

Marshall Memo 1014

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 4, 2023

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Quotes of the Week

“The world needs all kinds of minds.”
Marie Havran (see item #8)

“There’s rarely such a thing as a no-brainer. Our brains are always at work, sometimes, unfortunately, in ways that hinder rather than help us.”
John Hammond, Ralph Keeney, and Howard Raiffa (see item #1)

“Getting the main idea should not be the main idea. Students do better when reading goals are more demanding and more integrated.”
Timothy Shanahan (see item #4)

“In high school, I was talking to the same people, with the same ideas, same mentality, same personality. Being in this class, it was really interesting to learn how to work with people who were very much different from me.”
Tammy Nguyen comparing a college anatomy class with her high school experience, quoted in [“The Social Classroom”](#) by Beckie Supiano in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 24, 2023 (Vol. 70, #7, pp. 16-21)

“The desire to fix people is normal. But you can’t fix anyone. People fix themselves. You can speed their journey, but everyone chooses their own path forward.”
Dan Rockwell in [“Feedback: Do These 3 Things Before You Say a Word”](#) in *Leadership Freak*, November 29, 2023

“We assign homework because we know that students need practice. The problem is this: the characteristics of effective practice are feedback, response to feedback, and application of feedback. That does not happen at home unless the teacher is making house calls.”
Douglas Reeves in “Schools Can Respond,” an online article at Creative Leadership Solutions, May 4, 2023. Reeves is at douglas.reeves@creativeleadership.net.

1. Psychological Traps That Produce Bad Decisions

“Bad decisions can often be traced back to the way the decisions were made,” say the late John Hammond, Ralph Keeney (Duke University), and the late Howard Raiffa in this *Harvard Business Review* article. “There’s rarely such a thing as a no-brainer. Our brains are always at work, sometimes, unfortunately, in ways that hinder rather than help us.” Here are some ways that happens, and how leaders can guard against them.

• *The anchoring trap* – When thinking about a decision, we give disproportionate weight to an initial impression, a comment made by a colleague, a statistic mentioned in the news, a trend, a stereotype – and that anchors our thoughts and judgments. Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa suggest strategies to avoid this trap:

- View a problem from different perspectives.
- Initially think about the decision alone to avoid being anchored by others’ ideas.
- Seek information and opinions from a variety of people.
- Tell colleagues as little as possible about your own ideas to avoid anchoring them.
- Be especially wary of anchors in negotiations – but consider using them yourself.

• *The status quo trap* – Most people don’t want to rock the boat and want to avoid risks and stick with what’s established. Sometimes the best choice *is* the status quo, but we shouldn’t choose that because of comfort; opportunities for positive change might be missed. Strategies to avoid this trap:

- Remind yourself of ultimate goals and values, what’s really at stake.
- Avoid thinking of the status quo as the only option.
- Would you choose the status quo if it weren’t the status quo?
- Don’t exaggerate the effort or cost of switching from the status quo.
- Remember that what’s good about the current situation will change over time.
- If there are tempting alternatives, don’t default to the status quo just because it’s hard to choose among the options.

• *The sunk cost trap* – Having committed time and effort – for example, hiring and training a colleague – it’s hard to admit it’s not working and let go, even if not acting compounds the initial error. “For all decisions with a history,” say Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa, “you will need to make a conscious effort to set aside any sunk costs – whether psychological or economic – that will muddy your thinking about the choice at hand. Some techniques:

- Seek out the views of people who were not involved in earlier choices.

- Examine why admitting earlier mistakes bothers you and deal with it head-on.
- Be on the lookout for this bias among colleagues and pass along Warren Buffett's advice: "When you find yourself in a hole, the best thing you can do is stop digging."
- Don't cultivate a culture where people are afraid of making mistakes.

• *The confirming evidence trap* – We tend to seek out and pay attention to information that supports our existing instinct or point of view and avoid or dismiss information that contradicts it. "There are two fundamental psychological forces at work here," say Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa. "The first is our tendency to subconsciously decide what we want to do before we figure out why we want to do it. The second is our inclination to be more engaged by things we like than by things we dislike – a tendency well documented even in babies."

Counter-strategies (realizing that the decision you're drawn to may be correct):

- Are you looking at all the evidence with equal rigor?
- Ask someone you respect to play devil's advocate, or play that role yourself.
- Be honest with yourself about whether you're maneuvering yourself to one decision.
- Don't ask advisors leading questions about the decision, and don't listen to yes-people.

