Marshall Memo 910

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 8, 2021

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"We cannot ration well-taught, thoughtful mathematics to only a few people. We have to make it widely available."

Linda Darling-Hammond in "California's Effort to Close Math Gap Sets Off Backlash" in *The New York Times*, November 5, 2021

"The challenge of changing a grading system that has been the norm for multiple generations of students is daunting."

Jay Percell and Barbara Meyer (see item #4)

"A healthy striver has high expectations and commits to a task while also making mistakes and knowing that those mistakes don't indicate a personal flaw. A perfectionist's sense of self-worth is overly tied to external praise and accomplishments."

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"For people with disabilities, constantly being excluded, made to feel invisible, and having to self-advocate for even basic accommodations is a daily frustration."

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"Do I feel friendlier toward students who maintain eye contact with me? Do I tend to seat students whose bodies I perceive as jiggly further away from instruction? Do I spend as much time praising students who I perceive as frowning more often than smiling?"

Sue Ellen Henry and Abe Feuerstein (see item #3)

"Why am I doing this, and why am I doing it this way?

Gloria Ladson-Billings on the question teachers should be asking themselves, in "We Need to Do a Better Job Talking About Race" in *The Learning Professional*, October 2021 (Vol. 42, #5, pp. 11-12)

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1. Surging Anxiety Among Adolescents: What's Going On?

In this article in *Psychology Today*, psychiatrist Ralph Lewis (University of Toronto) says that in recent years, more and more young people have been coming to him with anxiety disorders. He suggests four possible explanations:

• There may be a genuine increase in distress among young people for any number of reasons – there's a lot to be distressed about these days!

• Kids seem more willing to report mental health issues. Before, they were reluctant to admit they had problems, and would come to a psychiatrist's office only at the insistence of concerned parents. Now more adolescents are self-diagnosing – and are disappointed if Lewis says their problems aren't serious enough for clinical treatment.

• This increased openness may be encouraged by media reports of widespread mental health problems among adolescents.

• The most recent edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) loosened its language on anxiety: "clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational (or academic), or other important areas of functioning."

Mental health problems like anxiety can be mapped on the left and right sides of a bell-shaped curve, says Lewis. With anxiety, the majority of people are in the mentally healthy, average bulge in the middle. At the right-hand side, he says, are those "prone to experience anxiety more intensely, more frequently, and for longer durations than others, causing those individuals greater distress and impairment in their functioning." They might have a moderate disorder or, at the tail end of the curve, a disabling condition requiring clinical treatment.

On the left side of the continuum are those who experience unusually little anxiety. These people may be courageous and cool under pressure, but they may also take unnecessary risks and come across as emotionally insensitive. "At the extreme of this end of the spectrum," says Lewis, "some might even be predisposed to be psychopaths."

Interestingly, he says, the extremes have been important to human survival: "Diversity of traits is essential for a species to survive and evolve as environments change; a trait that is a weakness in one environment at one time and place might well turn out to be a strength in another environment at another time and place."

"Something has changed," Lewis concludes. Perhaps "the cultural changes in society are significant enough that young people, now able to talk fluently about mental health, are looking to medicine as a way to explain the normal, if painful, parts of life."

"The Anxiety Boom" by Ralph Lewis in *Psychology Today*, November/December 2021 (Vol. 54, #6, pp. 28-29); Lewis can be reached at ralph.lewis@utoronto.ca.

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2. Elena Aguilar on Coaching Teachers Who Are Perfectionists

In this three-part series in *Education Week*, coaching guru Elena Aguilar suggests ways to work with a teacher who is never, ever satisfied with what they do, or what their students do. "At the heart of perfectionism," says Aguilar, "is a belief that, in order to be loved and accepted, we must strive to act and be the best all the time. Our very worth as a human being is tied to our perfection." Some tendencies:

- Getting upset when things aren't just right;
- Having uncompromising rules;
- Blaming oneself or others for things that aren't under their control;
- Thinking in black-and-white terms;
- Quickly discounting positive news;
- Holding rigidly high, unrealistic standards;
- Saying *should* a lot;
- Claiming not to be a perfectionist.

Because things aren't ever perfect, perfectionists often see themselves as failures. They're especially vulnerable to criticism, blame, feelings of inadequacy, and shame. Perfectionism is all tied up with self-worth, and may go back to childhood experiences. It's a "dysfunctional emotional tendency," says Aguilar, "… associated with increased stress, physical health problems, mental-health issues, and a high risk of burnout."

