

# Marshall Memo 343

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

July 5, 2010

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## Quotes of the Week

“Texting is my favorite subject.”

Slogan on a New Jersey sixth-grade girl’s T-shirt (see item #1)

“On Facebook, you can be as mean as you want.”

Another girl in this New Jersey middle school (*ibid.*)

“Part of your job is to know how to prevail in the political battles you will face. You will triumph if you understand the principles of power – and if you are willing to use them.”

Jeffrey Pfeffer (see item #2)

“Once you reach a certain point in your career, you simply have to make critical relationships work. Your feelings, or others’ feelings about you, don’t matter. Put aside resentments, jealousies, anger, and anything else that might hinder you from getting the job done.”

Gary Loveman (see item #2)

“When teachers believe they are the primary causes of student achievement, student gains are three to five times higher than when they assume that the causes are factors beyond their control.”

Douglas Reeves (see item #3)

“[F]ew activities have a greater and more consistent positive impact on every other discipline than nonfiction writing.”

Douglas Reeves (*ibid.*)

“In most schools, students turn in first drafts – work that doesn’t represent their best effort and that is typically discarded after it has been graded and returned.”

Ron Berger (see item #4)

“Be kind; be specific; be helpful.”

The rules of Ron Berger’s group critique sessions (see item #4)

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## **1. What Schools Can – and Should – Do About Off-Campus Cyberbullying**

In this troubling front-page *New York Times* article, Jan Hoffman reports on the phenomenon of middle-school online bullying, much of which happens after school hours but ricochets into classrooms, hallways, and cafeterias. “Affronted by cyberspace’s escalation of adolescent viciousness, many parents are looking to schools for justice, protection, even revenge,” writes Hoffman. “But many educators feel unprepared or unwilling to be prosecutors and judges... Reluctant to assert an authority they are not sure they have, educators can appear indifferent to parents frantic with worry, alarmed by recent adolescent suicides linked to bullying.” However, other parents say, “It didn’t happen on school property, stay out of my life.”

Can a student be suspended for posting a demeaning video about another student on YouTube? Can principals search a cell phone’s memory the way they search a locker or a backpack? What should a school’s code of discipline say about cyber communication? All these questions are up for grabs.

“Texting is my favorite subject,” reads a suburban New Jersey sixth-grade girl’s T-shirt. This school’s seventh-grade guidance counselor says she spends huge amounts of time mediating conflicts that start with text messages. Tony Orsini, the principal, was so upset when he found that some of his students had been vilified on Formspring, a site on which comments can be sent anonymously to mailboxes and posted at the mailbox owner’s discretion, that he sent an e-mail to all parents: “There is absolutely NO reason for any middle school student to be part of a social networking site.” He told parents that if their children were attacked through sites or texting, they should “IMMEDIATELY GO TO THE POLICE!” With tears in his eyes, he asked, “How does a 13-year-old girl recover her sexual self-esteem after reading that garbage?”

When a mother and father came to see him after their daughter received a series of obscene, threatening messages, apparently from a boy in the school she had briefly dated, Orsini retreated from his call-the-police position and called the boy in. It turned out that the boy had lost his cell phone just before the messages were sent and in any event didn’t have the literacy skills to send the messages that the girl received. The school couldn’t figure out who did send them, and after spending ten hours on the case, gave up, leaving the girl and her distraught parents very unhappy – but still unwilling to go to the police.

“In seventh grade, the girls are trying to figure out where they fit in,” says Meredith Wearley, a guidance counselor at the school. “They have found friends but they keep

regrouping. And the technology makes it harder for them to understand what's a real friendship." Peer approval has become a big part of their self-esteem. "With their erupting skin and morphing bodies, many seventh-grade students have a hard enough time just walking through the school doors," writes Hoffman. "When dozens of kids vote online, which is not uncommon, about whether a student is fat or stupid or gay, the impact can be devastating." They prefer texting to talking, but in text messages, they often miss cues about tone of voice and misunderstandings proliferate. Wearley frequently has girls in her office weeping, betrayed, astonished, depressed. "I've had to bring down five girls to my office to sort things out," she says.

"It's easier to fight online," said one girl, "because you feel more brave and in control. On Facebook, you can be as mean as you want." Said another, "We had so many fights in seventh grade. None of them were face-to-face. We were too afraid. Besides, it's easier to say 'sorry' over a text." School officials spend hours resolving cyberwars. They wish students would report problems before they escalate, but there are several reasons kids don't: adolescents are loath to snitch; they think they can handle ridicule; they may be too embarrassed to speak up; and they fear their parents will pull the plug on their cell phones or Internet access. Some schools try to make reporting easier by giving students cover. "When girls ask their friends, 'What were you doing in the guidance counselor's office?'," says Wearley, "I tell them, just say 'Mrs. Wearley was fixing my schedule.'"