• *The framing trap* – The way a decision is described profoundly influences how people decide, say Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa: "A poorly framed problem can undermine even the best-considered decision." But these precautions can help:

- Don't automatically accept the initial framing of the decision; look for possible distortions in the way it's framed.
- Pose problems in a neutral way that combines likely gains and losses.
- Ask yourself how your thinking might change with a different framing.
- When others make recommendations, examine how they framed the problem.

• *Overconfidence, over-prudent, and recalling traps* – People are sometimes unrealistically sure of estimating and predicting the future, even when things are uncertain. Conversely, people can be too cautious, planning for a worst-case scenario "just to be on the safe side." And recalling a dramatic or traumatic event in our lives can bias us toward a super-cautious approach. Some strategies:

- Take a very disciplined approach to making forecasts and judging possibilities.
- To avoid overconfidence, always start by considering the low and high ends, then challenge your estimates and adjust the range accordingly.
- To avoid the prudence trap, always state estimates honestly and emphasize the importance of honest input from colleagues.
- To minimize the recalling trap, carefully examine assumptions to make sure you're not being swayed by events in the past. "Get actual statistics whenever possible," say the authors. "Try not to be guided by impressions."

These biases can crop up one at a time, say Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa, or they can combine in a perfect storm: "A dramatic first impression might anchor our thinking, and then we might selectively seek out confirming evidence to justify our initial inclination. We make a hasty decision, and that decision establishes a new status quo. As our sunk costs mount, we

become trapped, unable to find a propitious time to seek out a new and possibly better course. The psychological miscues cascade, making it harder and harder to choose wisely.”

The best way to avoid this kind of mess, the authors conclude, is awareness of the biases. “Forewarned is forearmed,” they conclude. “And taking action to understand and avoid psychological traps can have the added benefit of increasing your confidence in the choices you make.”

[“The Hidden Traps in Decision Making”](#) by John Hammond, Ralph Keeney, and Howard Raiffa in *Harvard Business Review*, September/October 1998; Keeney can be reached at Keeney@duke.edu.

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2. Cautionary Notes on Online and Whole-Class Mental Health Programs

In this *New York Times* article, clinical psychologist Darby Saxbe (University of Southern California) notes the proliferation of well-intentioned efforts to reach greater numbers of teens experiencing anxiety and depression. For example, TikTok has offerings from Harvard’s School of Public Health, and WISE Teens provides eight weekly classroom sessions in which teens learn emotion-management skills with the help of principles drawn from cognitive behavior therapy and Zen Buddhism.

But several recent studies in Australia and the U.K. have found that efforts like these can actually make kids’ mental health problems worse. Why would such programs be counterproductive? Saxbe suggests three explanations:

- Focusing adolescents on mental health issues, either online or in classrooms, may lead them to think about normal life struggles as *symptoms* and *diagnoses*, changing how they view themselves in ways that can become self-fulfilling. “Teenagers, who are still developing their identities, are especially prone to take psychological labels to heart,” says Saxbe. “Instead of ‘I am nervous about X,’ a teenager might say, ‘I can’t do X because I have anxiety’ – a reframing that research shows undermines resilience by encouraging people to view everyday challenges as insurmountable.”

Saxbe believes it’s a positive development that problems that were once “whispered in shameful secrecy enter our everyday vocabulary and shed their stigma.” But when online influencers flood kids’ social media feeds with talk of trauma, panic attacks, and personality disorders, kids can self-diagnose and pathologize common “problems of living” and go down rabbit holes as social media algorithms do their thing.

- A second possible explanation for the counterproductive impact of programs like WISE Teens is that they are being provided “in the wrong place and to the wrong people,” says Saxbe. “Many of the skills taught in these programs were developed for people coping with severe mental illness, not everyday stresses. These tools might not feel applicable to teenagers who aren’t deeply struggling – and on the flip side, their wide-scale adoption might make them seem too generic and watered-down to teenagers who are truly ill.”

- A third explanation is that these online and in-school programs provide enough information to identify problems but not enough to fix them. To deal with a serious mental

health challenge, a teenager needs “steady, consistent, hands-on support from a dedicated therapist,” says Saxbe. “Effective therapies require clients to do hard things: exposure therapies for anxiety, for example, ask clients to confront fears they’d prefer to avoid.”

There are no shortcuts, she concludes; educators should be cautious about whole-class programs that may do more harm than good and steer teens away from unhelpful online material. But Saxbe believes there are things that should happen:

- Staffing schools with more trained counselors and therapists;
- Giving students greater access to traditional guidance counselors;
- Creating more opportunities for young people to build relationships with adults;
- Smaller class sizes;
- Later start times for secondary schools to encourage more sleep;
- Decreasing the homework burden;
- Creating more opportunities for play, exercise, music, art, and community engagement.

