Marshall Memo 1063

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 25, 2024

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1. David Brooks on rethinking the meritocracy

2. The state of the K-12 teaching profession since the 1970s

3. Key factors in teacher turnover

4. Helping students navigate information-rich material

Quotes of the Week

"If you rely on intelligence as the central proxy for ability, you will miss 70 percent of what you want to know about a person."

David Brooks (see item #1)

"Having a fast mental processor upstairs is great, but other traits may do more to determine how much you are going to contribute to society."

David Brooks (*ibid.*)

"Schools should prepare people to build things, not just to think things."

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"Teachers are at once heroes and villains, saints and scapegoats. Throughout the history of the common school in the United States, reforms have repeatedly characterized teachers as both the problem and the solution to the perceived shortcomings of public education."

Matthew Kraft and Melissa Arnold Lyon (see item #2)

"I went into teaching fully expecting a heavy workload. I've had previous jobs where the duties and requirements were substantial and put me under a lot of stress. The difference with this teaching job was the amount of time taken away from me by an enormous amount of nonsensical meetings."

A special education teacher who left the profession (quoted in item #3)

"Educational researchers must continue to attend to the ways in which cultural expectations trap students. How is culture a trap? Culture is a trap when it reduces individuals or groups to stereotypes. It is a trap when it is invoked to explain academic or behavioral outcomes. It is a trap when it is taken out of context, devoid of politics, history, and economics. The reluctance of researchers to study culture is not unwarranted, as culture has so often been used as a trap. But if we do not try to untangle the web, it will continue to entrap us, and we will continue to hear how Asian Americans do well in school because they value education and work hard, or

how militaristic schools are successful because they give structure to kids from chaotic homes."

Joanne Golann (Vanderbilt University) in an *American Journal of Education* review of *The Culture Trap: Ethnic Expectations and Unequal Schooling for Black Youth* by Derron Wallace (2023)

"Students selected their texts from the *New York Times* best-seller lists. They read longer, more-challenging books, and read with much more enthusiasm than ever before. They began to appreciate that reading was something that brought adventure and, even for some, pleasure… I encourage any reading instructor, from junior high to university classes, to consider this theory so students see novels and other books as texts to enjoy instead of test material."

Dewitt Clinton, a retired Wisconsin university professor of English, in a *New York Times* letter responding to Jonathan Malesic's November 10, 2024 article, "I Get Why Students No Longer Read"

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1. David Brooks on Rethinking the Meritocracy

In this article in *The Atlantic*, David Brooks says the American "social ideal" from the late 1800s to the 1950s was a well-bred graduate of Harvard, Princeton, or Yale – "good-looking, athletic, graceful, casually elegant, Episcopalian, and white." These men had a smooth pathway to high-paying jobs, power, and even the White House. "People living according to this social ideal," says Brooks, "valued not academic accomplishment but refined manners, prudent judgment, and the habit of command. This was the age of social privilege."

Then a small group of college presidents, led by James Conant at Harvard, decided that if the U.S. was to prosper and lead in the 20th century, it could no longer be ruled by this narrow, inbred aristocracy. Instead, admission to elite universities should be based on intelligence, with the aim of creating a brainy elite drawn from across the nation. "At least half of higher education, I believe," said Conant, "is a matter of selecting, sorting, and classifying students." He and other educators trusted IQ tests to identify this cognitive elite.

When a few selective universities adopted this mindset, says Brooks, the effect was "transformative, as though someone had turned on a powerful magnet and filaments across wide swaths of the culture suddenly snapped to attention in the same direction. Status markers changed" – and so did family life. Many parents tried to raise children who could get into selective colleges, "ferrying their kids from one supervised skill-building, résumé-enhancing activity to another. It turns out that if you put parents in a highly competitive status race, they will go completely bonkers trying to hone their kids into little avatars of success." Most working-class parents, on the other hand, let their kids be kids, free to wander and explore.

K-12 schools changed as well, cutting down on recess, art, shop, and home economics and spending more time on testing and Advanced Placement classes. "The good test-takers," says Brooks, "get funneled into the meritocratic pressure cooker; the bad test-takers learn, by about age 9 or 10, that society does not value them the same way." The upper end of the job market followed suit; a 2024 study showed that 54 percent of high-achieving lawyers, artists, scientists, business and political leaders had attended the same 34 elite colleges. Recruiters across the board were obsessed with college prestige. In short, Conant's dream of an aristocracy of intelligence became a reality.

But do we have a better elite? The earlier WASP aristocracy "helped produce the Progressive Era, the New Deal, victory in World War II, the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the postwar Pax Americana," says Brooks. "After the meritocrats took over in the 1960s, we got the quagmire of Vietnam and Afghanistan, needless carnage in Iraq, the 2008 financial crisis, the toxic rise of social media, and our current age of political dysfunction. Today, 59 percent of Americans believe that our country is in decline, 69 percent believe that the 'political and economic elite don't care about hard-working people,' 63 percent think experts don't understand their lives, and 66 percent believe that America 'needs a strong leader to take the country back from the rich and powerful.'"

That's the zeitgeist, and it's difficult for parents to pull out of the rat race; their kids might get passed by the tiger mom's kids next door. Teachers must teach to the tests, striving students focus on their GPAs instead of something they're passionate about, and college admissions officers are prisoners of the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. "In other words," says Brooks, "we're all trapped in a system that was built on a series of ideological assumptions that were accepted 70 or 80 years ago but that now look shaky or just plain wrong."

Here are what he considers the six deadly sins of the U.S. meritocratic ethos, each accompanied by a Brooks quote:

- *It overrates intelligence*. "If you rely on intelligence as the central proxy for ability, you will miss 70 percent of what you want to know about a person."
- *Success in school is not the same thing as success in life*. "We train and segregate people by ability in one setting, and then launch them into very different settings."
- *The game is rigged*. "As the meritocracy has matured, affluent parents have invested massively in their children so they can win in the college-admissions arms race."
- *The meritocracy has created an American caste system*. "As in all caste societies, the inequalities involve inequalities not just of wealth but of status and respect." There are troubling disparities in divorce, health, longevity, opioid addiction, and loneliness.
- *The meritocracy has damaged the psyches of the American elite*. "The system has become so instrumentalized – *How can this help me succeed?* – that deeper questions about meaning or purpose are off the table, questions like: *How do I become a generous human being? How do I lead a life of meaning? How do I build good character?"*
- *All this has provoked a populist backlash that is tearing our society apart*. "Many people who have lost the meritocratic race have developed contempt for the entire

system, and for the people it elevates. This has reshaped national politics" – not just in the U.S. but in France, Turkey, Hungary, and Venezuela.

In short, says Brooks, "James Conant and his colleagues dreamed of building a world with a lot of class mixing and relative social comity; we ended up with a world of rigid caste lines and pervasive cultural and political war."

So what is to be done? Moving away from meritocracy is not going to happen, says Brooks; throughout human history, every society has been hierarchical. "What determines a society's health," he believes, "is not the existence of an elite, but the effectiveness of the elite, and whether the relationship between the elites and everybody else is mutually respectful… The challenge is not to end the meritocracy; it's to humanize and improve it… The crucial first step is to change how we define merit… Having a fast mental processor upstairs is great, but other traits may do more to determine how much you are going to contribute to society." Brooks would like us to focus more on four human qualities:

• *Curiosity* – Kids between 14 months and five years old make about 107 inquiries an hour, but schools tend to stamp out kids' natural curiosity. Why? Brooks believes it's because of standardized tests, which push teachers to march through a test-aligned curriculum. This narrow focus produces a lifelong disadvantage, he believes. We need to allow more play and ability for children to keep being curious and pursue their passions.

• *A sense of drive and mission* – An important quality that needs to be uncovered and nurtured in the young is purpose beyond themselves. Perhaps that will be indignation at injustice, compassion for the disadvantaged, the pursuit of new knowledge, creating something beautiful.

• *Social intelligence* – "In an effective meritocracy," says Brooks "we'd want to find people who are fantastic team builders, who have excellent communication and bonding skills… players who have that ineffable ability to make a team greater than the sum of its parts." These non-cognitive skills – listening, empathy, communication – are just as important as technical brilliance.

• *Agility* – This is the ability to size up the different aspects of a situation, see the flow of events, and make good decisions about what to do next. High-IQ experts are seldom good at this, says Brooks, but agile thinkers "can switch among mindsets and riff through alternative perspectives until they find the one that best applies to a given situation."

In short, says Brooks, "If we can orient our meritocracy around a definition of human ability that takes more account of traits like motivation, generosity, sensitivity, and passion, then our schools, families, and workplaces will readjust in fundamental ways." He admires schools like High Tech High where students are immersed in project-based learning, skilled teachers act more as coaches of learning than purveyors of knowledge, and achievement is measured by portfolios of students' best work – papers, speeches, projects – defended in face-to-face presentations to a committee of adults and peers.

Brooks also wants us to redefine the nation's "opportunity structure – the intersecting lattice of paths and hurdles that propel people toward one profession or way of life and away from others." Right now, he says, our opportunity structure is too narrow, channeling kids

through one bottleneck after another to achieve elite status: high grades, good test scores, college and graduate degrees. Better to have "opportunity pluralism," where young people have a broader range of pathways and we have not a single pyramid but a mountain range with many possible peaks of achievement. Brooks suggests four ways to achieve this:

- Prioritize career and technical education – "Schools should prepare people to build things, not just to think things," he says.
- Make national service a rite of passage after high school, which will build friendships across class lines as young people make real contributions to society.
- Invest more in local civic groups and community organizations where young people can serve others, lead meetings, rally neighbors for a cause.
- Support economic policies like the CHIPS and Science Act to boost the U.S. industrial sector and provide jobs for those who don't want professional and office jobs.

Brooks's conclusion: "We want a society run by people who are smart, yes, but who are also wise, perceptive, curious, caring, resilient, and committed to the common good. If we can figure out how to select for people's motivation to grow and learn across their whole lifespan, then we are sorting people by a quality that is more democratically distributed, a quality that people can control and develop, and we will end up with a fairer and more mobile society… We want a meritocracy that will help each person identify, nurture, and pursue the ruling passion of their soul."

"How the Ivy League Broke America" by David Brooks in *The Atlantic*, December 2024 (Vol. 334, #5, pp. 26-40); Brooks can be reached at dabrooks@nytimes.com.

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2. The State of the K-12 Teaching Profession Since the 1970s

In this *American Educational Research Journal* article, Matthew Kraft (Brown University) and Melissa Arnold Lyon (University at Albany) trace the ups and downs of the U.S. teaching profession over the last five decades, measuring prestige, interest among prospective teachers, the pipeline, and on-the-job satisfaction. "We find a consistent and dynamic pattern across every measure," say Kraft and Lyon: "A rapid decline in the 1970s, a swift rise in the 1980s extending into the mid-1990s, relative stability, and then a sustained decline beginning around 2010. The current state of the teaching profession is at or near its lowest levels in 50 years."

Teachers play a central role in shaping young people's academic, emotional, and career trajectories and "also collectively shape the democratic ideals, social cohesion, and economic competitiveness of the nation as a whole," say Kraft and Lyon. "But despite the central role teachers play in our society, they have long struggled to gain and maintain the status of a prestigious profession… Teachers are at once heroes and villains, saints and scapegoats. Throughout the history of the common school in the United States, reforms have repeatedly characterized teachers as both the problem and the solution to the perceived shortcomings of public education."

K-12 schools need to fill more than 200,000 positions a year, so the perceived status of the profession is of great importance. Here's Kraft and Lyon's analysis of four key factors in recruiting and retaining effective teachers:

• *Occupational prestige* – The Harris and Phi Delta Kappa polls have traced public regard for the profession over time. One measure is whether parents want their children to pursue a teaching career. The percentage saying yes in the PDK poll went from 75 percent in 1969 to 46 percent in 1983, rose to over 65 percent by 2011, then fell to 37 percent in 2022.

• *Adolescents' interest in becoming a teacher* – High-school and college students' inclinations are shaped by public perceptions of K-12 teaching, family and peer influences, their own interests, and career opportunities. The rise and fall of interest in a teaching career tracks public perceptions of the prestige of teaching, falling to only 3 percent among first-year college students in the mid-2000s.

• *Those preparing to become teachers* – Not surprisingly, the number enrolling in and completing education degrees also mirrors public prestige and career interest.

• *Job satisfaction* – The pattern is similar, with a high of 52 percent of teachers reporting they are very satisfied with their work in 2001, a decline starting in 2011, falling to a low of 12 percent in 2022 after the pandemic, and then in 2023 a modest uptick to 20 percent.

