

Marshall Memo 816

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 16, 2019

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Quotes of the Week

“We’re in the middle of a full-blown mental health crisis for adolescents and young adults.”
Jean Twenge (quoted in item #4)

“We invest heavily in crisis care, which is the most expensive and least effective means of preventing suicide.”
John Ackerman (quoted in *ibid.*)

“Many observations teachers have received come from a place rooted in checkmarks, required walkthroughs, and supervisory requirements. Many of these interactions typically end up with ‘what could you have done differently’ paralysis, causing them to become numb to any strengths that may be observed. The process can be demotivating.”
Jody Flowers (see item #3)

“That’s what my students have to listen to each day? Oh my.”
A teacher upon watching himself on video (quoted in *ibid.*)

“I began to see myself as someone with a keen voice in the classroom, someone with agency and ability to determine how I might use this question superpower to understand my world more fully.”
Anne Bruder (see item #1)

“My students need to be bold enough to voice an inchoate or controversial speculation that might, in the end, fizzle out – or prove explosive. To do so, they must trust me enough to know that I’ll help them when their questions get tangled. They need to know that I won’t leave them hanging and that I’ll use my own questioning tone to reflect back to them what I think they’re trying to ask. And they need to believe, in some unshakable way, that my classroom is a hospitable place for their messiest queries.”
Anne Bruder (*ibid.*)

1. Questioning, the Most Basic Teaching Tool

In this article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Anne Bruder (Berea College) remembers that her fifth-grade teacher in northern Michigan thought she was trouble. Young Anne asked way too many questions: Why was Lansing the state capital? How and why had the region's Chippewa Indians vanished? Why did all fractions need to be reduced to their lowest terms? What really caused the Challenger explosion? And why were boys allowed to violently pelt girls during dodgeball?

"In my youthful taxonomy of questions," says Bruder, "I'd hopscotch between the factual and the philosophical, from the instrumental to the open-ended; all felt urgent to me and, I suspect, disruptive to her... I suspect she saw me as taking up too much space in the room or as being, quite simply, annoying... She glared at me sideways through her thick acrylic glasses. Her nude nylons squeaked as she passed by my desk, ignoring, as always, my incessantly raised hand."

The teacher tried moving Bruder to the back of the room, then to the front, and finally sent her to the school's social worker, who got pelted with more of Anne's questions: Where was she from? Did she have kids? How did she feel about Ronald Reagan? Did she listen to Madonna? Wasn't the teacher being unreasonable? Bruder liked the social worker, and they ended up agreeing on a behavior modification contract: If Bruder managed to limit her questions to five a day and kept that up for a whole week, she could spend an hour helping out in a kindergarten class. If she went over the limit, she'd go to the principal's office.

Bruder loved working with little kids, posing questions that aroused their curiosity and got their little hands waving in the air. Back in the fifth-grade classroom, she accepted the limits. "When my teacher begrudgingly gave me permission to ask one of my five measly questions," she says, "I'd concentrate and condense the chain of 12 interconnected curiosities spinning through my mind down to one meaty layered query. My 'may I ask you a question?' soon became my shorthand for 'may I have some space to wonder about these things that fascinate me?'" If the teacher was in a good mood, this sometimes opened up new learning for everyone in the room.

The contract worked, but it left Bruder with what she calls a "lingering verbal tic" – feeling she had to ask permission to ask a question. Finally, in college, a professor said to her, "Your questions are keen, important. Keep asking them. Ask even more. But stop asking for permission from me or anyone else." This was terrifically liberating, says Bruder. Finally she was released from "the anxious tic of a 10-year-old with a tiny budget for her curiosity." This class and others in college and graduate school came to resemble Socratic dialogues: "I began

to see myself as someone with a keen voice in the classroom, someone with agency and ability to determine how I might use this question superpower to understand my world more fully.”

Bruder went on to become a college English professor, and she knows that the questions with straightforward answers that she used to spend hours researching in the library, her students can now Google in seconds. But the Internet doesn’t answer the kinds of questions she dreamed up as a 10-year-old, and those are the ones she wants her college students to grapple with: How did it feel to be a girl in America at various points over the last 200 years? What happens to a democracy when radical ideas take center stage? Why should we still care about a sermon Ralph Waldo Emerson gave in 1838? Students come to her office asking lower-level questions that *can* be answered by Google, but don’t ask enough of the kinds of questions that require engaging deeply with books, footnotes – and of course thoughtful classroom discussions.

