# Marshall Memo 1013

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 27, 2023

## In This Issue:



## Quotes of the Week

"Our youngest students, even before they can decode any texts, need to begin building knowledge about the world and be exposed to domain-specific and academic vocabulary through read-alouds and whole-group literacy instruction… If we aren't teaching our primary students more than decoding, we begin to see students struggle and reading scores stagnate at around third grade. The primary years are foundational not just for learning to read, but also for learning about the world."

Gina Robles in "4 Myths About Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction in the Early Grades" in *Edutopia*, November 20, 2023

"The role of the school librarian in supporting classroom teachers and learners to have access to and make choices about using a variety of reading materials in their classroom instruction and for independent reading choices has never been more vital."

Marjorie Rowe and Rita Reinsel Soulen (see item #1)

"During my 15 years as an English teacher – basking in teenagers' moods, wit, and sometimes even joy – I learned that their phones, even if 'put away' in a book bag in class, continued to colonize their minds. Silently, they fretted over whether a parent had seen their frantic message and was on the way with forgotten homework, whether a BFF had left a consoling text, whether questions for the last-period exam had been sent by a fellow cheater, what grades had been updated, and (especially if you were a girl) what names you'd been called… Used to be, when my teenagers packed their satchels to troop toward the door – after, say, an hour of Shakespeare – some of the kids might still be thinking about him, or complaining about him, or chattering about *Hamlet* among themselves, or mouthing 'To be or not to be.' Nowadays, they're all on their phones."

Marc Vincenti in one of several letters to *The New York Times*, November 20, 2023, reacting to Pamela Paul's column on cellphones in school (summarized in Memo 1011)

"I don't believe that mandating pedagogy is an effective way to change pedagogy."
Peter Liljedahl in "Students Are Busy But Rarely Thinking, Researchers Argue. Do His Teaching Strategies Work Better?" by Jeffrey Young in *EdSurge*, 11/7/23

"School should be serious fun."
A maxim from Shrewsbury School, U.K.

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## 1. School Librarians' Role in an Effective Schoolwide Reading Program

"The role of the school librarian in supporting classroom teachers and learners to have access to and make choices about using a variety of reading materials in their classroom instruction and for independent reading choices has never been more vital," say Marjorie Rowe and Rita Reinsel Soulen (East Carolina University) in this article in *Knowledge Quest*. "Children need to handle high-quality reading materials in all formats and experience the joy of interacting with books alongside their peers, with classroom teachers and school librarians as role models."

Why is this a priority now? Rowe and Soulen are concerned that the current "phonics first and fast" push may lead teachers to shortchange other aspects of children's literacy development in the primary grades, limiting children's access to diverse texts and decreasing their motivation to read and write. Starting in preschool, the authors believe, all students need comprehensive literacy instruction, as outlined in Nell Duke and Kelly Cartwright's model (2021):

• *Word recognition* – Phonemic awareness (syllables, phonemes, etc.), the alphabetic principle, phonics knowledge, decoding skills, and sight word recognition;

• *Language comprehension* – Cultural and other background knowledge, reasoning skills (inference, metaphor, etc.), language structure (syntax, semantics, etc.), knowledge of genre and text types, a theory of mind;

• *Bridging processes* (the overlap of word recognition and language comprehension) – Print concepts, reading fluency, vocabulary knowledge, morphological awareness, and letter-sound-meaning flexibility;

• *Active self-regulation* – Motivation and engagement, executive function skills, strategies for word recognition, comprehension, and vocabulary across the entire reading process.

"Reading is not different from any other complex human capacity in that massive volumes of independent practice are required to become skillful," say Rowe and Soulen.

They're worried that the push to prioritize phonics is limiting kindergarten and first-grade students to decodable texts and reducing access to high-quality children's books until they master decoding. "Decodable readers have their place for application of phonics skills," they say. "However, unless exceptionally well written, they will not contribute much to the development of children's vocabularies or permit them to use their knowledge of natural language patterns as they read, two components of bridging processes and language comprehension that need to be extended from the moment children enter school."

Rowe and Soulen believe school librarians play a vital role in the school's overall reading program, including:

- Selecting and curating a wide array of diverse reading materials;
- Providing blocks of time for independent reading;
- Encouraging circulation by removing barriers such as fines and rigid schedules;
- Building self-regulation by giving students agency for book and topic selection and teaching book handling skills and responsibility for checking out and returning books;
- Providing high-quality programing to encourage reading for pleasure and lifelong learning: book talks, introducing new vocabulary, building cultural and background knowledge, discussing genres and text features, comparing and contrasting books;
- Encouraging and supporting research projects;
- Building decoding skills with playful activities around rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration;
- Encouraging teachers to implement well-structured independent reading time in their classrooms;
- Participating in the school's selection of high-quality literacy materials.

