

Marshall Memo 961

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 14, 2022

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Quotes of the Week

“The problem is not the problem. The problem is your attitude about the problem.”

Captain Jack Sparrow, quoted in “‘People Changed How They Thought About Life After Being Sideways’: Exploring Perspective in a Fifth-Grade Classroom” by Eric Groce, Robin Groce, Cacey Wells, Carly Mize, Kirbi Bell, and Jennie Weschler in *Social Studies for the Young Learner*, September/October 2022 (Vol. 35, #1, pp. 3-10)

“For many students, school librarians are the gatekeepers to the world of books and pleasure reading. Are your policies welcoming students in or shutting them out?”

Maura Madigan and Kim Sigle (see item #7)

“Even if you have experienced some version of academic trauma, you do not need to ‘haze it forward’ to your own students. You can choose to break the cycle.”

Leslie Berntsen (see item #1)

“Neither consistent classroom management nor challenging academic content need be in competition with expressions of kindness, caring, or joy.”

Jeff Vomund and Angela Miller (see item #3)

“Some students require a great deal of structure to succeed, while others would find that level of scaffolding to be suffocating. Not until teachers can see the world from their students’ eyes will they be able to craft lessons that balance autonomy and structure successfully for them. In the same vein, when does pushing a student to do their best become nagging them? It depends on the student, which is why effective teachers commit to getting to know each of them.”

Jeff Vomund and Angela Miller (*ibid.*)

1. What a Professor Learned from Her Own Struggles in College

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Leslie Berntsen (University of Southern California) says that every year, just before releasing the grades from her first psychology exam, she tells students this story. Taking introductory organic chemistry in college, she knew she hadn't done well on the first exam. As the professor handed back the papers, he announced the highest and lowest grades and the class average. Glancing at hers, Berntsen knew she was the lowest. "Even if other students didn't know he was talking about me," she says, "*I knew*, and that was more than enough."

The professor then said to the class that he couldn't believe how anyone could possibly do so poorly on the test. With a score that bad, did they even try? Did they come to class? Students laughed. "But there I sat," says Berntsen, "in the aisle seat that I had dutifully occupied twice a week, my failing exam face down on my desk."

She tells this story for three reasons. First, "I want them to know that it is normal to experience academic setbacks. They do not define you, serve as a negative reflection on your character, or indicate that you are destined for perpetual failure." In fact, research shows that students get a boost when they hear that famous scientists – and their own instructors – had academic setbacks.

Second, Berntsen wants students to know that she and her teaching assistants will work with them to explain concepts, address misconceptions, and give study tips and test-taking strategies. And third, she wants them to know that she won't be the kind of professor she had in organic chemistry years ago. The extra help will be delivered without making students doubt their potential and feel bad about struggling and asking for help.

Drawing on her own experience, Berntsen has the following suggestions for instructors at all levels:

- *We don't have to teach the way we were taught.* "Even if you have experienced some version of academic trauma," she says, "you do not need to 'haze it forward' to your own students. You can choose to break the cycle." Some courses are seen as gateways to a higher level, with failures weeding out students who don't have what it takes. A better definition of rigor, she says, is "helping every student develop the skills necessary to meet those standards."

- *Design instruction so students who stumble can recover.* In her courses, Berntsen allows students to drop their lowest of four exam grades, and for final grades, each student's

highest score is worth more than their second highest, which is worth more than their third highest. “As a result,” she says, “students have an explicit incentive to persist to the very end of the semester.”

- *Teach evidence-based study skills.* Many students have never been taught how to study for an exam, including understanding the retrieval effect and self-testing. When she debriefs with students after tests are returned, Berntsen explains challenging questions, shows students where the answers came from, and pulls back the curtain on her question-writing process. “It’s my hope that they will use this knowledge to generate their own practice questions and test themselves in advance of future exams.”

- *Assume the best in your students.* In recent years, there’s a lot of talk about how college students don’t know the meaning of hard work. Drawing on her own experience as a student, Berntsen urges educators to adopt a different mindset: “Why not assume that the vast majority of students want to succeed and will expend the effort required to do so? And meanwhile, you can assume responsibility for fostering a learning environment in which students are both challenged *and* supported... Teach the kind of class you wish you would have taken, and be the kind of teacher that you wish you’d had.”

[“Don’t Define Students By Their Academic Setbacks”](#) by Leslie Berntsen in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 11, 2022 (Vol. 69, #6, pp. 36-37)

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2. Beyond Learning Styles

In this *Theory Into Practice* article, Daniel Dinsmore and Meghan Parkinson (University of North Florida) and Luke Fryer (University of Hong Kong) tackle the controversy around teaching to students’ learning styles from three angles: why this approach is not an effective way to improve student learning outcomes; why the idea persists in so many classrooms; and a different way of thinking about student differences.