“I’ve come to see that for my students, asking the more unwieldy questions takes confidence and humility,” says Bruder, “both of which my teaching must nurture. My students need to be bold enough to voice an inchoate or controversial speculation that might, in the end, fizzle out – or prove explosive. To do so, they must trust me enough to know that I’ll help them when their questions get tangled. They need to know that I won’t leave them hanging and that I’ll use my own questioning tone to reflect back to them what I think they’re trying to ask. And they need to believe, in some unshakable way, that my classroom is a hospitable place for their messiest queries.” Since many of her students are the first in their families to go to college, this sense of safety and belonging is especially important. She wants them to feel okay asking the kinds of questions she was discouraged from asking in fifth grade.

When Bruder says to one of her college students, “May I ask you a question?” it has an entirely new meaning than when she spoke those words as a 10-year-old and as a 20-year-old. “Now, directed to my student, it tells her: ‘I see you. I recognize you as a full participant in our work together. I acknowledge that you are capable of seeing and knowing something new and exciting. I want to hear what you think. Come and think alongside me, alongside all of us in the room.’ Each time I ask for my students’ permission, I’m reminded of the power and the magic of our most basic teaching tool to forge connections and help us all move into the unknown together.”

“May I Ask You a Question?” by Anne Bruder in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2019/January 2020 (Vol. 101, #4, pp. 57-60), <https://bit.ly/34kJM9W>; Bruder is at brudera@berea.edu.

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2. A Successful Program for Long-Term English Language Learners

(Originally titled “Research in Action: Ramping Up Support for Long-Term ELLs”)

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, teacher/author Larry Ferlazzo reports on an action research project at his 1,650-student California high school. The focus was on improving the school performance of long-term English language learners – students who have been officially classified as ELLs for at least six years. Students in this category, who make up

between one-quarter and one-half of the 4.9 million ELLs in U.S. schools, are usually proficient with spoken English but aren't succeeding academically. (Six years is the maximum time that experts say students with adequate support need to acquire English proficiency.)

During the 2018-19 year, Ferlazzo's school launched a pilot program for 20 ninth-grade long-term ELLs. The key components:

- The 20 students were "cohort," attending academic classes together. In all but one of their classes, the cohort was joined by 12 non-ELL students.
- Ferlazzo taught the daily cohort-only support class (his time was freed up by teaching one less elective class and slightly increasing the size of several other classes). He gave the ELL group a leg up by using information he received from teachers on the topics they planned to cover and key background knowledge.
- Cohort students were closely monitored, with the support class serving as an "advisory on steroids." Ferlazzo (who speaks Spanish) stayed in close touch with families, making at least one call a month, with the student present, focusing on positive developments. "I would also throw in one thing they could improve on," he says, "like do some of the extra work available." Ferlazzo also pulled students out of academic classes to have short "walk and talk" check-in conversations, asking about their hopes and goals and next steps.
- Teachers identified students from the school's International Baccalaureate classes to serve as peer mentors for intervention students. They had 15-minute discussions of goals, challenges, and non-academic topics, and submitted a weekly report.
- Ferlazzo prepared brief social-emotional learning modules for the academic teachers, and taught key SEL concepts in his support class, including growth versus fixed mindset.
- Ferlazzo introduced a daily warm-up in the support class, asking students to write in their "retrieval practice notebooks" important knowledge or skills they'd acquired the day before, then sharing with the group.
- Teachers occasionally allowed especially responsible cohort members to leave academic classes and work independently in the ELL support center.

What were the results? While the 20 students in the intervention cohort outperformed a control group by only a small amount on academic assessments, they did far better on what Ferlazzo believes is the most important measure: performance on California's English Language Proficiency Assessment, which tells if an ELL can be reclassified as English proficient. Intervention students scored 22 points higher than their pretest on the ELPAC, while control-group students scored only 14 points higher. In addition, intervention students had nine percent higher attendance, eight percent fewer behavior referrals, and nine percent fewer suspensions than the control group.

At the end of the school year, cohort students were asked which components of the program made the biggest difference. Students ranked the peer mentors first, independent work in the support center second, lesson and knowledge "previews" third. The support class was also rated high, with Ferlazzo earning an A- from students. Lowest-rated were retrieval practice and "walk-and-talk" conversations. Most participating teachers were positive about the experiment, especially that students came to class better prepared, that teachers could send

students to the support center to do independent work, and that Ferlazzo helped them work with students and parents.