Perfectionism should not be confused with a strong work ethic and a commitment to excellence, says Aguilar. "You can have tremendous energy, conscientiousness, and persistence and not be a perfectionist. Perfectionism is about seeking external validation, whereas healthy striving is all about internal drive. A healthy striver has high expectations and commits to a task while also making mistakes and knowing that those mistakes don't indicate a personal flaw. A perfectionist's sense of self-worth is overly tied to external praise and accomplishments."

A coach working with a perfectionist teacher needs to draw on specific tools and approaches. Aguilar suggests these eleven:

• *Facilitate, don't direct*. The coach needs to help them discover their internal power. "You cannot fix a perfectionist teacher," she says. "They have to take care of themselves."

• *Coach toward emotional awareness*. This is true for all coachees, but is especially important for perfectionists, who need help putting their emotions into words.

• *Help them find indicators of success*. The teacher probably has a long list of unattainable goals for the class, project, unit, or school year. "Attainable, realistic goals help a perfectionist feel successful," says Aguilar.

• *Be cautious with praise*. "A perfectionist won't actually feel any better from it and may feel unsatisfied with your coaching," says Aguilar, "or feel that your praise wasn't

enough, or wasn't authentic, or wasn't the right kind of praise." What works is specific, genuine appreciation in bite-size chunks.

• *Help identify strengths*. "The perfectionist needs to hone their ability to see their own skills and to praise themselves," says Aguilar. Debriefing a lesson, a coach might ask the teacher to identify three things that went well and persist if the teacher waves off the compliments.

• *Normalize struggle and imperfection*. A light touch is helpful here, reminding the teacher that it's normal to mess up sometimes and mistakes are a learning opportunity.

• *Coach around what the teacher can control*. Help the teacher focus on areas where they have the most impact and steer them away from areas where they have no influence.

• *Coach away from stark generalizations*. "Help your client see the nuances, gray zones, and complexity of every situation," advises Aguilar. "Guide them to unpack 'total failure' so that they can see the 1 percent of the lesson that was neutral, or even strong."

• *Cultivate self-compassion*. Possible questions: *Would you talk to your best friend/ sibling/child/student the way you talk to yourself? What would it take for you to treat yourself the way you treat those you love the most in the world?*

• *Teach relaxation strategies*. "Perfectionists are anxious and live with a lot of fear," says Aguilar. "Mindfulness is an invaluable tool in this area."

• *Suggest a mantra*. "Perfectionists need to rewire their brain," she says. "They've spent decades, most likely, telling themselves they aren't doing a good enough job." They need to learn a new language, and a phrase or sentence that helps them accept partial perfection can be very helpful.

Aguilar describes working with a perfectionist teacher named Katie and suddenly realizing that her own emotional responses – frustration, impatience, anger – were adding to a "wall" between them and preventing the teacher from trusting and listening. "I was firmly attached to how I thought she should change and what she should do and when," says Aguilar, "and when I didn't see the kind of evidence I wanted to see, I felt frustrated. Impatient. I wasn't a very good coach at that point… because what I value most in a coach is that the coaching emerges from a place of deep compassion and curiosity… I had to acknowledge my own fears, anger, sadness, and insecurities first – and engage with those and understand them – before I could be the kind of coach I wanted to be, and that Katie needed me to be."

Patience, she says, is what was needed – not resignation or passivity, but being open to Katie's realities. Aguilar took this lesson into all her other coaching. "Slowing down helps me tremendously to recognize what I'm feeling," she says. "Now, when fear or anger surface during a coaching session, I acknowledge them and ask them to sit on the side while I'm working and I promise them we'll have a chat later. And then, once I'm in a place where I can reflect, I say, 'Hello, my little fearful coach-self. What happened in that session that triggered your insecurities?' And then I dig and uncover sometimes a new insight or sometimes the same old stuff."

With Katie, there was a moment when Aguilar had deep empathy for how difficult it was for this teacher to always think she was a terrible teacher. "Katie," she said, "I can hear

how much you're suffering, and my heart aches. I wish I could take it all away because I know how badly you want to teach and how much you want to meet the needs of your kids." Katie sensed her kindness and compassion and sighed deeply, and they had a profound connection. "And she talked," says Aguilar. "And I listened. The wall crumbled."

"How to Coach the Perfectionist Teacher: Understanding Perfectionism Part 1, Part 2, and Part 3" by Elena Aguilar in *Education Week*, February 27, 28, and March 5, 2019; Aguilar can be reached at elena@brightmorningteam.com.

