Marshall Memo 326

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 8, 2010

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Americans are suckers for good news. Given a choice between disagreeable fact and agreeable fantasy, they will choose the fantasy every time."
Adlai Stevenson (quoted in item #9)

"Modern brain research increasingly confirms what those who work with teenagers have long known: Adolescents are primed for action, stimulation, and relevance."
Joseph Allen and Claudia Allen (see item #6)

"Oh, my God. I still have 45 minutes left to go."
Doug Lemov during a floundering lesson when he was a novice teacher (see item #1)

"I believe in content-based professional development, obviously. But I feel it's insufficient… It doesn't matter what questions you're asking if the kids are running the classroom."
Doug Lemov (*ibid.*)

"Teaching depends on what other people think, not what you think."
Deborah Loewenberg Ball (*ibid.*)

"I have to work on going from the student who gets it wrong to students who get it right, then back to the student who gets it wrong and ask a follow-up question to make sure they understand why they got it wrong and understand why the right answer is right."
Katie Bellucci, first-year teacher (*ibid.*)

1. Can Good Teaching Be Taught?

In this thoughtful *New York Times Magazine* article, Elizabeth Green describes the work of Doug Lemov, a New York educator who has compiled a "taxonomy" of effective teaching, and Deborah Loewenberg Ball, a Michigan State researcher who has found that specific pedagogical content knowledge is important to getting classroom results. The gist of the piece is that Lemov and Ball, who had not heard of each other's work until they were interviewed for this article, should combine their efforts to create an even more powerful strategy to improve classroom teaching.

Lemov created his taxonomy after watching a few too many ineffective teachers – "a dispiriting exercise in good people failing," as he put it. He also remembered his own lame attempts as a beginning teacher – saying to himself as a lesson plan collapsed, "Oh, my God. I still have 45 minutes left to go." Lemov came to believe that teaching was not an innate capacity possessed by a few born superstars – it could be *developed*. Rather than trying to hire and motivate a "different caliber of person" (as Washington D.C. school chancellor Michelle Rhee puts it), Lemov focused on how to improve the effectiveness of the existing teacher corps – building talent rather than trying to buy it. Teachers want to do better, he believed – they just don't know how – and he set to work on a training program that would give them an incentive just as powerful as money: the chance to really make a difference for their students and be part of a winning team. In youth soccer (another Lemov passion), it's not enough for the coach to tell players to "get better." Good coaches tell them to "mark tighter" or "close the space." The problem, Lemov found, was that educators didn't have a clear idea of the specific components of good teaching. Even the best graduate schools of education were floundering in what educational historian Diane Ravitch calls "the contentless curriculum."

So Lemov spent five years observing and filming teachers who had a track record of bringing about dramatic gains in student achievement. He found that what appeared at first glance to be a magical gift – the innate "stuff" of natural-born classroom geniuses – was really a set of specific techniques that ordinary mortals could master. At the core was a simple principle: students can't learn unless the teacher knows how to capture their attention and get them to follow instructions. This is classroom management 101, and some teacher educators look down their noses at such mundane material, but Lemov believes it's as specialized, intricate, and learnable as mastering a musical instrument. He has been presenting his taxonomy, backed up by videotapes of teachers, in workshops around the country (a book

version, *Teach Like a Champion: The 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College*, will be published by Jossey-Bass next month). Here is a selection of the techniques:

• *Standing still when you're giving directions* – Don't do two things at once and students are much more likely to pay attention and comply.

• *Strong voice* – Adopting a different persona to get and hold the floor.

• *Being direct and specific* – Lemov is on a campaign to stop teachers from saying, *Shhh*. "It's fundamentally ambiguous," he says. "Are you asking the kids not to talk, or are you asking kids to talk more quietly?" He uses a videotape of Bob Zimmerli, a master teacher, to demonstrate direct and specific management. Zimmerli is teaching a group of inattentive fifth graders for the first time. One has headphones on, another is looking through a large three-ring binder, and none of them are paying attention. "O.K., guys," says Zimmerli from the front of the room, "before I get started today, here's what I need from you. I need that piece of paper turned over and a pencil out." Almost no students comply and he says, "So if there's anything else on your desk right now, please put that inside your desk." He makes a hand gesture like an underhand pitch and a few students in the front rows put papers away. But it takes a second technique to get the whole class with him…

• *Framing a positive outcome, building momentum, and narrating the positive* – Zimmerli points to the students who are putting their materials away and says, "Just like you're doing, thank you very much." When another student clears his desk, Zimmerli says, "Thank you, sir." When another does so, he says, "I appreciate it." As the last desk is cleared, Zimmerli points to the student and says, "Nice… nice." In the end, the headphones are off, the three-ring binder is stowed, and every student is paying attention. "It's this positive wave," says Lemov as he shows the videotape. "You can almost see it going across the classroom from right to left." Lemov focuses on the student with the three-ring binder. Ten seconds into Zimmerli's directions, the three-ring-binder student glances at a classmate to his left who has his paper and pencil out and is paying attention. For the first time, he looks at the teacher. "He's like, 'O.K., what's this?'" says Lemov. "'I guess I'm going to go with it.'" Half a minute later, the student closes the binder, puts it in his desk, and pays attention.