The success of the pilot led the school to continue it the following year with one significant tweak: the support class is being taught by the regular-education ELA teacher, closely supported by Ferlazzo. His closing words: “We hope other schools can build on our successful experience by trying this approach to supporting long-term English language learners.”

“Research in Action: Ramping Up Support for Long-Term ELLs” by Larry Ferlazzo in *Educational Leadership*, December 2019/January 2020 (Vol. 77, #4, pp. 16-23), <https://bit.ly/38MBBq8>; Ferlazzo can be reached at laferlazzo@aol.com.

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3. Video Coaching with a Positive Spin

In this article in *The Learning Professional*, Texas instructional coach Jody Flowers says that “when you mention video observation, fear often spreads across teachers’ faces as if they just woke up from a recurring nightmare.” Why these negative feelings when many educators share online videos outside of school, including family vacations and even marriage proposals? What’s more, people in other fields use videos to hone their skills and demonstrate best practices: professional athletes, lawyers, plumbers, mechanics, and electricians. It could be argued that teachers’ work with their students has more long-term impact than that of most other professionals, says Flowers, “yet video observation and reflection is not yet the norm in schools.”

Another reason for teachers’ reluctance to use videos of their lessons is negative experiences with supervision and evaluation. “Many observations teacher have received come from a place rooted in checkmarks, required walkthroughs, and supervisory requirements,” says Flowers. “Many of these interactions typically end up with ‘what could you have done differently’ paralysis, causing them to become numb to any strengths that may be observed. The process can be demotivating.”

Flowers’s district (and two others) decided they could do better and implemented a strengths-based video coaching program. Volunteer teachers were given an iPad and instructions on how to video lessons and then engaged in 8-10 coaching cycles over the school year. Here are the steps they followed for each cycle:

- The teacher made a video of a class and uploaded it to a dedicated website.
- The coach watched the full video and selected three 1-minute clips that best captured important (and positive) classroom interactions.
- The coach wrote a summary of the instructional dimensions that were evident in each clip and a prompt to get the teacher reflecting, and sent them to the teacher within two days.
- The teacher viewed the clips, read the coach’s commentary and prompts, and responded.

- The teacher and coach met for about 30 minutes (in person or electronically), reviewed the clips and responses, and discussed ways to maintain and duplicate positive classroom interactions.
- The coach wrote a summary of the conference and created an action plan that included viewing exemplary clips of other teachers in action, a short reading assignment, and specific actions to practice before the next video was made.

“The main challenge with video coaching,” says Flowers, “is overcoming the coach’s and teacher’s discomfort with hearing and seeing themselves on video... One teacher said after his first cycle, ‘That’s what my students have to listen to each day? Oh my.’ But after the third cycle, that same teacher reflected on how critical it was to see and hear what his students are seeing each day so he could better understand how peer dialoging and back-and-forth exchanges play a vital role in the effective pacing of his lessons.” Another teacher said, “It’s watching yourself so you can plan through the eyes of your students.”

Flowers says it took only three or four cycles for teachers and students to forget the camera was there. It’s also helpful that the coach focuses each debrief on three very short video clips rather than the whole lesson.

At the heart of this program was finding strengths in teachers’ work and building on them. Coaches (who were themselves coached by outside experts) deliberately refrained from following positive comments with “but...” and refrained from giving advice. “The questions from my coach were open-ended,” said one teacher, “and I felt like I could reflect without judgment or correction.”

In their own training sessions, coaches learned to shift from stock questions like “What could you have done differently?” to “What is something new you want to try next time?” They also moved beyond generic compliments like “Good job” or “Way to go” to being specific and using relevant details from the rubric— for example, “I noticed that you ask students to prove their answers to get students to return to the text.” Coaches also worked on balancing air time in conversations with teachers. “Coaches find themselves talking less and listening more,” says Flowers. “Teachers reflect and discover wisdom and answers on their own, instead of passively waiting for advice.”

The results of this pilot of video coaching won’t be available for two or three years, but Flowers is encouraged by the early results. “Think of the student who is afraid to ask a question because her teacher doesn’t realize his tone of voice is harsh,” he says, “or the one who disengages from school and drops out because he thinks none of the adults care about what he’s interested in. With video coaching, we can see those unintentional messages we sent and change them so that we can change students’ futures.”

“Accentuate the Positive” by Jody Flowers in *The Learning Professional*, December 2019 (Vol. 40, #6, pp. 36-40), <https://bit.ly/36HzHp3>; Flowers is at jody.flowers@wacoisd.org.