- *Problems with teaching to learning styles* – The idea of matching instruction to students’ learning styles sounds obvious – for example, when teaching fractions, doesn’t it make sense to give visual learners images of a pie chart, have kinesthetic learners manipulate pizza slices, and give auditory learners verbal instructions? But numerous studies of instruction geared to learning styles have failed to show learning gains. In fact, some studies show that students do *worse* when they’re taught only in their preferred modality.

Why? Dinsmore, Parkinson, and Fryer say that although students have learning style preferences, those aren’t the key variable in how well they learn. When teachers spend time creating multiple lesson plans for different learning styles, they may not be focusing on the content or skill and what will convey it to all students in the most effective way.

A better approach is using two modalities – the *dual coding hypothesis* – so students are grappling with the concept or skill from different angles. For example, students might learn about fractions by seeing and hearing key concepts, or seeing and touching physical manipulatives. The key, as with multimedia instruction, is that the different modalities are used strategically and are complementary, not detracting from one another. “At its heart,” say the

authors, “this theory suggests that learning is less about this medium or that medium and more about how information is presented to students.” That means teachers thinking less about how information is transmitted and more about how it’s organized.

• *Why teaching to learning styles is so seductive to teachers* – Dinsmore, Parkinson, and Fryer believe there are three reasons:

- Simplicity – Learning styles are easy to measure; teachers can survey students to find their preference, form learning style groups, and instruct each in a particular way.
- Marketability – Companies produce appealing materials for visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners and are good at convincing educators to buy them.
- Beliefs about students – Teachers pride themselves on caring about their students as individuals, and differentiating by learning styles is an appealing approach, especially when materials are available and there doesn’t seem to be a viable alternative.

For these reasons, experts’ attempts to debunk the learning styles hypothesis by presenting evidence of its ineffectiveness have failed to convince most educators.

• *A different way of thinking about individual differences* – Dinsmore, Parkinson, and Fryer cite Alexander’s *model of domain learning* (1997), which says that over time, students become more capable in math, reading, writing, science, and other subjects. Students start as novices, gain competence (often in adolescence), and attain proficiency (as adults). According to this theory, as students gradually become more proficient in each subject, there is solid research evidence for three key variables:

- Background knowledge – “Unlike learning styles,” say the authors, “the evidence base for knowledge as a predictor or explanatory factor in students’ learning and performance is quite strong.” Teachers need to constantly assess knowledge and address gaps.
- Strategies – These vary by subject area – for example, making inferences from a reading passage, doing a controlled experiment in science – and need to be systematically taught and developed over time. One effective teaching approach is having students engage in *think-alouds* to see which strategies are working and which could be improved.
- Interest – Teachers can make learning intriguing through relevant and fun lessons – for example, linking fractions to baking cookies – but that goes only so far. Longer term, teachers need to pay attention to and nurture students’ individual passions and steer them to opportunities for deeper, self-sustained learning – for example, encouraging a high-school student who is interested in government to get involved in Model UN.

[“The Learning Styles Hypothesis Is False, But There Are Patterns of Student Characteristics That Are Useful”](#) by Daniel Dinsmore, Luke Fryer, and Meghan Parkinson in *Theory Into Practice*, Fall 2022 (Vol. 61, #4, pp. 418-428); Dinsmore can be reached at daniel.dinsmore@unf.edu.

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3. Classroom Discipline and Kindness – It’s Not Either-Or

In this article in *Theory Into Practice*, Jeff Vomund and Angela Miller (George Mason University) express amazement that new teachers are still being told, *Don’t smile until December*. “Unfortunately,” say Vomund and Miller, “whatever truth this cliché communicates is outweighed by the reality it denies: neither consistent classroom management nor challenging academic content need be in competition with expressions of kindness, caring, or joy. To the contrary, consistent challenge, discipline, and joy should all be part of the classroom climate that students come to expect.” Here are some important elements to their *both-and* approach:

- *Autonomy support and structure* – It’s a fallacy, say Vomund and Miller, that students need to be tightly managed for four months before being allowed to make choices. “Consistent structures should be implemented alongside autonomy support,” they say, “so that in the context of consistency, students also perceive that they have agency in their learning.” When students have the three interdependent elements in self-determination theory – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – they’re more likely to develop intrinsic motivation for learning. And indeed, studies show that teachers who take a *both-and* approach get better results.