• *Warm/strict* – Teacher's control should be "an exercise in purpose, not in power," says Lemov. Correcting a student is done with a smile and an explanation, for example, "Sweetheart, we don't do that in this classroom because it keeps us from making the most of our learning time."

• *Cold calling* – Students are instructed not to raise their hands when the teacher asks a question; the teacher decides who get called on, asking the question first and pausing so every student has to do the work of figuring out an answer before one student is asked to respond.

• *No opt out* – A teacher should never allow a student to avoid answering a question, no matter how tough it is. "If I'm asking my students a question," says Katie Bellucci, a first-year teacher trained in Lemov's taxonomy, "and I call on somebody, and they get it wrong, I need to work on how to address that. It's easy to be like, 'No,' and move on to the next person. But the hard part is to be like: 'O.K., well, that's your thought. Does anybody disagree?'... I have to work on going from the student who gets it wrong to students who get it right, then back to

the student who gets it wrong and ask a follow-up question to make sure they understand why they got it wrong and understand why the right answer is right."

• *The J-factor* – Ways of injecting joy into the classroom, such as giving students nicknames and handing out vocabulary words in sealed envelopes to build suspense.

On a parallel track to Lemov's, Deborah Loewenberg Ball at Michigan State has observed scores of teachers and found that pedagogical content knowledge is associated with higher student achievement – for example, the detailed understanding of third-grade mathematics, which is distinct from general math knowledge and the pedagogical knowledge that Lemov has catalogued. Ball calls it Mathematical Knowledge for Teaching or M.K.T. – in essence, knowing how 30 different minds might understand (or misunderstand) a specific math concept and bringing them all to mastery in a 45-minute class. At the heart of M.K.T. is teachers' ability to step outside their own heads. "Teaching depends on what other people think, not what you think," says Ball.

The Michigan State researchers believe that M.K.T. is crucial, but they know classroom management techniques are important too. As college teachers, they use many of Lemov's techniques intuitively, but they haven't had a vocabulary and a conceptual framework for them. "That's one thing our program doesn't address right now, how to get and hold the floor," says Francesca Forzani, who is working with Ball to revamp Michigan's teacher education program. So it's clear that they could benefit from Lemov's ideas.

Lemov sees the importance of M.K.T. and its brethren in other subject areas, but he has no doubt about what comes first. "I believe in content-based professional development, obviously," he says. "But I feel it's insufficient… It doesn't matter what questions you're asking if the kids are running the classroom." That said, Lemov and his colleagues in the Uncommon Schools network are working on beefing up the taxonomy with an added focus on content knowledge in math, reading, science, and social studies.

"Can Good Teaching Be Learned?" by Elizabeth Green in *The New York Times Magazine*, March 7, 2010 (p. 30-37, 44, 46)
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/magazine/07Teachers-t.html?hp

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2. Mathematical Knowledge for Teaching

In this *Elementary School Journal* article, Harvard researcher Charalambos Charalambous reports on careful comparison of two teachers with differing levels of mathematical knowledge for teaching (M.K.T.). The study showed that the teacher with greater M.K.T. did a better job presenting students with cognitively appropriate and demanding tasks and following through during the instructional process. Charalambous draws three tentative hypotheses:

• Strong M.K.T. supports teachers in using representations to explain mathematical procedures to students, versus simply showing them the answers or having students use memorized rules.

• Strong M.K.T. supports teachers in giving and co-constructing explanations that illuminate the meaning of mathematical procedures for students.

• Strong M.K.T. supports teachers in understanding, responding to, and building on students' contributions in ways that help students make meaning.

"Mathematical Knowledge for Teaching and Task Unfolding: An Exploratory Study" by Charalambos Charalambous in *Elementary School Journal*, March 2010 (Vol. 110, #3, p. 247-278), no e-link available

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3. Using Video Clips to Help Teachers Tune in to Their Students' Thinking

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, University of California/Irvine professor Elizabeth van Es describes what she calls "video clubs" – teacher teams (usually same-subject) meeting to watch carefully chosen videotaped segments of each others' classes. The goal is to help teachers to pay close attention to their students' thinking and revisit things they may not have noticed when they were teaching – what van Es calls *noticing*. "A key component of expertise in teaching, regardless of content area," she says, "is being able to listen carefully to students and observe closely what they say and do, using these observations to make teaching decisions."

Van Es says there are three key components to a successful video club: setting up the group, capturing good clips, and running the meetings:

• *Establishing the group and defining goals* – For example, one group van Es facilitated convened teachers and university partners to examine how well the district's implementation of a reform-based mathematics curriculum was going in classrooms.

• *Videotaping and selecting clips* – "As we videotaped," says van Es, "we looked for instances when student thinking was visible, either through talk or through the work they displayed." They tried to film students' ideas about concepts, students' errors, strategies, questions, and explanations for arriving at correct answers. Facilitators picked a small number of clips – some showing individual students or small groups, some of whole-class interactions – to show in team meetings.

• *Facilitating the meetings* – "Simply showing clips that highlighted student thinking was not sufficient," says van Es. "One of the challenges of teachers sharing video from their teaching is that they will often celebrate each other's teaching and not critically analyze what occurred. A facilitator is essential to keep the group focused on this goal. He or she starts by giving the context of the lesson and then shows the clip or clips. Teachers are then prompted to scrutinize their students' thinking and discuss what students actually said and did in the video footage. For example, a facilitator asked, "But I'm confused about Thomas's drawing. If he was trying to figure out a quarter of 60, why did he find a quarter of 100? How did that help him?" and "So, if we had to guess, do these students understand part to whole?"

Van Es believes that video club meetings have helped teachers she's worked with *slow down*, become more attentive to their students' ideas, get into more conversations with students, make their students' thinking more visible, give students more time to think, push

them to explain their reasoning in more detail, consider more than one possible solution, and create a climate in which students more frequently probe each other's thinking. Teachers more frequently say things like, "Who wants to ask Maria a question?" and "Let me think about that for a second" and "I don't know. I want to try to figure it out" and "Wait a second, I don't understand. Can you tell me again what you did?"

"Viewer Discussion Is Advised: Video Clubs Focus Teacher Discussion on Student Learning" by Elizabeth van Es in *Journal of Staff Development*, February 2010 (Vol. 31, #1, p. 54-58), no e-link available; van Es can be reached at evanes@uci.edu.

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4. Lightweight and Heavyweight Instructional Coaching

In this article in *The Learning System*, National Staff Development Council leader Joellen Killion notes that instructional coaches are not always getting results, leading some districts to reduce or eliminate coaching positions. Too often, she says, "coaches spend an entire year building relationships without engaging in a deep analysis of teaching and learning. Relationship building will not change teaching quality. While trust is a precursor to reshaping the culture of a school, alone it will not change teaching and learning. Trust coupled with collaborative and honest dialogue about teaching and learning allows a coach to identify gaps in student learning and work collaboratively with a teacher to address the gaps without worry that the relationship will be impaired or teachers will feel they are being judged."

Killion urges school districts to do a better job selecting, training, and supporting coaches and making sure their role is clearly defined. She concludes with examples of "coaching light", which she believes has little impact, and "coaching heavy", which takes teachers outside their comfort zone and really improves teaching and learning:

• Coaching light:
  - Sharing publications or information;
  - Repeated demonstration lessons;
  - Finding websites for students to use;
  - Serving as substitutes and handling administrative tasks on a regular basis.

• Coaching heavy
  - Analyzing student data and the impact that specific teaching practices seem to be having;
  - Establishing goals for improvement and being mutually accountable for student success;
  - Discussing beliefs and how they influence practice;
  - Planning powerful instruction.

"High-Impact Coaching Ensures Maximum Results" by Joellen Killion in *The Learning System*, December/January 2010 (Vol. 5, #4, p. 1, 6—7), no e-link available

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5. An Online Professional Learning Community in Maryland

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, St. Mary's County, Maryland educators Jeff Maher, Christina Burroughs, Laurel Dietz, and AnneMarie Karnbach describe how they overcame the professional isolation of music, fine arts, and other "singleton" teachers by establishing a vehicle for online collaboration. Teachers organized synchronous chats and used online discussion threads to create common interim assessments, with teachers writing and critiquing test items. Teachers and administrators drew the following lessons from this experience:

• Believe in everyone's success. Participants were pleasantly surprised that even veteran teachers they expected to be technophobic participated frequently and substantively.