Kraft and Lyon suggest a number of hypotheses for these trends – economic, sociopolitical, educational policy, and social environment, all of which have some validity:

- Economic hypothesis #1: Declines in funding and subsequent contractions in the teacher labor market reduced interest in the profession.
- Economic hypothesis #2: Stagnant teacher pay has made the profession less attractive.
- Economic hypothesis #3: Rising college costs discourage students from pursuing teaching as a career.
- Sociopolitical hypothesis #1: The women's rights movement opened higher-paying career opportunities in other fields, while school desegregation in the South resulted in many African-American teachers losing their jobs, which discouraged entry to the profession for decades.
- Sociopolitical hypothesis #2: Unionization affected occupational prestige by associating teaching with blue-collar occupations, though it also improved working conditions and pay.
- Educational hypothesis #1: More-rigorous barriers to entry (certification, licensure requirements, and teacher tests) raised prestige but lowered the supply of new teachers (except where alternative routes to the profession have been available).
- Educational hypothesis #2: Teacher accountability, including high-stakes "competency based" teacher evaluation, undercut teacher prestige, interest, preparation, and satisfaction by reducing teacher autonomy and job security.
- School environment hypothesis #1: Unfavorable working conditions make the profession less attractive and enjoyable – among them unmanageable class sizes, weak school leadership, lack of collegiality, time constraints, inadequate resources, and disruptive student behavior.

- School environment hypothesis #2: Safety concerns have made the profession less attractive and enjoyable – perceptions of a "blackboard jungle" in the 1960s and 70s, zero tolerance policies since the 1990s, and school shootings, which spiked in 2017.

Kraft and Lyon sum up what they believe are the most important reasons for the current low point for the teaching profession: stagnant teacher wages, the rising cost of college, the perceived loss of teacher authority and job security, new policies and rhetoric targeting teacher unions, changing cultural perceptions about the teaching profession (for example, cover articles in *Time* and *Newsweek* about "rotten apple" teachers and campaigns to ban books and restrict discussion of race and sexuality), and most recently, teacher stress and burnout during Covid-19 school closures and backlash against teachers for resisting the reopening of schools as the pandemic waned.

What will turn around this crisis in the teaching profession? Kraft and Lyon believe teacher pay, benefits, job security, and career ladders are important, as well as increasing teacher autonomy, professionalism, and voice in their schools. "This is not to say that teachers should be left alone in their classroom or expected to develop curricular materials on their own," say the authors. "Such practices can lead to inconsistent instruction, professional isolation, and burnout. Instead, efforts to support teachers through coaching, professional learning communities, and peer observation and review programs might create the conditions, and develop the skills, teachers need to feel successful with their students and ensure the profession maintains high standards."

The authors suggest "bottom-up" collective action so teachers and unions play a greater role in school policymaking, and point to the importance of recruiting a diverse and talented pool of teachers and the need to deal with school shootings and other forms of violence.

"Elevating the teaching profession is a generational task," conclude Kraft and Lyon, "but one that would produce considerable benefits for both individual students and the nation. As our exploratory analyses demonstrate, the status of the teaching profession is neither arbitrary nor preordained. It is also not a monolith. Rather, it is a constellation of different localized contexts and markets that are directly shaped by education leaders, policymakers, and our society as a whole. We have the agency to make different decisions from the local to the national level by building on newly emerging bright spots amidst the worrisome evidence."

"The Rise and Fall of the Teaching Profession: Prestige, Interest, Preparation, and Satisfaction Over the Last Half Century" by Matthew Kraft and Melissa Arnold Lyon in *American Educational Research Journal*, December 2024 (Vol. 61, #6, pp. 1192-1236); Kraft can be reached at mkraft@brown.edu, Lyon at mlyon@albany.edu.

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3. Key Factors in Teacher Turnover

"The retention of high-quality teachers is a crucial policy issue across the United States," says Michelle Doughty (Vanderbilt University) in this *Teachers College Record* article. "Although some teacher turnover is healthy, high rates of turnover are associated with

negative outcomes for students and schools." Turnover tends to be higher in schools serving low-income families and students of color, she says, "contributing to patterns wherein the very students that most need a stable teacher workforce are least likely to have one." Below, in order of importance, are insights Doughty gleaned from 1,178 exit and transfer surveys of teachers in a large urban district from 2016 to 2018:

• *School leadership* – Departing teachers pointed to the shortcomings of the leadership team in terms of vision and handling of classroom resources, facilities, student behavior, and safety; inequitable treatment of teachers and students; unsupportive staff relationships and school culture; and teachers feeling unappreciated and not having input on decisions. One teacher described how her school went from being "a great place to work" to "a dictatorship" when a new principal arrived.

• *Teacher evaluation* – A quarter of departing teachers cited their performance evaluations as a major reason for leaving. Teachers pointed to unfairness in how formulas were used to determine their ratings, how student achievement was factored in, and how the system seemed biased against teachers working with high-need students. Although very few teachers got ratings that jeopardized their job security, they nonetheless perceived a threat to their status. One teacher said, "I don't perform at my highest when I feel constrained, managed, and/or evaluated like that. I work best when I have complete autonomy in my classroom and where a supportive specialist comes in at least twice a month to support (not evaluate) me."

• *Workload* – Teachers mentioned the difficulty of maintaining work/life balance, insufficient planning time, and the amount of time spent on activities unrelated to student learning. One young special education teacher who left the profession said, "I went into teaching fully expecting a heavy workload. I've had previous jobs where the duties and requirements were substantial and put me under a lot of stress. The difference with this teaching job was the amount of time taken away from me by an enormous amount of nonsensical meetings."

• *Personal reasons* – These included retirement, health issues, child care responsibilities, a long commute, and tempting job offers elsewhere. Personal reasons for leaving were often malleable, meaning that improvements in their current school's working conditions could have led teachers to stay longer. One teacher who chose to retire early said she "was not planning on retiring for another two years, but the lack of discipline at [the school] was not conducive to learning or a positive environment."

• *Student behavior* – Most teachers who cited this as a reason for leaving were concerned that school leaders weren't strict enough. One teacher cited "Students cursing out administrators as well as teachers. Students threatening administrators and they were right back at school in two or three days. The lack of structured discipline for the whole school." But some teachers left because discipline was too harsh. One teacher said, "I wanted to work under an administration that took a softer touch with behavior management." Another said, "My students would often confide in me that they felt disrespected by the school leadership." Some teachers pointed to biased and disproportionately punitive treatment of African-American students.

• *Pay* – This was lower down the priority order, but unhappiness with total compensation, the benefits package, and job security was part of some teachers' decision to leave their positions as they struggled to make ends meet and pay off student loans. One teacher said, "Your best and brightest will never remain as teachers in this kind of culture, because the best and brightest don't spend their lives in entry-level positions. Teaching needs to be rebranded in our culture. And part of that rebranding needs to come with better pay and better benefits."

Summing up, Doughty says school leadership is a common factor across all teachers' reasons for leaving. "Almost without regard to the questions asked," she says, "teachers consistently connected their exit to the effectiveness of, support from, and relationship with their school leaders. Leaders mediated the way they experienced their evaluations, workload, and relationships with students. Though evaluations and student behavior are considered as their own working conditions, teachers often expressed that their real issues were how specific leaders implemented evaluations or responded to student behaviors… Thus, the support of school leadership is not only a working condition in and of itself but also a key part of the social landscape that determines other working conditions."

"Making Sense of Teacher Turnover: A Mixed-Methods Exploration of Why Teachers Leave" by Michelle Doughty in *Teachers College Record*, August 2024 (Vol. 126, #8, pp. 32-62); Doughty can be reached at michelle.doughty@vanderbilt.edu.

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4. Helping Students Navigate Information-Rich Material

In this *Edutopia* article, Andrew Boryga summarizes strategies to help students read texts with challenging vocabulary and complex ideas:

• *Level with students*. "Some topics are inherently difficult," says Boryga. Telling students this up front helps them focus more intently, monitor their level of understanding, and deploy helpful strategies.

• *Build background knowledge*. Assigning related material – articles, photos, poetry, videos, podcasts – will activate what students already know about the subject and add new vocabulary and concepts.

• *Preview unfamiliar vocabulary*. Starting with a student-friendly definition, showing visuals, giving examples of using the word in context, and having students discuss the words in pairs will help them commit key vocabulary to memory and be prepared to read a passage more fluently. Alternatively, the teacher might pause while reading the text to scaffold new words.

• *Re-read and read ahead*. This can help clarify meaning, get a handle on the context, and see where the text is headed.

• *Read out loud*. This slows the pace of reading, engages students' eyes and ears, and can reinforce comprehension and retention. It's also less likely that students' minds will wander when they're reading aloud.

• *Annotate*. Students should be coached on how to actively engage with dense texts by jotting notes on the author's intent, use of literary devices, predictions, critiques, and summaries. If possible, students should mark up the text, circling key words, phrases, and dates, numbering evidence, and underlining the author's claims and connecting ideas.

• *Summarize*. Paraphrasing in their own words is much more effective for grappling with meaning and unpacking ideas than copying parts of the text verbatim.

• *Put it all together*. "It's a good idea to explain to students that truly understanding a complicated text will probably require a combination of many of these strategies in a coordinated way," says Boryga. "This recipe, while certainly more time-consuming than simply trying to power through a hard text and remembering what you can, will result in far greater comprehension and knowledge retention."

"Helping Students Read Complex Texts" by Andrew Boryga in *Edutopia*, November 15, 2024

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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
Ed Magazine
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 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
Language Magazine
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