math picture books* – Illustrated books like *Are We There Yet, Daddy?* and *Sir Cumference and the Dragon of Pi* not only improve student engagement with math but also strengthen their conceptual understanding. "Importantly," say Terada and Merrill, "math picture books weren't a substitute for procedural fluency or mathematical practice." Books are best used to pique students' interest and to complement direct instruction.

• *Student writing* – Lots of detailed feedback on students' essays "can swallow teacher weekends whole," say Terada and Merrill, "and there's no guarantee students know how to use feedback productively." Significantly more effective, say the authors of a high-school study, is having students use rubrics and mentor texts to do much of the revising themselves.

• *Teen mental health* – A 2023 study theorized that the primary cause of the current surge of anxiety, depression, and drug abuse is not cellphones and social media but "a decline over decades in opportunities for children and teens to play, roam, and engage in other activities independent of direct oversight and control by adults" – including walking or biking to school alone, some risk-taking, and being engaged in community life in meaningful chores and jobs. "Dozens of studies," say Terada and Merrill, "suggest that happiness in childhood, and then later in adolescence, is driven by internal feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness – and independent play, purposeful work, and important roles in classrooms and families are vital, early forms of practice."

• *Direct instruction versus inquiry learning* – Pitting these two approaches against each other is wrong, according to the latest research. Students can be actively engaged – if all-class instruction includes note-taking, discussion, and quick checks for understanding. And inquiry-

based learning, if structured properly, can engage students in deep learning, elaboration, and metacognition. It's both/and, not either/or, say Terada and Merrill: "Teaching is fluid and complex and spools out in real time; it resists every effort to reduce it to a single strategy or program that works for all kids, in all contexts."

• *Social-emotional learning* – A comprehensive meta-analysis of 424 studies found that well-executed SEL programs that include mindfulness, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and classroom management have broad impact, boosting academic achievement, school climate, and civic behaviors. While there's been pushback from some parents when programs are labeled SEL, studies show widespread support when the actual components are described.

• *Reading comprehension* – Two new studies build on earlier work showing the critical role of social studies, science, and literature knowledge in building students' reading proficiency. But the pendulum shouldn't swing too far away from reading skills, caution Terada and Merrill. There are two separate but complementary cognitive processes involved in proficient reading – skill-building and knowledge accumulation – and students need both.

"The 10 Most Significant Education Studies of 2023" by Youki Terada and Stephen Merrill in *Edutopia*, December 7. 2023

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5. Does School Choice Improve the Quality of Education?

The big idea behind school choice, say Ellen Greaves (European University Institute), Deborah Wilson (University of Bath), and Agnes Nairn (University of Bristol) in this article in *Review of Educational Research*, is to spur competition among schools, spread effective practices, and improve teaching and learning. "The effects of school choice on educational outcomes," say the researchers, "are, however, largely dependent on how schools respond to the incentives created."

In their review of studies of public and private K-12 schools in 16 countries, the researchers found that a major result of parental choice was in how schools marketed themselves. Looking at the brochures, online material, face-to-face events, and professional marketing consultants used to target families – and the overall impact of the choice process on schools – Greaves, Wilson, and Nairn came to these conclusions:

- Marketing was most active in areas where schools competed for students.
- Families did not always receive objective and accurate information about schools.
- Marketing was often indirectly aimed at attracting higher-achieving students.
- That can result in widening gaps in the composition of school populations.
- The choice process seldom resulted in improvements in classroom practices.

In fact, say the authors, "Schools generally employ marketing tools as an alternative to genuine pedagogical change, and this effect is heightened in response to competition. Marketing activity is being used to segment the market and attract certain pupil types, and schools are increasingly sophisticated in their segmentation activities. This links to the disturbing evidence of misleading and/or deceptive marketing practices by schools, which include nonverifiable

claims about the education package offered as well as misleading demographic messages regarding the student population."

What are the policy implications of this study? "If marketing as currently practiced does not result in curricular enhancement but instead incentivizes social division," say Greaves, Wilson, and Nairn, "then different incentives must be developed that redress the balance, through alternative – independent, trusted – sources of information and/or regulation of schools' own marketing and information provision."

"Marketing and School Choice: A Systematic Literature Review" by Ellen Greaves, Deborah Wilson, and Agnes Nairn in *Review of Educational Research*, December 2023 (Vol. 93, #6, pp. 825-861); the authors can be reached at ellen.greaves@eui.eu, ecsdw@bath.ac.uk, and agnes.nairn@bristol.ac.uk.

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6. Second Graders Create Culturally Relevant Decodable Readers

"There is a population of readers experiencing a gap between their identities and phonics instruction," says Amber Lawson (Michigan State University) in this article in *Reading Research Quarterly*. The problem is most pronounced, she believes, in the decodable texts in basal reading programs, which are designed to reinforce and give students practice on the letter-sound relationships taught in explicit phonics lessons.

Lawson cites research on the utility of decodable texts for kindergarten, first, and second grade students who know their letters and some words. For students at this stage, decodable texts connect isolated phonics lessons with decoding words as they read texts independently, improving students' confidence with reading.

But other research has raised concerns about the use of decodable texts. Some sentences don't make sense (*The pan is a hat*), "low-utility" words occur frequently, and non-standard sentence structures are unlike typical oral speech patterns. "When children approach reading tasks," says Lawson, "they approach the tasks with the expectation that what they will read will have meaning. Instead, children may begin to believe the purpose of reading is to be able to read words correctly orally instead of reading to comprehend."

Standard decodable texts are especially confusing and unhelpful for children of color, including English learners, says Lawson, "who may not have the vocabulary knowledge and knowledge of the dominant English dialect… to apply to these kinds of words and sentences, hindering their meaning making of the texts." Because of this, such texts "can undermine their fluency development and, ultimately, their reading comprehension." For all children, but especially for children of color, Lawson believes it's better to have students practice with high-quality texts that include some element of decodability, use more-natural language, and are fun to read.

But there's still something missing, says Lawson. Phonics lessons using improved decodable texts don't necessarily build upon children's cultural and linguistic identities. African-American families approach literacy "using dialogue, emphasizing oral storytelling, which is rarely acknowledged as a written composition in schools." Black children's literacy

practices are "not valued in the classroom, preventing them from experiencing their culture and race in literacy instruction."

Lawson attempted to bridge this divide by incorporating language experience into primary-grade reading instruction, positioning "children actively as creators and producers of knowledge." She describes her four-week intervention with second graders of color in a high-poverty school in the Midwest using the EL literacy curriculum. She had students in the intervention group collaboratively create their own decodable texts, connecting spoken and written language. This meant that cultural relevance and reading skill-building were included right from the start.

Lawson taught the intervention group (eliciting students' "enthusiastic participation in providing the content") and the control group (business as usual) with students' regular teachers. Afterward she analyzed students' pre/post performance on decoding skills and interviewed students. The results: students in both groups made progress, but the intervention group did twice as well, and their enthusiasm with the process and content was clear, as was their motivation to continue learning – "Can we write a story on wasps and bees next?"

The key was students' collaborative co-authorship and including authentic material from their own lived experience. "By co-authoring student-generated decodable readers," says Lawson, "reading is presented as an extension of speaking, which many children, regardless of race and ethnic background, enter the classroom capable of doing in linguistically diverse ways." For children of color, often bored and alienated by standard curriculum materials, this approach is especially powerful.

Lawson loves this quote from Harker (1981), which captures the spirit of her intervention:

What I can say, I can write.
What I can write, I can read.
I can read what I write and what other people can write for me to read.

"'We Can Draw and Think About It Ourselves': Putting Culture and Race in Phonics Reading Research" by Amber Lawson in *Reading Research Quarterly*, November 29, 2023 (pp. 1-83); Lawson can be reached at lawsonam@msu.edu.

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7. Literacy Skills in Different Content Areas

(Originally titled "Teaching Literacy Skills for Real Life")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, literacy expert ReLeah Cossett Lent (University of Central Florida) describes how she elicits from groups of teachers the key literacy skills of their subject. From scores of workshops around the world, she's developed a detailed set of literacy skills in science, history, math, ELA, visual arts, music, physical education and health and world language. Here's her current synthesis for history (quoted verbatim; click the link below for other subjects):

• When historians read, they:

- Interpret primary and secondary sources.

- Identify bias.
- Think sequentially.
- Compare and contrast events, accounts, maps, infographics, documents, photos, and visuals.
- Determine meanings of words within historical contexts.
- Evaluate credibility of sources.
- Seek a wide variety of texts to gain deeper understandings.