Courts are still sorting out the issues involved in online bullying. A few families have successfully sued schools for not protecting their children from bullies, but a 2009 Federal District Court decision in California concluded that an eighth-grade girl's mean-spirited YouTube clip about another student was protected free speech because school administrators had not shown that it caused substantial disruption to the school's educational mission. In overturning the girl's suspension, the judge wrote that the school couldn't discipline the student in this case "simply because young persons are unpredictable or immature, or because, in general, teenagers are emotionally fragile and may often fight over hurtful comments." The girl's father, who was outraged that his daughter was suspended, said, "The school doesn't have that kind of power. It's up to the parents to discipline their child." He did chastise his daughter for her "relentlessly juvenile" video, saying to her, "That wasn't a nice thing to do." The girl offered to take it down from YouTube, but he insisted on keeping it there "as a public service," so others could see "what kids get suspended for in Beverly Hills."

This decision is not the law of the land, and other courts have analyzed similar situations differently. The U.S. Supreme Court has yet to rule on student cyberspeech, and student-to-student cyberbullying cases are just now finding their way into the lower courts. Meanwhile, several courts have dealt with cases involving students' online speech against educators. One three-judge panel upheld the suspension of a student for posting the suggestion that the principal was a pedophile, while another panel sided with a student whose website said a different principal used steroids and smoked marijuana. These contradictory rulings were re-argued earlier this month before the full bench of the Third Circuit Court of Appeals.

Given that the case law in this area is still developing, it's not surprising that principals are all over the map in their responses to cyberbullying. Some suspend students who torment their peers online while others say that their hands are tied if students do their mischief after hours. Pepperdine University professor Bernard James believes administrators are interpreting the law too narrowly. "Educators are empowered to maintain safe schools," he says. "The timidity of educators in this context of emerging technology is working to the advantage of bullies."

School leaders sometimes resort to subterfuge. Tony Orsini, the New Jersey principal, recently bluffed with a group of boys he suspected of being online bullies, telling them (falsely) that the police were looking into their Facebook group. They took it down the next day. Orsini's assistant principal, Greg Wu, asks students who he suspects are not telling the truth to don a custom-made "anti-prevaricator" helmet with glued-on bells and a keypad from an old telephone; when they answer questions, the helmet flashes. Students get the joke, laugh, and see the importance of telling the truth. Wu then continues his cyber-investigations the old-fashioned way – questioning, confronting, cajoling, jotting copious notes.

Are school officials permitted to search cell phone memories? Legal experts disagree; some put phones in the same category as backpacks, arguing that they can be searched if there is reasonable suspicion that there's been an infraction; others say that phones are in a different category, protected by electronic communication privacy laws. Unlike police officers, who need probable cause and a warrant to search a student's locker or backpack, school officials may search students if they have reasonable grounds to believe that a school rule has been broken and the search is permissible in scope. What isn't clear to principals at this point is whether the search of a cell phone's memory is "permissible in scope."

Another reason principals are skittish about searching cell phones is that they may stumble upon sexting (students sending compromising photos of themselves) and getting caught up in child pornography investigations. When principals do find evidence of sexting, they generally turn the cell phone over to the police. In addition, there's sometimes uncertainty about which student used a particular cell phone as a tool for bullying. New Jersey principal Orsini told of a case in which a bully was a master manipulator, using a friend's cell phone to harass another girl and getting the friend to take the fall for her. In this case, when the bully began to pick on another girl, the initial victim confronted the bully and beat her up. Word of the outcome spread through the school. "All the kids chanted the victim's name in triumph in the lunchroom," says Orsini.

This principal went on to organize a group of eighth-grade girls to visit sixth-grade classrooms to talk about cyberbullying. The older girls said bluntly that the sixth graders shouldn't be on Facebook. "It's not that necessary, you know," said one. "We just want you to be safe." Another chimed in, "The Internet is a scary place. It can really hurt you. Our parents didn't grow up with it so they don't really understand it that well." And they urged the sixth graders to talk to administrators or their guidance counselors if bullying occurred. "The school will make it stop," they said, "immediately!"

