Marshall Memo 943

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 4, 2022

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Consistent exposure to music, like learning to play a musical instrument or taking voice lessons, strengthens a particular set of academic and social-emotional skills that are essential to learning."

Holly Korbey (see item #2)

"Forgetting serves us well. It tunes out useless information so we can focus on the relevant. Without it, neither anger at a slight nor the pain of grief would fade; feelings of love and attraction would not either, making it impossible to move on from relationships. Memories build us, and forgetting chisels away the excess, shaping the way we see ourselves and our world."

Corinne Purtill (see item #1)

"I've dedicated many hours to improving my spelling, but my brain refuses to cooperate."

Patrick O'Connor (see item #3)

"Part of speaking well is being able to speak *right*."

John McWhorter (see item #5)

"Given that academic inequality is largest and widens most consistently during kindergarten, interventions may be more effective when they target this formative period for students with disabilities."

North Cooc and David Quinn (see item #6)

1. Why We Should Worry Less About Forgetting

In this article in *Time*, Corinne Purtill says that until quite recently, neuroscientists believed that memory lapses – misplaced keys, a name we can't quite bring to mind – were a glitch in the memory system. "The brain's job was to gather and store information," she says, "and the inability to retain or retrieve those memories was a failure of some neurological or psychological mechanism."

But in the last few years, scientists have discovered that forgetting serves an important cognitive function, with the brain using molecular tools to discard what isn't useful or relevant. There's short-term sidelining of details that can be retrieved later with some effort and letting go of information we no longer need. According to Oliver Hardt (McGill University), forgetting is "one of the most fundamental aspects of a memory system. Without forgetting," he says, "nothing would work." Hardt and other scientists believe one of the key purposes of sleep is culling nonessential memories. That's why a good night's sleep is helpful to having a clear mind.

In evolutionary terms, the purpose of memory is to help make life-or-death decisions based on past experiences. If our brain stored all the hundreds of thousands of bits of information it processes every day (the way our socks felt when we pulled them on this morning, the shirt color of a person standing next to us at the grocery store) all those memories would keep popping up and we wouldn't be able to access the bits we need to take actions that truly matter. "Forgetting may be the basal state of the brain," says neuroscientist Ronald Davis (Scripps Research Institute). "The brain is designed to slowly erase information that's coming in on a daily basis, unless consolidation says, OK, this memory is important. And so it overrides the forgetting mechanism."

"Forgetting serves us well," says Purtill. "It tunes out useless information so we can focus on the relevant. Without it, neither anger at a slight nor the pain of grief would fade; feelings of love and attraction would not either, making it impossible to move on from relationships. Memories build us, and forgetting chisels away the excess, shaping the way we see ourselves and our world."

The research on forgetting is also producing insights on psychological conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), where there's an injury to the forgetting mechanism, and some types of autism, involving an aversion to excess stimuli and an inability to let go of nonessential inputs. It might also be possible to understand what's involved in Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, where the memory function breaks down in major ways.

"The New Science of Forgetting" by Corinne Purtill in *Time*, May 9/16, 2022
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2. Music as Academic Strength Training

In this *Edutopia* article, journalist Holly Korbey describes how a decade ago, Angélica Durrell began teaching percussion instruments in a Connecticut high-school's after-school program. Her students, many of whom had recently immigrated from Central and South America and were struggling academically, learned to play Pachelbel's Canon and perform "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" by the Shirelles, singing the lyrics in English and Spanish.

Within a few years, Durrell's program caught the attention of district leaders, who noticed that students were not only learning music and having fun but also attending school more consistently, improving their English proficiency, and more readily making friends. Today Durrell's non-profit program Intempo serves more than 3,000 students in Stamford and Norwalk, Connecticut.

"Consistent exposure to music," reports Korbey, "like learning to play a musical instrument or taking voice lessons, strengthens a particular set of academic and social-emotional skills that are essential to learning. In ways that are unmatched by other pursuits, like athletics for instance, learning music powerfully reinforces language skills, builds and improves reading ability, and strengthens memory and attention… What makes music learning so powerful is how it engages all those different systems in a single activity."

Neuroscientist Nina Kraus agrees: "People think of the hearing brain as being a silo within the brain. In fact, our hearing engages our cognitive, sensory, motor, and reward systems. That's huge. From an evolutionary perspective, being able to make sense of sound is ancient and has engaged all these different perspectives… What is important is that engaging with sound changes and strengthens how the brain responds to sound… Music should be a part of every child's education. Period." And it doesn't matter what instrument: flute, violin, accordion, piano, voice – they can all have a positive impact.