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4. Troubling Data on Youth Suicide

In her *New York Times* Personal Health column, Jane Brody cites statistics on the increase in suicides and suicide attempts among young people. From 2007 to 2017, the suicide rate among 10-to-24-year-olds increased by 56 percent, making it the second-leading cause of death in this age group (after accidents). Suicide attempts have quadrupled over the last six years, a statistic that is probably an undercount. “We’re in the middle of a full-blown mental health crisis for adolescents and young adults,” says psychologist/author Jean Twenge (San Diego State University). “The evidence is strong and consistent both for symptoms and behavior.”

Because of the shame generally associated with suicide, families often shroud the issue in secrecy, and there isn’t the kind of national mobilization that would normally accompany this kind of data spike. “We invest heavily in crisis care,” says John Ackerman, a suicide prevention expert at Nationwide Children’s Hospital in Ohio, “which is the most expensive and least effective means of preventing suicide.” The key, he says, is identifying vulnerable youth as early as elementary school, helping them cope with stress, and teaching them what to do if they have a crisis. This can be as simple as regularly checking in on young people’s emotional status. “It’s not putting ideas in their heads to ask directly whether they’ve had thoughts of suicide or dying,” says Ackerman. “That doesn’t increase their risk. Rather, it’s relieving. You actually reduce the risk if you help kids talk through these difficult issues.”

What is causing the increase in suicidal ideation, attempts, and deaths? Experts point to several factors:

- *Social media and communication patterns* – “Kids never disconnect,” says Henry Spiller, director of the Central Ohio Poison Center. “They go to bed with their smartphones. It may be cyberbullying. It may be envy.” Twenge agrees: “There’s less face-to-face time spent with friends. It’s now the norm to sit home Saturday night on Instagram. Who’s popular and who’s not is now quantifiable by how many people are following you... There’s a lot of negativity, competition, and jockeying for status...”

- *School-based interactions* – Suicide data for young people track the academic year – September to December, January to May – which is not true of adults. This suggests that negative social interactions in and around school are the areas that educators, families, and health care professionals have to monitor.

- *Sleep* – Teens’ quantity and quality of sleep can be affected by going to bed late and night-time social media activity. “The brain can’t slow down and relax,” says Twenge. Kids shouldn’t look at the blue light of their devices less than an hour before bedtime. Parents can set limits, such as setting their kids’ phones to shut down at 9:00 p.m.

- *Information and means* – Kids with smartphones have unfiltered access to Internet sites that tell them how to harm themselves. And some homes give young people unguarded access to firearms and potentially lethal medications and other substances.

- *Sometimes a perfect storm* – School, social, and family problems can converge to create a crisis. “Ultimately,” says Ackerman, “it’s a combination of economic, social, and

technological factors that come together along with family and school issues, and kids are less equipped to tackle these problems.”

“Time to Sound the Alarm Over Youth Suicide” by Jane Brody in *The New York Times*, December 3, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2Po5dCF>

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5. Rethinking Nightly Reading Logs

In this article in *Edutopia*, South Carolina instructional coach Allie Thrower remembers that as a fifth-grade teacher, she felt burdened by the daily routine of monitoring students’ reading logs – the requirement to report how much they read after school (it was almost always 20 minutes). “My students seemed to be reading merely because they had to,” says Thrower, “not because it opened up windows to the world, because reading about a character who looked like them brought them a sense of belonging and hope, or because they wanted to learn how to change the world for the better.” She decided to dump reading logs, experimented with several alternatives, and settled on what she called reading accountability partners. Here’s how it worked in her class:

- Students are paired with a partner who will challenge them academically and encourage them emotionally.

- The teacher conducts mini-lessons and models what it looks like for students to hold each other accountable for daily reading and be receptive to feedback. Some suggestions for partner chats (these might be posted on anchor charts):

- What do you like best about your book?
- What feelings did this book evoke?
- Which character do you most closely relate to?
- How have you been changed by what you read?
- Does your new understanding leave you feeling motivated to take action?

Thrower’s students were encouraged to jot notes about their partner conversations in a journal, noting insights on growth and trends in genres of reading being done.

- Thrower ensured that the daily time for accountability talks was “unrushed” and informal, with students choosing a comfortable place to chat. She found that ten minutes was usually enough time.

- She circulated and did some “guest partnering” with pairs. No grades were given, but students were accountable for having done some reading and having thoughtful conversations.

Thrower says the results of this process were “impressive” – especially for students who were reluctant readers and were not responding to the requirement to read for 20 minutes and record what they’d done in a log. Students read, talked about their reactions, and developed a love of reading.

