Marshall Memo 980

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
April 3, 2023

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Just imagine what our country would look like if our kids – as a rule, as a priority – were taught to listen to understand, to speak to be understood, and to disagree without being disagreeable. That's the power of critical thinking."
Colin Seale (see item #1)

"If you have to start somewhere, start with figuring out what kids want to know, what they care about, what they already do know and wonder about the world, who they might want to become, and see if you can use that as a launching point."
Sarah Fine (see item #3)

"The difference between turning something in to your teacher and then getting a grade, and performing or sharing that learning with an audience that is not just your teacher, is really profound."
Sarah Fine (*ibid*.)

"Teaching is uncertain work by design. Determining what's happening in your students' heads is no small feat."
Jeremy Murphy and Meira Levinson (see item #2)

"It depends on how mature the teacher is."
A student pondering how candid to be in an anonymous survey of instructors

"We have a whole bunch of people who feel like they're being 'left behind,' when they were born on the 20th floor and the elevator to the 25th floor isn't working quite as reliably as it once did, so they're deeply aggrieved and panicky and blaming the entire situation on the

people who recently moved into the 6th and 7th floor. Then you have a whole bunch of people who've spent their entire lives trying to plan and procure the materials to jerry-rig a ladder from the ground to the 4th floor or the 4th floor to the 10th. They know that unless they maintain utmost vigilance – watching that ladder every hour of every day – it risks falling apart entirely."

Anne Helen Petersen in "Why Are (White) Men So Unambitious?" in *Culture Study*, March 29, 2023

"Nothing is as important as you think it is while you're thinking about it."

Daniel Kahneman

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1. Teaching Critical Thinking So It Sticks

(Originally titled "Colin Seale on Closing the Critical Thinking Gap")

In this interview in *Educational Leadership*, Tara Laskowski asks Colin Seale (thinkLaw) about his career as a teacher, lawyer, author, and speaker. Some excerpts:

• *Expectations* – Critical thinking is touted as an essential 21st century skill, says Seale, and yet in schools it's often regarded as a "luxury good," something pursued in honors classes and after-school debate teams. "And I'm like, if critical thinking is so essential, why aren't we teaching it to all kids? Why do we assume that some kids can't do it?" Seale is on a mission to ensure that across the board, tier one instruction "unleashes the gifts and talents of all students by design."

• *Acceleration* – The way to meet the needs of students who are below grade level, he says, is not to meet them where they are but to "use *who* they are and *how* they are to get them where they need to be" – using a "culturally responsive model for critical thinking and a low-floor, high-ceiling framework where kids can have access to challenge and rigor from the very start of a lesson."

• *Integrating it* – Critical thinking isn't "one more thing," says Seale, "it's *the* thing," and it should be an integral part of the everyday curriculum. Instead of having students memorize facts about the Revolutionary War, ask them for the most significant events of the conflict. Instead of solving math equations, give them two incorrect solutions and ask them which is the most wrong. In a high-school class on U.S. monetary policy, ask students what would happen if every state had its own currency.

• *Thinking like a lawyer* – Seale says that in K-12, he was an indifferent student, engaged only when he was interested. But he graduated at the top of his law school class because he saw that his "street smarts" had academic value and could be harnessed to solve

real-world problems. Lawyers are "hardwired to look at problems and solutions from multiple perspectives," he says, "to ask questions until you get the information that you need to make a wide variety of claims, and to back those claims with valid and developing evidence." Why in the world would we wait until law school to teach those skills? he asks. "Just imagine what our country would look like if our kids – as a rule, as a priority – were taught to listen to understand, to speak to be understood, and to disagree without being disagreeable. That's the power of critical thinking."

• *Relevance and equity* – Seale worked with a third-grade class in Phoenix studying Antarctica. Kids thought about what their school would have to deal with if it moved there for a year: shelter, transportation, and food. Then they wrote to a friend coming to Arizona in the summer. At the end of the lesson, students wrote a letter to a city council member on behalf of people in Phoenix who struggle with access to food, shelter, and transportation.

• *Doing right versus being right* – Seale often poses this dilemma to parents and students: a sign says *No Driving in the Park*. If a child is injured in the park and bleeding from the head, can an ambulance drive in? People say sure, it's an emergency vehicle. But what about the father of the child, Seale himself? Can he drive his car into the park? In the five years he and his colleagues have posed this question, no student has ever said yes. "We need to raise kids that don't just look at the world the way it is, but imagine it as it ought to be," says Seale. "And they have to be psychologically safe enough to know it's OK to drive in the park to save someone who is bleeding from the head. That's why I am so passionate about using critical thinking to create spaces where – for the sake of deeper learning – we maximize opportunities for students to be disruptive on purpose; to be disruptive with a purpose."