"The Science of Reading and School Libraries" by Marjorie Rowe and Rita Reinsel Soulen in *Knowledge Quest*, November/December 2023 (Vol. 52, #2, pp. 38-45); the authors can be reached at rowem20@ecu.edu and soulenr19@ecu.edu.

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## 2. The Impact of Mentoring Relationships in Schools

In this *Economics of Education Review* article, Matthew Kraft (Brown University), Alexander Bolves (Harvard University), and Noelle Hurd (University of Virginia) report on their study of how informal mentoring relationships in school affected adolescents' development. These relationships between students and their K-12 teachers, counselors, and coaches were much more common in high school than middle and elementary schools. In order of frequency, the study found that adolescents' mentors engaged in:

- Guidance, advice, and sharing wisdom;
- Emotional nurturance;
- Practical, tangible help;
- Acting as a parent figure;
- Acting as a friend;
- Serving as a role model.

Commenting on the well-established research on teachers' long-term impact on students, Kraft, Bolves, and Hurd say that in some cases teachers' effect on social capital, aspirations, and life decisions may come from these non-academic relationships.

Not all students have positive mentoring relationships; only 15 percent of students in this study identified a K-12 teacher, counselor, or coach who played this role. The researchers also found that mentoring relationships were much more common in some schools than others, and that students of color and students from lower-income households were much less likely to report having a mentor. Significantly, when those students did have mentoring relationships, the benefits were greater than for other students.

Kraft, Bolves, and Hurd believe their findings point to the following priorities for U.S. schools:

- Recruiting and maintaining a diverse educator workforce;
- Creating a schoolwide ethos of belonging and caring;
- Creating more opportunities for students to interact with educators in small-group settings;
- Equipping students with the social skills to take advantage of those opportunities.

"How Informal Mentoring of Teachers, Counselors, and Coaches Supports Students' Long-Run Academic Success" by Matthew Kraft, Alexander Bolves, and Noelle Hurd in *Economics of Education Review*, August 2023 (Vol. 95, pp. 1-24); Kraft is at mkraft@brown.edu.

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## 3. Which Student Questions Should Teachers Not Answer?

In this chapter of his book, *Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics*, Peter Liljedahl (Simon Fraser University) says research and his own classroom observations show that teachers typically answer between 200 and 400 student questions a day – some teachers as many as 600. The problem is that the hard work of answering all those questions often lets students off the hook from doing their own thinking.

So what should teachers do? "The answer lies not in whether or not we answer students' question," says Liljedahl, "but which questions we answer." He's found there are three types of questions in classrooms:

• *Proximity questions* – Students ask these questions when the teacher happens to be close by, and most often the questions are about something kids don't really need help on – for example, *For Question 3, were we supposed to find all the answers?* or *Are we doing this right?* Why do students ask proximity questions? Because of highly socialized roles in classrooms, says Liljedahl. Asking a question is one of the most "studently" things a kid can do, and answering the question is one of the most "teacherly" things a teacher can do.

Sometimes a shy student will take advantage of the teacher's proximity to ask a question they wouldn't raise their hand or stand in line to ask, but most of the time, proximity questions are socialized filler and add little value. Sometimes these questions are a way for a student to distract the teacher from catching them on their cell phone or some other off-task behavior.

• *Stop-thinking questions* – Examples of this type: *Is this right? Is this going to be on the test? Do we have to learn this?* "These questions," says Liljedahl, "are motivated by the reality that, for students, thinking is difficult, and it's hard to decide for themselves that what they are doing is correct. If they can just get you to do that for them, their life would be so much easier."

• *Keep-thinking questions* – These clarifying or extension questions are asked when students are motivated and engaged with the task at hand – for example, *We're having trouble here. Were we supposed to do this for all the possible sizes?* or *Are we supposed to now look at the general case?*

Liljedahl has found that about 90 percent of the questions students ask are in the first two categories. The result: teachers are knocking themselves out doing something that contributes very little to students building their thinking muscles. In many cases it completely shuts down thinking.

The solution, lays Liljedahl, is for teachers to answer only the third type – the *keep-thinking* questions. This requires knowing how to quickly spot *proximity* and *stop-thinking* questions and developing a skillset for deflecting them. He's found that most teachers have no trouble discerning the type of question being asked. Most of the questions students ask immediately after being given an assignment are for clarification or to avoid having to do the work of seeing what's being asked and deciding how to solve the problem. The moments just after an assignment has been given are when the most questions are asked, and it's wise for the teacher to not circulate at this point.

Once students have their heads into the assignment, circulating is important and the teacher needs to decide on the effect answering a question will have: *Are they asking for more activity or less, more work or less, more thinking or less?* Students may be inventive, making a statement and quizzically raising their eyebrows at the end: *We are thinking this is correct. [What do you think?] This is correct [Right?] I think we are going the right way. [Right?]* "Don't be fooled by these pseudo-statements," advises Liljedahl. "If their tone is inviting a response from you, they are really asking a question – and by the nature of the disguise, it is almost always a stop-thinking question."

But how can teachers get away with not answering stop-thinking and low-value proximity questions? "Students can be very persistent in their efforts to get you to help them reduce their workload," says Liljedahl, "and how you respond to this is important." One approach is answering the question with a question – for example:

- *Isn't that interesting?*
- *Can you find something else?*
- *Can you show me how you did that?*
- *Is that always true?*
- *Why do you think that is?*
- *Are you sure?*
- *Does that make sense?*
- *Why don't you try something else?*

- *Why don't you try another one?*
- *Are you asking me or telling me?*

Some of the teachers Liljedahl was working with said this strategy was successful, but others found it was a slippery slope. Here's how one dialogue with a student went:

- *Why don't you try something else?*
- *Like what?*
- *Maybe you need to consider the cases where x is negative.*
- *You mean like this?*
- *Right!*

Answering a question with a question was only effective, Liljedahl found, when it was immediately followed by the teacher walking away without saying more. This annoyed students, but teachers found that within a few days using this approach, there were far fewer proximity and stop-thinking questions…

Except in primary-grade classrooms. "If a six-year-old asks a question and it is not answered," says Liljedahl, "they ask it again. If it is still not answered, they ask it again. And if it is still not answered they do something that a 16-year-old does not. They reach out and touch the teacher – tap them on the arm or pull on their clothing. And if the teacher walks away, they follow. I have multiple videos of kindergarten and grade 1 teachers walking around the room with a row of little ducklings following them."

With young students, when the teacher didn't respond a question, they assumed it hadn't been heard and felt ignored. So Liljedahl came up with a modification for primary grades: look at the student asking the question, maybe ask a question, smile, and then walk away. This turned out to be effective for all grade levels. Students knew their question had been heard and that the teacher's decision not to answer was deliberate.

"Many students took this to mean that they needed to do more work," says Liljedahl. "Over time, the students began to see the smile and walking away as a sign that the teacher had confidence in their ability to resolve the question on their own. There were still a few students who were frustrated by these encounters. But they were thinking more – or no longer having the teacher do their thinking for them."

What if students insist that the teacher answer a stop-thinking question? If it's an *Is this right*? question, Liljedahl suggests being explicit: "I'm not going to answer that question. Me telling you that it is right is worth almost nothing. If you can tell me that it is right, however, that is worth everything."

Should teachers explain the three types of questions to students, telling them which will be answered and which won't? Liljedahl has found this is a good idea, but only after a couple of weeks of responding only to keep-thinking questions, and with the others, answering a question with a question, smiling, and walking away. When it's handled this way, students say, "So that's what's going on!" and "It's cool that he told us that." When working in groups, students also begin monitoring themselves: "Dude! She's not going to answer that. That's a stop-thinking question."

Does answering a question with a question and smiling and walking away work for all students? There are some "who can't get past the fact that you have not answered their question," says Liljedahl. "This may be because they are insecure about their own abilities, have learned helplessness, or have a spectrum disorder – such as obsessive compulsive disorder – that does not allow them to move forward without resolution." And students have years of experience in classrooms where their questions get answered. Teachers need to read the situation and know when "a nod, a wink, or an encouraging remark – 'I have complete confidence that you can figure this out' – is needed."

Should parents be told about the question-answering policy? Absolutely, says Liljedahl – and parents should hear about it first from the teacher, with an explanation that the goal is to encourage students to do their own thinking and that answering only certain types of questions is part of a deliberate strategy.

"How We Answer Questions in a Thinking Classroom" by Peter Liljedahl, Chapter 5 in his book, *Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics* (Corwin, 2021); see Memos 976 and 992 for two other summaries of Liljedahl's work. Jenn David-Lang recently did a thorough summary of the book in The Main Idea and is making it available to Marshall Memo readers here. Liljedahl can be reached at liljedahl@sfu.ca.

