# Marshall Memo 823

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 10, 2020

## In This Issue:



## Quotes of the Week

"In profound ways, literacy is destiny. It is the single most important goal of schooling and the key to academic and career success."

Mike Schmoker (see item #1)

"Without a solid foundation of core knowledge stored in one's own memory, a student cannot move nimbly through the world of ideas, building on some and rejecting others. Additionally, students require background knowledge to decipher texts and understand references."

Kyle Redford in "For Reading Comprehension, Knowledge is Power" in *Educational Leadership*, February 2020 (Vol. 77, #5, pp. 52-56), available for ASCD members and for purchase at https://bit.ly/2tJE4SD; Redford can be reached at kredford@mcds.org.

"Do not assume students have already been taught how to collaborate or that they should know better."

Jennifer Gonzalez (see item #5)

"Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them."

James Baldwin, quoted in "*Errare Humanum Est*: A Teaching Odyssey" by Yekaterina McKenney in *English Journal*, January 2020 (Vol. 109, #3, pp. 17-19), no e-link available; McKenney can be reached at ymckenney@warriors.winnacunnet.org.

"Remember, it's all about relationships."

Words of wisdom from a principal to a rookie middle-school teacher working late into the evening before the first day of school, in "Revitalizing English Language Arts Through Social and Emotional Learning" by Rick Marlatt in *English Journal*, January 2020 (Vol. 109, #3, pp. 44-49); Marlatt is at rmarlatt@nmsu.edu.

"…teachers pretending to teach and students pretending to learn."

Quoted in item #4

## 1. Mike Schmoker on a Radically Simplified ELA Curriculum

(Originally titled "Radical Reset: The Case for Minimalist Standards")

"In profound ways, literacy is destiny," says author/speaker/consultant Mike Schmoker in this *Educational Leadership* article. "It is the single most important goal of schooling and the key to academic and career success." The Common Core standards were a well-intentioned effort to pare down ELA standards and support effective literacy instruction, says Schmoker, but he believes the standards went off the rails – an important reason that American students' achievement over the last decade has flatlined.

What went wrong? "In the heady development phase, there was plenty to like about the ELA Common Core," says Schmoker. "They called for vastly more content-rich, grade-level reading, discussion, writing – and writing instruction – across subject areas." The Common Core ELA's introduction and appendices are "inspiring and largely on-target." However, says Schmoker, the detailed standards created by committees are "an impossible profusion of grade-by-grade minutiae." The result is that many teachers have been spending far too much class time on strategies, skill drills, and worksheets, and students aren't doing much real reading, discussing, and writing grounded in literature and subject-area knowledge. Hence the lack of progress at a national level.

How can we return to the fundamentals that Common Core got right and "reset" literacy instruction in classrooms? Schmoker recommends that school leaders issue explicit public statements describing what went wrong so teachers and parents understand what isn't working and why. Then schools and districts should go about reducing the literacy curriculum to the essentials. For starters, this means intensive, explicit phonics instruction so every student is able to decode text by the end of first grade. But this shouldn't distract from the core of literacy, which Schmoker believes is "frequent, abundant amounts of reading, discussion, and writing" from the very beginning. He agrees with Richard Allington's 2006 goal of students doing at least 60 minutes of reading and 40 minutes of writing (across the curriculum) every day.

Following this general injunction, what do simple, high-leverage standards look like? Schmoker suggests that teacher teams spell out "the approximate number, amount, length, and frequency" of reading, writing, and discussion for each grade level – specifically:

- The number of knowledge-rich, grade-appropriate fiction and non-fiction books, articles, textbook selections, poems, plays, and primary resources students will read in each course (a high-performing network of schools in Texas and Arizona posted its grade-by-grade sequence at https://bit.ly/35FkPak);
- The number of pages of actual text (minus illustrations) that students will read each year (for example, at least 1,000 pages);

- The number and approximate length of inquiry-based discussions, seminars, and debates students engage in – that are "purposeful, grounded in reading, and aligned with simple criteria," says Schmoker, "– for example, speak audibly, clearly, logically, and with civility."
- The number and approximate length of short writing assignments completed each day and week, and more extensive, capstone-like projects at the end of a grading period or year, all assessed with detailed scoring guides and supported by exemplars of high-quality work.

Are such short, basic standards (without detailed skill objectives) enough to guide teachers? asks Schmoker. Absolutely, he says, citing the gains of a number of schools and networks that have taken this approach. "So why wait?" he challenges. "Arrange, as soon as possible, for your school or district teams to develop provisional standards and expectations for reading, discussion, and writing. Then stand back and watch your students' life chances soar."