The key elements of a structured classroom are clear and explicit directions, guidance for ongoing classroom activities, and feedback on how to be successful. Autonomy-supporting practices include getting students’ perspectives, responding to students’ individual preferences and interests, and providing relevant and interesting instruction. Vomund and Miller believe these can coexist quite happily: “Classrooms high in structure need not be doctrinaire; instead, they offer proactive clarity and ongoing support. Students know what to do because they have been clearly told, and if the message was not clear, then students get constructive feedback to get them back on track.”

- *Pedagogical caring* – Studies show that students regard effective instruction as one of the best ways teachers can show they care. That includes helping students with their work, explaining assignments clearly, making sure students understand, offering encouragement, orchestrating good classroom management, and planning fun activities. In other words, there’s no conflict between caring and rigor. Students work harder and engage in more prosocial activity when they believe teachers care about them. “If teachers focus on either one aspect of caring or the other,” say the authors, “then we have embraced a more truncated form than students seek.”

- *Challenge and warmth* – Another aspect of the don’t-smile-till-December trope is that rigorous instruction needs to be delivered in a standoffish manner. But students have a more-nuanced view. “The research on academic press,” say Vomund and Miller, “suggests students experience teachers’ high expectations as a form of concern and respect – as long as these expectations are coupled with effective student supports and strong student-teacher relationships – and respond to it with greater effort and increased achievement.” Students appreciate higher-order questions, interactive lessons, and feeling respected as learners. Some research has found that African-American students are especially appreciative of teachers who

are “warm demanders.” With sensitivity and cultural competence, say Vomund and Miller, this style can be implemented by teachers of all races and backgrounds.

• *Cognitive empathy* – This means understanding the thoughts and feelings of another person, from that person’s perspective. Affective empathy is different: it’s sharing the feelings of another, while recognizing that the other person is the source of those emotions. Both kinds of empathy are important in a productive teacher-student relationship. “What makes advice like ‘don’t smile until December’ so attractive,” say Vomund and Miller, “is that it suggests good teaching can be accomplished without seriously consulting one’s students, as if teaching were a series of strategies that, when performed correctly, led students – any students – to higher achievement... Cognitive empathy is the trait that allows teachers to understand life from their students’ perspective, thus, it provides the information necessary to make classrooms more conducive to student learning and motivation.”

Taking the time to get to know students is a vital part of balancing caring and rigor. “Some students require a great deal of structure to succeed,” say the authors, “while others would find that level of scaffolding to be suffocating. Not until teachers can see the world from their students’ eyes will they be able to craft lessons that balance autonomy and structure successfully for them. In the same vein, when does pushing a student to do their best become nagging them? It depends on the student, which is why effective teachers commit to getting to know each of them.”

Vomund and Miller conclude with examples of specific classroom suggestions that embody the *both-and* approach:

- Autonomy and structure – Giving students the choice of doing a book report, a class presentation, or a group video, all assessed by a detailed rubric showing what success looks like in each medium;
- Pedagogical caring – The teacher differentiates a math class by having all students work on long division, providing more support to students who are struggling to set up their equations;
- Challenge and warmth – With primary-grade students learning penmanship, the teacher compliments students on how well they’re forming their letters, and keeps coming back to see if they’re becoming even more proficient.

[“Don’t Smile Until December’: Bad Advice Based on the Either-Or Fallacy”](#) by Jeff Vomund and Angela Miller in *Theory Into Practice*, Fall 2022 (Vol. 61, #4, pp. 454-464); Vomund can be reached at jvomund@gmu.edu.

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4. How the “Illusion of Asymmetric Insight” Can Disrupt a Classroom

(Originally titled “Why Students Make Weird Assumptions”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Philadelphia teacher/author Matthew Kay wonders why students sometimes make wild, off-the-wall comments that derail classroom discussions. These might be the result of poor lesson pacing, a badly thought-out prompt, or the energy level in the classroom being “off” for some reason.

Reading up on the psychology of human interactions, Kay found another possible explanation: the *illusion of asymmetric insight* – people being comfortable making assumptions about others while believing such assumptions don't apply to themselves. Could this be why a student blurts out that another student (or the teacher) is a mean or aggressive person?

A related cognitive bias is *naïve realism* – “that sense that our own perceptions and judgments are reflections of some objective reality,” that we are experts in “reading” others while believing that they can't possibly “read” us because we are far too complex. [A similar bias is the *fundamental attribution error* – assuming that a person's actions reflect their character, while our own actions don't.]

