

Marshall Memo 418

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 9, 2012

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Quotes of the Week

“How can schools inspire and teach students to be moral people, to care about and take responsibility for others, to think clearly about and pursue justice, to sacrifice for important principles?”

Richard Weissbourd (see item #1)

“Teachers don't choose whether they want to influence children's characters. Teachers are always influencing moral attitudes and capacities... by what they choose to reward and punish, how fairly they balance different students' needs, whether they alert children to injustice and justice in the school and world around them, how they define students' obligations to each other, and what they model day to day.”

Richard Weissbourd (*ibid.*)

“To really excel, you need both [talent and practice]. But a good work ethic trumps lazy talent every time.”

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (see item #7)

“Being prepared, understanding your strengths and limitations, and having a good game plan – those are essential elements of success.”

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (*ibid.*)

“[T]he best teachers shut up. You'd be amazed how quiet I am in the classroom; I don't talk a lot.”

Rafe Esquith (see item #8)

“Clearly, instruction that provides students with decoding and comprehension skills and strategies is not sufficient.”

Linda Gambrell (see item #3)

1. Moral Education in Schools

In this thoughtful *Harvard Education Letter* article, Richard Weissbourd asks, “How can schools inspire and teach students to be moral people, to care about and take responsibility for others, to think clearly about and pursue justice, to sacrifice for important principles?” Parents want schools to do this work, but are schools up to the job? Few character-education programs have any measurable impact. Weissbourd’s suggestions:

- *Don’t patronize.* Most children know about honesty and respect by the time they are five, and lecturing adolescents doesn’t work. A jaded student responds: *Do you want me to tell you what you want to hear, or do you want me to tell you the truth?*

- *Walk the talk.* Schools post their values, but children are quick to spot hypocrisy. “I’ve been in far too many schools that tout respect for others,” says Weissbourd, “yet not uncommonly adults in hallways ignore children repeatedly saying ‘that’s so gay’ and ‘no homo,’ boys make lewd comments to girls, or some students are openly ostracized.”

- *Be moral mentors.* “Teachers don’t choose whether they want to influence children’s characters,” says Weissbourd. “Teachers are always influencing moral attitudes and capacities...” Good sports coaches can get through to teenage boys about respecting girls.

- *Teach by actions.* Do teachers report a colleague who isn’t performing well or is acting unfairly? Adults can “morally progress and regress at every stage of their lives,” says Weissbourd, “and adults’ own unfolding moral development can deeply affect children’s unfolding moral development.”

- *Analyze data.* Ask students: Do you feel emotionally and physically safe? Are there adults you can talk to if you feel harassed or isolated? Does the school care about you? Are there hot spots – hallways, gyms, buses – where problems occur?

- *Teach.* Moral discussions naturally occur in the regular curriculum and in teachable moments: *Should I back up my best friend in a fight even though I know he’s wrong?*

- *Put students to work.* They can help formulate rules and policies and do community service.

- *Involve parents.* Students look first to their families for guidance, and adults need to be enlisted in the moral-education community.

“Promoting Moral Development in Schools” by Richard Weissbourd in *Harvard Education Letter*, January/February 2012 (Vol. 28, #1, p. 8, 6-7), <http://www.edletter.org>

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2. How Mindset Affects Happiness – and Productivity

In this intriguing *Harvard Business Review* article, corporate CEO and author Shawn Achor says that when anxious managers pester their employees with urgent demands and frequent meetings, they “jack up everyone’s anxiety level” and activate the part of people’s brains that processes threats (the amygdala), which steals resources from the part of the brain that handles problem-solving (the prefrontal cortex). This is why a negative management style is counterproductive: it results in unhappy employees and continuous damage to the organization’s mission.

High-pressure, intrusive managers often take their cues from two misconceptions about employees’ happiness:

- Misconception #1: That people attain a happy state when they’ve accomplished something worthwhile: *Once I achieve my goal, I’ll be happy*. This belief can make a boss demanding and uncaring about people’s feelings, thinking they’ll be happy when they’ve done good work. “In fact, it works the other way around,” says Achor. Happiness precedes success. “People who cultivate a positive mind-set perform better in the face of challenge.”

- Misconception #2: That how happy people are is largely inborn – some people are naturally cheerful and some people are sourpusses. This belief leads all too many bosses to scorn the “touchie-feelie” stuff because it doesn’t make any difference. But people’s general sense of well-being is “surprisingly malleable,” says Achor. “The habits you cultivate, the way you interact with coworkers, how you think about stress – all these can be managed to increase your happiness and your chances of success.”

So he urges managers to take the time and effort to create a more positive culture: “Research shows that when people work with a positive mindset, performance on nearly every level – productivity, creativity, engagement – improves.” And he says that training our brains to be more positive is not very different from training muscles at the gym: specific activities and new habits can literally rewire the brain.

Working with a tax company during a very busy and stressful filing season, Achor asked employees to choose one of the following activities and do it every day for three weeks:

- Jot down three things you’re grateful for.
- Write a positive message to someone in your social support network.
- Meditate at your desk for two minutes.
- Exercise for ten minutes.
- Take two minutes to describe in a journal the most meaningful experience of the past 24 hours.

After three weeks, researchers assessed these tax workers’ level of optimism and life satisfaction and found it was significantly higher than that of a control group – and the advantage was still there four months later. “Just one quick exercise a day kept these tax managers happier for months after the training program had ended,” says Achor. “Happiness had become habitual.”

Of the five activities above, the most effective was the second – engaging positively with people in a social network. “Strong social support correlates with an astonishing number

of desirable outcomes,” writes Achor. “[H]igh levels of social support predict longevity as reliably as regular exercise does, and low social support is as damaging as high blood pressure.” This works in both directions – providing social support and receiving it. One study found that people who help coworkers who were overwhelmed by their work, pick up slack for others, invite colleagues to lunch, and organize group activities are not only happier but more successful.

In another experiment, Achor asked 11,000 employees in a large health-care organization to adopt the “10/5 Way” – when they walked within ten feet of another person in the workplace, they were to make eye contact and smile. When they walked within five feet, they were to say hello. Most people complied, and this simple intervention led to measurable improvements in unique patient visits, patient recommendations, and medical-practice provider scores. “Social support appears to lead to not only happier employees but also more-satisfied clients,” says Achor.

Stress is another cause of unhappiness and health problems. There are lots of stress-reduction programs, but some of them get people even more in a tizzy as they worry about all the ill effects. Achor believes that stress is an inevitable part of work – and in fact, it’s often the crucible of personal and professional growth (there’s evidence for this in the biographies of successful people). What’s important is our *attitude* toward stress. Achor recommends that the next time we’re feeling overwhelmed, we should make a list of the things that are stressing us out and then sort them into two groups: those we can control and those we can’t. “Choose one stress that you can control and come up with a small, concrete step you can take to reduce it,” he says. “In this way you can nudge your brain back to the positive – and productive – mind-set.”

“Positive Intelligence: Three Ways Individuals Can Cultivate Their Own Sense of Well-Being and Set Themselves Up to Succeed” by Shawn Achor in *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2012 (Vol. 90, #1-2, p. 100-102), no e-link available

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3. Building Students’ Motivation to Read

In this *Reading Teacher* article, Clemson University professor Linda Gambrell cites a 2010 PISA study of schools in 64 countries that found a close link between students’ enjoyment of reading and their reading proficiency. The study also found that 37 percent of students say they don’t enjoy reading at all – and their achievement is often the worst.

“Clearly, instruction that provides students with decoding and comprehension skills and strategies is not sufficient,” says Gambrell. “If students are not motivated to read, they will never reach their full literacy potential.”

Motivation to read manifests itself in children frequently and voluntarily engaging in reading. This suggests a number of strategies for elementary teachers:

- *Find reading tasks and activities that are relevant to students’ lives.* Students might spend three minutes a day writing in their “reading diary” about their self-selected books and other reading matter.

- *Give students access to a wide range of materials.* There should be an array of genres and text type, magazines, Internet-capable computers, resource materials, and real-life documents, says Gambrell. This may involve weeding outdated books from the classroom library and continually adding new material. Equally important is raising interest and curiosity through read-alouds and “sales pitches.”

- *Give students plenty of time to read.* On average, American students spend only 18 minutes a day engaged in actually reading a text. Studies show that much more time is required, and that spending a significant amount of time in sustained reading contributes more to achievement gains and motivation than time spent on word study, alphabetic skills, and phonemic awareness. Gambrell suggests that teachers start with 10 minutes a day of sustained, self-selected reading at the beginning of the year and gradually increase the time as students’ interest, skills, and stamina improve. If teachers build sufficient interest and momentum, all students will continue to read during the unsupervised summer months.

- *Give students choices in what they read and how they read.* “Choice has been identified as a powerful force that allows students to take ownership and responsibility for their learning,” says Gambrell. But struggling readers tend to make poor choices of pleasure reading, selecting books that are too difficult. The best strategy for these students is giving them “bounded choice” – they pick from 4-5 teacher-selected books that are of interest and at a manageable reading level.

- *Get students interacting with each other about what they are reading.* This includes getting students “talking about books with others, reading together with others, borrowing and sharing books with others, talking about books with peers in class, and sharing writing about books with others,” says Gambrell. What peers say piques curiosity and increases confidence about reading new materials. After reading time, teachers might get pairs of students to take 3-4 minutes to do a “quick share” about what they have just read.

- *Help students experience success with difficult texts.* “One feature of effective reading instruction is offering reading tasks and activities that advance, rather than overwhelm, the reader,” says Gambrell. “Struggling readers do not necessarily fail in reading because they lack motivation; they often fail because they do not experience progress and competence.” This is the fine line between frustration and boredom – moderately challenging, requiring real effort, showing the teacher’s expectations, stretching students’ skills and knowledge, building confidence. Instead of labeling books *Easy*, *Average*, and *Difficult*, teachers might label them *Hard*, *Harder*, and *Hardest*. This might raise the chances of a below-level student reading a book at the just-right level.

- *Give students plenty of feedback.* “The research is clear that constructive and supportive teacher feedback provides a powerful and motivating incentive to learn,” says Gambrell. Teachers’ verbal scaffolding, support, direction, and specific, elaborated, and embellished praise are key. Of course, the praise must be honest, specific, and deserved – otherwise students will see right through it and it will be counterproductive. Research shows that well-chosen words of praise and encouragement are more effective motivators than prizes and gold stars. “In general, tangible incentives have been found to undermine the development

of intrinsic motivation,” says Gambrell. But she sees the virtue of rewards like extra time for pleasure reading, an extra teacher read-aloud, books, and bookmarks.

“Seven Rules of Engagement: What’s Most Important to Know About Motivation to Read” by Linda Gambrell in *The Reading Teacher*, November 2011 (Vol. 65, #3, p. 172-178), no e-link available

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4. Getting More from Primary-Grade Read-Alouds

In this *Reading Teacher* article, Miami University (Ohio) professor Jessica Hoffman says that read-alouds in the primary grades rarely fulfill their potential because:

- Teachers’ questions don’t go beyond the literal level;
- The books chosen aren’t aligned with curriculum content;
- They aren’t approached in an intentional manner;
- Teachers don’t engage students in discussing major story ideas and characters.
- Teachers fall into the initiate-respond-evaluate (IRE) pattern – asking low-level questions, getting answers from students, and telling them if they are right or wrong.

Hoffman believes young students are perfectly capable of engaging in higher-level literacy practices – provided they get the proper support. She describes how she worked with a kindergarten teacher in an urban school to get more out of read-alouds. Their goal was interactive discussions and higher-level literacy practices such as actively constructing meaning through analysis, interpretation, and critical thinking. Here were the supports the teacher put in place during read-alouds:

- *Encouraging students to talk to build interaction* – The teacher decided that during read-alouds, students would be allowed to quietly chime in with comments and questions without raising their hands. This was in keeping with the class norm of participating and learning, but the teacher was anxious that it would cause chaos. Instead, it got more students talking, raised the level of discussion, and proved easy to manage.

- *Strategically using reconstruction of meaning* – The teacher realized that she had been allowing student misunderstandings and misconceptions about stories to continue, sometimes “fishing” for correct answers from other students – for example, in *Seven Blind Mice*, in which one mouse feels an elephant’s trunk and thinks it’s a snake, one student thought it really was a snake. The teacher stuck with the confused student and, through two or three exchanges, helped the student understand what was really going on in the story.

- *Strategically using co-construction of meaning* – The teacher’s goal was to get students constructing meaning *with* her, rather than telling them the answer. In her read-aloud dialogues with students, she prompted and encouraged students to come up with theories, build on each others’ ideas, and capitalize on them to move the discussion forward. She complimented them when they thought of things she hadn’t.

- *Shifting the focus from literal to interpretive* – At first, when the teacher read books with her class, students tended to see only the literal meaning. The teacher gently pushed them

and helped them read between the lines, see symbolism, and interpret what the author was trying to say.

The big differences from the typical initiate-respond-evaluate pattern are that the initial idea or question can come from either the teacher or a student and, depending on whether students' responses are fully developed, the teacher can either follow up with another question or praise, encourage, and summarize.

For all this to work well, the choice of books is important. Here are Hoffman's suggestions on good kindergarten books for promoting interaction and higher-level literacy discussions in kindergarten classes:

- *When Sophie Gets Angry, Really, Really Angry* by M. Bang (Blue Sky, 1999)
- *Poinsettia and Her Family* by F. Bond (HarperCollins, 1985)
- *Beautiful Blackbird* by A. Bryan (Atheneum, 2003)
- *The Little House* by V.L. Burton (Houghton Mifflin, 1969)
- *Town Mouse and Country Mouse* by L.B. Cauley (Putnam, 1990)
- *Jamela's Dress* by N. Daly (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1999)
- *Strega Nona* by T. dePaola (Aladdin, 1979)
- *Zinnia and Dot* by L.C. Ernst (Viking Juvenile, 1992)
- *"Let's Get a Pup!" Said Katie* by B. Graham (Candlewick, 2001)
- *Elizabethi's Doll* by C. Hale (Lee & Low, 1998)
- *Jamaica and Brianna* by J. Havill (Houghton Mifflin Books for Children, 1993)
- *Kitten's First Full Moon* by K. Henkes (HarperCollins, 2004)
- *Come On Rain!* By K. Hesse (Scholastic, 1999)
- *Duck and Goose* by T. Hills (Schwartz & Wade, 2006)
- *The Pig's Picnic* by K. Kasza (Putnam Juvenile, 1988)
- *Fish Is Fish* by L. Lionni (Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 1970)
- *The Paperboy* by D. Pilkey (Scholastic, 1996)
- *Max Found Two Sticks* by B. Pinkney (Simon & Schuster, 1994)
- *Something Beautiful* by S.D. Wyeth (Doubleday Books for Young Readers, 1998)
- *Seven Blind Mice* by E. Young (Philomel, 1992)

"Co-Constructing Meaning: Interactive Literary Discussions in Kindergarten Read-Alouds" by Jessica Hoffman in *The Reading Teacher*, November 2011 (Vol. 65, #3, p. 183-194), no e-link available; Hoffman can be reached at hoffmajl@muohio.edu.

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5. Using Puns to Enhance ELLs' Language Development

In this *Reading Teacher* article, National-Louis University/Chicago professor Kristin Lems says that word play, verbal jokes, and puns are an excellent literacy activity for English language learners because they develop a conscious awareness of the forms of language and harness humor in service of learning. "Humor raises motivation, lengthens attention span, and helps create a fun and relaxed classroom community," says Lems. ELLs feel more "with it" when they can get the joke – and understand the English behind it.

Puns are a good starting point because the humor is language-specific and involves playing with subtle similarities and differences. There are three types:

- *Sound-alike puns* – These are based on homophones – words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings. Mastering these demons is an important part of learning the English language. Here’s an example:

A teacher asks a student to tell something about electricity.

The uncertain student stammers, “Why – er –”

Very good, wire,” says the teacher. “Now name a unit of electrical power.”

“The what?” asks the clueless student.

“Very good job,” says the teacher. “The watt is correct!”

- *Lookalike puns* – These are based on words that sound and look the same but have different meanings in different contexts.

A teacher asks a student, “Karen, what is the highest form of animal life?”

Karen responds, “A giraffe?”

Another example relying on knowing an idiom:

A teacher asks, “Which travels faster, hot air or cold?”

A student responds, “Hot. You can always catch a cold.”

- *Close-sounding puns* – These play with words that have different meanings and spellings but sound alike. An example:

Knock knock.

Who’s there?

Eiffel.

Eiffel who?

Eiffel down and scraped my knee.

Or a sewer and drainage truck with the company logo, Ex-Stink. “Close-sounding puns require making an association between the sounds of words that have nothing else in common,” says Lems. “These jokes often require an advanced English language proficiency level.”

She suggests the following steps for introducing puns, being careful to match them to the age level and English proficiency of students:

- Get hold of some joke collections, which tend to have a long shelf life;
- Create a pun collection suitable to your class;
- Choose puns that will serve as good exemplars of each kind of pun;
- Choose a few easy, funny “winners” to start out with;
- Collect 9-12 puns that exemplify the three types, at different levels of English proficiency, and type them on a single sheet;
- Prepare a colorful, readable three-column chart (Sound-alike, Look-alike, Close-sounding) and make smaller copies that students can use in groups;
- As the lesson begins, define pun as a humorous word play based on a double meaning and share some examples;
- Put up the three-column chart and with an example of each type of pun;

- Scaffold students' understanding by reading the puns to the class, explaining each, asking students to classify it, and filling in the chart with explanations;
- Have students work in small groups to “get” several more puns;
- Come back together to share answers and interpretations.

As extension activities, the teacher might keep a pun wall in the classroom that gets added to in the course of the year; give students a chance to illustrate a pun; have pairs of students perform puns as part of a “joke of the day” activity; and have students report on puns they see around the community – for example, a bridal shop named Wedding Belles (can you get all three meanings?).

“Puns Work Helps English Learners Get the Joke” by Kristin Lems in *The Reading Teacher*, November 2011 (Vol. 65, #3, p. 197-202), no e-link available; Lems can be reached at klems@nl.edu.

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6. Is the Amount of Time Students Spend in School the Key Variable?

It's commonly believed that the U.S. is way behind other countries on classroom time. According to a brief just released by The Center for Public Education, this is incorrect. Some countries have a longer school year than the U.S., but daily seat time in classrooms is less, so things even out. Here are the classroom hours per year, according to data from the OECD and World Data on Education:

- Finland: 608 hours (elementary), 777 hours (middle), 856 hours (high)
- Korea: 612 hours (elementary), 867 (middle), 1,020 (high)
- Vermont: 700 hours (elementary)
- India: 800 hours (elementary), 1,000 (middle)
- California: 840 hours (elementary), 900 (middle), 1,080 (high)
- Japan: 868 (middle)
- China: 900 hours (elementary), 1,000 (middle)
- Florida: 900 hours
- New York: 900 hours (elementary), 990 hours (secondary)
- Massachusetts: 900 hours (elementary), 990 (secondary)
- France: 926 hours (elementary)
- Italy: 1,001 (middle), 1,089 (high)

Noting that Finland and Korea have among the highest student achievement in the world, France is average, and Italy on the low side, the authors conclude, “[T]he relationship between time and student learning is not about the amount of time spent in school. Rather, it is how effectively that time is used... Providing extra time is only useful if that time is used wisely.”

Their recommendations to policymakers considering extra instructional time:

- Determine how effectively school time is currently being used – for example, the quality of curriculum standards and teaching;
- Explore scheduling alternatives that use existing time – for example, a year-round calendar to offset summer learning loss;

- If considering block scheduling, look at the research – it’s mixed, with the 4x4 block schedule producing the least gains;
- Low-cost options like four-day weeks (with longer school days) can help;
- Logistics can be challenging but are solvable – for example, child care for year-round scheduling with longer vacations during the year and a shorter summer vacation.

“Time in School: How Does the U.S. Compare” by Jim Hull and Mandy Newport, The Center for Public Education, December 2011, spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, Jan. 6, 2012; the full study is available at <http://bit.ly/tofmZw>

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7. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar on Practice, Winning, and Leadership

In this *Harvard Business Review* interview, Alison Beard gets some great quotes from basketball great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who is now a successful writer, historian, and filmmaker:

- On which is more important, talent or practice: “To really excel, you need both. But a good work ethic trumps lazy talent every time.”
- On winning: “Being prepared, understanding your strengths and limitations, and having a good game plan – those are essential elements of success.”
- On judging people: “There are good people and thieves, and you’ve got to have the judgment to understand which is which and adjust.”
- On how to lead: “By example. I was always in shape, always a team player. I understood the fundamentals of the game and worked on them even in the off-season.”
- On “managing up” to coaches: “Respect always makes people more amenable to criticism or a correction. The idea of mutual appreciation smooths out those interactions between people on different levels.”

“Life’s Work” by Alison Beard in *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2012 (Vol. 90, #1-2, p. 156), no e-link available

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8. A Superstar Teacher on Principals and Teachers

In this *Principal Magazine* interview, renowned Los Angeles fifth-grade teacher (and author) Rafe Esquith has strong feelings about what principals can do to support teachers: “Principals can make sure their teachers get to observe each other and teachers outside the school... Many of my good ideas came from watching other good teachers.” And he adds, “Administrators have to do everything in their power to keep their teachers so happy that they want to keep teaching.”

On the characteristics of outstanding teachers, Esquith says, “The kids have a clear vision of what the classroom mission is. I also think the best teachers shut up. You’d be amazed how quiet I am in the classroom; I don’t talk a lot. I know that a lot of young teachers

like to be the center of the classroom and entertain the kids. But the best teachers are almost invisible. The best teachers simply model the behavior that they expect of the children.”

“Q&A with Rafe Esquith: America’s Most Inspiring Teacher” in *Principal*, January/February 2012 (Vol. 91, #3, p. 6-7), no e-link available

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, 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 others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 41 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 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 about 50 issues a year).

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Better Evidence-Based Education
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
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Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
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PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
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Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice