Marshall Memo 1031

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
April 8, 2024

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"What's the ultimate goal of education? Where is a student 10 years after high-school graduation?"

> Temple Grandin in "We Need the Skills of People Who Think Differently" in *American School Board Journal*, April 2024 (Vol. 211, #2, pp. 44-47)

"What does this reveal about the subject's world view?"

> Elliot Cole remembering a question asked in every course at his classical Austin, Texas school, which "prepared me to think critically about my educators' beliefs," in a letter to *The New Yorker*, April 8, 2024

"We are trying to teach students to read and to read better. If they are always taking on texts that the teacher guarantees will be comprehended immediately and with minimum effort, we aren't really teaching reading – just watching kids practicing."

> Timothy Shanahan (see item #2)

"Even the loss of a single letter can radically change the meaning of what a student intended to write, as is evidenced by 'Pavlov studied the salvation of dogs.'"

> Steve Graham (see item #3)

"E-mail is an easy tool for communication right up until it isn't any longer. When you need to discuss something nuanced, communicate a specific tone, or clarify a complicated detail, it might be time to move to the telephone or video call."

> Caileen Kehayas Holden (see item #5)

"Everyone needs some grasp of data science – and programming. While all students won't be interested in becoming the algorithm developers of the future, all young people will use these

algorithms, such as when they rely on an online recommendation system to choose a restaurant or navigate the route to get there. Having some insight into the data science processes used to develop algorithms and an idea of how they work and how to test their answers for accuracy (and whether any solutions provided should be trusted) is an essential skill many of us lack."

Mahmoud Harding and Rachel Levy in "The Hidden Rigors of Data Science" in *Educational Leadership*, April 2024 (Vol. 81, #7, pp. 54-58); the authors can be reached at mharding@uchicago.edu and rlevy@ncsu.edu.

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1. How Five Classroom Myths Can Be Tweaked for Positive Impact

In this *Edutopia* article, Stephen Merrill and Daniel Leonard describe five common teaching-learning misconceptions and explore the "nugget of wisdom" each contains:

• *Myth #1: Doodling improves focus and learning*. Studies have shown that when students idly sketch geometric patterns or cartoon characters while listening to a teacher, they are less focused and academic outcomes suffer. That's because doodling is more cognitively demanding than we think, say Merrill and Leonard: "Because our ability to process information is finite, drawing and learning about different things at the same time is a simple question of too much."

But "task-oriented drawing" – for example, making representational drawings about cell structure in a biology class – can be very helpful. Students don't have to be proficient artists to reap academic benefits, especially if they annotate their sketches and describe them to someone else.

• *Myth #2: Round robin reading improves fluency*. Students seem attentive while the teacher has one student after another read aloud, but a 2012 study found "no research evidence" that it contributes to students' fluency or reading comprehension. Oral reading can also stigmatize students who have difficulty reading, while exposing their classmates to mediocre or poor models of oral reading. In addition, in a class using round robin reading, individual students get very little practice.

But oral reading *is* helpful, and students can get useful practice if the teacher has students pair up and take turns reading aloud to a partner and discussing comprehension questions. This can be especially productive if the teacher circulates to monitor accuracy and focus. Choral reading – the whole class reading aloud together – or echo reading – the class

mimicking the teacher reading phrases with expression and fluency – can also boost reading proficiency.

• *Myth #3: Talent beats persistence*. Many teachers believe that students who display natural talent are more able than those who need to work hard to achieve the same level of proficiency. That's also true of bosses' assessment of their employees. But "scientific research," say Merrill and Leonard, "reveals that true expertise is mainly the product of years of intense practice and dedicated coaching." Teachers need to make this point when they talk with students about talent and effort: "All kids – even the ones who already excel in a discipline – benefit when teachers emphasize the importance of effort, perseverance, and growth." It's good for teachers to model their own stumbling and persistent effort to compose a piece of writing on the board.

• *Myth #4: Background music undermines learning*. This is true if the music has lyrics unrelated to what the student is studying. That uses some of the same neural circuitry that's needed to attend to an academic task, thus overloading attention and detracting from comprehension. Distraction also occurs if there are dramatic changes in a song's rhythm or when there's a transition from one piece of music to another.