These biases can be highly disruptive in a classroom when students draw expansive conclusions or “hot takes” about what classmates or adults say without listening carefully or understanding where they're really coming from.

Kay believes teachers can mitigate moments like these by explicitly teaching students about these cognitive biases and asking them to notice when they pop up. “During conversations,” he says, “try to encourage and habitually reward students who ask each other questions instead of blurting out presumptuous assertions.” Students need to be reminded that, “despite what their community, their family, or even their overconfident brain says about the simplicity of ‘other’ people, they are precisely as complex as this student is.”

[“Why Students Make Weird Assumptions”](#) by Matthew Kay in *Educational Leadership*, November 2022 (Vol. 80, #3, pp. 80-81); Kay can be reached at mrkay@notlight.com.

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5. Jim Knight on Coaches Keeping Teachers' Self-Beliefs in Mind

(Originally titled “How Not to Hit Land Mines in Coaching Conversations”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Jim Knight (University of Kansas/Instructional Coaching Group) says criticizing teachers is tricky because their image of themselves is so closely tied to their work with students. Knight says educators have four beliefs about their identity that supervisors and coaches need to consider, especially when being critical:

- *I am a morally good person.* If a supervisor or coach suggests this is not the case, conversations break down. One way to work around this is having teachers watch videos of themselves in action. “What professionals discover for themselves about their practice,” says Knight, “is often more valuable than the comments of an external observer watching one lesson.” A video focuses on actions and results, without the coach having to talk about intent.

- *I'm doing a good job.* Although teachers want to be reassured on this score, making general comments – *You're such a patient teacher* – is not helpful; teachers can think of all the times they weren't patient. Better to notice and comment on a specific action that exemplifies a general trait.

- *I want to be accepted.* Negative judgment can be conveyed in critical comments, tone of voice, or body language, shutting the teacher down. “We don't seek help from someone who rolls their eyes when we talk,” says Knight.

• *I want to control my life.* Giving teachers choices is much better than making directive suggestions – for example, I know you’ve thought a lot about this problem. What are you thinking you might do?

Understanding self-beliefs in these ways, says Knight, “helps us speak the truth in ways that can be heard.”

[“How Not to Hit Land Mines in Coaching Conversations”](#) by Jim Knight in *Educational Leadership*, November 2022 (Vol. 80, #3, pp. 78-79); Knight can be reached at jimknight@mac.com.

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6. Waypower, Willpower, and Hope

(Originally titled “Getting Their Hopes Up”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Bryan Goodwin (McREL International) cites research on three habits of mind that help students become self-directed learners and achieve ambitious goals:

• *Waypower* – “The mental plans or road maps that guide hopeful thinking” (Snyder, 1994). A goal is not enough, says Goodwin; students need to chart a course of action and find additional support if they, for example, struggle to understand a textbook chapter or realize they’re on the wrong track.

• *Willpower* – “A reservoir of determination and commitment that we can call on to help us move on” (Day et al., 1994). This might take the form of positive self-talk: *I can do this. I’ll find a way to get it done. I am not going to be stopped.* One study found that the combination of waypower and willpower accounted for 20-47 percent of college students’ GPAs.

• *Hope* – This is not an emotion, says Goodwin, but a cognitive state that makes goal-setting, waypower, and willpower possible. Studies show that people with high levels of hope have better mental health, life satisfaction, and success.

Goodwin suggests five ways teachers can foster a sense of hope in their students – by having them:

- Set small, attainable goals, breaking larger tasks into bite-sized chunks.
- Choose goals for which they have interest and ownership.
- Celebrate small wins.
- Stretch to take on more-challenging goals.
- Develop hopeful self-talk, replacing doubtful *I can’t* statements with upbeat, confident, goal-oriented declarations.

[“Getting Their Hopes Up”](#) by Bryan Goodwin in *Educational Leadership*, November 2022 (Vol. 80, #3, pp. 82-83); Goodwin can be reached at bgoodwin@mcrel.org.

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7. Should Libraries Stop Late-Book Fines and Allow Unlimited Take-Outs?

In this *School Library Journal* article, Maura Madigan and Kim Sigle (Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia) say that many school librarians have rethought their policy on late fees, “realizing that the benefits of not charging fines outweigh those of collecting them.” Surprisingly, when libraries adopt a more-lenient policy, circulation increases and more books are returned.

