Marshall Memo 1011

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 13, 2023

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Phonics is essential but not enough… Reading is complex and multifaceted. Skilled readers use phonics but always in conjunction with other sources of information."

Catherine Compton-Lilly, Lucy Spence, Paul Thomas, and Scott Decker (see item #1)

"We need to give them the basic tools and then play with them in many different ways so they can explore the beauty of math."

Daniel Ansari (quoted in item #4)

"The goal of education should never be trying to make some people feel superior. It should be to make everyone smarter, to get them to push their minds further and to help them gain the knowledge and skills to live up to their potential."

Jonathan Loving in one of several letters to *The New York Times* responding to an article by Tim Donahue about grade inflation, November 7, 2023

"Generative AI greatly reduces the degree to which access to expertise is an obstacle to education… What does it mean for education that, at any point when a learner needs an answer to a question, needs a different explanation, needs another example, needs some practice, needs some feedback, or needs any of the myriad other things that someone with expertise in a discipline could provide in support of their learning, they have immediate access to that expertise?"

David Wiley in "The Near-Term Impact of Generative AI on Education, in One Sentence" in *Improving Learning*, October 17, 2023

"Humility isn't thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less."

C.S. Lewis (quoted in item #8)

1. What It Takes for All Children to Read Well

"Phonics is essential but not enough," say Catherine Compton-Lilly, Lucy Spence, and Scott Decker (University of South Carolina/Columbia), and Paul Thomas (Furman University) in this article in *The Reading Teacher*. "Reading is complex and multifaceted. Skilled readers use phonics but always in conjunction with other sources of information." Reading involves four neurological processes, all of which are involved in successfully making meaning from written texts:

- Phonetics – the sounds of a language;
- Orthographics – conventions of written language;
- Semantics – word meanings and general knowledge;
- Syntax – the arrangement of words and phrases in a sentence.

Compton-Lilly, Spence, Decker, and Thomas believe the ongoing debate about reading instruction is best understood in stories about individual students. They describe a third grader, Brittany, reading part of a story as her teacher listens: "Once upon a time there was a pond that was home to a family of frogs. But one morning they *decided* a surprise visitor." Brittany pauses and immediately re-reads, correcting her error: "…they *discovered* a surprise visitor."

Why did she stop? *Decided* was phonetically quite close to the correct word, *discovered*, but Brittany realized that she had the wrong word, without prompting from her teacher, because of syntax and semantics – her understanding of the English language, her background knowledge, and therefore what made sense in that context. "As neuroscientists have described," say the authors, "Brittany is learning to orchestrate multiple sources of information as she reads. Brittany's brain is developing reading networks that connect visual images (e.g., letters and words), language patterns, and sounds, to meaning."

Compton-Lilly, Spence, Decker, and Thomas then describe the reading struggles of four other children:

- Sam reads fluently and with appropriate phrasing, but doesn't understand what he's reading.
- Sheila makes numerous decoding miscues and skips words, but she talks in detail about the stories she's reading.
- Tanya reads quickly and does not pause when she misreads words, hoping that if she reads quickly her teacher won't notice her mistakes.
- Cedrick reads whole pages accurately, but freezes when he encounters a word he doesn't know, waiting for help from his teacher.

"While these children all struggle with reading," say the authors, "phonics is not the universal solution." Rather, it's essential that their teachers carefully observe kids as they read, notice the kinds of errors they're making, and intervene appropriately. Sensible next steps with each of the students above:

- Sam needs help thinking about the ideas presented in the text while he reads so he can link those ideas together.
- Sheila is making meaning but needs to get better at recognizing when her reading diverges from what's on the page, especially when her errors affect comprehension.
- Tanya needs to move beyond seeing reading as something to be done for her teacher and engage in reading opportunities that are engaging and purposeful.
- Cedrick has a strong visual memory for words but must develop strategies for when he encounters words he doesn't know.

"All children," say the authors, "need resourceful teachers who can expertly draw upon multiple instructional strategies to meet the needs of their students… Based on close observation, teachers can determine when, how much, and what types of support particular children need. The goal is to help children attend to previously ignored aspects of text. Students make accelerated progress when their teachers are adept at observing and responding to them as readers."

"Given the diversity of learners and the complexity of reading," conclude Compton-Lilly, Spence, Decker, and Thomas, "it is impossible to justify a simple or single approach to teaching reading… Differences in how children become readers reflect cultural, educational, familial, and experiential backgrounds, which can be affected by economic, social, and nutritional inequalities. In short, the 'human factor' – differences among individuals and groups of people, their practices and interactions – disrupts the possibility of narrow and universal solutions for helping all children become readers."