“Online Bullies Pull Schools Into the Fray” by Jan Hoffman in *The New York Times*, June 28, 2010 (p. 1, 12, 13)

[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/28/style/28bully.html?\\_r=1&sq=Online%20Bullies%20Pull%20Schools%20Into%20the%20Fray&st=cse&adxnnl=1&scp=1&adxnnlx=1278352933-Xjb3BmOuUdIV7ghkbAgurw](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/28/style/28bully.html?_r=1&sq=Online%20Bullies%20Pull%20Schools%20Into%20the%20Fray&st=cse&adxnnl=1&scp=1&adxnnlx=1278352933-Xjb3BmOuUdIV7ghkbAgurw)

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## 2. The Wise and Effective Use of Power

“Strategies don’t implement themselves,” writes Stanford business professor Jeffrey Pfeffer in this tough-minded *Harvard Business Review* article. “Any new strategy worth implementing has some controversy surrounding it, and someone with a counter-agenda fighting it. When push comes to shove, you need more than logic to carry the day. You need power.”

This is a subject that makes many leaders uncomfortable. Power is seen as the “dark side” of workplace behavior, “playing politics” in the worst sense of the word. Pfeffer lists three reasons that well-intentioned people shy away from exercising power:

- *A belief that the world is a just place* – Those who embrace that view think that if they do a good job and behave appropriately, things will work out for the best – and that immoral and conniving people will ultimately lose out. Pfeffer says that this naïve view limits a leader’s ability to see land mines ahead, learn from negative experiences, and build a power base.

- *Reading the leadership literature* – Too many accounts of successful leaders sugar-coat the way they got where they are. “The teaching on leadership is filled with prescriptions about following your inner compass, being truthful, letting your feelings show, being modest and self-effacing, not behaving in bullying or abusive ways – in short, prescriptions that reflect how people *wish* those in positions of power behaved,” says Pfeffer. “But wishing that’s how people behaved won’t make it so.”

- *Trying to maintain an unrealistically positive self-esteem* – Pfeffer says that “if people don’t actively seek power, the fact that they don’t obtain it doesn’t have to be seen as a personal failure.” This kind of self-handicapping is a way of avoiding the perceived evils of being “power-hungry” and doesn’t help get things done.

“So, welcome to the real world,” he says. “It may not be the world we want, but it’s the world we have. You won’t get far, and neither will your strategic plan, if you can’t build and use power... Part of your job is to know how to prevail in the political battles you will face. You will triumph if you understand the principles of power – and if you are willing to use them.” Here are his eleven suggestions for wisely and effectively wielding power:

- *Mete out resources.* Don’t hesitate to allocate equipment, space, information, and money to those whose support you need. The quid pro quo doesn’t need to be explicit – everyone knows that favors must be repaid.
- *Shape behavior through rewards and punishments.* “People who effectively wield influence make it clear that you will get rewards if you help them and problems if you don’t,” says Pfeffer.
- *Advance on multiple fronts.* If you encounter resistance in one area, work on another and return to the first when the climate is better.

- *Make the first move.* “Don’t wait to see a power struggle coming,” advises Pfeffer. “While you hesitate, others are mobilizing the support to beat you.”
- *Co-opt antagonists.* It’s amazing how quickly you can redirect the energies of opponents by making them part of your team or giving them a stake in the system.
- *Remove rivals – nicely, if possible.* “Helping adversaries move to another organization where they’ll be out of your way may not be the first thing you think about doing,” says Pfeffer, “but it ought to be high on the list. Remember, though: It’s important to let people save face.”
- *Don’t draw unnecessary fire.* When obstacles and opposition arise, the key question is whether they threaten your core objectives. If they don’t, it’s wise to back off and take a short-term loss on small things so as not to create unnecessary opposition and turmoil. Save your powder for the most important battles.
- *Use the personal touch.* Be unfailingly polite, meet face to face with key people whenever possible (versus using e-mail), return calls promptly, and don’t hesitate to say nice things about people.
- *Persist.* “Persistence is like water eroding a rock,” says Pfeffer; “it wears the opposition down. And if nothing else, staying in the game keeps open the possibility that the situation will shift to your advantage. Your opponents may eventually make mistakes or take new jobs or retire. When the environment changes, so can the balance of power.”
- *Make important relationships work.* Pfeffer quotes corporate leader Gary Loveman: “Once you reach a certain point in your career, you simply have to make critical relationships work. Your feelings, or others’ feelings about you, don’t matter. Put aside resentments, jealousies, anger, and anything else that might hinder you from getting the job done.”
- *Make the vision compelling.* “Place your personal objectives in a broader context that compels others to support you,” says Pfeffer. “It’s easier to exercise power when you are aligned with a compelling, socially valuable objective... Rudy Crew, who wielded power as the superintendent of schools in Sacramento, Tacoma, New York City, and Miami-Dade County, invariably talked about the hundreds of thousands of children left behind by current policies and how his initiatives would help them.”