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3. Unconscious Bias Related to Social Class and Teacher Expectations

In this *Kappa Delta Pi Record* article, Sue Ellen Henry and Abe Feuerstein (Bucknell University) say they were surprised when a veteran teacher, observing a kindergarten class in mid-September, said he could already tell which students would need to repeat the grade. Challenged to defend such an early prognostication, he pointed to children's ability to sit on the carpet and listen, raise their hands to be called on, hold a crayon and pencil, put on their jackets without a struggle, as well as certain academic skills.

This conversation led Henry and Feuerstein to conduct a study of how elementary teachers "read" their students through body language and other subtle cues. "Humans can produce more than 7,000 distinct facial expressions," they say, "and others can evaluate these clues within 100 to 200 milliseconds." This ability has been a powerful evolutionary tool, allowing people to size up others, understand the world around them, and survive. "And yet," say Henry and Feuerstein, "while such determinations might be natural, it's easy to see how such uninterrogated associations could lead to stereotypic thinking. This threat is especially true for the most vulnerable children in the school-age population, including students from low-income backgrounds."

Their study of 343 elementary teachers in a diverse set of Pennsylvania districts showed that teachers associated a number of behaviors with economically-privileged students; a selection:

- Sits upright;
- Smiles, looks happy;
- Looks at others when listening;
- Raises eyebrows in an interested way, tilts head upward during conversation;
- Acts animated, laughs during an interaction;
- Is skilled using voice to express oneself;
- Gestures with hands when talking;
- Knows when not to interrupt someone else;
- Has confident, self-assured expressions;
- Initiates shaking a person's hand.

Teachers were likely to link a different set of behaviors with less-privileged students; a selection:

- Engages in invasive behaviors toward others – standing too close, touching, pointing;

- Interrupts others;
- Averts gaze;
- Frowns, glares, displays anger;
- Shows fear and sadness;
- Has unresponsive expressions;
- Twirls a pencil, flips book pages, fiddles with a sheet of paper;
- Wiggles feet, moves legs, shifts body position, is restless;
- Has halting speech, many speech errors;
- Intersperses speech with "um" and "ah", stammers, makes false starts.

"Research also suggests," say Henry and Feuerstein, "that children described by teachers as poorly dressed, hungry, tired, or sleepy are rated as less academically competent and less engaged in the classroom."

Teachers aspire to do right by all students, say the authors; the question is whether unconscious beliefs related to social class affect teachers' expectations of and behaviors toward their students. What is to be done?

"Step one in generating awareness," Henry and Feuerstein, "is developing a more precise picture of what we're seeing when we don't think we're looking. Being cognizant of head nods, smiles, eye contact, and other micro-bodily actions and then questioning the interpretations we are making of these moves is a start… Do I feel friendlier toward students who maintain eye contact with me? Do I tend to seat students whose bodies I perceive as jiggly further away from instruction? Do I spend as much time praising students who I perceive as frowning more often than smiling?"… Becoming aware of these subtle, unconscious cues is a first step in interrupting subconscious influence on our beliefs about students."

Step two, say Henry and Feuerstein, "is to make time to reflect deeply on our practices, perhaps in conversation with trusted teacher partners." They suggest adopting an if/then approach to neutralize unconscious biases – for example: *If I see a student frowning, I will ask her whether she needs help*. "Over time," they say, "the combination of conscious attention to and honesty about one's assumptions and deliberate redirection of action has the possibility of not only altering latent yet pervasive forms of stereotypic thinking, but also changing our behavior toward our learners."

At the schoolwide level, leaders might examine discipline referrals and how students of differing SES are assigned to accelerated programs.

"Body Language Signals, Social Class, and Implicit Bias" by Sue Ellen Henry and Abe Feuerstein in *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, October-December 2021 (Vol. 57, #4, pp. 151-157); the authors can be reached at sehenry@bucknell.edu and afeurstn@bucknell.edu.

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4. Dealing with Pushback on Standards-Based Grading

"The challenge of changing a grading system that has been the norm for multiple generations of students is daunting," say Jay Percell and Barbara Meyer (Illinois State University) in this *Kappa Delta Pi Record* article. They describe how a large, diverse suburban

district implemented standards-based grading, starting with the elementary grades and then moving into middle and high schools. District leaders spent two years preparing stakeholders for the change, using a book study group, an educator task force charged with writing an implementation plan, "coffee talks" to acquaint families with the coming changes, and presentations by leading experts to all faculty and staff. A major feature of the reform was replacing A B C D F with 4 3 2 1 grades based on detailed standards in each subject.