• Take time to prepare and support everyone. That said, some self-professed "computer illiterates" needed lots of support to get up to speed.

• Make it personal. Organizers made a point of keeping participants in small and familiar content and grade-level groups. "Participants were willing to take risks because they knew they were among colleagues," say the authors.

• Make sure people know what they need to do and what will result from their participation.

• Stay involved. "Be sure not to leave anyone hanging and waiting for your reply," advise the authors. "When someone knows others are listening and interacting, they are more likely to share."

• Celebrate successes and highlight user contributions.

• Take the next steps with the material that's generated by the group so everyone sees the concrete results of their work.

"The electronic learning community has become a beacon of collective learning for teachers," conclude the authors, "guiding collaboration and extending learning beyond the traditional setting for professional development."

"From Solo to Ensemble: Fine Arts Teachers Find a Harmonious Solution to Their Isolation" by Jeff Maher, Christina Burroughs, Laurel Dietz, and AnneMarie Karnbach in *Journal of Staff Development*, February 2010 (Vol. 31, #1, p. 24-29), no e-link available; Mayer can be reached at jamaher@smcps.org.

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6. What Boosts Motivation for Bored Adolescents

In this *Education Week* article, psychologists Joseph Allen and Claudia Allen say that the steady decline in student motivation from fifth grade and through high school (culminating in the 25 percent dropout rate) is not due to innate adolescent traits but rather to "a profound mismatch between teenage biology and school structure."

"Modern brain research increasingly confirms what those who work with teenagers have long known," say Allen and Allen. "Adolescents are primed for action, stimulation, and relevance. They seek action as they hit peak physical capacities and energy levels; they seek

stimulation as the reward centers in their brains develop; and they seek relevance as they gain the capacity to take on adult-like tasks, both mentally and physically."

The problem is that these healthy traits are incompatible with our society's long "waiting period" before entering the adult world. Imagine the frustration of surgeons if they could operate only on cadavers, lawyers if they could argue only mock cases, plumbers if they could fix only fake leaks, and teachers if they could perform only for video cameras in empty classrooms. And the "Twilight Zone" that we ask adolescents to endure is worse, since it involves "years doing little more than reading and listening to others talk about material that is often not even directly relevant to their chosen careers." To be sure, students need to learn how to defer gratification, but their ability to do this is being pushed past the breaking point.

The good news, say Allen and Allen, is that with the right motivation and rapid feedback, similar to what they get in computer games, adolescents can thrive. Three examples:

• The Teen Outreach Program engages young people in meaningful community service with classroom-based dialogue with a trained adult. "It's like volunteerism on steroids," say the Allens, "linked to a school setting and providing opportunities for action, immediate feedback, and relevance. Follow-up studies have shown that this simple intervention reduces failure and dropout rates by almost 50 percent – and reduces teenage pregnancy rates by a similar percentage.

• The Early College High School Initiative has drastically improved high-school graduation rates among high-risk students by offering them college credit for their academic work after 10th grade.

• When teachers are trained to attend to students' need for action, immediate feedback, and a sense of relevance, engagement improves dramatically. "Like nutritionally deprived children," conclude the Allens, "teenagers need only a bit of the sense of relevance and efficacy they've been hungering for to see their motivation shoot upward."

"Escaping the High School 'Twilight Zone'" by Joseph Allen and Claudia Allen in *Education Week*, March 3, 2010 (Vol. 29, #23, p. 22-23), e-link for subscribers only

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7. Ideas for Turning Around Failing Schools

Andy Smarick's article in the Winter 2010 *Education Next*, "The Turnaround Fallacy", provoked several strongly-worded letters. Some excerpts:

• *Bryan Hassel and Emily Ayscue Hassel* of Public Impact make these points:

- Smarick is incorrect that school turnarounds have been tried widely and haven't worked. In fact, they say, real turnarounds involving a highly capable leader with "the big yes" to do what's needed to fix the school almost never happen.
- It's not true that in healthy industries, leaders close down failing units rather than trying to fix them. "In fact," they write, "large companies with failing units try many strategies. They typically start by enforcing faithful execution of practices that work in other areas.

When that doesn't work, they replace the leader and give the new manager a change mandate."

- Smarick is correct that the *threat* of closure is motivational. But to rescue more schools, they say, "policymakers must make the option of school 'doom' real, but then vigorously try to fix failing schools in the meantime."
- Smarick greatly overstates the potential of start-up schools. While outliers like KIPP are doing a fine job, there are not nearly enough of them to rescue all the students trapped in failing schools, and about 75 percent of start-ups don't make it. "Let's start great new schools and fix bad ones," conclude the Hassels. "Let's expect both strategies to work some of the time, but not always. And when they don't work, let's try again, rapidly, so kids don't continue to languish in schools that aren't getting the job done."

• *Donald Feinstein* of the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) in Chicago says that Smarick applies the word "turnaround" to a wide range of efforts to help struggling schools and is mistaken when he says that they have all failed. AUSL's top-to-bottom approach to turning around a number of Chicago schools has dramatically improved attendance, test scores, and attitudes toward learning, he says, and it all happens without closing schools or disrupting students. The key:

- A new principal;
- A new, handpicked team of teachers;
- Renovations to the facility over the summer;
- A new curriculum;
- New conduct codes and disciplinary standards;
- New expectations for student success;
- Direct involvement of parents and community members.

• *Karen Hawley Miles* of Education Resource Strategies says there are simply too many failing schools to close them all. While shuttering persistently underperforming schools should be an option, she says a district can do a lot with these components of a comprehensive improvement plan:

- Measure every school's performance and use the data to decide which to close;
- Recruit transformational school leaders who can establish high expectations;
- Give leaders the power to assemble high-performing teams with appropriate expertise and assign teachers efficiently;
- Provide sufficient expert instructional support and collaborative time for teachers to adjust instruction based on data;
- Fund targeted student support and take the time to accelerate student learning;
- Provide additional problem-solving and support staff from the central office.

"Correspondence" in *Education Next*, Spring 2010 (Vol. 10, #2, p. 6-9); for the text of these letters and the Smarick article, see http://www.educationnext.org.

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8. Richard DuFour on Asking the Right Questions

In this paid advertisement in *Education Week*, author/consultant Richard DuFour suggests the questions a professional learning community staff might ask to guide its collective inquiry process:

- What is the fundamental purpose of our school?
- What do we know about the characteristics of the most effective schools?
- Are any of those characteristics present in our school?
- What commitments should we make to one another to create a more effective school?
- What indicators will help us monitor our progress?
- What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions we want all students to acquire as a result of every course, grade level, and unit of instruction?
- How should we pace our instruction to ensure all students have access to a guaranteed curriculum?
- What evidence will we gather to monitor each student's learning?
- Do we agree on the criteria we will use in assessing the quality of students' work?
- How do we apply the criteria consistently?
- How will we respond when some students aren't proficient?
- How can we enrich and extend the learning for those who are already proficient?
- Who among us seems most effective in teaching each skill?
- How can we learn from each other?
- Which of our policies, programs, and practices support learning for all students?
- Which ones interfere with student learning?

"Clarifying Collective Inquiry" by Richard DuFour in *Education Week*, March 3, 2010 (Vol. 29, #23, p. 8); more details at http://www.allthingsplc.info.

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9. Why Merit Pay Is a Distraction and a Delusion

Merit pay is an "agreeable fantasy," says school superintendent Wayne Gersen in this powerful article in *Education Week*. Paying teachers more for better test scores won't cure the fundamental problems in our schools because:

• *We already have merit pay, and it undercuts the key agenda*. Many of the most experienced and highly qualified teachers move to wealthier districts that offer higher salaries and far superior working conditions. This works against the urgent goal of improving instruction for high-need students.

• *Tax revenues are not responsive to teachers' performance*. Pay increases in the public sector depend on taxes, and taxes fluctuate in response to variables that educators can't control. No matter how well teachers do, their salaries are at the mercy of external forces, and merit pay schemes never survive economic downturns.

• *Teachers don't want merit pay*. "Given the choice," says Gersen, "teachers will accept decent pay and good working conditions over extraordinary pay and a stressful workplace.

They want to work where they have a sense that they are making a difference in students' lives, where they are respected and valued in the community, and where they can earn enough to live comfortably in the community where they work."

Those who advocate for merit pay, concludes Gersen, are distracting us from a central moral issue – the glaring disparities among American schools. "Only a sizable and sustained infusion of money can offset the existing pay and workplace disparities that make a mockery of the ideal of equal opportunity in public schools," he writes. "The hard-working teachers in low-paying districts need decent wages; the forlorn schools in those districts need to be upgraded; and students in all schools should experience an education with the small class sizes and rich curriculum offerings that are givens in affluent districts."

"Merit Pay: An Agreeable Fantasy" by Wayne Gersen in *Education Week*, March 3, 2010 (Vol. 29, #23, p. 23), e-link for subscribers only

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 37 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 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 about 50 issues a year).

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
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Journal of Staff Development
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Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
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Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
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Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine (online)
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The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
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Theory Into Practice
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