Marshall Memo 311

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 23, 2009

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"When it comes to turning around a school, the principal is akin to a professional stunt driver who must whip a car around 180 degrees in traffic, achieving a drastic change in direction without causing an accident or flipping the car."

Michael Salmonowicz (see item #3)

"Having your parents involved in a field trip is not wholly consistent with what an adolescent wants."

Nancy Hill (see item #4)

"Where high-school students start off their coursework is the best predictor of where they finish their coursework in high school, and where they finish their coursework is the best predictor for whether they go to college and whether they stay in college."

Robert Crosnoe (see item #4)

"To be adorable and energetic would be great, but to feel that perpetual trepidation that I'll never find a job, a partner, a place in the world, or an apartment that I don't have to share with six other people? No deal. To feel as if the whole world is open to me would be lovely, but to live with the anxiety that I'll end up on the outskirts or end up an outcast? No thanks. To wonder whether I'll ever do work meaningful to me, let alone anyone else? Not a chance. To not know what professions to profess, or which lovers to love – to not even know whether you can trust your internal compass to lead you home, or indicate your own, personal true north? Not even for spell check. By the time you're in your 50s or 60s, you might still wrestle with these demons, but at least they're familiar."

Gina Barreca, University of Connecticut English professor, on whether she envies college kids; in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nov. 20, 2009 (Vol. LVI, #13, p. B2)

1. Why Math Teaching Lags in the U.S. – and What We Can Do About It

In this important *Kappan* article, James Stigler and James Hiebert reprise and update their 1999 book, *The Teaching Gap* (a revised edition was just released by Free Press), adding new information from a number of other countries. The original book compared 8th-grade math teaching in Japan, Germany, and the U.S. Stigler and Hiebert confirm their earlier finding that teaching is a "cultural" activity – that is, teaching is shaped by the way teachers were taught as children, which tends to be similar within each country (and resistant to change), but quite different between countries.

In the 1999 edition of their book, the authors found that Japanese schools were significantly more successful than German and American schools. They left unanswered whether Japan had cornered the market on successful teaching practices and we should copy them to improve American schools. In the last ten years, Stigler and Hiebert have examined videotapes of classrooms in Australia, the Czech Republic, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, and Switzerland and compared them with Japanese and U.S. classrooms.

What did they find? That teachers in different high-achieving countries use a *variety* of methods. "In other words," say Stigler and Hiebert, "it appears that there is not one way to teach effectively, but many… No single approach has a monopoly on students' learning… Furthermore, many of the superficial features we might have expected to differentiate teaching in high-achieving countries from teaching in the United States varied as much among the high achievers as they did between those countries and the United States." Certain methods that were regarded as silver bullets by an earlier generation of researchers – students working in groups, for example – were not consistently associated with high achievement.

So are teaching methods fungible? Only on the surface. When Stigler and Hiebert looked more closely at the videotapes, they found a common denominator for success: "Although teachers in the high-achieving countries employed a variety of strategies and routines, in every case these strategies were used to achieve a common learning experience for students. Czech teachers might lecture, and Dutch teachers might not, but their varied approaches all accomplished the *engagement of students in active struggle with core mathematics concepts and procedures*. It was this feature of teaching that we found common to the high achievers and missing in the United States." The difference was not in the kinds of problems teachers presented to students but how teachers worked with students on the problems and used the problems to teach concepts.

Specifically, American teachers took challenging math problems and made them easier by supplying key information, transforming them into not-very-challenging drills. Given the problem, *Find a pattern for the sum of the interior angles of a polygon*, rather than having

students use protractors to measure the sum of angles in various three-sided, four-sided, and five-sided polygons and then study the results, or having students divide the polygons into triangles and study how many triangles can be formed in polygons with different numbers of sides, most American teachers told students to find the sum of the angles by counting the number of sides, subtracting 2, and multiplying by 180. Rather than being asked to search for patterns and *think*, American students were allowed to practice an arithmetic procedure. The result, say Stigler and Hiebert, is that "students in the United States, compared with their peers in higher-achieving countries, ended up with very few opportunities to learn concepts." And this is reflected in the mediocre performance of U.S. students in international comparisons.

"In order to improve the teaching of math in the United States," they continue, "we need to engage students in exploring mathematical relationships and wrestling with key mathematical ideas." But how? Not by showing videos of "best practices," they say. "Given what we know about the cultural nature of teaching, this strategy is unlikely to work. However, given what we now know about the variety of teaching approaches that are related to high achievement, this strategy is no longer necessary." The key, say Stigler and Hiebert, is for teachers to "monitor what students are experiencing, thinking, and learning during a lesson and be able to constantly readjust their strategies in order to capitalize on every opportunity for students to learn."