Despite all the outreach and planning and a gradual rollout, there were bumps in the road, including widespread confusion about exactly what standards-based grading involved, a wait-and-see attitude and outright resistance by some teachers, and lots of parent pushback on the new grades. Percell and Meyer conducted surveys in the district and got insights on five major challenges. With each one, they have suggestions for preventing similar problems in other districts.

• *Teacher buy-in* – Some teachers were not convinced of the merits of standards-based grading. There was also concern that giving grades on individual standards (versus one overall grade) took too much time – and the district hadn't allocated additional hours for grading and collaborating.

Prevention – District leaders need to listen to teachers' concerns and grapple with how learning is discussed among educators – for example:

- Grading versus assessing;
- Scores versus assessments;
- Judgment or criticism versus feedback;
- "This is wrong" versus "Try another way."
- "What grade did I get?" versus "What did I learn?"
- Get good grades versus achieve proficiency or mastery;
- Problem versus challenge/opportunity.

Leaders need to make a convincing case on how standards-based grading benefits teachers and students, and create a culture that supports ongoing feedback to students and teachers on what's being learned and what needs work. It's also a good idea to identify exemplary classes and schools to serve as models for colleagues. And ongoing monitoring and tweaking of the initiative is essential.

• *Workload and gradebooks* – Teachers were asked to document students' progress on eight or nine standards per quarter. This allowed them to track progress and give clearer information to students and parents on areas that needed improvement, but many teachers complained about the extra work and said the electronic gradebook was a nightmare.

Prevention – Teachers must be given an opportunity to test-drive different gradebooks and have input on which is adopted. They also need to be sold on the advantages of breaking down student progress by standards – for example, having detailed and helpful information at their fingertips for parent conferences. In addition, the grading process needs to be streamlined and adequate time provided. Finally, it's important that grading is equitable, so students in different classes are graded fairly on the same standards.

• *Parent buy-in* – Letting go of letter grades was a bridge too far for many parents in this district. "Kids don't have anything to strive for anymore when letter grades are removed and they can't reach for straight As," said one parent. "My child lacks motivation now that this system has taken over."

Prevention – District leaders need to bring parents into the discussion early on and continue to communicate with them throughout the initiative, say Percell and Meyer, using meetings, e-mails, texts, websites, videos, and one-on-one conversations to explain the disadvantages of traditional grading and the rationale for the new system. At a minimum, parents need to believe their concerns have been heard.

• *College admission* – "The perception is that without the GPA, colleges and universities will not know the student's potential," say Percell and Meyer, "and scholarship grantors will not recognize the academic success of the applicant." What's more, there won't be a valedictorian and the honor of being in the top 10 percent of the class.

Prevention – All too many students with high GPAs arrive in college and need remediation, say Percell and Meyer. That's because focusing so heavily on grades in high school may undermine acquiring the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in higher education. A number of colleges and universities (and the New England Board of Higher Education) have said they will accept competency-based grades, which should alleviate some parents' concerns.

• *Student motivation* – A common concern among parents in this district was that students would be content with a grade of 3 (proficient) and not strive for a 4 (mastery). "This begs the question of whether students are more motivated to get grades or to experience genuine learning," say Percell and Meyer. Rather than grades as an indicator of status, standards-based grading "shifts the target solely to students' demonstrated learning and understanding."

Prevention – The answer to this concern is giving separate grades on academic achievement and students' work habits, which holds them accountable for effort, engagement, and timely submission of assignments. "All scores should be attainable," say Percell and Meyer, "and teachers should provide clear explanations of what it takes to earn each level and the difference between them… Providing at least one example of what could result in an exemplary grade is the teacher's responsibility."

"Resolutions for a New Paradigm: Addressing Common Issues in Standards-Based Grading" by Jay Percell and Barbara Meyer in *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, October-December 2021 (Vol. 57, #4, pp. 185-190); the authors can be reached jpercel@ilstu.edu and bbmeyer@ilstu.edu.

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5. The Importance of Amplification in Classrooms and Meetings

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Jessie Ramey (Chatham University) recalls a faculty meeting in which a colleague was offered a microphone and said, "No thanks, I'm good." Almost as bad, she says, is when a speaker asks, "Can everyone hear me in the

back?" or complains, "Oh no, do we really need to use a mike?", putting the burden on others to speak up.