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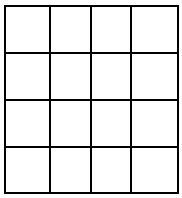
## 4. Engaging Math Thinking Tasks with a Low Floor and a High Ceiling

In his book, *Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics*, Peter Liljedahl advocates having students work on challenging, highly engaging tasks in mixed-achievement groups of two (at the primary level) or three (in grades 3 to 12). Each group works collaboratively on a vertical whiteboard, standing up, sharing one marker, with the teacher observing their work and, as described in the summary just above, answering only "keep-thinking" questions. Liljedahl suggests starting with fun problems to establish a collaborative culture, then segueing into the regular curriculum, always posing open-ended tasks that challenge students to put their heads together and think at higher levels. The teacher encourages students to observe and learn from other groups' work and brings closure at the end of each class. From his book, here are some examples of the types of tasks Liljedahl suggests:

**Lower elementary:**

How many squares are in this image?



You have 16 jellybeans and four jars:

- Place the jellybeans in the jars so that each jar has either 3 or 6 jellybeans. Are there some things that are not possible?

- Place the jellybeans such that each jar has one more than the jar before it. How many ways can you do this?
- Place the jellybeans so that each jar has twice as many as the jar before it. Three times as many.

The Ice Dream ice cream shop has 10 flavors of ice cream. How many different two-scoop ice cream cones can you make? What if there were 11 flavors? What if there were 12 flavors? How about with 20 flavors? What if each cone had at most three scoops?

A farm has some chickens and some pigs. One day the owner notices that the animals have a total of 22 legs. How many chickens and how many pigs might there be? Can you come up with another solution? And another? Can you come up with all the solutions? How do you know that you have all the solutions?

**Upper elementary and middle school:**
If 6 cats can kill 6 rats in 6 minutes, how many will be needed to kill 100 rats in 50 minutes?

If I were to write the numbers from 1 to 100, how many times would I use the digit 7? What if I wrote 1 to 1000? How many zeroes?

Select four numbers from 1 to 9 at random. Using these four numbers and any operations, make the values from 1 to 30.

How many ways are there to make a dollar using only nickels, dimes, and quarters?

I have a four-minute egg timer and a seven-minute egg timer – the kind you turn over and let the sand run through. Can I use these to cook a nine-minute egg? If so, how long will someone have to wait for their egg?

**High school:**
Decompose 25 using addition, for example: 25 = 10+15, 25 = 10 + 10 + 5…
What is the biggest product you can make if you multiply the addends together?

You want to arrange four candles on a birthday cake. How many ways can you place the candles such that there are no more than two different distances between two candles?

From *Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics* by Peter Liljedahl (Corwin, 2021)
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## 5. What Really Matters in College

In this interview by Maryam Abdullah in *Greater Good Magazine*, author Jennifer Breheny Wallace describes a 2014 study of more than 30,000 U.S. college graduates conducted by Gallup and Purdue University. Researchers asked graduates about five key dimensions of their well-being as adults:

- Purpose – How motivated were they to achieve goals?
- Social – Did they have strong, supportive relationships?
- Physical – Were they in good health?

- Financial – Were they effectively managing income and expenses?
- Community – Did they have a sense of belonging?

The researchers found that the type of college people attended – public or private, highly selective or not, large or small – "hardly mattered at all to their current well-being and their work lives." What did make a difference to their post-graduate years were specific experiences they had in college, especially:

- Taking a course with a professor who made learning exciting;
- Having a professor who cared about them personally;
- Having a mentor who encouraged them to pursue personal goals;
- Working on a meaningful project across semesters;
- Participating in an internship;
- Being active in extracurricular activities.

"In other words," says Wallace, "these students who went on to have greater happiness and career and financial success *felt valued* on campus by faculty and their classmates and had an opportunity to add meaningful *value back* through internships and projects. Or, simply put: these students enjoyed a high level of *mattering*."

"Why Achievement Culture Has Become So Toxic"– An Interview with Jennifer Breheny Wallace by Maryam Abdullah in *Greater Good Magazine*, August 30, 2023

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## 6. What Is the Best Way to Memorize Times Tables?

In this Hechinger Report, Jill Barshay says cognitive scientists have found memorizing times tables frees up students' working memory so their brains can focus on more-demanding areas of mathematics. But what is the best way to achieve automaticity with basic multiplication facts? Does it come naturally as students work with elementary math problems? Not so, say proponents of memorization. There are a number of strategies, some of which have passionate proponents:

- Students drawing their own color-coded charts and studying them;
- Copying or saying multiplication facts many times (*Two times eight is sixteen*…);
- Using flashcards;
- Playing multiplication songs and videos;
- Using mnemonic tricks – e.g., the digits of multiples of nine add up to nine;
- Shouting multiplication facts while doing jumping jacks in physical education class.