These findings are a wake-up call to schools that have been shortchanging music in the curriculum. A 2014 study showed that 1.3 million U.S. elementary students don't take music, and exposure in middle schools is uneven, with students in the Northeast twice as likely to have access as students in the South and West (where only one-third of students did). Given budget cuts and a shortage of music teachers, districts are wise to engage nonprofit organizations and community partners like Save the Music Foundation, Harmony Project, and the Soulsville Foundation.

Not being exposed to music in school feeds many children's belief that "I can't sing" and "I'm not musical." Music curriculum developer Kelly Green says, "When I start singing with students, they often realize singing is just a practiced skill. All these things start happening. They feel this sense of euphoria."

"How Music Primes the Brain for Learning" by Holly Korbey in *Edutopia*, April 22, 2022
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3. A High-School English Teacher Who Struggles with Spelling

In this article in *Education Week*, Massachusetts high-school English teacher Patrick O'Connor remembers two students at the back of his class snickering and pointing out a spelling mistake he'd made on the whiteboard (*are* instead of *our*). One of them came up to him after class and he thought she was going to apologize. Instead she said, "I've never had an English teacher who couldn't spell." Humiliated, O'Connor tried to explain: "I've dedicated many hours to improving my spelling, but my brain refuses to cooperate."

He also has difficulty when he speaks: "I'm prone to malapropisms. I get tangled up in syntax, I lose place in my thoughts, and sometimes I stutter. Language is an ever-replenishing fountain of shame – and no matter how often I aim for eloquence, my brain eventually reveals the tongue-tied, sentence-mangling, word-abusing fake under the mask." O'Connor recalls other incidents: a sixth-grade teacher asked the class an easy question and said, "Come on, even Patrick could answer this one!" Watching a Mets game with family members, he asked, "What's Dave Kingman's first name?" Once when he had difficulty finishing a sentence, a neighbor's father snapped, "You stuttering idiot." On a first date in college, he said that a group of cyclists looked like the "Tour de Force."

"There have been hundreds of other moments like this in which I felt like the idiot they said I was," says O'Connor. "Even after graduating from college with honors, earning a master's degree in education, becoming a high-school English teacher, and getting published as a writer, I still feel like the idiot they said I was. I don't know how to shake the feeling."

Recently O'Connor sat down with a student with a learning disability who had written an essay on how teachers, standardized tests, and a premium on quick answers make students like him feel dumb. "I could have told him that I was one of those students," says O'Connor, "that I spent most of my high-school years in a cloud of disorganized thinking, that I was blessed to discover literature (not in any classroom, but on my own), and through reading I learned to write well, and through writing I learned ways of thinking and organizing my thoughts.

"I could have told him that I still struggle with my own intellectual inabilities, and these perceived flaws make me feel stupid almost every day. I could have told him this is why he never sees me writing on the whiteboard, because I'm an English teacher who can't spell. Instead, I kept quiet and just listened. I praised his ideas and the way he expresses them, and said I always enjoy hearing his thoughts. And when he walked out of my classroom, I think he felt smart."

"How Schools Can Make Students (and Teachers) Feel Dumb" by Patrick O'Connor in *Education Week*, June 28, 2022

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4. "Language Nutrition" Second Graders Can Get from Their Teachers

In this *Elementary School Journal* article, Carla Wood and Christopher Schatschneider (Florida State University) and Jeanne Wanzek (Vanderbilt University) report on their study of

the ways 38 second-grade teachers verbally interacted with their students. The researchers recorded, transcribed, and analyzed teachers' words in a sampling of lessons through the school year, sorting them into five categories:

- *Directives* – commanding a student's actions – for example "Sit down," "Stop talking," "Give me that."
- *Closed questions* – eliciting a simple one-word response with a limited set of possible right answers, usually drawing on prior knowledge and what had been taught.
- *Open-ended questions* – allowing a wide range of possible ideas – for example, "What do you think will happen next?" "Why do you think he did that?" In response, students can predict, infer, give opinions, make connections with their own experiences – using lists, sentences, or stories.
- *Statements* – providing students with information – facts, concepts, comments, descriptions, definitions, opinions, plans, affirmations.
- *Responses to direct questions* – including answering students' requests for clarification.

Wood, Schatschneider, and Wanzek had two research questions: What types of communicative interactions were most common in classrooms: directive, neutral, or facilitative? and Were there differences in the way teachers interacted according to students' socioeconomic levels (as determined by their free and reduced-price meal status)? Here's what they found:

• The majority of teachers' verbal output consisted of statements and information sharing, followed by closed questions, directives, and commands. Teachers less frequently asked open-ended questions and responded to students' questions. Overall, closed questions and directives were used twice as often as facilitative communications. Nevertheless, the researchers gave teachers credit for using talk behaviors that were "supportive of reading comprehension."

• There was "a moderately strong correlation" between teachers giving direct commands and students' lower socioeconomic status, with correspondingly less facilitative communication with these students. "The current findings," say the authors, "provide additional support for the need for causal research examining the extent to which teachers' use of facilitative communication behaviors can improve outcomes and reduce disparities in exposure to facilitative communication behaviors, particularly for classrooms that differ in economic resources related to SES advantage."

• Finally, say the authors, "The predominant use of directives and closed questions suggests students are not optimally encouraged to engage in high-level thinking to respond to open-ended questions, but instead are constrained to evaluative and directive interactions. The use of directives and questioning with prespecified answers could be viewed as perpetuating dependency in learners rather than pushing students' critical thinking with authentic questions and discussions." This suggests that principals and other supervisors should be attuned to these verbal dynamics during classroom observations and do more "to support teachers' implementation of facilitative communicative behaviors that foster higher-quality discussion and critical thinking in elementary classrooms."

"The Relation Between Teachers' Communicative Behaviors and Class-Level SES" by Carla Wood, Jeanne Wanzek, and Christopher Schatschneider in *Elementary School Journal*, June 2022 (Vol. 122, #4, pp. 534-556); the authors can be reached at carla.wood@cci.fsu.edu, jeanne.wanzek@vanderbilt.edu, and schatschneider@psy.fsu.edu.

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5. John McWhorter on Tuning Speech to Formal and Informal Contexts

In this *New York Times* article, linguistics professor John McWhorter (Columbia University) asked his daughter why she was no longer saying *gonna* and *wanna*, instead enunciating *going to* and *want to*. She replied that teachers in her elementary school said that *gonna* and *wanna* were not in the dictionary and students should be speaking properly.

"I'm gonna diverge from this guidance," says McWhorter. Taking pains to say that his daughter's teachers are excellent in every other way, he points out that *gonna* and *wanna* are in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, with the part of speech given as a "pronunciation spelling" – similar to a contraction in the way they combine two words into one. He says that sociolinguistics, a subfield of linguistics, has provided insights about the way people speak differently in formal and informal situations, using distinct vocabulary and grammar.

"Making that point initially struck me as hammering on something rather obvious," says McWhorter. "However, I've realized that it can be hard for people to quite get past an idea that written language, in its permanence and formality, is the real thing, while casual speech can be seen as a mere approximation, full of messy floutings of rules." And yet his daughter's careful choice of words, dutifully following her teachers' directives, might come across to her peers "as an affectation, a kind of precocious fuddy-duddyism."

After McWhorter had this conversation with his daughter, she wryly said to her sister, "My dad is teaching me *not* to speak well!" "Ah, the plight of the linguist parent," he says. "I have no doubt that she'll grow up able to speak 'well,' but part of speaking well is being able to speak *right*. I wanna make sure she can."

"Sometimes 'Proper' Speech Isn't Correct Speech" by John McWhorter in *The New York Times,* June 20, 2022; McWhorter can be reached at jm3156@columbia.edu.

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6. Kindergarten Inequality Among Students With and Without Disabilities

In this *Elementary School Journal* article, North Cooc (University of Texas/Austin) and David Quinn (University of Southern California) report on their study of learning loss over the summer and during the school year, comparing national data on kindergarten children with and without disabilities. The researchers expected to find a pattern similar to studies comparing learning loss by race and socioeconomic status, which have documented the "faucet theory" – students with less access to academically enriching experiences over the summer fall behind their more-advantaged peers. Cooc and Quinn thought the paucity of special education services during the summer months (only about 15 percent of students receive them) would produce a similar widening of achievement gaps between students with and without learning disabilities.

The researchers were surprised to find that the academic gap between students with and without disabilities widened most significantly *during* the kindergarten year. In fact, students with disabilities did slightly better over the summer than those without disabilities. What explains this finding? Cooc and Quinn believe it was partly the result of students without disabilities stagnating academically over the summer, but their main concerns are:

- The less-than-adequate academic preparation that many children with disabilities received before kindergarten (if any);
- The challenge these children had adjusting to more-formal schooling in kindergarten, including building social-emotional skills like self-regulation;
- The inadequate support schools gave to parents of kindergarten students with disabilities;
- The quality and intensity of special education services during the kindergarten year;
- The "Matthew effect," with students who entered kindergarten with advantages being more able to capitalize on what the school provided.

Cooc and Quinn draw several policy lessons from their study: "Given that academic inequality is largest and widens most consistently during kindergarten, interventions may be more effective when they target this formative period for students with disabilities. This may involve strengthening existing procedures to ensure students receive timely and appropriate services early on. Improving transitional supports from preschool and early childhood programs may enrich the kindergarten experience for children with disabilities. Careful monitoring of their learning trajectories at different time points of the kindergarten year may also assist educators in developing appropriate interventions." The authors also suggest improving the quality of summer school programs and tying them closely to during-the-year content and pedagogy.

"A Seasonal Analysis of Disparities in Academic Skills for Early Elementary School Children with Disabilities" by North Cooc and David Quinn in *Elementary School Journal*, June 2022 (Vol. 122, #4, pp. 502-533); the authors can be reached at ncooc@austin.utexas.edu and quinnd@usc.edu.

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7. Making Sense of the Negative Findings of a Tennessee Preschool Study

In this *Mind/Shift* article, Anya Kamenetz interviewed Dale Farran, the lead researcher in a recent Vanderbilt study that followed Tennessee students from their prekindergarten programs through sixth grade. When students reached the lower elementary grades, those who had attended preschool programs did well, but after third grade, they did worse than the control group and by the end of sixth grade, the news was even more discouraging: lower test scores, more discipline referrals and suspensions, and a higher rate of referrals to special education.

"It's a bad time for early childhood advocates to get bad news about public Pre-K," says Kamenetz. "The United States has a child care crisis that Covid-19 both intensified and highlighted. Progressive policymakers and advocates have tried for years to expand public support for child care by 'pushing it down' from the existing public school system, using the

teachers and the buildings… Policymakers and experts have touted for decades now that if you give a 4-year-old who is growing up in poverty a good dose of story time and block play, they'll be more likely to grow up to become a high-earning, productive citizen."

The Tennessee study had very different findings from a study in Boston, which showed impressive long-term gains for students who attended high-quality preschool: better disciplinary records and greater likelihood of graduating from high school, taking SATs, and going to college (although their K-12 test scores were not better than the control group).

Farran looked carefully at the divergent results from the two studies. Boston spent more money per student and served a mixed-income population, while Tennessee worked with only low-income children. But she believes there's more to it than that; she questions how teachers are prepared, how programs are funded, the physical layout of schools, and preconceptions about what makes a high-quality preschool program.

"One of the biases that I hadn't examined in myself," says Farran, "is the idea that poor children need a different sort of preparation from children of higher-income families." All too often, preschool programs in lower-income neighborhoods emphasize drilling kids on basic skills, students tracing numbers and letters on worksheets, and teachers giving 10-minute lectures while students sit on their hands, only a few of them paying attention. "Higher-income families are not choosing this kind of preparation," says Farran. "And why would we assume that we need to train children of lower-income families earlier?" More-advantaged families tend to choose play-based programs with art, movement, music, and exposure to nature, with teachers asking children open-ended questions and listening carefully to their answers.

Why is there so much adult talk and so little higher-level, play-based pedagogy in lower-income communities? Farran believes it's partly because in many states, preschool teachers are certified through grade 5 or 8 and don't have specific training for working with younger children. Another possibility, she says, is that there's no correlation between licensure and teaching quality.

Farran recalled a 2016 study she had done of publicly funded preschool programs, also in Tennessee. This study found that a big chunk of children's days was spent on transitions: traipsing between the classroom and bathrooms, the cafeteria, and the playground (*Don't touch your neighbor, don't touch the wall, put a bubble in your mouth because you have to be quiet*).

This was because the programs were in traditional public schools that didn't have a bathroom within the preschool classroom and required moving some distance for all three activities. "I think children are not learning internal control," says Farran. "If anything, they're learning sort of an almost allergic reaction to the amount of external control that they're having, that they're having to experience in school" – being reprimanded, even suspended, for normal four-year-old stuff, and coming to see schools as aversive places with unrealistic expectations.

Farran believes a better approach is what New York City is using – a "mixed-delivery" model with slots for 3- and 4-year olds, some kids attending free public preschool in existing nonprofit day care centers, some in Head Start programs, some in traditional schools.

But the biggest challenge is figuring out whether we're asking too much of preschool programs. "We tend to want a magic bullet," she says. "Whoever thought that you could provide a 4-year-old from an impoverished family with a 5-1/2-hour day, nine months a year of preschool, and close the achievement gap, and send them to college at a higher rate? I mean, why? Why do we put so much pressure on our pre-K programs?" We might get better results, she suggests, with programs more like those currently enjoyed by more-advantaged children.

"New Research Updates What's Important in a Quality Preschool Program" by Anya Kamenetz in *Mind/Shift*, February 10, 2022

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8. Another Perspective on the Tennessee Study

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Meghan McCormick (MDRC) has a different take on the troubling Vanderbilt finding that early gains from Tennessee preschool programs fade as students move through the elementary grades and then students do worse than the control group by sixth grade. "Often overlooked in understanding the 'fadeout' phenomenon," says McCormick, "… are the types of children's skills that are being measured by the assessments commonly used in these studies" – tests like the DIBELS and Woodcock Johnson that measure students' knowledge of letters, letter sounds, numbers, and shapes. All U.S. kids are expected to master this foundational material in the early grades, says McCormick, and it's not surprising "that children who do not attend pre-K typically catch up to their pre-K-attending peers on these outcomes."

What if studies of preschools' long-range impact used assessments of a more-ambitious set of skills that children are less likely to acquire quickly in kindergarten? Then, she says, we "would get more-complete information on whether and how early learning investments pay off in the long term." Her specific suggestions:

• Assess critical thinking, problem solving, vocabulary knowledge, oral discourse, and executive functioning. These develop gradually through the grades (and after adolescence), don't have a "ceiling," and are predictive of school and life success.

• Use more-efficient ways of assessing children's skills. With traditional tools, it takes 15-20 minutes to administer an in-person assessment of a child's executive functioning. The Minnesota Executive Function Scale, available on an iPad, has an interactive, game-like interface and can get the same information in five minutes. These and other new assessments, says McCormick, "provide exciting opportunities for more seamlessly integrating assessments into the classroom, making the data accessible and usable by teachers and parents, and better supporting children's learning and development."

• Invest in data tracking infrastructure that captures information from age 4 through the upper grades. To really find out how well preschool programs are working, we need to do parallel assessments from preschool through upper elementary and even into the higher grades. North Carolina and Mississippi have implemented systems that do this, and several other states are working in the same direction.

"Engaging in this work," concludes McCormick, "will yield broader knowledge to build better early learning programs and support the well-being of our youngest citizens."

"Building Better Evidence on Pre-K by Strengthening Assessments of Children's Skills" by Meghan McCormick in *Education Gadfly*, July 1, 2022

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9. What Not to Say to a Person Seeking Help

In this article in *Psychology Today*, therapist Anthony Smith confesses that he's sometimes used three well-intentioned responses that have left a patient, family, or student feeling misunderstood and minimized:

• *I understand*. He might say this to show that he's listening and following along, but the other person might take it to mean that he's had a similar experience and knows how to solve the problem. When that turns out not to be true, the person can feel disappointed, even irritated. Better to say, "I recognize…" or "I can see…"

• *There's not much we can do about that*. Again, this statement is an attempt to ground the other person in reality and accept that some things just can't be changed. But these words can increase anxiety, hopelessness, and despair. Better to help the person develop strategies for managing the situation in the best way possible.

• *You just have to…* This implies that the solution is obvious – but if solving the problem were easy, the person would have done that already. The word *just* is the trigger here (as in *Just calm down* when a person is really upset or *Just suck it up* when they're at their wits' end). All these minimize the seriousness of the problem and can come across as patronizing. The key is to help the person figure out a better way to address or cope with the problem.

"Three Things Therapists Shouldn't Say" by Anthony Smith in *Psychology Today*, July/August 2022 (Vol. 55, #4, p. 8)

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10. Short Items:

a. Visualizing Gene Editing – In this *New York Times* article, Eleanor Lutz shows vividly how CRISPR works at the molecular level.

"CRISPR in the Classroom" by Eleanor Lutz in *The New York Times*, June 28, 2022

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b. Animated Science Infographics – This website by Eleanor Lutz shows the flight mechanics of bats, dragonflies, geese, moths, and hummingbirds; how humans, birds, and grasshoppers breathe; how muscles work; and planet Earth's control deck.

"Science Infographics" by Eleanor Lutz, on her website, 2022

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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 52 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 150 articles each week, and selects 8-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD Express
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
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Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
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