"If our colleagues and students can't hear in meetings or in classrooms," says Ramey, "they can't participate. Those of us with low hearing, a hearing impairment, or a hearing-assistive device need you to speak into the microphone so we can fully understand your words… Simply talking loudly isn't enough. It's not about the fact that you took a high-school theater class and learned to project from the stage. Or that you can use your 'teacher voice' to be heard in the back of the room. It's not about your belief that you are a good speaker. The quality of sound coming from a microphone is different: it's more distinct and easier to hear."

Many educators don't know that about 15 percent of adults have some hearing loss, says Ramey, and with people between 55 and 64 the percentage is about 25 percent. This means that in most college classrooms, there are several students who can't hear "normal" discourse.

"For people with disabilities," Ramey concludes, "constantly being excluded, made to feel invisible, and having to self-advocate for even basic accommodations is a daily frustration. Dealing with hearing loss is also exhausting. When there is no microphone, we are spending a huge cognitive load concentrating on hearing your words. With amplification, I can turn my attention to thinking about what you are saying and being present in the meeting or in the classroom. It literally frees up brain cycles to attend to the reason we are gathered together."
The basics:

- Make a personal habit of using a microphone, and ask guest speakers to do so as well.
- For events and conferences, build amplification technology into the budget.
- For a large-group Q&A, pass a microphone around or repeat the questions.
- Use the microphone correctly, which usually involves having it 1-2 inches from your mouth and not turning your head.
- When showing films, be sure to turn on subtitles if they are available.

"A Note from Your Colleagues with Hearing Loss: Just Use a Microphone Already" by Jessie Ramey in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 20, 2019

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6. A High-School Teacher Has One-on-One Conferences with Students

In this *Edutopia* article, Ileana Sherry says that before the pandemic, her school offered tutoring before or after school or during lunch. A drop-in-when-you-can system didn't seem to be helping students who were struggling with writing, so Sherry switched to scheduling five-minute one-on-one conferences. "These conversations showed me that some students who rarely asked for help had had misunderstandings on our content for months despite class reteaches," she says. "The talks alleviated these misunderstandings, boosted students' confidence, and reduced their anxieties. And I was able to talk privately with students who were normally so quiet that I barely heard a few words all year."

Sherry continued the one-on-ones during the pandemic – when connecting with students and building relationships was even more important – and sees them as a vital adjunct

to her teaching going forward. She has these suggestions for getting the most out of five minutes:

- Connect each conference to an assignment, skill, or piece of content.
- Have students reflect beforehand on strengths and struggles and their goal for improvement.
- Greet the student and explain how the conference will proceed.
- Ask the student how they felt about the assignment or goal, and validate what they say.
- Share three main thoughts on the work or skill, starting with positive feedback.
- Ask the student if they have questions or clarifications for the teacher.
- Ask for feedback on the process, to be completed afterward (optional).

Sherry has 125 students; how does she manage so many one-on-one conferences? She's using four strategies:

- Linking conferences to major assignments, which has improved students' understanding, turn-in rates, and overall scores;
- Holding conferences in a week when students can work independently on assignments;
- Converting her tutoring time into conference slots for two weeks;
- Reading over students' positive feedback on conferences, which has motivated her to keep going.

"One-on-One Conferences as a Tool for Building Rapport with Students" by Ileana Sherry in *Edutopia*, April 28, 2021

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7. Getting the Most from Adult One-On-Ones

In this *Leadership Freak* article, Dan Rockwell says regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings won't go well if they are left to the last minute and the boss hogs the time, focuses only on the work, and adopts a "professional" tone. His suggestions:

• *Make one-on-ones employee-driven*. "Let people know it's their meeting, not your meeting," says Rockwell. "You are there for them. They aren't there for you. Don't let pressing issues distract you from their development time."

• *Focus*. It's helpful to send a note beforehand with questions like, *What's on your agenda for our meeting today? What area of personal development would you like to focus on? What results would you like to get from our conversation? What would make this a great conversation for you?*

• *Make it personal*. "Listen to stories," advises Rockwell. "What happened over the weekend? What's going on with the kids?" Share a story of your own.

• *Keep the goal in mind*. One-on-ones are to help colleagues develop. "Remember," says Rockwell, "performance comes from strength, not weakness."

"4 Ways Managers Screw Up One-On-Ones" by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, November 4, 2021; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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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
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
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
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
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