Marshall Memo 1066

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 16, 2024

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Show up. Work hard. Be kind."
On the cover of the student handbook at Goffstown High School, New Hampshire

"Without data, you're just another person with an opinion."
W. Edwards Deming, statistician, professor, and guru of total quality management

"Poetry and music are very good friends. Like mommies and daddies and strawberries and cream, they go together."
Nikki Giovanni (for more quotes, see item #1)

"In the institutional, normative structure of school, the teacher says, 'Let me show you how to do it. Now you do it.' That sets up mimicking. In a thinking classroom, the teacher says, 'I'm going to give you a task. You're going to have to think about it, so I'm not going to do it first.'"
Peter Liljedahl (see item #2)

"Teacher effort in correcting and evaluating papers is fruitless unless it results in further student effort to improve the papers."
Eric Johnson (see item #5)

"Show students how to make themselves 'strangers' to their own writing, and then to read it with a cold, objective eye, or better yet, read it aloud so that they can *hear* the mistakes they don't see."
Eric Johnson (*ibid*.)

1. A Tribute to Nikki Giovanni

Poet, activist, children's book author, and professor Nikki Giovanni died December 9th. She was 81. This is the New York Times obituary, and here are some of her memorable quotes:

If you don't understand yourself, you don't understand anybody else.

Nothing is easy to the unwilling.

Mistakes are a fact of life: it is the response to the error that counts.

I am so hip even my errors are correct.

You must be unintimidated by your own thoughts because if you write with someone looking over your shoulder, you'll never write.

Deal with yourself as an individual worthy of respect, and make everyone else deal with you the same way.

I really don't think life is about the I-could-have-beens. Life is only about the I-tried-to-do. I don't mind the failure but I can't imagine that I'd forgive myself if I didn't try.

I'm glad I understand that while language is a gift, listening is a responsibility.

We write because we believe the human spirit cannot be tamed and should not be trained.

Poetry and music are very good friends. Like mommies and daddies and strawberries and cream, they go together.

Art is not for the cultivated taste. It is to cultivate taste.

If I could come back as anything, I'd be a bird, first, but definitely the command key is my second choice.

We love because it's the only true adventure.

If now isn't a good time for the truth I don't see when we'll get to it.

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2. Peter Liljedahl on "Thinking Classrooms"

In this *Kappan* interview with Kathleen Vail, Peter Liljedahl (Simon Fraser University, Canada) discusses the details of Building Thinking Classrooms. Some key points:

• *The difficulty of getting kids thinking* – Twenty years ago, at the beginning of Liljedahl's research, a middle-school math teacher asked him for help teaching complex problem-solving (she was getting students ready for impending changes in Canada's curriculum expectations). Working together for a week, says Liljedahl, "it was disaster after disaster after disaster." Why? Because even though students seemed to be working hard and the teacher was running the class well, the standard *I do, we do, you do* lesson structure resulted in most students mimicking the teacher, stalling, faking, or spinning their wheels. Very few of them were actually *thinking*, so it was difficult for them to solve challenging problems.

• *Problems with standard math lessons* – Observing math classes around the world, Liljedahl noticed that almost everywhere, lessons began with a teacher explanation, then students tried a problem, the teacher clarified, then there was independent work and an assessment. Another universal feature, even in classes trying various innovations: the teacher was standing and writing on a vertical surface, students were sitting down and writing on horizontal surfaces. Everywhere he went, Liljedahl noticed that only about 20 percent of students were thinking (about 20 percent of the time) and there was generally a low level of intellectual engagement.

• *Restructuring classroom norms* – He realized that to change this dynamic – which has been a feature of math classes for almost two centuries – the usual lesson pattern had to be shaken up. He proposed a radically different structure within the four walls of classrooms and the standard bell schedule:

- Giving students an engaging thinking task they couldn't solve by mimicking or faking;
- Getting students started with only a brief launching introduction from the teacher;
- Having students work in randomly selected groups of three (two in the primary grades);
- Having groups work standing up, using one marker to write on erasable whiteboards;
- The teacher circulating and giving hints, support, and additional challenges as needed.

"This is a massive revision to the way a classroom normally functions," says Liljedahl. "In the institutional, normative structure of school, the teacher says, 'Let me show you how to do it. Now you do it.' That sets up mimicking. In a thinking classroom, the teacher says, 'I'm going to give you a task. You're going to have to think about it, so I'm not going to do it first.'"