But studies show that in certain conditions, music can boost learning. A catchy melody can improve a student's mood, motivation, and concentration. With academic tasks that aren't too demanding, and with instrumental versus vocal music, the net effect can be positive. However, with intellectually challenging work, says Daniel Willingham, "the distraction is probably going to make music a negative overall."

• *Myth #5: Grades motivate students to do their best work*. Not true, according to numerous studies. In fact, getting A-B-C-D-F grades can have a negative effect on student motivation and achievement. What does help is teachers' comments and specific, actionable suggestions. Most schools require teachers to give grades, and Merrill and Leonard suggest several ways teachers can mitigate the negative effects:

- Holding off on giving grades for students' work until the end of a unit, while giving personalized comments along the way;
- Allowing students to re-take assessments;
- Letting students drop their lowest grade;
- Giving students the option of turning in their best work for a series of related assignments.

"5 Popular Beliefs That Aren't Backed by Research" by Stephen Merrill and Daniel Leonard in *Edutopia*, March 29, 2024

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2. Timothy Shanahan on Directed (a.k.a. Guided) Reading

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) answers a teacher's query on whether guided reading is supported by research. Shanahan says he prefers the term *directed reading* because it's not associated with a specific publisher or "brand." He

defines it as the teacher working with students as they read the same passage together, either in small groups or as a class. "The point," he says, "is to practice reading under the vigilant watch of a teacher, who provides guidance and support to ensure success." In an overall literacy program consisting of word knowledge, fluency, comprehension, and writing, Shanahan believes directed reading fits under comprehension.

Is directed reading effective? That depends on how it's implemented, says Shanahan. He suggests how the five components of a typical directed reading lesson can have maximum impact:

• *Pre-teaching new vocabulary* – Shanahan believes only the most difficult and esoteric words should be taught before diving into a passage. "A big part of successful reading depends upon dealing with unknown words," he says. "That is part of the reading process… It is important to remember that the purpose of directed reading isn't to guarantee high comprehension on an initial read. We are trying to teach students to read and to read better. If they are always taking on texts that the teacher guarantees will be comprehended immediately and with minimum effort, we aren't really teaching reading – just watching kids practicing."

• *Setting a purpose* – Shanahan disagrees with asking students to read for narrow look-fors – for example, "Find out what happens at Janie's birthday party." Students might locate the answer to that question but ignore other information or fail to grasp the overall meaning of the passage. He believes it's better for students to read with a general purpose – looking for what happens next in the story, or being able to summarize it – which is more like the way proficient readers tackle an article or book chapter. "Be vague here, rather than specific," he advises.

• *Oral reading of text segments* – "When students are starting out, they need to read aloud," says Shanahan. "This is true in kindergarten and for at least a part of grade 1 for most kids." But by the time they're reading at a high first-grade level, they need to start reading silently. Many teachers avoid this in an effort to keep tabs on reading comprehension, engaging their students in round robin reading. But "how are they going to get good at silent reading comprehension if never asked to do such reading with a vigilant teacher close by?" asks Shanahan. Students need practice reading silently – with sentences and short paragraphs at first, perhaps using whisper or mumble reading – then stretching out the length of silent reading time.

• *Questions and discussion* – The benefits of the teacher asking specific comprehension questions after students read a passage "tend to be tiny," says Shanahan. "I would much rather have the teacher ask questions aimed at identifying whether students comprehend the text well and, if not, where things went wrong." *What's important to remember? Which words? Where did you need background knowledge to understand the text?* If students can't answer questions like these, the teacher needs to take them back to the text, often orally, to figure it out. And it's important not to let these questions be answered by a few eager students with their hands up. Shanahan strongly encourages the use of whiteboards, notebooks, or electronic ways to see what everyone knows.

"By the end of these lessons," he says, "the student should have a fair understanding of the text – even though they may not have started that way – and the teaching should have helped the student to understand better the actions that may be needed to ensure comprehension."

• *Oral reading practice* – The problem with the way reading aloud is handled in many classrooms, says Shanahan, is that teachers use easier passages that students can read fluently without too many errors. Students need to be stretched to work with harder texts – with support from the teacher and others. The right kind of oral practice, he says, "can transform many supposedly frustration level texts into instruction level ones that students can take on successfully. That fluency work can be done in pairs, through echo reading, chorally, at home with cooperative parents, or even with a recording device."