What works best?

Researchers in the Netherlands did a controlled study with second graders comparing flashcards with chanting times tables. After a pretest, half the class practiced the three times table using chanting, the other half with flashcards. Moving on to the four times table, the groups reversed methods, so all students practiced memorizing both ways.

The result? Chanting produced solid improvement over pre-test results, but students who used flashcards did even better – and they maintained their advantage when all students were retested a week later.

The reason? Flashcards involve *retrieving* information – or trying to retrieve it – from the brain. "There's a growing body of evidence," says Barshay, "that trying to recall something is itself a powerful tool for learning, particularly when you are given the correct answer immediately after making a stab at it and then get a chance to try again. Testing your memory – even when you draw a blank – is a way to build new memories." Systematically spacing retrieval practice over time solidifies information in long-term memory.

While retrieval is a better study strategy (not just in math), Barshay isn't in favor of throwing out all the other strategies for memorizing times tables. Further research may show that a combination of methods has the biggest impact.

"Proof Points: Flashcards Prevail Over Repetition in Memorizing Multiplication Tables" by Jill Barshay in Hechinger Report, October 30, 2023; Barshay is at barshay@hechingerreport.org.

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## 7. AI Chatbots – What Could Go Wrong?

In this article in *Visual Capitalist*, Katie Jones lists nine potential problems with artificial intelligence large language models. Her list was generated with the help of ChatGPT and then extensively fact-checked:

• *Mindless parroting* – "Despite their advanced capabilities," says Jones, "generative AIs are constrained by the data and patterns they were trained on. This limitation results in outputs that may not encompass the breadth of human knowledge or address diverse scenarios."

• *Static* – Keeping large language models up to date requires substantial computational resources and time, says Jones, so only the most highly capitalized models are up to date.

• *Bias in, bias out* – Chatbots reproduce biases that are present in the vast amounts of data they "scrape" from the Internet to formulate answers. "Rather than mitigate biases," says Jones, "these tools often magnify or perpetuate them, raising questions about the accuracy of their applications – which could lead to much bigger problems around ethics."

• *Hallucinations* – Generative AI models sometimes make up statements or images when they encounter gaps in their data.

• *Human values* – Chatbots are amoral, not considering the consequences of their actions – for example, spreading deepfakes or false information about a public health menace.

• *Black box* – The chatbots' decision-making process is not transparent, so users can't check on the accuracy (or even existence) of the sources.

• *Copyright and intellectual property infringement* – Many artists and content creators are concerned about their work being disseminated without consent, credit, or compensation.

• *Expensive* – According to Sam Altman of OpenAI, the cost of the initial "training" of ChatGPT was $100 million.

• *Power hungry* – The computers behind large language models consume enormous amounts of electricity – for ChatGPT, the equivalent of 33,000 U.S. households. Answering a single query takes AI ten to one hundred times more energy than sending an e-mail.

"9 Problems with Generative AI, in One Chart" by Katie Jones in *Visual Capitalist*, November 26, 2023

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## 8. Recommended Books That Feature Unreliable Narrators

In this *School Library Journal* feature, retired librarian Steven Engelfried touts books with the unusual characteristic of deliberately misleading storytelling:

- *The Assassination of Brangwain Spurge* by M.T. Anderson, illustrated by Eugene Yelchin, grade 4-7
- *The Ogress and the Orphans* by Kelly Barnhill, grade 3-7
- *Simon Sort of Says* by Erin Bow, grade 5 and up
- *The Probability of Everything* by Sarah Everett, grade 3-7
- *Invisible* by Christina Diaz Gonzalez, grade 4-7
- *Ground Zero: A Novel of 9/11* by Alan Gratz, grade 4-7
- *The Worlds We Leave Behind* by A.F. Harrold, illustrated by Levi Pinfold, grade 5 and up
- *Scary Stories for Young Foxes* by Christian McKay Heidicker, illustrated by Junyi Wu, grade 4 and up
- *Linked* by Gordon Korman, grade 4-8
- *The Windeby Puzzle* by Lois Lowry, grade 5 and up
- *When Sea Becomes Sky* by Gillian McDunn, grade 3-7
- *The Many Assassinations of Samir, the Seller of Dreams* by Daniel Nayeri, illustrated by Daniel Miyares, grade 4-8
- *The List of Things That Will Not Change* by Rebecca Stead, grade 5-8

"Telling It Like It Isn't: Unreliable Narrators Keep Readers on Their Toes" by Steven Engelfried in *School Library Journal*, November 2023 (Vol. 69, #11, pp. 38-40)

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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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- The "classic" articles from all 20 years

## *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