• *Why visibly randomized groups* – Trying out various strategies, Liljedahl and his colleagues found that even if students were told the groups were chosen at random, they assumed the teacher had formed each group with a "smart" student who was expected to do the real work. In this case, or when students were allowed to choose their own groupmates, most were unlikely to offer an idea because they thought their role was to follow. But when students saw that groups were truly random (using playing cards or another visibly random process), the researchers found that within three weeks, 100 percent of students were likely or highly likely to offer an idea. Truly random grouping told students that the teacher thought they were capable of making a real contribution and they did.

• *Why erasable surfaces* – With whiteboards (or glass surfaces), students were more likely to get started with ideas knowing they could erase mistakes. With flip chart paper, on the other hand, students thought, "We don't know what the answer is yet, so we can't put anything down." Without knowing that their work was perfect, many students didn't write anything, and there was a negative feedback loop on problem-solving and creativity.

• *Why vertical surfaces* – Liljedahl and his colleagues tried a number of configurations and found that having students work standing up was by far the most effective. When students were sitting down facing each other, even if they were using small erasable whiteboards, the work was oriented toward the student who was writing, making that person the leader. With a vertical surface, everyone in the group was facing the work, creating a more collaborative dynamic. Each group's work was also visible to students around the classroom, enhancing "knowledge mobility" – students could see common errors and good ideas spread from group to group. And the teacher was more aware of what was going on and could push in with just-in-time interventions, versus waiting till the quiz on Friday to see who understood.

• *Students feeling visible* – "It turns out that when students are sitting," says Liljedahl, "they feel anonymous. The further they sit from the teacher, the more anonymous they feel. When students feel anonymous, they are more likely to disengage. And the more anonymous they feel, the more likely they are to disengage. Standing up took away that anonymity, and not in a way that made students feel exposed. *I'm not anonymous, and I'm not invisible. If I'm not invisible, I'm less likely to disengage.* This was a huge shift."

• *The teacher's role* – The first order of business is choosing tasks wisely, then launching the lesson in a way that reminds students of key skills but leaves the real work to each group, then cruising around the room intervening strategically. "This group needs a hint," says Liljedahl. "This group needs to talk to another group. This group needs a little bit of direct instruction on this, and this group needs an extension." Then in the last one-third of the lesson, the class sits down to consolidate learning, students take notes "for my future forgetful self," and everyone does a quick formative assessment that tells the teacher the level of mastery.

• *Curriculum coverage and innovation* – "We cover tremendous amounts of content," says Liljedahl. "Because the kids are thinking, so much learning can happen. When they're not thinking, everything is difficult. It takes a long time and they don't retain it… Imagine how hard teaching and learning is in a space like that, versus where 93% of students are thinking for 100% of the time. Just think about how much more learning can happen in those spaces." He also believes that other pedagogical innovations are much more likely to get traction in Thinking Classrooms because the radical changes in classroom structure get students collaborating, engaging with the content, and *thinking*.

"Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics: A Conversation with Peter Liljedahl" by Kathleen Vail in *Kappan*, December 2024/January 2025 (Vol. 106, #4, pp. 32-35); for other articles on Thinking Classrooms, see Memos 976, 992, 1013, and 1052. Liljedahl can be reached at peter@buildingthinkingclassrooms.com.

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3. Timothy Shanahan on Test Prep in Reading

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) says the idea behind test prep is that schools can raise standardized reading scores by having students practice specific reading comprehension skills they struggle on – main idea, supporting details, inferencing. In mathematics, having students drill weak areas may be effective. "But reading comprehension questions are a horse of a different color," says Shanahan. "In math, 3 x 9 is going to be 27 every doggone time. But the main idea of a short story? That is going to depend upon the content of the story and how the author constructed the tale. In other words, the answer is going to be different with each text. Practicing skills is fine, but if what you are practicing is not repeatable, then it is not a skill."

As evidence, Shanahan points to the fact that companies marketing reading tests – SAT, ACT, AIR, SBAC, PARCC – report students' overall reading comprehension score, not the subskills. Why? "Because," he says, "it is impossible to come up with a valid and reliable score for any of these question types. ACT studied this issue closely and found that question types didn't determine reading performance."

What does matter is the difficulty level of the texts. Experts in the test company found, says Shanahan, that "if the questions were complex and the texts were simple, readers could answer any kind of question successfully; but if the questions were simple and the texts were hard, the readers couldn't answer any question types. Reading comprehension tests measure how well students can read a collection of texts – not how well they can answer different types of questions."