"Does Research Support 'Guided Reading'? Practical Advice on Directing Reading" by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, April 6, 2024; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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3. In-the-Moment Feedback on Students' Writing

"Formative assessment and the feedback resulting from it are essential to good writing," says Steve Graham (Arizona State University) in this *Literacy Today* article. "Even the loss of a single letter can radically change the meaning of what a student intended to write, as is evidenced by 'Pavlov studied the salvation of dogs.'"

Formative assessment compares students' writing to "a desired, expected, or idealized version of writing," he says, most often resulting in individual feedback to students. But the insights can also be used by the teacher to decide on lessons to target a specific area of need – run-on sentences, for example – or to speed up instruction if students are moving along more quickly than anticipated.

Graham has these suggestions on formative assessment of student writing, based on research, theory, and practice:

• Less me and more *we* – If feedback is a one-way street from teacher to student, it's unlikely to be effective. Teachers' comments need to be useful, clear, and understandable, taking into account the characteristics of each student. A teacher's feedback is sometimes off-base and students need to feel empowered to correct the misunderstanding. Ideally students aren't just passive recipients but always reaching out for ways to improve.

• More than one flavor – A teacher's comments on students' writing can take a number of forms, including:

- Feed-up – *Your paper has all the prescribed parts of a story*.
- Feed-back – *I underlined any sentence I didn't understand*.
- Feed-forward – *If you add more evidence to support your first point, your argument will be stronger*.
- Side-shadowing feedback – *How might a different character interpret these events?*

A teacher's comments might also be aimed at the processes a student used to create a text and their underlying beliefs, knowledge, and emotions.

• Secrets to success – "Effective feedback is specific, clear, non-judgmental, and in language students understand," says Graham. It's most effective when it's timely and accompanied by concrete examples, explanations, and models of good writing.

• Celebrations – Feedback should honor students' accomplishments and encourage them to keep doing high-quality work.

• A Goldilocks amount – Too much feedback can be debilitating "and send a negative message about a youngster's writing capabilities," says Graham. "Writing develops over time. Each paper does not have to be perfect."

• Connecting past and present – It's helpful to remember the feedback on previous writing, acknowledging progress and addressing persistent issues.

• Times for whole-class instruction – Some writing problems need to be addressed in targeted lessons for all students.

"Formative Assessment and Writing" by Steve Graham in *Literacy Today*, April/May/June 2024 (Vol. 41, #4, pp. 72-73); Graham can be reached at steve.graham@asu.edu.

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4. Classroom Walkthrough Checklists – Can We Do Better?

In this *Kappan* article, Joshua Starr (Center for Model Schools) remembers when, earlier in his career, he was in charge of accountability in a high-poverty New Jersey school district. The superintendent asked him to figure out a way to measure how a new literacy program was doing, making sure the central office was applying the right balance of "pressure and support" to principals and schools. Starr came up with a walkthrough checklist to see if classrooms were literacy-rich environments:

- A readily accessible word wall?
- Desks arranged in groups?
- A carpet area for whole-class reading?
- A leveled classroom library?
- A place for the teacher to conference with students?
- In small-group conferences, students doing most of the talking?
- Students choosing the books they were reading?

After a walkthrough, supervisors would compile the data and share it with the school's leadership team, then compile a full report with recommendations on next steps.

Classroom observation checklists can be helpful in promoting coherence in a school district, and the data can give teachers and school leaders objective feedback on program implementation. He remembers the walkthrough visits being useful and contributing to improved student achievement. "Yet they can also distort our perspective on classroom life," says Starr. "Those of us doing the walkthroughs can end up focusing on whether teachers and

students are following our designs, rather than looking to see what they're actually doing. Walkthroughs explicitly locate expertise for instructional improvement in system leaders."

Starr believes it's time to rethink accountability for instructional improvement. In the wake of the pandemic, he says, "central office personnel should focus on supporting teachers and staff who need help as they try to deal with myriad complex professional and personal issues. If there were ever a time to maximize the capacity, knowledge, energy, and creativity of our teachers, this is it."

Thinking back to his New Jersey walkthrough model, he wonders "what would have happened if, rather than enter classrooms with clipboards to check for compliance, we had asked our teachers to lead the conversation and the work. It may have looked a little different, but I suspect that if those who are closest to the problem were more deeply involved in designing the solutions, we'd all be better off."