“Ditching the Reading Logs” by Allie Thrower in *Edutopia*, November 6, 2019, <https://www.edutopia.org/article/ditching-reading-logs>

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6. Online Supplemental Materials: *Caveat Emptor*

In this Thomas B. Fordham Institute white paper, Morgan Polikoff (University of Southern California) and consultant Jennifer Dean report on their study (with a team of four other reviewers) of the “bazaar” of supplemental curriculum materials available to teachers on the Internet. Here are their conclusions, based on an analysis of high-school ELA materials on three widely used platforms: ReadWriteThink, Share My Lesson, and Teachers Pay Teachers:

- The quality of the main texts was good to excellent, and students were often asked to provide textual evidence. Texts on ReadWriteThink and Share My Lesson got somewhat better ratings than Teachers Pay Teachers.

- The materials were generally free from errors and well designed. Across the sites, materials on Share My Lesson were rated the least attractive and least organized, while those at ReadWriteThink were rated most positively on those criteria.

- However, most of the materials that accompany the texts were rated “mediocre” or “probably not worth using.” Fewer than 10 percent of the materials on each site were rated “exceptional.” The main concerns were lack of clarity and inadequate instructional guidance.

- Materials were weakly aligned with the standards to which they claimed to be aligned. “These low alignment ratings occur primarily because most materials claim alignment to a very large number of standards,” say Polikoff and Dean.

- The overall quality of writing, speaking, and listening tasks was weak. Although students were asked to write a paragraph or more in 82 percent of the materials, the tasks were not rigorous or high-quality.

- Assessments included in the materials ranked poorly because they sometimes failed to cover key content and rarely provided teachers with the supports needed to score student work.

- Lesson units did a poor job of building students’ content knowledge, and they were generally not cognitively demanding (reviewers used Webb’s Depth of Knowledge scale).

- The materials did a very poor job helping teachers differentiate instruction for low-performing students, those with disabilities, and English language learners.

- Materials scored fairly low on how interesting they were likely to be to students, and did not reflect the cultural diversity of classrooms.

Polikoff and Dean have the following takeaways for high-school ELA teachers and school leaders:

- The supplemental materials market is “bewildering and begs curation.”
- Supplemental materials on these three sites have a long way to go before they can fill gaps in classrooms.
- There are significant gaps in assessments, supports for diverse learners, and diversity of authors and cultural content.
- Supervisors and coaches at the building and district level need to monitor the materials teachers are using in classrooms and help teachers find and develop high-quality materials.

“The Supplemental Curriculum Bazaar: Is What’s Online Any Good?” by Morgan Polikoff with Jennifer Dean, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, December 2019, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/supplemental-curriculum-bazaar>

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7. What’s Missing in Science Textbooks

In this article in *Education Week Teacher*, Sarah Schwartz reports on a study in *High School Journal* that critiques the way scientific discoveries are portrayed in textbooks. An analysis of 17 middle- and high-school science texts found that scientists were portrayed as geniuses who worked alone and spotted things that others hadn’t – like Isaac Newton discovering gravity when he was bonked on the head by an apple. What’s missing is that science is an “ongoing enterprise” that includes contributions by other scientists, collaboration, competition, hypothesis testing, revising prior knowledge in light of new evidence – and all of these things make a breakthrough possible.

Anthony Pellegrino, the lead author of the study, put it this way: “There’s sort of a lack of understanding of the process of what experimenting means. That’s the stuff we don’t see in textbooks.” This deficiency makes science less relevant to students and less attractive as a possible career. “It strips away the agency of the students in seeing themselves as part of science,” says Pellegrino.

The study pointed to another deficiency: a lack of racial and geographic diversity. Of 1,476 textbook passages, only 12 mentioned non-Western scientists or discoveries.

“Few Science Textbooks Show How Discoveries Are Really Made” by Sarah Schwartz in *Education Week Teacher*, December 12, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Ep9AHp>

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8. Short Item

The best kids’ books of 2019 – This *School Library Journal* section includes reviewers’ choices of the best picture books, nonfiction books, graphic novels, middle-grade books, and young adult novels, each with a cover image, recommended grade span, and short description: <https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=best-young-adult-books-2019-slj-best-books>

“Best Books 2019” in *School Library Journal*, December 2019 (Vol. 65, #11, pp. 24-46)

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*If you have feedback or suggestions,
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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 50 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

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

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

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