So how *can* schools improve their students' scores on standardized tests? "Teach kids to read," says Shanahan. "It works like magic." Ditch test prep and worksheets and focus on explicit teaching and guided practice aimed at developing:

- Knowledge of words – phonemic awareness, phonics, letter names, spelling, morphology, vocabulary;
- Oral reading fluency – accuracy, automaticity, prosody;
- Reading comprehension – written language, strategies, knowledge;
- Writing – transcription, composition;
- Background knowledge – teaching social studies and science every day, including content texts;
- Oral language skills – explicit instruction is especially important for English learners and students who are behind for any reason;
- Stamina – intentionally stretching how long kids can persist in making sense of texts (but not in test prep-type exercises).

"Nothing very exciting here, right?" says Shanahan. "If you want higher test scores, it takes a lot of dedicated teaching of the key things that matter in learning… Focus like a laser on what works and your kids will do better."

What about students doing independent reading during the literacy block? "Kids do need to read," says Shanahan, but the reading and writing should be part of the teacher's lessons. He is also critical of students reading books they can already read reasonably well.

Beyond first grade, he believes, "teaching kids at their supposed 'reading levels' hasn't been found to facilitate learning, but lowers the sophistication and complexity of the content and language they get to work with."

"'Tis the Season of Test Prep: Bah Humbug" by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, December 14, 2024; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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4. Is Calculus Essential to Getting Into Selective Colleges?

In this *Hechinger Report*, Jill Barshay presents some data about calculus courses in U.S. high schools, which are taken by about 20 percent of students (800,000) each year, usually as seniors:

- For many students, it's a "miserable slog."
- Calculus is believed to be a necessity for students bound for selective colleges.
- But many college math professors say students are arriving in college with weak algebra skills and need to focus on solidifying math fundamentals versus calculus.
- Most students who need calculus for their college majors end up retaking it in college.
- College professors in other fields believe high-school students are better off studying statistics, data analysis, accounting, and spreadsheets.
- The calculus track in high schools is racially and economically skewed.
- There's also an opportunity gap; an estimated 17 percent of students don't have access to calculus, even online or through a community college.

So why do so many high schools offer calculus and why do so many students take it? Because of the perception that it gives students a leg up applying to selective colleges. There's something to that, says Barshay. A recent survey of 130 college admissions officers (admittedly not a fully representative sample) showed that many believe calculus is a proxy for academic rigor. Even though 95 percent of respondents said calculus wasn't necessary for all students, 74 percent said an AP College Board calculus course carries significant weight, and almost a third said calculus improves the chance of admission and being successful in college.

Those survey results notwithstanding, says Barshay, college admissions officers' views may be shifting. In interviews, ten survey respondents said they were "nudging" applicants away from the belief that "good" students take calculus. "If not pursuing a STEM program," said one, "and especially engineering, we consider stats or data science perfectly fine as a fourth-year math course."

But other admissions officers said giving extra weight to candidates with calculus is a "deeply ingrained practice," and that's especially true in colleges with test-optional admissions, where admissions teams put greater emphasis on calculus on a student's transcript as a proxy for math preparation.

The key in changing college admissions officers' mindset, say equity advocates, is demonstrating that students who don't take calculus in high school can succeed in college.

"Until then," Barshay concludes, "students struggling with limits and derivatives may just have to wait until the evidence adds up."

"Is Calculus An Addiction That College Admissions Officers Can't Shake?" by Jill Barshay in *The Hechinger Report*, December 9, 2024; Barshay is at barshay@hechingerreport.org.

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5. Improving Students' Writing Without Working All Weekend

In this article published in *Learning Magazine* almost 45 years ago, author/educator Eric Johnson addressed the perennial challenge of how we can get students to write a lot and somehow give them prompt and meaningful feedback. His suggestions:

Preventive care:

• *Foresee students' difficulties and pre-teach*. "If students are likely to have to spell *embarrass* or *government* or *character* or even *its/it's*, teach them ahead of time," says Johnson. "Pre-teaching has two advantages over mop-up teaching: it allows students to practice doing things right, and it saves you a lot of correcting time."

• *Teach, and teach again, how to proofread papers*. "Show students how to make themselves 'strangers' to their own writing," he says, "and then to read it with a cold, objective eye, or better yet, read it aloud so that they can *hear* the mistakes they don't see." This process can be modeled with the class participating in editing an error-filled passage, and then students taking ten minutes going through the same steps with their own writing before handing it in.

• *Have students edit one another's work*. Johnson suggests having students sit in groups of three, pass their papers around with students making suggestions on the two that are not their own, and then giving each student time to consider those edits and make final changes before handing in their work – which will be considerably improved without any teacher correcting time.

Evaluating and editing:

• *Resist overcorrecting*. "Let students know that you will correct selectively," says Johnson. "Then mark only those errors and needs for revision that you think the writer can and should address efficiently… No rule or sense of integrity requires you to mark every error, and students should not get back papers that look more as if they had been attacked by a disease than worked on by a teacher/editor." He also suggests coding edits – P for punctuation, Sp for spelling, O for organization, T for transitions, SV for sentence variety, and L for logic – and not giving an overall grade that lumps together all these different aspects of the craft of writing.

• *Teach a lesson on common problems*. After quickly looking over the entire set of handed-in papers, Johnson suggests picking out five or six common problems, teaching a lesson on those the next day, then handing back the papers (unmarked) so students can edit their work in light of what they've just heard and submit it again.

• *Teach from examples*. Identify selected sentences and passages that have significant writing problems and use them (without identifying who wrote them) to teach a writing principle or skill, and have the whole class discuss improvements.

• *Project selected papers*. Pick a few student essays that can serve as exemplars of effective writing (or areas for further enhancement) and, with those students' permission, project them for all-class discussion.

• *Have groups of students read and evaluate papers according to selected criteria*. Divide the class into groups of five and have students read their own paper aloud and ask for the group's reaction on criteria you've chosen – interesting beginnings, good descriptions, apt word choice, needless repetition. Each group might then select one paper to nominate for being read aloud to the whole class. "With all this attention having been given to the students' writing," says Johnson, "it may not be necessary for you to spend time correcting and editing the batch of papers."

Follow-up:

• *Insist that students stay involved until papers are of high quality*. "Teacher effort in correcting and evaluating papers is fruitless unless it results in further student effort to improve the papers," says Johnson. "If you have evaluated a paper thoroughly, you and the writer should consider the work unfinished until the writer has dealt with every item you noted – spelling mistakes corrected, mechanical errors fixed, awkwardnesses revised, etc." This means thoroughly grading only a few papers each semester and making time for follow-up before a final grade is given.

• *Have one-on-one conferences*. Johnson suggests a weekly or every-other-week period when the class works or reads independently and selected students come up one at a time to talk with you about how to improve their work – or hear praise and appreciation.

These ideas and others you might invent, Johnson concludes, "can help all of your students feel that their work has been read, appreciated, and improved. They'll be encouraged to write more and better, all without your becoming a miserable martyr or a dull drudge."

"Ten Shortcuts to Grading Children's Papers" by Eric Johnson in *Learning Magazine*, March 1980 (Vol. 8, #7, pp. 36-37)

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6. Reestablishing Classroom Management Mid-Year

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez interviews Claire English on her advice for teachers whose classroom management has started to unravel approaching the midpoint of the school year. English sums up some possible causes and her recommendations:

• *Inconsistent reinforcement of expectations* – Norms that were clear at the beginning of the year can erode if limits aren't constantly adhered to. The solution: do a mid-year reboot and re-establish your expectations "with fresh consistency," says English. "*You* are steering the ship. No matter what things have been like throughout the year, you are in the position to press the reset button and do things differently."

• *Being approachable when you need to be firm* – Teachers try to balance these, but there's a tendency to ease up in intangible ways that are sometimes expressed in a more-casual tone or body language. "It's not about having a sour face on," says English. "It's not about giving the teacher look out over the glasses. Our pace is slower. We're weighted evenly on

both feet. And the message we're sending when we're in this teaching presence is: *I'm serious, and I'm credible, and I mean business, and we're going to be learning. This is a place of learning*."

• *End-of-term blahs* – This might include apathy, students not giving 100 percent, showing up late, pushing back on assignments, being overly chatty, being caught up in other activities around the school. English's advice: "Stick even more closely to your routine… Be that consistent, predictable island of safety for your students." Another approach: Have brain-break activities handy – classroom games chosen by students, meditation or chair yoga, with a nature sound video in the background.

English has one overall classroom management suggestion: "Be what you want to see from your students." If they're dysregulated, be the opposite – calm, centered, taking the class where you want it to go.

"When Your Classroom Management Goes Off the Rails" by Jennifer Gonzalez and Claire English in *Cult of Pedagogy*, December 8, 2024; Gonzalez can be reached at gonzjenn@cultofpedagogy.com.

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7. Do Students Collaborate Better With or Without Individual Preparation?

In this article in *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, Wenli Chen, Qianru Lyu, and Junzhu Su (Nanyang Technological University) report on their study of student collaboration in an English language all-girls fifth-grade class in Singapore. On two different days, students worked in pairs on a collaborative project in which they had to construct an argument on a particular topic. On the first day, students started collaborating right after getting instructions and worked together for 24 minutes. On the second day, students were given a few minutes by themselves to study the content of a similarly difficult question before working in their dyads.

What did the researchers find? Students' collaborative work was significantly better with individual work time before pairing up, measured in terms of idea elaboration, engagement with content knowledge, reading and editing each other's work, and the logic of the arguments they were able to make. "Students seemed to be more prepared for in-depth discussion when there was individual preparation before collaboration," say Chen, Lyu, and Su. "This process offers the opportunity for students to fully develop their ideas that could be intuitive and naïve in the immediate collaboration context."

"The Role of Individual Preparation Before Collaboration: An Exploratory Study on Students' Computer-Supported Collaboration Argumentation in a Primary Classroom" by Wenli Chen, Qianru Lyu, and Junzhu Su in *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, September-December 2024 (Vol. 33, #45-5, pp. 757-798); Lyu can be reached at nie20.lq@e.ntu.edu.sg.

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8. Behavioral Economics: Common-Sense Ways to Improve Teacher PD

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Kathleen Lynch (University of Connecticut/ Storrs) says that U.S. public school districts spend about $18 billion a year on teacher professional development – with very mixed results. Lynch believes that applying four principles from behavioral economics to teacher PD could help with the implementation of well-designed programs and thus improve teaching and learning:

• *Limited attention* – Cognitive overload is often an issue for K-12 teachers, and implementing ideas from professional development sessions – or remembering key details – can easily get lost in the welter of competing demands being juggled every day. Tools from behavioral economics: checklists and timely reminders.

• *Short-term focus* – "People have a tendency to act in ways that match their immediate priorities, not their long-term objectives," says Lynch. Tools from behavioral economics: goal-setting and implementation plans.

• *Too many choices* – When asked to choose among numerous possible options, or when PD materials are too lengthy and complicated, teachers can get overwhelmed and make suboptimal choices. Tools from behavioral economics: a brief version of materials and a slimmed-down menu of implementation options with longer versions available.

• *Social identity* – People need social support and motivation to make changes. Behavioral economics tools: build in professional collaboration, teamwork, and social commitment.

"The Application of Behavioral Economics to Teacher Professional Development" by Kathleen Lynch in *Educational Researcher*, December 2024 (Vol. 53, #9, pp. 508-520); Lynch can be reached at kathleen.2.lynch@uconn.edu.

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9. Recommended Picture Books

In this *Edutopia* article, Ryan Tahmaseb shares his picks for the ten best picture books of 2024 (click the article link for cover images and brief descriptions):

- *Drawn Onward* by Daniel Nayeri, illustrated by Matt Rockefeller, preschool-grade 3
- *The First Week of School* by Drew Beckmeyer, preschool-grade 3
- *Pepper & Me* by Beatrice Alemagna, preschool-grade 3
- *Harriet's Reflections* by Marion Kadi, preschool-grade 3
- *Garbage Gulls* by Dorson Plourde, illustrated by Isabella Fassler, preschool-grade 3
- *The Quacken* by Justin Colón, illustrated by Pablo Pino, preschool-grade 3
- *Into the Goblin Market* by Vikki VanSickle, illustrated by Jensine Eckwall, preschool-grade 3
- *Rumi: Poet of Joy and Love* by Rashin Kheiriyeh, preschool-grade 3
- *Touch the Sky* by Stephanie Lucianovic, illustrated by Chris Park, kindergarten-grade 3
- *A Star Shines Through* by Anna Desnitskaya, kindergarten-grade 4

"10 Remarkable Picture Books of 2024" by Ryan Tahmaseb in *Edutopia*, December 10, 2024

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10. Short Item:

Notable Books of 2024 for Young People – This end-of-the-year *School Library Journal* feature has the editors' recommendations in these categories: Picture, Transitional, Middle Grade, Young Adult, Elementary, Middle, and High School Nonfiction, Poetry, Graphic Novels, Manga, and Top Ten Audiobooks.

"Best Books 2024" in *School Library Journal*, December 2024 (Vol. 70, #12, pp. 24-51)

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If you have feedback or suggestions, please e-mail kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

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

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed Magazine
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Language Magazine
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education