"Who Are the Real Experts in Your School System?" by Joshua Starr in *Kappan*, September 21, 2020; Starr can be reached at josh.starr@hmhco.com.

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5. Protocols for Workplace E-mails

In this *Career Contessa* article, Caileen Kehayas Holden suggests some guidelines for professional e-mails:

• *Spell the recipient's name correctly.* "This is an open-book test with one question," she says, "and the answer is the top of the page." If you're creating a cold e-mail, Google the person or say you're unsure of the spelling, which at least lets them know that you tried. Holden has an unconventional first name and has seen numerous variations in e-mails she's received, including Colleen and Kaileen, which she finds annoying.

• *Personalize when possible*. Mention the recipient's recent accomplishments or perhaps their favorite singer, if you have good intel. It really adds something when you make this extra effort.

• *E-mail formatting is your friend, so use it*. Bullet points, adding line spacing, and boldface fonts make a huge difference to readability and are a kindness to recipients, says Holden. Click on the full article for an example of the same information with murky and clear formatting.

• *It's okay to start a new e-mail thread*. This means your recipient doesn't have to scroll through a long chain of e-mails and responses, and you can refer to a previous thread if needed.

• *Move some people to bcc*. "Everybody does not need to be in the loop at all times," says Holden. "Another idea is to set up e-mail aliases so you can quickly e-mail a group of people but not need to input each person's e-mail address."

• *Don't guilt-trip*. "If someone has missed your e-mail (or multiple e-mails)," she says, "be kind. You simply don't know what is happening behind someone's work e-mail address, so exercise some patience. Don't be the jerk." And if you're trying to be funny, beware, because it's hard to discern tone in an e-mail.

• *The follow-up to the follow-up doesn't need a follow-up*. Sometimes checking in on something that's due is helpful, says Holden. "I am extremely guilty of reading an e-mail and letting it fall into the abyss. I meant to reply, but I just forgot." But there's a limit to follow-ups, and she believes switching to the person's personal e-mail address is a big no-no.

• *Know your audience*. As a greeting for your best friend, *Hey!* is fine, but something more formal is best for work e-mails. For sign-offs, Holden always uses *Best regards,* and follows the lead of colleagues on length or brevity and using a confirming receipt protocol. "By learning and mirroring how someone communicates via e-mail," she says, "you're showing care and attention to detail."

• *Sometimes pick up the phone*. "E-mail is an easy tool for communication," says Holden, "right up until it isn't any longer. When you need to discuss something nuanced, communicate a specific tone, or clarify a complicated detail, it might be time to move to the telephone or video call."

• *If someone breaks these rules, don't be rude*. "We all makes mistakes, and they're embarrassing," she says. "While you can politely correct someone, there's no victory in making someone feel worse for making a mistake, even if it does seem careless."

• *No attachments in your first e-mail*. Most e-mail servers have protections against attachments from an unknown e-mail address, so your message is sent to spam and the recipient may never see it. Holden advises against sending giant files; instead, use a file hosting service like Dropbox.

• *Emojis and exclamation points don't absolve bad behavior*. Better to use direct and more-professional language or pick up the phone.

"E-mail Etiquette – 12 Rules to Follow for Professional E-mails" by Caileen Kehayas Holden in *Career Contessa*, February 7, 2024

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6. Is a College Degree Worth It?

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Jeff Murray reports on a study comparing the downstream earnings of 2.9 million college graduates and 2.9 million high-school graduates. The researchers looked at U.S.-born adults from 2009 to 2021 and factored in the cost and lost earnings of attending college. Here are the major findings:

- A college degree still provides "a solid return on investment" compared to a high-school diploma – between 9 and 10 percent.
- Male college graduates got a slightly lower return on investment than their female counterparts – three quarters of a percent less.
- The college premium is lower than it was in the late 1980s, reflecting higher college costs and a flattening of wage growth after the Great Recession.
- College degrees in engineering and computer science had the highest rate of return – more than 13 percent – with business, health, math, and science close behind.
- At the lower end were education, humanities, and the arts – less than 8 percent rate of return.

- There was a significant increase in the higher-earning majors during this time period, accompanied by an overall decrease in college enrollment since 2010.