"Radical Reset: The Case for Minimalist Standards" by Mike Schmoker in *Educational Leadership*, February 2020 (Vol. 77, #5, pp. 44-50), https://bit.ly/2vouIvW; Schmoker can be reached at schmoker@futureone.com.

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## 2. Reading As Liberation

(Originally titled "Freedom for Literacy")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Kimberly Parker (Shady Hill Teacher Training Center) describes being raised by her grandparents on a Kentucky farm with plenty of books and magazines – and the Bible – to peruse. "I was free to read as much as I wanted, whenever I wanted," says Parker, "grounded in the literary traditions of black folks."

Later, as a high-school teacher, she found that many of her students weren't as lucky: "Consistently, what emerged was that the young people with whom I shared a classroom were not reading, mainly because their past literacy struggles resulted in a general dislike of reading." At first Parker thought her own love of books would ignite a similar passion in students, but she saw that was naive. Here are the strategies she developed:

• *Acceleration* – For students reading below level, she taught foundational strategies and built "an intentional literacy community that helped connect them with their reading identities." Students realized they deserved to be literate and that being literate was extraordinarily liberating. At least 20 minutes of class time a day was spent reading.

• *Introspection* – As a student, Parker studied mostly white authors, and as a novice teacher, she covered the traditional canon. Sensing the problem, she worked to make her personal reading more inclusive, including works about indigenous and LGBTQ+ people. "This critical excavation of my own reading life," she says, "enabled me to think about how books have influenced me and the decisions I make about text selection and implementation."

• *Listening to students* – Parker questioned students about previous literacy experiences, and found that those in remedial tracks often had the least choice in what they read. One sophomore described a teacher pushing her class through a novel that was too hard and "old

and boring." Required to complete nightly reading logs made her hate reading and believe she wasn't good at it. Parker began giving students choices and talked often about her own reading journey (which fascinated students). "The only hard and fast rule I have," she says, "is that *not* reading anything is impermissible."

• *Historical perspective* – For African-American students, it's important to know about people for whom literacy was life-changing – Malcolm X, Jacqueline Woodson, Jason Reynolds, Darnell Moore. As author Theresa Perry put it, "Education was how you claimed your humanity, struck a blow for freedom, worked for racial uplift, and prepared yourself for leadership."

• *Mirrors, windows, and doors* – Students must see themselves in the literature they read in school; also, what they read should open their minds to cultures and experiences they haven't yet imagined. "Once young people have a text they want to read, a regular time to read it, and a teacher to assist and guide their growth," says Parker, "they are able to develop their reading identities."

• *One-on-one reading conferences* – "These regular, informal conversations during daily independent reading time," says Parker, "allow me to determine what reading experience a young person is having, what supports they need (which vary from a new book recommendation to affirming their reader identity), and what steps we both need to take next."

• *Book talks* – Parker gives quick daily presentations that provide "just enough information about a text to entice readers," she says; "an overview of the plot, juicy moments, characters that share traits with students, and a culminating cliffhanger." Soon students begin doing books talks as well.

"Freedom for Literacy" by Kimberly Parker in *Educational Leadership*, February 2020 (Vol. 77, #5, pp. 57-61), available to ASCD members and for purchase at https://bit.ly/2vhNuFA; Parker can be reached at kimpossible97@gmail.com.

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## 3. How Teachers' Standards and Expectations Affect Student Performance

In this paper from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Seth Gershenson reports on his study of how the grading practices of eighth- and ninth-grade North Carolina math teachers affected their students' content mastery and downstream math success. Gershenson looked at Algebra I data in North Carolina from 2006 to 2016 because during those years, high-school students were required to take Algebra I and sit for a statewide end-of-course exam. This made it possible to compare students' scores on a common assessment with teachers' grades. For example, if students were given good grades by their teachers but scored poorly on the statewide test, that was an indication of low teacher standards and expectations and/or a watered-down curriculum. The huge data set made it possible for Gershenson to look at grades and test results for the same course across the state, and zero in on teachers and students in the same school in the same year.

Gershenson's focus was on teachers' standards and expectations. "One way that teachers convey their expectations," he says, "sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, is

through the grades they assign. Students can respond to this information by recalibrating their own expectations and beliefs about what's possible, reengaging with school, and putting forth greater effort… When students who have not mastered the material receive passing marks anyway, they can become complacent and fail to reach their full potential. Lax grading is a pernicious practice that provides students and parents with a false sense of security and accomplishment that might prevent them from trying harder, learning more, and maximizing their own future prospects in the 'real world.'"

Across the state, comparing teachers' grades with end-of-course results revealed widespread grade inflation: more than one-third of students who earned a B in Algebra I from their teachers failed to score proficient on the state Algebra I exam, and more than half of B students fell short of the state's "college-and-career-ready" standard. Gershenson interviewed teachers and found a variety of opinions on what grades meant:

- "I kind of think a B is like the new average… and if you're A, it's above average, and if it's a C, then it's like, nobody likes a C anymore."
- "An A in my classroom, unfortunately, means that they probably turned everything in. It's not necessarily A work, but that's what it means because if you put out a rubric, and you're like, 'Okay, they've met these standards, but it's absolutely awful work,' you have to give an A.
- "The teachers who grade a little bit easier, like just easy, they probably struggle with teaching it, and so they feel that they don't want to have to [deal with] complaints, so they just give the kids the grade, so they don't have to hear about it, or they felt guilty that they didn't teach it right."

So what did the study conclude? Here are the major findings:

• Students learned more from teachers who had higher grading standards. In other words, students whose teachers' grades during the Algebra I course were more in line with performance on the state test were the most effective. "No matter how you slice it," says Gershenson, "stricter grading standards appear to have a sizable impact on student performance."

• Teachers with higher grading standards improved their students' performance in subsequent math classes up to two years later, as well as their post-secondary intentions. Gershenson looked at Geometry and Algebra II grades and found a strong link with more realistic grades during the Algebra I course.

• Teachers with higher grading standards significantly improved the learning outcomes of all student subgroups. This was true for male, female, Hispanic, and African-American students, and for those with strong and weak math backgrounds.

• Teachers with higher grading standards significantly improved student learning in all types of schools. In affluent and less-affluent schools, and in middle and high schools with different school climates, the power of teacher standards and expectations was almost identical.

• Teachers who attended selective colleges, held graduate degrees, and had more experience tended to have higher grading standards. Female teachers also had higher standards than male teachers.

• Grading standards tended to be higher in middle schools, suburban schools, and schools serving more-advantaged students. "More-affluent schools have grading standards that are, on average, more than one-third of a standard deviation stricter," says Gershenson.

"Great Expectations: The Impact of Rigorous Grading Practices on Student Achievement" by Seth Gershenson, February 2020, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, https://bit.ly/37h4IQH

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## 4. Lifting the Curtain on *SparkNotes*

In this *English Journal* article, Jeraldine Kraver (University of Northern Colorado) juxtaposes every English teachers' dream – students deeply appreciating great literature – with the hard reality that many students use *SparkNotes* and other sites to avoid reading assigned books, or peek at the notes of the student sitting next to them in class and fake engagement in discussions. The latter scenarios can create a dynamic once described as "teachers pretending to teach and students pretending to learn."

What is to be done? Kraver believes teachers have to meet students where they are and convince them that "getting over" in English class is not in their long-term interest. "To do so," she says, "we must bring *SparkNotes* from the shadows of 'getting away with it' into the harsh fluorescent light of the classroom."

The underlying issue in students' avoidance of "great books" is the question familiar to every middle- and high-school English teacher: *Why do we have to read this?* Kraver's answer (which doesn't convince many students at first) is that literature "challenges us by raising complex, difficult, and essential questions that matter at every point in our lives…

- *Who am I?*
- *What might I become?*
- *What is the world in which I find myself?*
- *How might it be changed for the better?*

I tell my students that meaningful texts raise questions that are as profound today as they were when the writers posed them." Kraver believes literary classics can, if they are taught well, connect with these deeper purposes; with easier, more-engaging books, students don't need much help, and the teacher's role is, to be blunt, superfluous.

Grappling with difficult texts also prepares students for situations in college, the workplace, and life where they must engage with material that they don't find engaging. "Our content," she contends, "should include literary and canonical texts that enlarge their world, stretch their frames of reference, and expand their zones of proximal development… At the same time, making a text matter is impossible if students do not read. How is a teacher to start?"

That's where the usually-forbidden crutch sites come in. "*SparkNotes*, more than any cajoling on my part," says Kraver, "can illustrate to students why their interaction with texts is fundamental to a meaningful reading experience. Analyzing *SparkNotes* study guides alongside the actual texts reveals to students the dangers in abdicating their role as meaning-makers, thus

developing their agency and self-efficacy." Here's how she uses this strategy as her class reads *The Odyssey*:

- Students read Book One of the poem for homework.
- In class, they read the *SparkNotes* summary of that book together.
- Working in groups, students discuss the differences between the original text and the *SparkNotes* version.
- Kraver displays the *SparkNotes* version and the class analyzes key differences, reading some lines aloud. Students consider these questions:
  - What don't we get in *SparkNotes* that we do from the actual text?
  - How does that affect how we understand the situation and/or the characters?
  - How are our understandings of the text different based on the two versions?
  - Do any interpretive words appear in the *SparkNotes* passage? If so, what are they?
  - How could these words affect the reader's understanding?
- For homework, students read the *GradeSaver* version of the same section of *The Odyssey* (it's quite different from *SparkNotes*) and write about what both sites can and cannot do.
- Back in the classroom, students discuss their reflections in groups, then with the class.
- The class lists what has been excluded and discuss the impact.

This sequence, says Kraver, always produces lively class discussions, gets students into the original text, makes connections to students' own experiences, and opens their eyes to the need for close reading. Students' takeaway, she says, is almost always that they should read the original text first, then the *SparkNotes* summary to make sure they didn't miss anything important.

Another assignment is having students read a chapter of an original text and then two online versions, discussing and writing about distortions, errors, and omissions. "Often," says Kraver, "they discover interpretive insertions that do not quite align with their sense of the original. Through in-class discussions of their observations, students realize that, with appropriate textual support, their claims are as valid as – if not more valid than – the supposed 'experts' of these sites. Together, these assignments reinforce for students how these sites usurp the reader's role in the transaction with the text and empower them, as readers and meaning-makers, to assert their own conclusions."

Kraver believes there are four reasons this approach works so well with secondary and college students:

- They realize that the teacher knows about *SparkNotes*, and see that her concern is not about cheating but meaning-making, which builds trust.
- Because assignments involve group work, students develop the kind of classroom community needed for collaboration, learning, and success.
- Students who have availed themselves of *SparkNotes* or other similar resources (which is almost everyone, says Kraver) feel a common bond with their classmates.

- These assignments provide what she describes as "an early glimpse into how students engage with literature and offer a baseline sample of their analytical and argumentative writing."

"Challenging Spark, Cliffs, and The-Kid-Who-Sits-Next-to-Me's Notes" by Jeraldine Kraver in *English Journal*, January 2020 (Vol. 109, #3, pp. 60-66); e-link for subscribers only; Kraver can be reached at Jeraldine.Kraver@unco.edu.

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## 5. Jennifer Gonzalez on Effective Use of Cooperative Learning

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez recalls that when she was a middle-school English teacher, she often had students work in groups – sometimes to brainstorm ideas, sometimes as a break from the whole-class routine, and, she confesses, sometimes to lighten her grading load (30 final products versus 120).

But cooperative work was not without its problems. Some groups didn't stay on task, there were personality clashes, absences complicated things, and certain students ended up doing most of the work in their groups. Gonzalez began to question whether cooperative learning was adding value. Recently, she took a careful look at the research and reached out to colleagues to answer some basic questions.

First, is cooperative learning worth it? Researchers say that it is. "In general," summarizes Gonzalez, "when students work together, they make greater academic and social gains than when they compete against one another or when they work individually." But cooperative learning produces these gains only when teachers orchestrate group activities to include these key elements:

- Positive interdependence – Kids must work together to achieve a common goal.
- Individual accountability – Each group member must do his or her part.
- Supportiveness – Students help and encourage each other.
- Developing interpersonal skills – Students are taught how to communicate, tackle problems, and resolve conflicts.
- Processing – Students have time to reflect on their group's interactions.

Implemented with these components, cooperative learning works, and it's especially important given the demands of the 21st-century workplace, where communication, creativity, and collaboration are more important than ever. What's more, says Gonzalez, contemporary Americans' fixation on smartphones "is stunting our ability to have regular conversations and robbing us of all the gifts that come with those interactions. Giving students regular opportunities to share physical space and actually talk through complex problems is a gift they may not get anywhere else, so yes, it's worth it."

Having established the value of cooperative work in classrooms, Gonzalez reached out for solutions to four common challenges:

• *Problem #1: Uneven student contributions in groups* – Quite frequently, academically stronger students do most of the work while others freeload. Or everyone works, but in "parallel play" mode, without truly collaborating. Teachers can address this problem by:

- Explicitly teaching the skills required to work well in a group. This means doing role-plays, modeling desired behaviors, and demonstrating what *not* to do. "Do not assume students have already been taught how to collaborate or that they should know better," says Gonzalez. She advises starting with simple group tasks and debriefing with students. The links in her full article below include a breakdown of skills and rubrics to evaluate group work.

- Structuring the learning task so it lends itself to collaboration. Gonzalez provides links to resources for these approaches:

- Jigsaw, in which each group member learns a discrete body of information and is then responsible for teaching it to the rest of the group.
- Solve in Time, in which students clearly define a problem, research and understand it, come up with a solution, and share their work.
- Kagan Cooperative Learning Structures, including Quiz-Quiz-Trade and Numbered Heads Together.
- Team-based learning, popular in medical schools but applicable in K-12.
- Agile Project Management, breaking large projects into shorter cycles.
- POGIL (Process-Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning), often used in science courses.

It's also important for the teacher to set norms and expectations up front (which might involve students creating group contracts before they get to work), spelling out procedures and roles, and what to do when there are serious disagreements.

• *Problem #2: Interpersonal conflicts* – Researchers have found that psychological safety is an essential prerequisite for successful group work, so it's wise to spend time developing a comfortable group dynamic before students tackle academic tasks. Gonzalez suggests surveying students ahead of time (to avoid personality clashes that might derail a group), doing team-building activities, surveying students in the middle of multi-day cooperative projects, and actively problem-solving when issues arise (perhaps changing groups or having some students work independently).

• *Problem #3: Off-task behavior* – This might be excessive chit-chat, kids on their devices, or just plain fooling around. Gonzalez suggests establishing check-ins when specific tasks must be completed, using a timer for completion of certain tasks, and the teacher being self-critical about an assignment that confuses or doesn't engage students, leading to a mid-course correction.

• *Problem #4: Student absences throwing things off* – "One missed day is usually not a big deal," says Gonzalez, "but if a student misses multiple work days when the group should be actively collaborating, it becomes much harder for that person to make an equal contribution." Her suggestions:

- Design group projects so some parts require everyone's involvement and others are done by individuals and collaboration might be "nice to have" rather than "must have."
- Be clear about individual roles and responsibilities so if a student has been absent, it's clear what he or she must do to catch up.
- Have groups use Google Drive or Hyperdoc, keeping the work in one cloud-accessible place so it's possible for an absent student to contribute from home.

- Let groups use Skype, Facetime, or Google Hangouts to chat with an absent student.
- If a long-term absence is holding a group back, reshuffle groups or have the absent student work individually.

Gonzalez concludes with three practical tips:

- Conduct cooperative projects in the classroom. Differences in students' access to materials, technology, and transportation may create inequities if major collaboration is done outside of school.
- Limit groups to 3-4 students. "Once a group gets larger than four," says Gonzalez, "it becomes easier for students to slip through the cracks."
- Check out collaborative technology. Beyond Google's tools, there are collaborative features in Trello, Asana, Kanbanchi, Slack, Wakelet, and Canvas.

"Making Cooperative Learning Work Better" by Jennifer Gonzalez in *Cult of Pedagogy*, February 3, 2020, https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/making-cooperative-learning-work-better/

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## 6. Classroom Materials on the 19th Amendment

This piece in *School Library Journal* has resources for the upcoming August 18, 2020 centennial of the Constitutional amendment through which women won the right to vote:

Websites:

- Library of Congress material on women's suffrage: www.bit.ly/2TcaLmf
- 2020 Women's Vote Centennial Initiative: www.2020centennial.org
- Crusade for the Vote, National Women's History Museum: www.crusadeforthevote.org
- The Turning Point Suffragist Memorial: www.suffragistmemorial.org

Books:

- *Vote! Women's Fight for Access to the Ballot Box* by Coral Celeste Frazer (Twenty-First Century, 2020), grade 6 and up
- *Women Win the Vote!: 19 for the 19th Amendment* by Nancy Kennedy (Norton, 2020), grades 5-8

Articles:

- "African-American Women and the Nineteenth Amendment" by Sharon Harley, National Park Service, www.bit.ly/35MN06Y
- "How Black Suffragists Fought for the Right to Vote and a Modicum of Respect" by Martha Jones, National Endowment for the Humanities www.bit.ly/36Dnsdw

"The 19th Amendment's Centennial" in *School Library Journal*, Feb. 2020 (Vol. 6, #2, p. 18)

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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 50 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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- A free sample issue

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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
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Essential Teacher
Exceptional Children
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Education Gadfly
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 Magazine