In the same vein, some librarians are lifting restrictions on the number of books students can check out each visit, citing the American Library Association’s policy affirming “the importance of having open, unrestricted, and equitable access to a school library’s resources and services.” Madigan and Sigle have found that removing limits has seven benefits:

- Students are more likely to develop a positive attitude toward reading if they are allowed to take out a variety of books.
- Students can explore different interests if there’s less pressure to find the perfect book.
- Students can choose books beyond those at the “just right” reading level, finding books that are challenging as well as easier books to read to younger siblings.
- An unrestricted checkout policy “cultivates an atmosphere of trust and respect between the librarian and students,” say Madigan and Sigle.
- “In school, students have few chances to make their own decisions,” they say. “We should empower them whenever possible.”
- Librarians can spend less time in “cop mode” monitoring checkout limits.
- Such a policy in elementary schools builds a foundation of increased library use in middle and high schools, where students tend to make less use of the school library.

School librarians often express two worries about unrestricted take-outs: losing books and not being able to manage increased traffic. When Madigan and Sigle lifted limits in their libraries, there was an initial surge in books taken out, but then students settled to a more-reasonable number – usually about five a week. Overall circulation increased, but the job of checking out and re-shelving books was still manageable, even for Madigan, who doesn’t have a helper in her library. “More importantly,” they say, “the number of lost and overdue books decreased when students felt more in control.”

Madigan and Sigle recommend the following procedures to prevent a “rush and grab of books” when students are told there are no limits:

- Ask students to think about how many books they need that week, how many they still have from the previous week, and how much free time they have for reading.
- Set limits on the number of books that can be taken from popular series.
- Limit students to the number of books they can comfortably carry.
- Provide a rolling cart to classrooms so returned books can be wheeled to the library every morning, allowing the librarian to use available time to check in and re-shelve.
- Teach students how to access their library accounts to keep track of overdue books.

- If a student with overdue books asks to take out more books, the librarian tells them which are overdue, asks if the student wants to renew them, and prints out a receipt for the student to take home. Most students want to return books on time, but some need reminders and support.

“For many students,” conclude Madigan and Sigle, “school librarians are the gatekeepers to the world of books and pleasure reading. Are your policies welcoming students in or shutting them out?”

[“No Limits”](#) by Maura Madigan and Kim Sigle in *School Library Journal*, November 2022 (Vol. 68, #11, pp. 12-14)

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8. Recommended Children’s Books on Native Americans

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Shelley Diaz highlights these books on Native Americans for elementary- and middle-school students:

Fiction:

- *The Woman in the Woods and Other North American Stories* by Kate Ashwin, Kel McDonald, and Alina Pete (editors), grade 5-7
- *Moonshot The Indigenous Comics Collection* by Hope Nicholson (editor), grade 5 and up
- *Native American Stories for Kids: 12 Traditional Stories from Indigenous Tribes Across North America* by Tom Pecore Weso, grade 2-4
- *Ancestor Approved: Intertribal Stories for Kids* by Cynthia Leitich Smith (editor), grade 3-6
- *Tales of the Mighty Code Talkers* by Arigon Starr (editor), grade 3-5

Nonfiction:

- *Aqui Era El Paraiso: Poemas Seleccionados/Here Was Paradise: Selected Poems* by Humberto Ak’Abal, grade 6 and up
- *Native Americans in History: A History Book for Kids* by Jimmy Beason, illustrated by Amanda Lenz, grade 3-7
- *Voices of the People* by Joseph Bruchac, grade 5 and up
- *Dreaming in Indian: Contemporary Native American Voices* by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale (editors), grade 6 and up
- *Urban Tribes: Native Americans in the City* by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale (editors), grade 7 and up
- *Native Women Changing Their Worlds* by Patricia Cutright, grade 6 and up
- *The Sea-Ringed World: Sacred Stories of the Americas* by Maria García Esperón, illustrated by Amanda Mijangos, grade 5 and up
- *Living Ghosts and Mischievous Monsters: Chilling American Indian Stories* by Dan SaSuWeh Jones, grade 4 and up

“A Multitude of Stories” by Shelley Diaz in *School Library Journal*, November 2022 (Vol. 68, #11, pp. 37-39)

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9. Short Item:

Talking About Race with Young Children – In this [TEDxStanford talk](#), Beverly Daniel Tatum (currently interim president at Mount Holyoke College) describes conversations she had with her 3- and 4-year old son, and the lessons it suggests for talking about race at home and in schools.

“Is My Skin Brown Because I Drank Chocolate Milk?” by Beverly Daniel Tatum, TEDxStanford, May 19, 2017; Tatum can be reached at president@mtholyoke.edu.

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

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

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than 150 articles each week, and selects 8-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Tuesday (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there’s also a podcast and HTML version.

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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
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
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Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
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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