"As clear as these data are about the declining but still quite positive return on a college degree even as recently as 2021," says Murray, "the future for today's degree earners is nowhere near as crystalline as that hindsight… Ongoing technological advancements in robotics and artificial intelligence, as well as the increase in career-technical education opportunities in the middle- and high-school years, have the potential to upend all employment sectors in unpredictable ways."

"The Value of a College Degree: Evidence and Trends from 2009-2021" by Jeff Murray in *Education Gadfly*, March 26, 2024

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7. Writing a Letter from Your Future Self

"People find clarity about the present by reflecting on the future," says consultant Dan Rockwell in this *Leadership Freak* article. "They often know what they should or shouldn't do. They also find courage to take small steps toward their preferred future." He sometimes advises a client to imagine they are thriving at some point in the future and write a letter asking their present self these questions:

- *What are you glad you did today?*
- *How much will this matter tomorrow? A month from now? Next year?*
- *What should you start doing?*
- *Keep doing?*
- *Stop doing?*
- *What next steps should you take?*

"What Will Your Future Self Thank You For" by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, April 1, 2024; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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8. What's the Appropriate Age for Kids to Read Controversial Classics?

When books are challenged by parents as inappropriate for classrooms or school libraries, the contention is often that students are not old enough to deal with the content. In this *School Library Journal* article, expert reviewers from SLJ and the National Council of Teachers of English provide short synopses of 15 books that have often been the center of controversy and suggest grade levels at which they believe students might read each one:

- *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, grade 9 and up
- *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, grade 8 and up
- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, grade 10 and up
- *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, grade 7 and up
- *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen, grade 7 and up

- *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume, grade 5-8
- *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, grade 8 and up
- *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, grade 7 and up
- *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, grade 8 and up
- *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, grade 8 and up
- *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, grade 7 and up
- *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, grade 10 and up
- *1984* by George Orwell, grade 10 and up
- *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, grade 8 and up
- *The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman, grade 8 and up

"Defending the Classics" by Shelly Diaz, Kristyn Dorfman, Bob Hassett, Ashley Leffel, Heather Lassley, Dorian Harrison, Raven Jones, Diana Liu, Mona Mustafa, Darius Phelps, Evelyn Pollins, and Jen Vincent in *School Library Journal*, April 2024 (Vol. 70, #4, pp. 32-35)

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9. Picture Books on Accomplished Women

In this *Edutopia* article, Lorraine Radice (Long Beach, California director of literacy) recommends picture books featuring perseverance, determination, creativity, and strength in women. Click the article link below for a brief synopsis and discussion questions for each book:

- *Dancing Hands: How Teresa Carreño Played the Piano for President Lincoln* by Margarita Engle, illustrated by Rafael López, Preschool-grade 3
- *Dressing Up the Stars: The Story of Movie Costume Designer Edith Head* by Jeanne Walker Harvey, illustrated by Diana Toledano, Preschool-grade 3
- *More Than Peach* by Bellen Woodard, illustrated by Fanny Liem, K-grade 2
- *Words of Wonder from Z to A* by Zaila Avant-garde, illustrated by Keisha Morris, Preschool-grade 2
- *Malala's Magic Pencil* by Malala Yousafzai, illustrated by Kerascoët, Preschool-grade 3
- *The Queen of Chess: How Judit Polgár Changed the Game* by Laurie Wallmark, illustrated by Stevie Lewis, K-grade 4
- *Queen of Physics: How Wu Chien Shiung Helped Unlock the Secrets of the Atom* by Teresa Robeson, illustrated by Rebecca Huang, K-grade 2
- *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures: The Story of Dr. Temple Grandin* by Julia Finley Mosca, illustrated by Daniel Rieley, grade 2-5
- *The Leaf Detective: How Margaret Lowman Uncovered Secrets in the Rainforest* by Heather Lang, illustrated by Jana Christy, grade 2-5
- *The Girl with a Mind for Math: The Story of Raye Montague* by Julia Finley Mosca, illustrated by Daniel Rieley, grade 2-5

- *Turning Pages: My Life Story* by Sonia Sotomayor, illustrated by Lulu Delacre, Preschool-grade 3

"11 Picture Books on Notable Women for Young Students" by Lorraine Radice in *Edutopia*, March 7, 2024

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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
Education Digest
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 Ed (formerly Ed. Magazine)
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
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