• When historians write, they:

- Create timelines with accompanying narratives.
- Synthesize, compare, and contrast information and evidence from multiple sources.
- Organize ideas coherently.
- Grapple with multiple ideas and large quantities of information.
- Make historical claims supported by evidence.
- Corroborate accounts.
- Utilize argumentative principles.

• When historians think, they:

- Create narratives.
- Seek credible primary and secondary sources.
- Compare, contrast, and ponder causes and effects.
- Consider big ideas or inquiries across long periods of time.
- Recognize bias.
- Use the past as a mirror to the present.
- Question content and purpose.
- Wonder what has been left out and seek to discover what's missing.

"Teaching Literacy Skills for Real Life" by ReLeah Cossett Lent in *Educational Leadership*, December 2023/January 2024 (Vol. 81, #4, pp. 42-46); Lent can be reached at releahclent@gmail.com.

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8. Factors in Effective Substitute Teaching

In this *Review of Educational Research* article, Andrea Reupert (Monash University) and six colleagues report on their review of the literature on substitute teachers around the world. In U.S. schools, say the authors, the average teacher is absent 11 days a year, which means that the average student is with substitute teachers for a full school year between kindergarten and high-school graduation – eight percent of their time in school. Clearly, say Reupert et al., substitutes "are an essential part of the teaching workforce."

Studies consistently show the negative impact of teacher absences on student learning – but that is mitigated by the quality of instruction provided when regular teachers are out for illness, training, family emergencies, and other reasons. Reupert et al. found a number of key variables contributing to effective substitute teaching:

- The experience and qualifications of substitutes;

- The amount of time they are in a school [ideally as a full-time "building sub"];
- The way they are "supported, feel connected, and are respected by students, staff, and administrators" – not as "second class citizens" or "babysitters";
- Established classroom and building-wide behavior norms and routines;
- Curriculum materials and lesson plans to continue regular instruction;
- The training, support, and onboarding they receive, ideally including access to the school's PD;
- Decent pay and benefits.

"An Exploration of the Experiences of Substitute Teachers: A Systematic Review" by Andrea Reupert, Anna Sullivan, Neil Tippett, Simone White, Stuart Woodcock, Lingling Chen, and Michele Simons in *Review of Educational Research*, December 2023 (Vol. 93, #6, pp. 901-941); Reupert can be reached at andrea.reupert@monash.edu.

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9. Recommended Children's Books on Autism

In this *Literacy Today* feature, South Carolina literacy specialist Marie Havran (Furman University) suggests the following books on autism (lists of books on dyslexia and Tourette syndrome will be included in future Memos; books on ADHD were in last week's issue):

Primary grades:

- *A Friend for Henry* by Jenn Bailey, illustrated by Mika Song
- *All My Stripes: A Story for Children with Autism* by Shaina Rudolph and Danielle Royer, illustrated by Jennifer Zivoin
- *Masterpiece* by Alexandra Hoffman, illustrated by Beatriz Mello
- *My Brother Charlie* by Holly Robinson Peete, illustrated by Shane Evans
- *Noah Chases the Wind* by Michelle Worthington, illustrated by Joseph Cowman
- *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures: The Story of Dr. Temple Grandin* by Julia Finley Mosca, illustrated by Daniel Rieley

Middle grades:

- *A Boy Called Bat* by Elana Arnold, illustrated by Charles Santoso
- *A Kind of Spark* by Elle McNicoll
- *Anything But Typical* by Nora Raleigh Baskin
- *How to Look for a Lost Dog* by Ann Martin
- *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erksine
- *Rules* by Cynthia Lord

"Children's and YA Literature: Centering Neurodiversity" by Marie Havran in *Literacy Today*, October/November/December 2023; Havran can be reached at marie.havran@furman.edu.

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10. Short Items:

a. Lots More Intriguing Math Problems – Stella's Stunners is a well-organized, free collection of more than 700 open-ended, non-routine, brain-challenging math questions for middle- and high-school students, collected by former Oberlin, Ohio mathematics teacher

Rudd Crawford. These would be perfect for the Peter Liljedahl "Thinking Classroom" structure, with students standing up in groups of three working on challenging problems on erasable whiteboards (see Memos 976, 992, and 1014 for more on this approach).

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b. A News Literacy Website – Checkology is a free online learning platform from the News Literacy Project to help students spot misinformation and conspiracy information online.

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If you have feedback or suggestions, 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 other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 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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Core list of publications covered

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