[“This Is Not the Way to Help Depressed Teens”](#) by Darby Saxbe in *The New York Times*, November 26, 2023; Saxbe can be reached at dsaxbe@usc.edu.

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3. What Can We See in a 30-Second Classroom Video?

In this *Boston Globe Magazine* article, Katharine Wittemore reports on a classic 1990s study by psychologists Robert Rosenthal and the late Nalini Ambady. The researchers showed undergraduates a number of 30-second video clips of professors in action *without audio*. “Watching these clips,” says Wittemore, “you wouldn’t know if the subject was Urdu or thermodynamics. The point was to observe the teachers’ non-verbal behavior, their body language.”

Students were then asked to rate the professors on a 1-to-9 scale based on how attentive, dominant, likable, professional, and anxious they seemed. Another group of students more systematically noted professors’ actions in the video clips: head shakes, smiles, frowns, yawns, lip-biting, and downward gazes – also how hands, legs, and torsos were positioned.

Ambady and Rosenthal then compared students’ ratings on the video clips with the professors’ end-of-semester student evaluations from Harvard’s Committee on Undergraduate Education (CUE) Guide. What was the correlation? Remarkably high; fleeting impressions from the video clips matched CUE evaluations nearly three quarters of the time. “Content and affect are highly correlative,” said Ambady. “We were amazed and baffled. The numbers were so high.” Repeating the study with high-school teachers, the researchers got identical results.

Ambady and Rosenthal did a follow-up study in which they asked college and high-school students to rate instructors on physical attractiveness based on still photographs, then compared the ratings to instructors’ actual ratings. With photos, there was no correlation; in fact, with high-school teachers, teachers whose photos were rated as less attractive actually had better ratings as teachers. “Charisma seems to have more to do with behavior than looks,” commented Ambady.

What explains students' ability to size up an instructor on so little video information? "It appears that some stable underlying essence is picked up by the judges," wrote Ambady and Rosenthal. Students "spontaneously and automatically categorize social information into traits." An instructor leaning forward conveys enthusiasm, a downward gaze signals disengagement, and the combined effect of subtle body language conveys an immediate and remarkably accurate impression.

Why are we wired this way? Ambady and Rosenthal believe this ability emerged over the course of human evolution: being able to immediately tell friend from foe, learning "to allow for a quick processing along a pleasant/unpleasant or a safety/threat dimension," was an advantage, and those genes were passed along.

What are the implications of this study for hiring and performance evaluation in the modern world? "Researchers can save time and money by using thin slices of behavior to evaluate important affective variables," say Ambady and Rosenthal.

[In terms of K-12 teacher supervision and evaluation, the study sheds light on teachers' fear of being quickly judged when people walk into their classrooms. Hence the importance of frequent classroom observations, always followed by face-to-face conversations to give context and get into more detail on what's working and what can be improved. K.M.]

"First Impressions" by Katharine Wittemore in *Boston Globe Magazine*, July 30, 1995; the 1995 study by Ambady and Rosenthal was titled "Half a Minute: Predicting Teacher Evaluations from Thin Slices of Nonverbal and Physical Attractiveness"

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4. Timothy Shanahan on the Problem with Main-Idea Instruction

In this article on his website, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) responds to a teacher's question: shouldn't teachers have students read short passages and practice main-idea questions to master state standards and prepare for high-stakes test questions on finding the main idea? Shanahan's answer: this time-honored strategy is not the best way to improve students' reading comprehension or test scores. Here's why:

- Having students practice main-idea questions isn't teaching, he says; it's test prep. And many of the reading passages used for this kind of practice "tend to be vapid, stupid, and wasteful."

- Main idea is a fuzzy concept with at least nine definitions. "The ability to determine the main idea," says Shanahan, "is affected by text type (narrative, exposition), text structure, the explicitness with which the idea is stated, the length of the text, the amount of topic knowledge possessed by the readers, and any and all these variables may interact with each other making it even more complicated."

- Studies show that doing lots of main-idea question-and-answer practice doesn't improve students' reading proficiency. "There is certainly nothing wrong with asking questions about what the kids have read," says Shanahan; "just don't expect such practice to exert much impact on the ability to deal with specific question categories, nor even to have any impact on reading comprehension. It just doesn't work that way."