In other words, effective reading instruction is an equity issue, and ineffective practices harm students with the greatest needs.

"Stories Grounded in Decades of Research: What We Truly Know About the Teaching of Reading" by Catherine Compton-Lilly, Lucy Spence, Paul Thomas, and Scott Decker in *The Reading Teacher*, November 2, 2023; the authors can be reached at comptonlilly@sc.edu, spence2@email.sc.edu, paul.thomas@furman.edu, and sdecker@mailbox.sc.edu.

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2. Groupwork That Is Challenging, Empowering, Engaging, and Equitable

In this article in *Middle School Journal*, Barbara Ann Swartz and Katherine DeRosa (West Chester University of Pennsylvania) note the important social-emotional benefits of students working in groups, but raise a common concern: how to ensure that all students are participating equitably and engaging with the academic content? "The most important part of implementing effective groupwork," say Swartz and DeRosa, "is to think through *how* you want your students to participate and why it is important that they work together."

Two key elements need to be present, they believe: a participation structure that shows students specifically how to participate in the group's work, and "group-worthy" tasks.

• *Participation structure* – This is key to supporting all students in contributing to the final product and includes:

- Individual roles to provide space for hesitant students to engage – for example, students randomly assigned to be the facilitator, monitor of equitable participation, supply manager, and reporter;
- Clear directions on the instructional task for all members;
- Prompts and sentence stems to keep conversations on task and advance the work;
- Additional scaffolding from the teacher if students are stuck.

The teacher circulates around the classroom, but doesn't intervene with a group until students have used each other as resources (answering an individual student's query by asking, "Is this a group question?").

• *Group-worthy tasks* – To get all students fully immersed in a lesson, the academic task needs to:

- Be open-ended and require complex problem-solving;
- Have multiple entry points and opportunities to show intellectual competence;
- Deal with content-based, intellectually important material;
- Require positive interdependence and individual accountability;
- Include clear criteria for evaluation of the group's product.

Swartz and DeRosa give two examples of group-worthy tasks for middle-school students: the NCTM Counting Cubes task for math classes and for ELA, a Stanford University lesson on metaphors and similes in the Langston Hughes poem about "a dream deferred" (click the article link for details).

"Designing the Supports for Successful Groupwork: How to Make Your Task Group-Worthy" by Barbara Ann Swartz and Katherine DeRosa in *Middle School Journal*, November 2023 (Vol. 54, #5, pp 4-15); Swartz can be reached at bswartz@wcupa.edu.

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3. Helping Elementary Students Understand Mathematical Equivalence

In this article in *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, Jodi Davenport, Yvonne Kao, and Kristen Johannes (WestEd), Caroline Byrd Hornburg (Virginia Tech), and Nicole McNeil (University of Notre Dame) say that elementary students understanding mathematical equivalence "is a critical precursor to advanced mathematical concepts and algebraic thinking." But most students don't grasp the concept before moving on to middle school, say the authors, and "traditional instruction may perpetuate unhelpful misconceptions."

Why do students not understand equivalence? It stems from "logical, but inappropriate, generalization of knowledge constructed from narrow experiences in early mathematics," say the authors. "Repeated practice solving arithmetic problems in traditional formats [3 + 2 = 5], coupled with a lack of explicit instruction on equivalence, leads students to develop long-term memory representations of equations that focus on operations (e.g., the calculations involved)

rather than relations (specifically, that the equal sign expresses a relationship between the two sides of an equation)." Children come to believe, not unreasonably, that the equal sign is shorthand for "find the answer" to the numbers on the left.

There have been a number of attempts to change this mistaken learning trajectory, say Davenport et al., none of them very successful. Looking for a better way, they studied the ICUE intervention (Improving Children's Understanding of Equivalence) in a large sample of California second-grade classrooms, implemented in 32 supplementary lessons in two 15-20-minute sessions per week over 16 weeks. The study found that using all four of the ICUE's key components together produced significant, robust gains in students' understanding of this key mathematical building block – without sacrificing computational fluency:

• *Introducing the equal sign before arithmetic* – ICUE starts using the equal sign to compare objects (dogs and bones, lightbulbs and lamps, boxes of stickers) outside of and prior to standard arithmetic.