But how are American teachers going to adopt these practices, given the dismal state of most professional development? The good news, say Stigler and Hiebert, is that some American educators are beginning to question the value of standard-issue PD and look for new ways for teachers to improve their craft. One of the most promising is *lesson study*, which involves teams of teachers collaboratively designing lessons, testing them out in several different classrooms, and studying what works and what doesn't. Lesson study kills five birds with one stone: teachers become more knowledgeable about the curriculum they are required to teach; learn more about how their students learn; hone their teaching skills by sharing insights with their colleagues; shift the focus from teachers to teaching; and get better student achievement results.

The bad news is that conventional PD is so entrenched in the culture of many schools that teachers pioneering lesson study run into resistance and the practice is not sweeping the nation. In addition, even when it is implemented, lesson study doesn't always fulfill its potential because American teachers see it through their own cultural lens, collaboratively planning a lesson without observing it in several classrooms, gathering information on its effectiveness, and revising the lesson. The whole culture of teacher learning must change, say Stigler and Hiebert, beginning with shifting the conversation in schools to results. "Effective teacher learning must be built into teachers' daily and weekly schedule," they say. "Schools must become the places where teachers, not just students, learn."

"Teaching the same old way is natural," they conclude. "… becoming an expert teacher will require consistent opportunities over long periods of time for teachers to study and improve their own teaching and the teaching of their colleagues… Teaching in new ways is far more complicated than many think. Teachers must have knowledge of the domain (for

example, mathematics) and of how students think about and learn the domain. They must also have skills at implementing a variety of different methods that have been validated and incorporated into a growing knowledge base for teaching. Finally, they must have the skills to assess what students know and where they are in a learning trajectory, as well as the judgment to decide which of the methods in their repertoire to deploy when."

"Closing the Teaching Gap" by James Stigler and James Hiebert in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2009 (Vol. 91, #3, p. 32-37), http://www.pdkintl.org

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2. Improving the Teaching of History at Indiana University

In this intriguing *Chronicle of Higher Education* article with K-12 implications, David Glenn reports that several years ago, history professors at Indiana University at Bloomington zeroed in on the fact that many of their students did poorly on essay exam questions, filling their blue books with disconnected strings of facts. "Students come into our classrooms believing that history is about stories full of names and dates," said IU professor Arlene Diaz. As she and her colleagues discussed these poor results, they realized that assembling and interpreting evidence was second nature to professors but they weren't modeling and teaching the skill in their classrooms. No wonder students' essays were terrible!

So the professors launched the History Learning Project and began to build every history course around assembling and interpreting evidence. They systematically modeled and taught the skill, divided large concepts into smaller, evidence-related steps, and crafted learning experiences that built the skills of interpretation, evidence, and argument. "To succeed on an essay exam requires a host of different operations," says David Pace, one of the IU professors. "When you break things down into pieces, it becomes much easier to assess where the students are succeeding and failing." This task analysis and scaffolding is hard work for students, says Pace, but in the end they are much better at putting all the skills together in essay assignments and final exams.

Professors now ask students to perform online assignments before each class in which they analyze historical evidence – for example, in a European history course, finding three passages that illustrate the differences between Thomas Mann's and Rosa Luxemburg's responses to World War I. During class, professors lecture less and pose challenging problems like this one: "Imagine that you're overhearing an argument in Berlin in 1926 between a 60-year-old conservative and his radical 25-year-old son. They're arguing about Otto Dix's portrait of Sylvia von Harden [a journalist depicted wearily smoking a cigarette at a café]. How does each of these people respond to the painting? I want you to list three historical experiences that might have shaped each of their reactions. You can assume that the son fought in the war. Cite specific things that you've read, and explain why they're relevant."

In addition, professors drill students on small tasks as often as possible. "One of the things that we talk about in the History Learning Project is the importance of repetition," says

Lauren Miller, a graduate teaching assistant. "We don't just want to teach skills once. Students do these exercises every single week."

The results of this approach have been encouraging; students are writing better essays – but not in every case. Diaz thought she was doing a good job modeling the skills in her Latin American history course, but in the final exam, many students didn't apply them. This year, she is making further changes in her teaching, including more in-class group exercises like the one above. "Arlene and other people in the program have really had a great willingness to admit failure," says Joan Middendorf of IU's Campus Instructional Consulting office. "They're willing to try new strategies if things don't seem to go well the first time."

The professors call this process "decoding the discipline" and it's not easy. "These projects can be very messy," says Middendorf, "but also extremely rewarding after you've made some breakthroughs." Here are three examples:

• Colonial Latin American history – The bottleneck: students were having trouble identifying relevant information from primary documents and relating it to course themes. The strategy: periodically giving students sets of documents (maps, letters, legal records) and asking them to extract information.

• Freshman seminar on 19th-century Parisian culture – The bottleneck: students were having trouble using pieces of evidence to support a historical argument. The strategy: in weekly online assignments, students had to answer questions like, "For this argument to be valid, what factual premises would need to be true?"

• Medieval heroes – The bottleneck: students didn't understand that primary sources (in this case, heroic tales) reveal things about the audiences for which they were created. The strategy: weekly assignments asking students about a source's likely original audience and how that audience might have responded to it.

Indiana University's History Learning Project is attracting attention around the world and professors in different disciplines are coming to IU for advice. It turns out that every discipline has bottleneck tasks that students have difficulty grasping. In biology, for example, students find it difficult to form an accurate mental image of molecules. IU's model of analyzing bottlenecks and developing instructional strategies to help students master them is proving useful across the board.

"A Teaching Experiment Shows Students How to Grasp Big Concepts" by David Glenn in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nov. 20, 2009 (Vol. LVI, #13, p. A1, A10), no e-link available

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3. How to Radically Improve a Low-Performing School

In this *Kappan* article, Michael Salmonowicz provides specific recommendations for turning around dysfunctional schools, based on researching this subject at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education from 2004-08 and teaching during the 2008-09 school year in a Chicago high school in the throes of a turnaround effort.

• *Guarantee adequate resources*. Before a turnaround effort begins, says Salmonowicz,

leaders should ask what resources will be needed and make sure they will be in place long enough to make a lasting difference. He recommends flooding the school with resources up front – personnel, technology, extra time for students and staff, etc. – and after real progress has been made two or three years down the road, strategically trimming a few of the extra resources, watching carefully to make sure the reductions aren't undercutting progress.

• *Make sure the principal knows what's involved*. "When it comes to turning around a school," says Salmonowicz, "the principal is akin to a professional stunt driver who must whip a car around 180 degrees in traffic, achieving a drastic change in direction without causing an accident or flipping the car." Turnaround leadership takes special training and/or careful observation of other successful turnaround efforts. It also requires clear agreement among school and district leaders on what is required and how success will be measured (Salmonowicz suggests a Balanced Scorecard).

• *Don't blow the opening moves*. "Failure to get the important things right in the opening weeks of the school year can hurt teacher and student morale and diminish trust in the administration, damaging the school's chances to improve," says Salmonowicz. It's essential to handle nuts-and-bolts items well (i.e., teaching duties, room keys, student schedules, and books and supplies in place for Day One), orchestrate a smooth opening, and make a compelling speech at the opening faculty meeting. "The fierce urgency of now" notwithstanding, it's also important for leaders to hold off on untested ideas until they have been pilot-tested. "Just remember that students and teachers in a low-performing school likely have been subjected to myriad failed reforms over the years," says Salmonowicz. "It is vital for them to see that this time will be different."

• *Give cynical teachers hope*. Doubters must be shown credible evidence that schools just like theirs can be turned around – by presenting research that shows effective teaching is more important than SES and family background (Sanders and Horn, 1998) and through descriptions of effective urban schools – for example, *It's Being Done* (2007), *How It's Being Done* (2009), and *Teachers' Guide to School Turnarounds* (2008).

• *Make literacy the centerpiece*. Low reading levels are at the heart of the problem in every dysfunctional school, which means that staffing, course scheduling, resource allocation, and professional development must focus on putting a successful literacy program in place.

• *Provide frequent, targeted professional development*. Teachers should meet at least weekly and PD must focus on no more than two or three areas – definitely literacy, perhaps discipline and differentiation, depending on diagnosed needs.

• *Don't jump the gun on scaling up*. Make sure the pilot model is working before trying to spread it to other schools, advises Salmonowicz.

"Meeting the Challenge of School Turnaround" by Michael Salmonowicz in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2009 (Vol. 91, #3, p. 19-24), http://www.pdkintl.org

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4. What Kind of Parent Involvement Is Best in Middle and High School?

In this *Education Week* article, Debra Viadero reports on some recent thinking about parent involvement at the secondary level. "Having your parents involved in a field trip is not wholly consistent with what an adolescent wants," says Nancy Hill, a Harvard education professor who recently co-edited a book on the subject, *Families, Schools, and the Adolescent* (Teachers College Press, 2009). "When you look at parent-adolescent relationships, you see kids pushing back on decisions they want to have control of, and it's much harder for parents to call schools and find out how kids are doing holistically, because they have so many teachers and their teachers see over 100 students a day."

Hill and her colleagues have found that a number of parent-involvement ideas that seem to work at the elementary level are less effective for secondary students – among them, helping with homework (very little impact on student achievement) and visiting the school, volunteering, and attending school events (moderate impact). What parent activities do make a difference for older students? According to Hill's research:

- Communicating expectations for achievement;
- Discussing learning strategies;
- Linking school content and the child's interests to outside activities;
- Working with the child to prepare for college;
- Fostering career aspirations and making plans for the future.

Researchers call these types of parent involvement "academic socialization" and recommend that schools maximize them.

However, these practices don't help all parents help their children. Hill has found that parents who didn't themselves go to college are less successful in raising their children's academic achievement, no matter how many parent-involvement activities they engage in. Schools need to guide these parents to make their efforts more effective, she says. "They should be saying, 'Here are the courses you need to take, and if your child's not ready for those courses, here is what you can do to get your child ready so the pathways lie open.'"

A chapter by Robert Crosnoe in Hill's book goes deeper on this point, addressing the slippage that often happens as students move from middle to high school – the disconnect when high-school freshmen are placed in courses that don't match with their previous preparation. This problem is most common for Latino youth. "Where high-school students start off their coursework is the best predictor of where they finish their coursework in high school," says Crosnoe, "and where they finish their coursework is the best predictor for whether they go to college and whether they stay in college."

"Researchers Explore Teens, Parents, Schools" by Debra Viadero in *Education Week*, Nov. 18, 2009 (Vol. 29, #12, p. 1, 14)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/11/18/12parent_ep.h29.html

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5. Five Skills Needed to Be an Effective Innovator

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, professors Jeffrey Dyer, Hal Gregersen, and Clayton Christensen report on their six-year study of the key characteristics of innovative people. The authors believe that about one-third of innovativeness is innate but two-thirds comes from developing the following "discovery" skills:

• *Questioning* – asking the right questions and questioning the unquestionable, constantly asking, *Why*, *Why not*, and *What if*? Innovators approach work in a hypothesis-testing frame of mind, playing the devil's advocate, holding two diametrically opposing views in their mind at the same time and seeking a new approach. Innovators also like to find new ways of working within real-world constraints.

• *Observing* – Innovators watch others with an anthropologist's and social scientist's eye – in Toyota's maxim, "going to the spot and seeing for yourself" – observing minute details of everyday activities and asking, "Why do they do that? That doesn't make sense."

• *Experimenting* – the sprit of constant experimentation, which produces a lot of failures but occasional flashes of insight. "I haven't failed," said Thomas Edison. "I've simply found 10,000 ways that do not work." Amazon's Jeff Bezos says, "I encourage our employees to go down blind alleys and experiment."

• *Networking* – "Devoting time and energy to finding and testing ideas through a network of diverse individuals gives innovators a radically different perspective," say Dyer, Gregersen, and Christensen. Innovators make it their business "to extend their own knowledge domains" and "visit other countries and meet people from other walks of life."

• *Associating* – the ability to link seemingly unrelated questions, problems, or ideas from different fields. The human brain does this all the time – for example, the word *theater* isn't just filed in a person's brain under *t*, but is linked from the person's past experience to *West End*, *intermission*, and *anxiety*, with fresh associations and connections formed over time. "Creativity is connecting things," says Apple honcho Steve Jobs, who, according to the authors, "is able to generate idea after idea because he has spent a lifetime exploring new and unrelated things – the art of calligraphy, meditation practices in an Indian ashram, the fine details of a Mercedes-Benz." The important thing, say the authors, is that "Associating is like a mental muscle that can grow stronger by using the other discovery skills. As innovators engage in those behaviors, they build their ability to generate ideas that can be recombined in new ways. The more frequently people in our study attempted to understand, categorize, and store new knowledge, the more easily their brains could naturally and consistently make, store, and recombine associations."

The authors sum up by asking you to imagine that you have an identical twin, separated at birth but with the same level and kind of intelligence and natural talents as yours. You and your twin are both given the same challenge: in one week, come up with a bold new idea for your workplace. You are confined to a room and must come up with the idea all alone. Your twin is able to talk to ten people, including an engineer, musician, stay-at-home father, and designer; visit three innovative workplaces to observe what they do; sample five new ideas in the field; run a prototype of the idea by five people for reactions; and ask "What if I tried this?"

and "Why do you do that?" at least ten times each day during these networking, observing, and experimenting activities.