"Colin Seale on Closing the Critical Thinking Gap" An Interview by Tara Laskowski in *Educational Leadership*, April 2023 (Vol. 80, #7, pp. 14-19); Seale's books are *Thinking Like a Lawyer* and *Tangible Equity*.

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2. Teachers Don't Always Have to Be The Smartest Person in the Room

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Jeremy Murphy (College of the Holy Cross) and Meira Levinson (Harvard University) say that many instructors think they're not doing their job if students are frustrated or confused. But in fact, classroom ambiguity can foster curiosity, active learning, and metacognition. Wrestling with uncertainty also prepares students for the real world, where people in all walks of life constantly deal with messy dilemmas. Murphy and Levinson suggest five ways to deliberately introduce the X factor in classrooms:

• *Pursue the unanticipated.* "Teaching is uncertain work by design," they say. "Determining what's happening in your students' heads is no small feat. And although you enter the classroom with clear plans – sometimes even time-stamped ones – the diversity of perspectives and experiences before you undoubtedly steers the discussion into unanticipated territories." While ultimately covering the required curriculum, they continue, class discussions should be "jazz, not classical… pursuing different, unexpected tunes wherever they might

lead… By making room for serendipity, you allow class discussion to do what it is best positioned to do: bring students and instructor alike to new, unanticipated understandings."

• *Welcome incorrect answers and complicate those that are right*. Most students are afraid to make mistakes in class, but "wrong answers are often more illuminating and instructive than right ones," say Murphy and Levinson. Teachers have to be careful not to slight or quash mistakes but rather use them to tease out new insights from false leads. With correct answers, the teacher might ask, *What makes you think that?* or *What else should we consider?* When students don't get quick validation, they are more likely to pause and think, dig for stronger arguments, and confer with their classmates.

• *Leverage uncertainty to build suspense and surprise*. "Withholding a correct answer can stir greater engagement than divulging it," say Murphy and Levinson. If half of the students in a class still don't understand a key concept after it's been "taught," the best thing is to let them debate it and perhaps challenge them to think about it overnight. This will produce far more engagement and learning than simply explaining the answer.

• *Admit not knowing something*. "Sharing your own uncertainties is a powerful act of modeling," say Murphy and Levinson. "Although it may appear to contradict your status as 'the expert,' it demonstrates to students that you expect the same honest participation from them."

• *Create systems that explicitly honor the unknown*. One science instructor had two bulletin boards in her classroom: the Nobel Prize Board (for super-challenging questions that nobody had the answer to) and the Nobel Prize 'Lite' Board (for questions that she and her students would find the answers to between classes). "Showcasing so prominently on the classroom wall what she and her students don't know," say Murphy and Levinson, "serves as a tangible reminder of science's mysteries but also normalizes uncertainty's place in the classroom and the learning process."

"How to Embrace Uncertainty in Your Teaching" by Jeremy Murphy and Meira Levinson in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 27, 2023; the authors can be reached at jtmurphy@holycross.edu and meira_levinson@gse.harvard.edu.

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3. What Produces Powerful, Enduring Learning?

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez interviews Sarah Fine (High Tech High) about what she and co-author Jal Mehta found in their multi-year search for schools where deeper learning was taking place (their 2019 book is *In Search of Deeper Learning*). It was often at the "periphery" of the school day – in debate teams, theater productions, art and robotics extracurriculars, athletics – and only occasionally in individual classrooms. Fine urges teachers to look around their schools for places where this kind of learning is happening and think about ways to take their own pedagogy to higher levels. Some key elements:

• *Identity* – "If you have to start somewhere," she says, "start with figuring out what kids want to know, what they care about, what they already do know and wonder about the world, who they might want to become, and see if you can use that as a launching point."

• *Mastery* – In a human anatomy class, for example, this means going beyond labeling the heart on a diagram and defining its functions – instead understanding the heart's role in the body and its interconnections to everything else.

• *Creativity* – This means branching out from humdrum learning and creating something new and useful – for example, using a math skill to solve an engineering problem.

• *Depth over breadth* – Go deep on a few carefully selected ideas rather than rushing through the curriculum with shallow coverage. Many teachers, says Fine, have "a high level of hunger to do things differently," and doing less can be the gateway to deeper learning.

• *Student choice* – Even if the basic curriculum is mandated, students can be given choice with projects and essays, going deeper on things that intrigue them or resonate at the level of identity.

• *Authentic audience* – "The difference between turning something in to your teacher," says Fine, "and then getting a grade, and performing or sharing that learning with an audience that is not just your teacher, is really profound." The audience can be younger students, all-school assemblies, community members, policymakers – or just peers in the classroom.

"What Is the Secret Sauce for Deeper Learning?" by Jennifer Gonzalez and Sarah Fine in *Cult of Pedagogy*, April 2, 2023

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4. Strategic Data Check-Ins to Keep Students on Track for Graduation

In this article in *The Learning Professional*, Nikki Giunta (New Visions for Public Schools) says that back in 1989, the high-school graduation rate in the New York City schools her organization was supporting hovered around 50 percent, with huge variations within and between schools. Working with front-line educators, Giunta and her colleagues identified a key problem: schools didn't have timely access to data about students' academic profiles – for example, a seventh grader reading at the third-grade level – and without that, students getting the right support depended on which teachers they happened to be assigned to.

This led New Visions to identify key six data points that pinpointed students in danger of falling through the cracks and not graduating:

- A graduation plan – Each student's projected graduation date and type of diploma;
- Regents planning and prep – Which state exams students plan to take;
- Attendance – Students with attendance below 90 percent;
- Marking period grades – Students failing midterms;
- Credit accumulation – The courses students need to take to be on track for graduation and meet their post-secondary college and career plans;
- A projected GPA of at least 80 – Further research showed that students with a GPA of 80 or above (out of 100) at the end of ninth grade had a higher rate of college entry and completion.

Having identified these key measures of students' trajectories, New Visions figured out how to pull individual students' data from multiple sources in the school department's computers, organize it in spreadsheets, and make it available to teachers, administrators, and counselors in

a user-friendly Portal. This web application (also launched in Lansing, Michigan) lives on top of the student information system and extracts data on a nightly basis, providing an analysis that includes city and state data on students.

With this continuously updated information at their fingertips, schools began to hold regular data check-ins, identify struggling students' needs, and implement timely action steps. The result: in the 71 schools supported by New Visions, the average high-school graduation rate is now 91.5 percent. "The establishment of these routines," Giunta concludes, "not only provides stability to the school and ensures consistency in the quality of student plans, but also provides the space and time for schools to be more innovative, all of which have contributed to improved student outcomes over time."

This data protocol has been rolled out in all New York City public schools, and the overall high-school graduation rate has risen from about 50 percent in 1989 to over 80 percent now (there were setbacks during Covid-19), with the most significant gains in high-poverty schools and closing gaps between racial/ethnic subgroups.

"Educators Learned to Use Student Data. Graduation Rates Improved" by Nikki Giunta in *The Learning Professional*, April 2023 (Vol. 44, #2, pp. 62-66); Giunta can be reached at ngiunta@newvisions.org.

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5. An Online Tool That Lets Students Create Customized College Rankings

In this *New York Times* article, Quoctrung Bui says that college rankings like the one compiled by *U.S. News and World Report* are not helpful to high-school students who have different priorities. For example, when Bui was in high school, he was looking for a college that was close to home, had exceptional academics and a large athletic program, was affordable, and would set him up for jobs that paid well. None of those criteria were in the algorithm used by *U.S. News and World Report*.

Nevertheless, many high-school students, their teachers, and their families put great stock in these ratings – which distorts the college application process, increases stress, and leads to some poorly informed decisions. That's why Bui and his *New York Times* colleagues designed an online tool that allows students to input their values and preferences and get college rankings customized to them. "You tell us what matters to you and we'll give you a list of schools that best matches your priorities," he says. "In doing so, our intent is to place value and emphasis on your opinions about college and show the range of schools that could meet your individual needs and goals."

What went into the tool? Bui and his colleagues sorted through reams of data, drawing mainly on the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics and College Scorecard, Niche (a college ranking company that collects millions of reviews of school campuses), and Opportunity Insights. The tool also uses two important criteria: it includes only colleges that graduate more than 50 percent of students within eight years, and only colleges where more than 75 percent of students attend full-time.

"New Tool, Picking a College Gets Personal" by Quoctrung Bui in *The New York Times*, March 30, 2023

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6. Phonics First?

"There is widespread agreement that teaching phonics is an important component of early reading instruction," say David Reinking (Clemson University), George Hruby (University of Kentucky), and Victoria Risko (Vanderbilt University) in this article in *Teachers College Record*. "However, we argue that phonics instruction is more effective when embedded in a more comprehensive program of literacy instruction that accommodates students' individual needs and multiple approaches to teaching phonics – a view supported by substantial research."

Reinking, Hruby, and Risko are concerned that the issue of phonics (teaching children how to decode letters into speech sounds) has become highly politicized and ideological in recent years, with more than half of state legislatures persuaded to pass laws mandating an emphasis on phonics and a particular approach to teaching it. This *phonics-first* push has the following core beliefs:

- There is a crisis in reading achievement in the U.S., and it is explained by a failure of mainstream educators to fully invest in the primacy of phonics.
- Phonics is not just *an* essential component of learning to read; it is *the* essential component.
- Therefore, phonics should dominate early reading instruction, with vocabulary development, comprehension, fluency, and motivation addressed afterward.
- Virtually all difficulties in learning to read are attributed to and remedied by phonics.
- Once children master phonics, almost all of them will become successful readers.
- A synthetic approach – teaching letters and their sounds and blending them to pronounce words – is preferred and emphasized.
- All children should move together through a well-defined sequence of phonics skills.
- Phonics instruction should continue through the primary grades and, if necessary, beyond.
- A settled science unassailably supports these beliefs, assertions, and assumptions.

These precepts have energized and directed the efforts of a diverse five-part coalition: frustrated parents demanding straightforward answers to their children's reading difficulties; professional organizations created to promote phonics first; commercial interests selling phonics teaching materials and services; politicians and journalists persuaded by the arguments; and a few outspoken academics who believe phonics is the technical solution to reading problems. This coalition has been very successful in driving the current debate and passing legislation.

But are the beliefs behind the phonics-first movement correct? Reinking, Hruby, and Risko say disagreements about the role of phonics go back to the early 1900s, and flared up in the mid-1950s, when Rudolph Flesch's best-selling book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, blamed the

whole-word approach used by most American schools for disappointing reading achievement. Then in the 1980s and 1990s, *whole language* emerged as a distinctly different approach, drawing on psycholinguistic theory to promote a more organic way to teach reading, seeing it as a natural outgrowth of oral language. Whole language proponents rejected explicit phonics instruction, instead introducing it at teachable moments as students engaged with meaningful texts.

Phonics advocates vigorously pushed back, and there were more than 100 legislative efforts that successfully countered whole language's influence in schools. By the early 2000s, a *balanced approach* emerged as a middle ground, based on the belief that authentic and meaningful language activity was compatible with systematic phonics. But phonics proponents didn't buy the compromise and criticized balanced literacy as whole language in sheep's clothing. That argument has continued in the current "science of reading" debate.

Reinking, Hruby, and Risko examine four key assertions that underlie the phonics-first movement:

• *There a reading crisis in the U.S. and it's caused by inadequate phonics instruction.* NAEP reading scores have been basically flat since the 1960s, with a troubling 30 percent of students reading below basic – but no noticeable surge of underachievement that would indicate a crisis. Is the number of students not reading proficiently caused by inadequate phonics instruction? There's no evidence of that, say Reinking, Hruby, and Risko. What *does* influence students' reading proficiency, they say, are "teachers' experience and dedication, the availability of materials, instructional leadership, context, and a variety of out-of-school factors."

"Without overwhelming evidence to the contrary," they continue, "it is unlikely that any single in-school factor, let alone one instructional variable such as phonics, can be so powerful that it is the single cause of virtually all variation in reading achievement."

• *The 2000 National Reading Panel report supports the current push for phonics.* Today's phonics-first advocates point to the NRP report as evidence for their approach to teaching phonics. But in fact the NRP report, say Reinking, Hruby, and Risko, took a nuanced look at the research on alphabetics and phonics and didn't recommend one teaching approach. In addition, it emphasized the importance of not overdoing phonics, the role of teacher expertise and judgment, and making sure students understand *why* they are learning letters and letter sounds. Subsequent research has fine-tuned the NRP findings on phonics, but there still isn't a definitive template for how it should be taught.

• *A "balanced approach" to early reading instruction is "whole language" in disguise.* Definitely not, say Reinking, Hruby, and Risko. Whole language had its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s and declined quickly thereafter, supplanted by a synthesis of approaches that gave plenty of emphasis to phonics – integrated with vocabulary development, building background knowledge, writing, comprehension strategies, monitoring, exposing students to meaningful texts, student motivation, and emphasizing teacher judgment and differentiation.

Phonics-first advocates continue to assert that whole language and the balanced approach are one and the same – and that they don't work. Mostly incorrect, say the authors. Whole

language had a very mixed track record and is used in only a small number of classrooms today, but there is solid evidence that "the most experienced and successful teachers of reading use a balanced approach."

• *There is a settled science of reading.* There is no justification, say Reinking, Hruby, and Risko, for saying "there is a settled science of reading that provides final answers about how reading should be taught to every child, particularly among those who live in poverty and who experience institutional inequities and injustice… There is no one uppercase *Science of Reading*. Instead, there are multiple lowercase *sciences* of reading, each contributing interesting and relevant findings to our understanding. But, to suggest that they constitute a settled science of reading is to ignore the history of science, or, for that matter, reading research," which is a constantly evolving field with new insights emerging every year.

"We see physicians," continue the authors, "because we expect them to know the latest science and the evidence about effective practices in general, but we want them to apply professional judgment that includes clinical experience and a deep understanding of our individual case. Anything that might be considered standard practice in general is not necessarily best practice in every particular case." It's the same with reading instruction: there are some solid principles and research findings, but new insights are emerging all the time, and there's an important role for teachers' judgment as they work with each child.

"Ironically," conclude Reinking, Hruby, and Risko, "the promotion of phonics has become more of a movement, much akin to whole language in its heyday. Therefore, it can be accused of the same questionable tactics leveled against its historical adversary. It uses evidence rhetorically, not scientifically, despite its claims. Consequently, its stance is promotional, not neutral… It draws support from anecdotal cases and arguments sometimes dispensed by journalists and media outlets, and it ignores or discounts unfavorable evidence. It engages in polemics for the sake of political lobbying driven by a fervent, and often emotional, commitment to and belief in an unmitigated truth, not a dispassionate consideration of what might effectively serve the needs of those who teach reading and, more important, the students they teach."

"Legislating Phonics: Settled Science or Political Polemics?" by David Reinking, George Hruby, and Victoria Risko in *Teachers College Record*, January 2023 (Vol. 125, #1, pp. 104-131); Reinking can be reached at david.reinking@uga.edu.

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7. A Quiz on How Talkative You Are

These 16 questions in a *Time* article by Dan Lyons produce a score on where you are on a scale from too reticent to too talkative. If you're at the talkative end of the scale, Lyons has these suggestions, with a quip for each one:

- *When possible, say nothing*. "Be Dirty Harry, not Prince Harry."
- *Master the power of the pause*. "Take a breath. Wait. Let the other person process what you've said."
- *Quit social media*. "The first cousin of overtalking is over-tweeting."

- *Seek out silence*. "Detach. Unplug. Giving your brain a rest can kick-start your creativity."
- *Learn how to listen*. "Pay fierce attention to the other person."

"Mute: Overtalkers Are Everywhere – But Saying Less Will Get You More" by Dan Lyons in *Time*, January 30/February 6, 2023

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8. Recommended Books on African-American Joy

In this *Edutopia* feature, educator/writer Andrew Boryga shares several educators' recommendations of young adult novels depicting the everyday joys, passions, and triumphs of African-American protagonists – in contrast to the all-too-common themes of racism, poverty, suffering, grief, slavery, trauma, and oppression (click the link below to see cover images and short summaries):

- *Cool. Awkward. Black.* edited by Karen Strong
- *You Should See Me in a Crown* by Leah Johnson
- *Some Places More Than Others* by Renée Watson
- *New Kid* by Jerry Craft
- *One True Loves* by Elise Bryant
- *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky* by Kwame Mbalia
- *Look Both Ways* by Jason Reynolds
- *Instructions for Dancing* by Nicola Yoon
- *Shuri: A Black Panther Novel* by Nic Stone
- *Black Boy Joy: 17 Stories Celebrating Black Boyhood*, edited by Kwame Mbalia

"10 Books with Black Protagonists That Don't Center Black Pain" by Andrew Boryga in *Edutopia*, February 28, 2023

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9. "Read-Alikes" with the TV Show *The Crossover*

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Indiana librarian Abby Johnson suggests three books that middle-school students might enjoy if they're watching *The Crossover*, a Disney+ series that began airing early this month:

- *Falling Short* by Ernesto Cisneros, grade 4-7
- *Planet Middle School* by Nikki Grimes, grade 5-8
- *Ghost* by Jason Reynolds, grade 5-8

"Navigating Friendship and Sports" by Abby Johnson in *School Library Journal*, March 2023 (Vol. 69, #3, p. 26)

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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 48 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 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 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