• *Using nontraditional arithmetic practice* – using different formats like ___ = 9 + 8, presenting problems in sets with equivalent values (2 + 5 = __, 3 + 4 = __, 6 + 1 = __), and using "is equal to" and "is the same amount as" rather than the equal sign.

• *Using concreteness fading exercises* – Teachers using ICUE began with concrete examples, comparing sets of real objects, and then gradually shifted to numerical representations.

• *Using comparison and explanation* – Students in the intervention classes were asked to compare and explain different problem formats and problem-solving strategies, which required them to articulate and justify generalizations about which were correct and which were incorrect.

"Improving Children's Understanding of Mathematical Equivalence: An Efficacy Study" by Jodi Davenport, Yvonne Kao, Kristen Johannes, Caroline Byrd Hornburg, and Nicole McNeil in *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, October-December 2023 (Vol. 16, #4, pp. 615-642); Davenport can be reached at jdavenp@wested.org.

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4. Back to Basics with Math Facts?

In this *Edutopia* article, Holly Korbey reports on the recent trend toward elementary teachers spending more time on basic mathematics skills. This is part of the response to anemic NAEP scores in math: in 2022, only 36 percent of fourth graders and 26 percent of eighth graders scored proficient and above. Are foundational math skills part of the solution?

Research suggests that *fluency* in whole-number addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division facts is critical to math achievement, says Korbey: "The goal of practice is to move foundational skills into long-term memory so they become quick and automatic." Math is "relentlessly hierarchical," says psychologist Kathrin Maki (University of Florida), and more-advanced skills and concepts are much easier to master when the basics are in place.

Of course conceptual understanding is also important, but some experts believe there's been an "overcorrection" at the expense of students learning the basics, says Korbey. She

quotes cognitive scientist Daniel Ansari (University of Western Ontario) on what works best for students: "We need to give them the basic tools and then play with them in many different ways so they can explore the beauty of math."

Why are math facts neglected in so many classrooms? "An overstuffed curriculum and the drive to cover an overwhelming number of standards," says Korbey; "test prep pressure, and instructional philosophies that consider repetitive practice, sometimes negatively referred to as 'rote' or 'drill and kill,' to be uniformly harmful and to be avoided at all costs." Also, many math programs haven't built in enough practice problems.

In fact, says Korbey, improving math fluency doesn't require huge amounts of time. "Frequent, low-stakes quizzes, entry and exit tickets, and some digital games, like FactFreaks, can offer effective retrieval practice," she reports. And interleaving (mixing together) different skills – not just drilling the same set – adds to the power of retrieval because students must decide which skill they need to use and become much more nimble in solving real math problems.

"Should More Time Be Spent Learning Math Facts?" by Holly Korbey in *Edutopia*, October 20, 2023

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5. Data on Teachers Sending Students to the Office

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Jing Liu (University of Maryland/College Park), Emily Penner (IZA Institute of Labor Economics, Germany), and Wenjing Gao (University of California/Irvine) report on their four-year study of teachers' office discipline referrals in a large, diverse urban school district in California. Liu, Penner, and Gao drew on "exceptionally detailed administrative data" on students who got in trouble with teachers, noting that there was wide variation in what different teachers considered defiant and disruptive behavior. The study's findings:

- Only about a third of teachers in the district ever made an office referral in a given year.
- Half of those teachers referred fewer than five students a year.
- The average referral rate was less than one student every two months.
- A small number of teachers (1.7 percent) referred over 48 students a year.
- These "top referrers" accounted for 34.8 percent of total office discipline referrals.
- The less experienced teachers were, the more likely they were to be top referrers.
- The top referrers were most likely to teach in middle schools.
- Black and Hispanic teachers were much less likely to be top referrers than their white colleagues.
- The top referrers were much more likely to refer more African-American and Hispanic students than white and Asian students.
- The top 5 percent of referring teachers effectively doubled racial referring gaps in the district.
- Those gaps cascaded into racial gaps in out-of-school suspensions.

- Only about 25 percent of top referrers in a given year were still in that category the next year, and an even smaller percent the following year.

This last finding, say Liu, Penner, and Gao, "suggest that extensive referring behavior is quite malleable," and can be changed by coaching on classroom management – especially among less-experienced teachers. The authors encourage school and district leaders to track office referral data in real time and intervene early with teachers who are frequent flyers.

"Troublemakers? The Role of Teacher Referrers in Expanding Racial Disciplinary Disproportionalities" by Jing Liu, Emily Penner, and Wenjing Gao in *Educational Researcher*, November 2023 (Vol. 52, #8, pp. 469-481); Liu can be reached at jliu28@umd.edu.

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6. Helping Students Deal with Negative Self-Talk

In this *Kappan* article, special educator/consultant Jessica Minahan says that in the wake of the pandemic, it's unrealistic to expect school counselors and psychologists to keep up with the increased caseload of students with high levels of anxiety. That leaves a lot to teachers, most of whom don't have training in dealing with mental health issues. There's been an increase in all-or-nothing thinking among students (*I stink at math*), catastrophic ideation (*If I fail this test, I'll never get into college*), and avoidance, shutting down, defiance, and disengagement. Giving students pep talks and incentives, says Minahan, is rarely successful at silencing the "internal chatter of negative thinking."

However, she believes that if teachers use several "targeted and easy-to-implement strategies," they can reduce students' anxiety and improve their social-emotional, behavioral, and academic performance. It's possible to quite quickly change students' perspectives, head off some negative patterns, and disprove unhelpful perceptions with evidence, by:

• *Reframing with specifics* – A student might say she's having a "horrible" day, blowing a relatively minor incident (her essay was criticized by a teacher) out of proportion. Without minimizing the student's feelings, a teacher might help her focus on the details: *Looks like he made three corrections in the first paragraph and made only positive comments on the remaining pages*. "It's a strategy that the student can easily use on her own," says Minahan, "giving her a way to take a more-balanced – and not so emotionally fraught and stressful – view of her experiences."

• *Reframing with visuals* – If a student is distraught about spilling a water bottle or not being able to open his locker, the teacher might draw a circle and then sketch the small fraction of the whole represented by these two upsetting experiences, helping the student put them in perspective.

• *Narrating the positive* – With an elementary student who is despondent at the beginning of recess because he can't find anyone to play with – but then does – the teacher might say, "Wow, it looks like you two have been playing for ten minutes straight." The student is then more likely to reflect back on recess and have a more-accurate perception (*I played with Nathan!*).

• *Conducting regular check-ins* – First thing in the morning, students might put anonymous sticky notes on a wall chart indicating their mood (*I'm great, I'm okay, I'm meh, I'm struggling, I'm having a hard time, I'm in a really dark place*) and, if necessary, follow up with a one-on-one check-in meeting with the teacher.

• *Giving assignments that appear do-able* – "The way in which you introduce and assign an academic task can do a lot to ward off anxieties and negative thoughts," says Minahan. This is especially true with multi-step projects, essays, and science experiments, where giving clear, chunked directions, milestones, and reminders can make the work feel manageable.

• *Asking students to monitor their own progress* – With a student who thinks she can't write *anything*, the teacher might provide a three-column chart with specific tasks (coming up with an idea, outlining, introduction, finishing, proofreading), strategies that might help, and what actually happened. When the work is finished, the teacher goes over the chart writing a check-mark for what happened at each step. The student might realize that only part of the writing process is challenging.

• *Self-assessing on expectations and recollections* – When an assignment is first given and triggers some anxieties, students are asked to rate how difficult they think it is, and then when it's finished, rate it again, noting any disparities. This may tone down some of the initial jitters some students (or the whole class) might feel about new work.

• *Asking students to rate the separate components of a task* – With essay-writing, for example, the teacher might break it down into component parts (starting with pencil-sharpening) and ask each student to rate how much they like each one on a three-point scale (*I like it, It's okay, I don't like it*). Having students fill out their individual sheets at the beginning of a new assignment might help them get started with a more-positive attitude.

"Tackling Negative Thinking in the Classroom" by Jessica Minahan in *Kappan*, November 2023 (Vol. 105, #3, pp. 24-29); Minahan can be reached at jessica@jessicaminahan.com.

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7. Should We Ban Cellphones During the School Day?

In this *New York Times* column, Pamela Paul says she refused to get her own children cellphones until high school. All the arguments for caving in earlier are really about adult convenience, she says: "As much as we lament the besotted, agonized, needy relationship our kids have with their phones, that same phone lets parents off the hook. If we screw something up, we can always text: Remember your grandfather's birthday! Don't forget violin. So sorry, I can't pick you up this afternoon. You forget your Chromebook."

One study found that teens are on their phones 43 minutes *during the school day*, mostly social media, gaming, and YouTube. Paul is delighted that some schools are now forbidding cellphone use in classrooms – some for the entire school day. The result: "less bullying, increased student engagement, even actual eye contact between students and teachers in the hallway." An administrator in a cellphone-free secondary school in Ireland said, "It's hard to measure, but we find the place has a happier atmosphere for everyone."

What about convenience – and safety? "Our own parents," says Paul, "would just call the front office – in *an emergency*. Not because they wanted to make sure we remembered to walk the dog. And really, if we're trying to teach kids to be safe, responsible, and independent, shouldn't we give them the leeway to do so? Phones don't teach kids these values; parents do."

"Kids Aren't the Ones with the Cellphone Problem" by Pamela Paul in *The New York Times*, November 10, 2023

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8. Jim Knight on Learning to Be Humble

(Originally titled "Five Habits of Humility")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Jim Knight (University of Kansas, Instructional Coaching Group) says that when he asks school leaders and instructional coaches to describe people who have positively shaped their lives, humility is always mentioned. Knight recently asked his online contacts to define humility and especially liked this response: "Humility involves putting aside pride, position, and ego to connect with others and assist them in reaching their desired goals."

The opposite of humility is arrogance. Knight believes an important challenge is finding the right mix of humility, servant leadership, and self-efficacy. He quotes C.S. Lewis: "Humility isn't thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less." Knight believes humility is a learned skill and offers these tips (he's working on these himself):

• *Listen first*. "When we authentically listen," he says, "we quiet our minds and prioritize what the other person is saying so we can understand their needs and emotions."

• *See the good in others*. "When we let go of the need to judge and adopt a desire to appreciate," says Knight, "we move closer to being humble."

• *Be ready to admit when you're wrong*. Good questions to ask: *If someone were to criticize this idea, what would they say? What can you see here that I'm missing?*

• *Get a clear picture of reality*. This is why watching videos of classrooms and meetings is such a powerful coaching tool.

• *Speak humbly*. Knight flinches when school leaders talk about "My school" and "My teachers." Better to talk about "Our school" and use tentative sentences like, "Let me just put this on the table for us to discuss…" and "You know more about your students than I do…"

"Five Habits of Humility" by Jim Knight in *Educational Leadership*, November 2023 (Vol. 81, #3, pp. 78-79); Knight can be reached at jimknight@mac.com.

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9. How to Improve a ChatGPT Prompt

In this article in *School Library Journal*, Virginia educators Idamae Craddock and Kristen Wilson suggest six ways to improve results when tapping into ChatGPT and other large language models:

- *Be specific*. Include the information, tone, voice, audience, length, and type of output you're seeking; long prompts will work just as well as a short one.
- *Provide background information*. If you're asking for a lesson plan, tell how many students you're teaching, their ages, the languages they speak, and the preceding curriculum unit.
- *Mind your manners*. If your prompt uses crude language, the LLM will respond in kind; if you use polite language, you'll train it to respond in kind.
- *State your constraints*. You can request a 20-minute lesson plan, a 750-word article, a list of 10 historical events.
- *Fine-tune*. If you don't get what you're looking for the first time, re-word your prompt.
- *Push back*. "If the output is incorrect, too long, too short, the wrong tone, wrong information, or wrong structure," say Craddock and Wilson, "you need to reply with that feedback. Treat the prompt as a conversation – that's what it is."

"Six Prompt Tips" by Idamae Craddock and Kristen Wilson in *School Library Journal*, November 2023 (Vol. 69, #11, p. 16)

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10. Recommended Books About the Native American Experience

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Cynthia Leitich Smith suggests eight books as a follow-up for students who've watched *Reservation Dogs*, an award-winning TV series about four Native American teens and their intergenerational tribal community on a modern-day Oklahoma reservation (click the article link below for cover images and brief synopses):

- *Two Tribes* by Emily Bowen Cohen, grade 5 and up
- *A Snake Falls to Earth* by Darcie Little Badger, grade 7-10
- *Rez Ball* by Byron Graves, narrated by Jesse Nobess, grade 8 and up
- *Firekeeper's Daughter* by Angeline Boulley, grade 9 and up
- *Dreaming in Indian: Contemporary Native American Voices* edited by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale, grade 6-9
- *If I Ever Get Out of Here* by Eric Gansworth, grade 9 and up
- *Give Me Some Truth* by Eric Gansworth, grade 9 and up
- *Hearts Unbroken* by Cynthia Leitich Smith, grade 9 and up

"Reading About the Rez" by Cynthia Leitich Smith in *School Library Journal*, November 2023 (Vol. 69, #11, pp. 13-15)

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

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

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

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

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