So what should teachers do to help their students master state standards on main idea, improve their reading comprehension, and do well on state tests? Shanahan recommends daily, explicit, time-intensive guided practice with a variety of high-quality reading passages aimed at a comprehensive understanding of the texts. The three most effective practices are for students to:

- Summarize passages, putting text information into their own words;
- Understand different text structures and authors' organizational plan;
- Paraphrase or restate the text's main idea and other important details.

Shanahan believes that "main-idea questions steer students into thinking about a specific fact in a text, while these three instructional emphases... require more-integrated, extensive, and thorough thinking about a text's content; hence the power to improve reading comprehension."

Another component of effective reading instruction, he believes, is using "texts worth reading" – from which students will gain worthwhile knowledge and insights about high-quality literature, STEM, and creative content.

"Getting the main idea should not be the main idea," Shanahan concludes. "Students do better when reading goals are more demanding and more integrated."

["Why Main Idea Is Not the Main Idea – Or, How Best to Teach Reading Comprehension"](#) by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan On Literacy*, December 2, 2023; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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5. Effective Note-Taking Strategies

In this article in *Edutopia*, Illinois physics teacher Marianna Ruggerio says that many students see note-taking as a passive activity. They copy down what the teacher says or writes on the board and don't engage with the content. Ruggerio suggests two active note-taking approaches that have worked for her:

- *Retrieve note-taking* – First, she delivers a mini-lecture on important content with no student note-taking permitted. Then she asks students to write down everything they can remember, using words, drawings, equations – anything that helps retrieve what they just heard. Finally, students confer with each other and fill in gaps in their memory. "Because each student will remember different parts of the lecture," says Ruggerio, "this activity brings the class together as they piece together the entire content from the lesson... The best part is that since the focus has shifted from furiously copying all of the details to spending time with the content, students begin to see the big picture."

- *Notes with a future purpose* – Ruggerio has used the lesson sequence suggested in Peter Liljedahl's book, *Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics*. Students stand in groups of three at vertical whiteboards and tackle a challenging problem. If they get stuck, they are encouraged to walk around the classroom and see how other groups are solving it. At the end of the class, students sit down and write key insights and conclusions in their notebooks, framed as "notes to my future forgetful self." They follow up by answering:

- What was something that made you say *Aha* as you were working?

- What was a conversation you had with a peer that reminded you of an idea you didn't think of initially?

She prompts students, saying, "These are the kinds of things you should document so you can work on your homework tonight." Ruggerio has been surprised and pleased that so few students feel the need to pull out their cellphones to take photos of the work on the whiteboards; their hand-written notes capture their insights.

"The first time I tried these strategies," she concludes, "I was anxious about the amount of time they took. The payoff is worth the time. Not only are my students working through later problems more efficiently, but also they're working more collaboratively and trusting their own genius."

["2 Ways to Encourage Better Note-Taking"](#) by Marianna Ruggerio in *Edutopia*, March 20, 2023

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6. Using Poems About Social Justice to Encourage Student Empathy

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Tara Concannon-Gibney (Dublin City University, Ireland) says that when she was a third-grade teacher, poetry was an important tool (especially with struggling students) due to "its brevity, its rhythm and musical qualities, and its ability to paint pictures in our minds in just a few words."

Saddled with a basal reader and workbooks that were "uninspiring and often tedious," Concannon-Gibney took advantage of the autonomy granted by her principal and taught her students about visualizing, inferring, empathy, and making connections with poems on contemporary social justice issues. "In this way," she says, "I could enrich my reading instruction, enhance their reading abilities, and address the need for meaningful curriculum integration in my classroom."

To explore bullying and stir students' moral imagination, Concannon-Gibney shared the poem *Left Out* by Celia Warren, which describes a young girl who feels isolated from her peers (click the link below to see the full text). She displayed the poem on a chart and read it aloud, modeling appropriate prosody, as students read along. Students then read the poem silently and then the class discussed:

- What is the poem about?
- How do you know?
- Is this a happy poem? Why or why not?

Taking a line or two at a time, Concannon-Gibney talked about what she visualized – saw in her mind's eye – and asked, "What feeling do I get from this image? Have I felt this feeling recently?" and invited students to pair up and share any recent connections they made to the feelings the poem evoked. This sparked lively conversations that students then shared with other pairs and the whole class, comparing their interpretations.

Returning to the poem on the chart, Concannon-Gibney asked if it could be read differently given students' personal reflections, and if reading it more slowly or with a different tone would make a difference. This prompted a lively discussion, and students again paired up

and explored and rehearsed different ways of reading the poem and were eager to perform them for the class – and subsequently with other classes.

The next poem was *Sitting in a Doorway* by John Foster, about the plight of a homeless person (click the link below for the text). “Sadly,” says Concannon-Gibney, “homelessness is quite a prominent feature of Irish society, and the children were quite aware of this social justice issue.” Following a similar sequence to *Left Out*, she added these questions:

- What feelings are in the poem?
- What words create these feelings?

This got students engaged in a close reading of the poem; they discussed the poet’s word choices and recorded their discussion on a chart using sticky notes. “We then attempted to visualize the poem,” she says, “and I encouraged the children to add color to their visualization to illustrate the feelings evoked by the poem.” The class read the poem again in light of their mental images, inferred what the poet might be thinking, added to their thought bubbles, and made text-to-self connections.

With a third poem, *Captain Save-the-Planet* by Rodger Stevens on climate change (click for the text), Concannon-Gibney started with just the title and asked students to discuss what such a captain would look and act like. She then displayed and read the poem aloud and asked the class to look for clues to add to their visualization. With their own copies of the poem, kids underlined words or phrases and described the appearance and qualities of the captain and shared them with the class and she highlighted them on the chart. They looked for words that implied the captain was a “good guy,” words or phrases that implied that other characters were “bad guys,” and what connections and conclusions were sparked by the poem.

Concannon-Gibney encourages teachers to use poems on other social justice themes, including children’s rights, gender stereotypes, migration, and cultural diversity (see the article link below for suggested collections). It’s important that teachers choose poems carefully, she adds, “as sometimes there may be children who are directly affected by the themes and may be sensitive to the content of the lesson.”

[“Comprehending Poetry with Social Justice Themes”](#) by Tara Concannon-Gibney in *The Reading Teacher*, October 31, 2023; the author is at tara.concannon-gibney@dcu.ie.

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7. Prompting AI Chatbots for SEL Lesson Ideas

This collection of suggested prompts, developed by AI for Education in collaboration with Margot Toppen, can elicit from a chatbot like ChatGPT ideas for developing K-12 lessons on social-emotional learning topics:

- *Reflective journaling*: Create a list of journal reflection prompts that help students reflect on their emotions, strengths, and goals.
- *Mindfulness*: Design mindfulness strategies to help my students cope with stress, test anxiety, and feelings of isolation.
- *Classroom meetings*: Create a class meeting agenda that fosters inclusion, empathy, perspective-taking, respect for others, and a positive community.

- *Cooperative learning*: Design a cooperative learning project for [a curriculum unit] that includes strategies to help students develop positive relationships with their peers.
- *Conflict resolution role-play*: Generate culturally responsive role-playing scenarios to help students practice navigating difficult situations, solve problems, and/or resolve conflicts.
- *Modeling SEL competencies*: Brainstorm different strategies that I can use to model [specific SEL skills and competencies] for my students.

For more SEL prompts and other ideas, click [here](#).

[“6 Strategies for Using AI for Social-Emotional Learning”](#) from AI for Education, developed in collaboration with Margot Toppen, December 1, 2023

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8. Recommended Children’s Books on ADHD

“The world needs all kinds of minds,” says South Carolina literacy specialist Marie Havran (Furman University) in this *Literacy Today* feature, “and our students need exposure to neurodivergent characters with rich and multidimensional stories.” She suggests the following books on attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (books on autism, dyslexia, and Tourette syndrome in future Memos):

Primary grades:

- *Mrs. Gorski, I Think I Have the Wiggle Fidgets* by Barbara Esham, illustrated by Mike and Carl Gordon
- *My Brain Is a Race Car: A Children’s Guide to a Neuro-Divergent Brain* by Nell Harris
- *My Busy, Busy Brain: The ABCDs of ADHD* by Nicole Russell, illustrated by Antoinette Thomas
- *Pay Attention, Emily Brown!* by Linda Burton, illustrated by Carl Burton
- *Sarabella’s Thinking Cap* by Judy Schachner

Middle grades:

- *Each Tiny Spark* by Pablo Cartaya
- *Focused* by Alyson Gerber
- *It’s the End of the World and I’m in My Bathing Suit* by Justin Reynolds
- *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* by Jack Gantos
- *Lights, Camera, Disaster* by Erin Dionne
- *The Boy with the Butterfly Mind* by Victoria Williamson

[“Children’s and YA Literature: Centering Neurodiversity”](#) by Marie Havran in *Literacy Today*, October/November/December 2023; Havran can be reached at marie.havran@furman.edu.

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If you have feedback or suggestions, please e-mail kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Ed (formerly Ed. Magazine)
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education