“Power Play” by Jeffrey Pfeffer in *Harvard Business Review*, July/August 2010 (Vol. 88, #7/8, p. 84-92), no e-link available; the author can be reached at [pfeffer\\_jeffrey@gsb.stanford.edu](mailto:pfeffer_jeffrey@gsb.stanford.edu)

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### **3. Douglas Reeves on Six Critical School-Success Factors**

In this thoughtful *American School Board Journal* article, author/consultant Douglas Reeves lists six core strategies that have the greatest impact on student learning and educational equity:

- *Feedback* – “When students receive feedback that is accurate, specific, and timely, the impact on achievement is so great that it is more significant than the socioeconomic status of children,” says Reeves, quoting a meta-analysis of meta-analyses by John Hattie that drew on

data from millions of students. “The purpose of feedback is to improve performance... Ask yourself if your present feedback systems are leading to improved performance by students, teachers, and leaders.”

- *Educator efficacy* – “When teachers believe they are the primary causes of student achievement, student gains are three to five times higher than when they assume that the causes are factors beyond their control,” says Reeves. The key here is providing teachers with accurate, timely ways of seeing their impact on student learning.

- *Time* – Students who have fallen behind need extra instructional time before, during, or after school to catch up, says Reeves. “If a quarterback needed to improve passing skills, a basketball player needed to work on free-throw shooting, or a musician had a difficult time playing a particularly challenging piece, we would not hesitate to prescribe ‘more practice’ as the remedy.” The same goes for struggling students.

- *Nonfiction writing* – “[F]ew activities have a greater and more consistent positive impact on every other discipline than nonfiction writing,” says Reeves. “Description, persuasion, and analysis help students at every level improve thinking, reasoning, and analytical skills.” Students need to do a great deal more of this kind of writing in school, he says – and get feedback on it.

- *Formative assessment* – On-the-spot classroom checks for understanding and interim assessments can have a powerful effect on teaching and learning, says Reeves. The key is effective follow-up: “What are teachers and principals doing differently today as a result of the most recent formative assessment data?”

- *Expectations* – Reeves says that 40 years of research have shown that “when teachers and administrators expect more, they get more; when they expect less, they get less.” The key is having clear, rigorous grade-level standards and ensuring that teachers’ unit and lesson plans are aligned with those expectations.

“Focusing on the Essentials” by Douglas Reeves in *American School Board Journal*, July 2010 (Vol. 197, #7, p. 39, 41), no e-link available; Reeves is at [dreeves@leadandlearn.com](mailto:dreeves@leadandlearn.com).

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#### **4. Five Practices That Support Classroom Excellence**

In this 2006 article in *The Fourth and Fifth Rs: Respect and Responsibility*, teacher/consultant Ron Berger shares pedagogical practices that he believes are the secret to getting excellent results for all students:

- *Assign work that matters*. “Students need assignments that challenge and inspire them,” says Berger. For example, Boston middle-school students studied vacant lots in their neighborhood, interviewed neighbors for ideas, and presented their findings to the Mayor, who saw to it that one of the sites was developed into a community garden.

- *Study examples of excellence*. Before launching a project, students look at models of high-quality work done by previous students and by professionals. “What makes a particular science project, piece of writing, or architectural blueprint so good?” they ask. “What was the

process of achieving such high quality? What mistakes and revisions were probably part of the process?"

- *Build a culture of critique.* Teachers use peer review of first drafts to teach concepts and skills, giving students regular experience improving the quality of their work based on feedback from others. The rules of group critique are, "Be kind; be specific; be helpful." Classmates are taught to lead off with positive comments and phrase their suggestions as questions: "Have you considered...?"

- *Require multiple revisions.* "In most schools, students turn in first drafts – work that doesn't represent their best effort and that is typically discarded after it has been graded and returned," says Berger. "In life, when the quality of one's work really matters, one almost never submits a first draft. An ethic of excellence requires revision."

- *Provide opportunities for public presentation.* Final drafts of students' work are presented to a real audience – perhaps to a kindergarten class, the principal, or community members. "The teacher's role is not as the sole judge of their work," says Berger, "but rather similar to that of a sports coach or play director – helping them get their work ready for the public eye."

"Fostering an Ethic of Excellence" by Ron Berger in *The Fourth and Fifth Rs: Respect and Responsibility*, Winter/Spring 2006 (Vol. 12, #1), <http://www.cortland.edu/character/newsletters.asp> and click on Winter/Spring 2006 Vol. 12 #1

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## 5. Is There Hope for a 15-Year-Old Non-Reader?

In this *American School Board Journal* article, contributing editor Susan Black tells the story of Willie Brown, a Chicago tenth grader who was a non-reader at the age of 15. "What's wrong with my brain?" he would ask after scoring zero on a spelling test for which he'd studied hard. Willie decided it was better to be "bad instead of dumb" and started getting in trouble in school and hanging out with a gang.

But Willie's parents enrolled him in a Florida private school that specializes in helping students like him and he made dramatic progress. Willie is now 20, enrolled in college, on track to be a history teacher, and making frequent visits to schools to tell struggling students about his "hard-earned miracle." What made the difference? Lots of individual attention from caring, patient teachers, targeted lessons focused on sequential skills, a computerized reading program, and plenty of opportunities to succeed.

How does a student get so far behind? Black quotes University of California/San Diego expert Paula Tallal on what needs to go right in a child's brain at every step of the learning process:

- Reacting in milliseconds as the 44 phonemes of the English language are heard in the early stages of reading acquisition;
- Reacting in seconds during reinforcement learning;
- Reacting in minutes to adapt actions to perceptions;
- Reading in days or weeks during consolidation of learning;

- Reacting in years during maturation.

To read well, children’s brains must simultaneously and rapidly handle phonemic understanding, decoding, vocabulary, syntax, fluency, and comprehension. In addition, they must use short- and long-term memory to store information and ideas, focus their attention, absorb rapidly incoming information, and sequence sounds, letters, words, and concepts. Children who are slow to catch on to reading have “slow shutter speeds” – sounds and words fly by too quickly, leaving them stranded. They fail to distinguish rapid speech at the first level and have a much more difficult time building a large vocabulary. If they can’t process initial sounds in words like cat, bat, and pat, they are often classified as learning disabled and assigned to special education classes. If they don’t get effective help, they are often poor readers for life.

Neuroscientists say these children need two things: exercises to help them forge neural connections in their brains, and individual instruction to diagnose their problems, get them working at the right level, and provide just the right amount of practice before moving on to the next level. Computer programs can be very helpful in this regard. Black mentions two:

- Fast ForWord, which has a track record of boosting students like Willie 1-2 years in reading skills with 8-12 weeks of instruction;
- Lexia Reading, which a 2009 study by the Florida Center for Reading Readiness praised for its intensive, structured practice, immediate feedback to students, age-appropriate strategies, and Web-enabled connections that make it possible for students to practice at school or at home. The study concluded that with good teacher training and consistent use, Lexia produced impressive results – especially for the lowest-performing students.

Because of the brain’s plasticity, says Black, it’s never too late to teach severely disadvantaged students to read.

“It’s Never Too Late” by Susan Black in *American School Board Journal*, July 2010 (Vol. 197, #7, p. 34, 36), no e-link available

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## **6. A Website of Cool Math Problems**

Stella Stunners, sponsored by the Ohio Resource Center for Math, Science, and Reading, contains more than 600 non-routine math problems with teaching suggestions. They range from simple visual problems requiring no specific mathematical background to problems that use the content of Pre-Algebra, Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II and Trigonometry, up through Pre-Calculus.

Stella problems are not typical textbook exercises; they are “non-routine” in that the methods of attacking them are not immediately obvious. As such, they are ideal for supplementing and enlivening traditional mathematics courses.

Stella problems were collected over many years by Rudd Crawford, a long-time mathematics teacher at Oberlin High School, and have been used by a number of teachers across Ohio. Rudd welcomes any comments or questions.

The website is at <http://ohiorc.org/for/math/stella/>

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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](mailto: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:***

Individual subscriptions are \$50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

## ***Website:***

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- Headlines for all issues
- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
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Marshall Memo subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

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- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- 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  
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  
Teachers College Record  
The Atlantic Monthly  
The Chronicle of Higher Education  
The Language Educator  
The Learning Principal  
The New Yorker  
The Reading Teacher  
Theory Into Practice  
Tools for Schools