Who do you think would come up with the best idea? Clearly, your twin would, proving that genetic endowment is less than half the battle. Leaders must use these five avenues to constantly develop the ability to come up with the best solutions to life's challenges and develop that ability in others.

"The Innovator's DNA: Five 'Discovery Skills' Separate True Innovators from the Rest of Us" by Jeffrey Dyer, Hal Gregersen, and Clayton Christensen in *Harvard Business Review*, December 2009 (Vol. 87, #12, p. 60-67), no e-link available; Dyer is at jdyer@byu.edu, Gregersen at hal.gregersen@insead.edu, and Christensen at cchristensen@hbs.edu.

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6. Crisis Management 101

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, professors Alice Tybout and Michelle Roehm draw on ten years of research to suggest just-right, just-in-time steps that leaders should take when there is a scandal or things go badly wrong. Although the study draws on corporate case studies, the advice might well apply to similar problems in a school or school district.

• *Assess the situation*. Put yourself in the shoes of a "customer," not management, and take a cold-eyed look at the situation. An incident is most likely to get traction and be damaging if it is surprising, vivid, emotional, and closely linked to the mission of your organization.

• *Acknowledge the problem*. Public statements should immediately acknowledge what happened, express concern for any parties harmed, and outline what the organization is doing to investigate and prevent further damage. Avoid drawing premature conclusions because they can make things worse.

• *Formulate a response*. The leadership team should take the time to think things through and evaluate a course of action based on how it will affect external relationships over the long run. If there are false accusations, rebut them forcefully. If there are true allegations, address them with an appropriate combination of explanation, apology, compensation, and punishment.

• *Implement the response*. The leadership team needs to decide which issues should be addressed, at what level of detail, who should deliver the response, and with what kind of tone. Be careful to align what is said and done with an outsider's perceptions of your organization and its mission.

"Let the Response Fit the Scandal – A Step-by-Step Guide to Tailoring Your Crisis Response" by Alice Tybout and Michelle Roehm in *Harvard Business Review*, December 2009 (Vol. 87, #12, p. 82-88), no e-link available; Tybout is at amtybout@kellogg.northwestern.edu and Roehm at michelle.roehm@mba.wfu.edu.

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7. Stereotype Threat in Action

In this *Education Week* article, Debra Viadero summarizes a new study in *Child Development* that found African-American and Latino children become aware of negative stereotypes about their racial or ethnic group in middle to late childhood and suffer negative consequences almost immediately. The study looked at more than 150 children aged 5-11 in a suburban Chicago school district and found that when children learned of racial or ethnic stereotypes about their group (including from their parents talking about racism in society), they performed poorly compared to white children on tests that teachers said measured intellectual ability. Students were also more likely to see discriminatory intent in interactions with other children.

"Stereotype Awareness" by Debra Viadero in *Education Week*, Nov. 18, 2009 (Vol. 29, #12, p. 5); the full study, "Developmental Antecedents and Social and Academic Consequences of Stereotype-Consciousness in Middle Childhood", is in the current issue of *Child Development*: http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/122683307/HTMLSTART?CRETRY=1&SRETRY=0

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8. Short Items:

a. Play scripts online – D.M. Bocaz-Larson offers a variety of drama scripts free at this website: http://www.freedrama.com.

Spotted in "Anna's Class: Experiences of a First-Year Teacher" by Dave Short in *Education Digest*, December 2009 (Vol. 75, #4, p. 28-31), http://www.eddigest.com.

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b. Life magazine photos online – Hundreds of news, celebrity, travel, animal, and sports photos from the pages of *Life* magazine are now available free at http://www.life.com. *Life* was a large-format news/photo magazine read by millions of Americans from the 1930s through its demise in 1972.

Spotted in "Look Back in Wonder" by Owen Edwards in *Edutopia*, December 2009/January 2010 (Vol. 5, #6, p. 18-19), http://www.edutopia.org/

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c. Engineering magazine online – *Engineering: Go for It!* or *eGFI* is an online magazine for middle- and high-school students created by the American Society of Engineering Education aimed at showcasing innovations in engineering – for example, algae-based fuel, a skyscraper with rotating floors, and artificial limbs. It's available at http://www.egfi-k12.org.

"Engineering Gets Cool" in *Principal Leadership*, November 2009 (Vol. 10, #3, p. 6)

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 37 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

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

Subscriptions:

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- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Changing Schools (McREL)
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine (online)
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal