# Marshall Memo 1024

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 19, 2024

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1. Project-based learning – suggestions for successful implementation
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## Quotes of the Week

"I knew which teachers cared deeply about me and which teachers could not care less about connecting with me. Fortunately, my educational experience was filled with educators who cared and connected with me. I know they cared because they talked to me about school, my home life, and happenings outside of school."

> Ra'Chelle Spearman in "There's No Place Like Homeplace: School Principals' Roles in Developing Student Belonging As Resistance Against Oppression" by Kendra Lowery, Kiara Johnson, and Ra'Chelle Spearman in *Theory Into Practice*, Winter 2024 (Vol. 63, #1, pp. 17-27)

"Most of the time, eating disorders tend to be characterized by a lack of insight. Young people don't appreciate the risks of the behaviors they're engaging in. Often, they present for care because their parents or teachers or coaches or others become concerned first."

> Sarah Smith in "Discussing the Eating Disorders of Adolescent Boys" by Matt Richtel in *The New York Times*, February 13, 2024

"Through their actions, teachers give signals concerning what is most valued or important in each classroom."

> Sarah Miles, Denise Pope, and Caitlin Ciannella (see item #2)

"Dividing a class into groups means someone will get less attention."

> Timothy Shanahan (see item #5)

"Our thesis here is that, in fact, teaching is a lot more about a series of learnable skills than any sort of magic talent or trait that some people have and some people don't. But it's hard to specifically articulate exactly what are those skills."

> Eugene Korsunskiy (quoted in item #4)

## 1. Project-Based Learning: Suggestions for Successful Implementation

In this *Kappan* article, Anna Rosevsky Saavedra and Amie Rapaport (University of Southern California) describe 15 years of work they've done with project-based and inquiry-based learning initiatives, including:

- International Baccalaureate
- Knowledge in Action
- Generation Citizen
- New Tech Network
- Street Law "Rule of Law"
- PBLWorks
- The Democratic Knowledge Project.

Saavedra and Rapaport are impressed with the academic and social-emotional benefits of these programs, which include student engagement, sustained learning of content, and "soft skills" like persistence, taking responsibility for learning, research and discussion skills, note-taking, and addressing procrastination.

But launching and sustaining successful project-based learning is not easy. Drawing on their observations of successful programs, the authors suggest these considerations for schools implementing (or thinking about implementing) PBL:

• *Expert-created, high-quality, adaptable curriculum materials* – The programs that Saavedra and Rapaport are familiar with have spent years developing extensive materials that new adopters can use "off the shelf," adapting them to fit their classrooms and students and align with state standards. Teachers should not start from scratch developing materials when such rich resources are available.

• *Aligned professional learning supports* – Good curriculum materials are not enough, say the authors. PD support that is personalized and continues through the school year is essential, ideally aligned with the work of school-based PLCs. Some key areas:

- How to teach fundamental content skills through projects;
- Fostering a collaborative student culture;
- Developing a grading system;
- Facilitating group and project work to build complex thinking skills;
- Fostering authenticity, student choice, and empowerment in ways that promote learning.

"Even teachers with PBL experience can benefit from additional support in these areas," say the authors, "though they also want help keeping their projects fresh and relevant over time."

• *A schoolwide project-based learning culture* – PBL teaching looks and sounds different: teachers stand in front of the classroom less, desks are arranged differently, students move more frequently (sometimes leaving the classroom to engage in the community), the noise level may be higher, and students may demonstrate their learning in non-traditional ways. "These approaches can feel more comfortable," say Saavedra and Rapaport, "when everyone in the building – educators and students alike – understands and agrees with the mechanisms and philosophies of inquiry-based instruction." In schools where only a few classrooms are using project-based learning, there are challenges for teachers and students. High-achieving students, having been successful in traditional classrooms, may be particularly resistant to project-based learning.

• *Managing the tension between breadth and depth* – Saavedra and Rapaport have found that inquiry-based learning can be intellectually rigorous and prepare students to be successful with traditional assessments, including AP tests. But covering the required standards while maintaining the authenticity of projects is challenging, and educators new to PBL will be on a steep learning curve.

• *Keeping projects central* – In some schools, projects are short – only one or two classes – and lack intellectual rigor, say the authors, with most instructional time reverting to conventional instruction. Creating and implementing longer, meatier projects is serious work. Again, using already-developed programs is very helpful.

• *Alignment with standardized assessments* – Fixating on test scores can throw project-based educators off their game, with some resorting to extensive test prep while singing the praises of PBL for its impact on "soft" skills like problem solving, persistence, communication, and creativity. Saavedra and Rapaport believe PBL students can do just as well on tests as those traditionally taught; if teachers implement PBL with integrity, test scores should take care of themselves.

• *Funding* – Even though some PBL materials are free and open source, say the authors, some are not, and the professional development and teacher training time for a successful project-based learning program are not cheap.

Still, conclude Saavedra and Rapaport, project-based learning is worth it. "Our studies of multiple PBL programs show that educators who decide to move toward more student-centered learning value its benefits, as do their students." They hope their suggestions will support successful implementation in more schools.

"Key Lessons from Research About Project-Based Teaching and Learning" by Anna Rosevsky Saavedra and Amie Rapaport in *Kappan*, February 2024 (Vol. 105, #5, pp. 19-25); the authors can be reached at asaavedr@usc.edu and greenrap@usc.edu.

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## 2. Keys to Student Motivation, Engagement, and Success

In this *Kappan* article, Sarah Miles and Caitlin Ciannella (Challenge Success) and Denise Pope (Stanford University and Challenge Success) name two "foundational factors" that spur learning:

- Motivation – why students do what they do;
- Engagement – students do the work, see its purpose, and find it interesting and enjoyable.

Motivation and engagement are intertwined, say Miles, Ciannella, and Pope, and are further enhanced when there's personal interest, agency, and joy. All this results in student success and high levels of learning.

However, many schools undermine these factors by focusing on extrinsic measures of success like grades, college acceptance, and career financial status. This shows up when students are asked about their level of engagement in school. Here's how a recent survey of 46,000 high-school students deconstructed engagement, with sample questions:

- Interest and enjoyment – *How often do you find your schoolwork interesting?*
- Effort and assignment completion – *How often do you try as hard as you can in school? How often do you pay attention in your classes?*
- Attitudes and perception of cognitive engagement – *How often do you find your schoolwork meaningful?*

Researchers combined these three measures into a single, comprehensive measure of engagement, and calculated where the surveyed students fell on a continuum:

- Disengaged – These students said they were *never* or *rarely* engaged affectively, behaviorally, or cognitively (on average) – 12 percent of students were in this category.
- Doing school – These students said they were behaviorally engaged *always* or *almost always*, but *never* or *rarely* cognitively and affectively engaged – 52 percent of students.
- Purposefully engaged – These students said they were behaviorally and cognitively engaged *always* or *almost always,* but *never* or *rarely* affectively engaged – 20 percent of students.
- Fully engaged – The students said they were affectively, behaviorally, and cognitively engaged *always* or *almost always* – 12 percent of students.

Four percent of students didn't fit into any of the categories.

Are these mindsets that students have when walk into school, or can teachers affect them? "Through their actions," say Miles, Ciannella, and Pope, "teachers give signals concerning what is most valued or important in each classroom" – for example, getting the right answer, getting a good grade, learning, or understanding. How teachers respond when a student makes a mistake is especially telling – is it seen as a ding or an opportunity to learn?

The key correlates with student engagement emerged when the researchers asked students a different set of questions, including:

- *In how many of your classes is it really important how much you improve?*
- *In how many of your classes is the main goal understanding the material?*

Students who scored their teachers high on these questions were in classes that emphasized *mastery*, and those were the classes where students were cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively engaged. Conversely, students who said their teachers emphasized getting the right answers and good grades were disengaged and "doing school."

"Given this relationship between engagement and mastery-based classrooms," ask Miles, Ciannella, and Pope, "how can we help educators find more-effective ways to emphasize mastery?" From their work in schools and scanning the research, they identified the following ways to align assessment and grading systems with a mastery orientation, treat assessments as opportunities to learn, and maximize student engagement, motivation, growth, and learning (a survey of teachers revealed that many were not using these strategies):

- Using pre-tests to determine which students have some level of mastery and differentiating instruction;
- Using more-frequent, low-stakes, formative assessments throughout a unit to gauge understanding and fix learning problems in real time;
- Making homework assignments optional for students who already feel confident with the material (this might apply to a portion of a homework assignment);
- Giving narrative feedback on an assignment and letting students use the suggestions to revise the assignment before it's given a grade;
- Allowing students to skip an assignment if they have already demonstrated mastery;
- Providing opportunities for students to demonstrate that they know a topic before the teacher moves on to a new topic;
- Allowing opportunities for students to revise and resubmit assignments;
- Allowing test corrections;
- Making some assignments pass/no credit or non-graded.

"These strategies can signal to students that we value growth, learning, and improvement," say the authors, "and teachers can use them to engage more students in school."

"Helping Students to Learn and Grow" by Sarah Miles, Denise Pope, and Caitlin Ciannella in *Kappan*, February 2024 (Vol. 105, #5, pp. 13-18); the authors can be reached at smiles@challengesuccess.org, dpope@stanford.edu, and cciannella@challengesuccess.org.

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## 3. How Different Students Respond to a "Wise" Intervention

In this article in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Jaymes Pyne (Stanford University) reports on his study of students who went through a two-part "wise" intervention designed to allay their anxieties as they entered a new middle school:

- Students read vignettes from older peers saying that being worried about belonging in middle school is normal, and most students worry less about belonging by the time they're in seventh grade.
- Students are asked to write about why they might worry about middle school at first, why they might worry less over time, and why they might do well in middle school despite worrying.

Previous studies have shown that this brief intervention, taking less than a class period, often has a positive effect on students' anxieties and, ultimately, their academic achievement.

Researchers believe the intervention works because it treats young adolescents respectfully, helping them think in a grown-up way (wisely) about the psychological dynamics of entering a new school. As students are prompted to see that anxiety about entering a new school is normal and will recede over time, they're able to focus more on academic and social demands and are less likely to get into trouble, fueling a "virtuous cycle" of positive peer relationships and better grades.

Whether planting this idea in students' minds makes a positive difference depends first on the climate and culture of the new school. Pyne cites research suggesting that "the psychological change made by an intervention is simply a 'seed' planted in an individual, and just as a seed needs the right soil to grow, individuals need the right contextual affordances for the intervention's change to flourish." However, Pyne extends this idea to consider not just current contexts, but past experiences in similar contexts as well.

Looking at a group of sixth graders who had been through the two-part intervention described above, Pyne was able to access students' behavior record in elementary school as reported by their teachers from kindergarten through third grade. Based on the data, Pyne sorted students into four categories:

- Consistent Engagers – These students got high teacher behavior ratings from kindergarten through third grade.
- Rising Engagers – They had low teacher ratings in kindergarten but then improved as they moved to third grade.
- Disengagers – These students got high teacher ratings in kindergarten but then lower ratings over time;
- Nonengagers – They had low teacher ratings from kindergarten through third grade.

Pyne then analyzed how each group did in middle school after the "wise" intervention. Previous research showed that students might be *receptive* to the intervention, understanding its message – based on positive experiences in elementary school – but not necessarily *responsive* to it – changing their thinking and actual behavior in school, resulting in academic improvement. This insight was helpful in understanding how the four types of students did as they progressed through middle school:

• *Disengagers* showed moderately positive gains in GPA – about a 0.35 standard deviation increase through eighth grade. "When peers tell Disengagers they will eventually worry less about belonging in middle school," says Pyne, "because of their teachers' past perceptions of them, *they likely believe them*."

• *Consistent Engagers* and *Rising Engagers* showed no significant improvement in middle school academic achievement. These students were *receptive* to the intervention, since it resonated with positive experiences in elementary school, but weren't *responsive* to it because their positive behavior evaluations from elementary teachers led them to have fewer worries about fitting in and doing well in middle school. They already knew that they belonged because their elementary teachers had signaled that to them.

• *Nonengagers* showed some improvement in sixth grade, but it faded to nothing by eighth grade. Pyne believes this is the seed and soil analogy: the Nonengagers were *receptive* to the intervention's reassurances about fitting into middle school, but the shadow of negative experiences from elementary school took away their *responsiveness* to the message. "When peers tell Nonengagers – students who teachers have consistently perceived as having poor classroom behaviors – that they will someday worry less about belonging in school," says Pyne, "it is likely they either *do not* believe it or are not adequately rewarded for doing so." In middle school, this led to a non-virtuous cycle, with problem behavior eliciting disciplinary actions from teachers, feeding a downward spiral of behavior and academic results.

"Teacher Perceptions of Past Classroom Behaviors Influence Adolescents' Receptivity and Responsiveness to a Belonging Intervention" by Jaymes Pyne in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, March 2024 (Vol. 46, #1, pp. 82-105); Pyne can be reached at jaymes.pyne@stanford.edu.

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## 4. Problems and Progress Evaluating Teaching at the College Level

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Beth McMurtrie reports that among college instructors, student surveys are widely regarded as popularity contests that can be gamed by bringing donuts or other treats when students are filling out their course evaluations. But survey results – reduced to a faux precise numerical score like 6.7 out of 7 – are consequential. In some schools, they determine instructors' pay, with those scoring above average getting a merit increase and those scoring below average making less.

The survey question with the most perverse impact asks students to rate the intellectual challenge of a course. A professor whose content is impenetrable might score high, while a professor who works hard to make the content accessible can get a low score. Overall, the evaluation of teaching is "more *ad hoc* than deliberative," says McMurtrie, "more superficial than substantive."

The two questions with the most impact on the instructor's evaluation ask students to give an overall rating for the course, then give the instructor an overall rating. These are highly subjective measures at best, putting a premium on charisma and student engagement, not pedagogical substance and student learning – and subject to racial and gender bias. For example, students react favorably when male instructors talk about their own children – *he's such a family man* – but negatively when female instructors do the same – *Oh, they talk about their kids!* Instructors of color report dealing with microaggressions and worry about unfairness in their evaluations.

This is most unfortunate, says McMurtrie. "A growing body of research shows that effective teaching is hugely influential in determining whether students succeed in college, and that it is a key lever in helping support students who may have come into college with fewer educational advantages than their classmates. A slapdash evaluation of teaching, in other words, undermines higher education's ability to deliver on its promise."

When a university faculty member comes up for tenure, the evaluation process is more serious, but it's still flawed. A few colleagues are asked to sit in on a class and write comments – usually glowing so as not to throw a fellow instructor under the bus, perhaps suggesting using a different font in PowerPoint slides. "Everybody's like, 'Well, whatever," said a University of Colorado professor. "You can't really measure teaching anyway. And so we just do what's required by the system."

That idea is out there – that we know good teaching when we see it – but some disagree. "There are still very many people for whom good teaching seems a little bit magical and mystical," says Eugene Korsunskiy of Dartmouth College, who's helping design a new evaluation model. "Our thesis here is that, in fact, teaching is a lot more about a series of learnable skills than any sort of magic talent or trait that some people have and some people don't. But it's hard to specifically articulate exactly what are those skills."

A number of colleges are working to unpack effective classroom instruction, teasing out the techniques that research indicates will make the biggest different to student learning – and moving away from numerical scores. They're trying to rewrite student evaluations to remove ambiguous, open-ended questions and focus on what students actually experience, including:

- Engaging students intellectually;
- Running well-structured lectures;
- A well-organized syllabus and instructional sequence;
- Course material and class discussions that align with what students are tested on;
- Sparking students' curiosity;
- Increasing students' confidence as learners;
- Adapting instruction as the student body changes;
- Staying on top of the latest teaching innovations.

The result in colleges that are moving in this direction is more attention to classroom practices. "Are people talking about teaching more?" asked an Oregon professor whose college is pioneering this work. "The answer is definitely yes."

"Teacher Evaluations Are Broken. Can They Be Fixed?" by Beth McMurtrie in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 16, 2024 (Vol.70, #12, pp. 14-22)

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## 5. Should Phonics Instruction Be Whole-Class or Small-Group?

In this online article, literacy expert Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) answers a teacher's question about the merits of whole-class phonics lessons. With students at different levels of phonics proficiency, the teacher asks, is this appropriate?

There isn't any gold-standard research on this precise question, says Shanahan, but there are studies of whole-group and small-group phonics teaching. In the best studies (part of the 2000 National Reading Panel), the two approaches produced very similar levels of phonics learning. This is striking, since each has possible advantages – whole-class with the potential

efficiency of teaching all students at once, small-group with tailoring instruction to individual needs – and disadvantages – whole-group's lack of differentiation, small-group's potential for low-level busywork for students not working with the teacher.

"I think part of the problem here," says Shanahan, "is that teachers may be thinking about phonics in the same way they think about (or should think about) math curriculum. It would not be possible to teach kids long division before they had some degree of mastery of subtraction, since it is entailed in division problems. But phonics instruction is not like that. Few skills need to be taught before other skills can be learned. The sequence of phonics is largely arbitrary." Yes, it's wise to teach the skills more frequently used, and some skills help unlock others, but it's not necessary to know the t/t/ sound before the w/w/sound, or CVC and CVCe patterns. Mastery of one is not necessary to tackle the other.

His bottom line: "Dividing a class into groups means someone will get less attention… I would keep everyone moving forward with their phonics program whole class because that allows maximum teaching time for each element and pattern. It allows students to develop the ability to visually and phonemically recognize the elements in a variety of word contexts, as well as sufficient time for spelling and reading such words, and for practice with decodable text. The same instruction in small groups either must be less thorough or more hurried. Not good choices if our goal is mastery."

Shanahan ends with a cautionary note: don't let phonics "devour" the rest of reading instruction – fluency, comprehension, language development, background knowledge, and writing.

"Small-Group Phonics in the Classroom – Good Idea or Not?" by Timothy Shanahan in Shanahan on Literacy, February 17, 2024; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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## 6. Tips for Evaluating AI Edtech Tools

"AI edtech tools can provide power boosts to instruction," say Tracy Huebner and Rachel Burstein in this *SmartBrief* article, specifically:

- Personalization, differentiation, and customization for students;
- Curation of vetted educational materials and learning environments;
- Increased student engagement, interest, and motivation;
- Communication, collaboration, and relationship-building;
- Learning analytics.

"Some AI tools are well-designed to harness these areas of instructional impact," say Huebner and Burstein, "while others are not." They suggest five questions teachers might ask as they figure out the best ways to harness AI tools:

• *Does the tool allow me to differentiate?* The features to look for are scaffolding, multiple ways of assessing learners, opportunities for immediate feedback, and ways to free up teacher time. For example, Khan Academy's chatbot Khanmigo allows students to get responses directly linked to their questions.

• *Does the tool offer access to vetted educational materials?* This is helpful for finding the best resources without having to sort through unvetted options – a real time-saver for teachers.

• *Can the tool promote student interest?* "So-called intelligent tutoring systems may have the potential to make this process easier," say Huebner and Burstein, "offering guidance to students about how to evaluate sources of interest to them and freeing teachers to foster deeper student interest. Of course, accuracy, bias, and ease of use will be important considerations as educators evaluate such tools."

• *Does the tool help build relationships?* Automatic translation of meetings with parents about students' progress is a very attractive feature. Tools like AllHere and Family Engagement help educators communicate with historically underserved families.

• *Does the tool offer helpful learning analytics?* AI has great potential for providing real-time data on student learning and struggles, say Huebner and Burstein, and offering suggestions for specific interventions. For example, TeachFX provides teacher feedback at scale.

"5 Questions to Ask When Evaluating AI Edtech Tools" by Tracy Huebner and Rachel Burstein in *SmartBrief*, February 4, 2024

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## 7. Recommended Children's Nonfiction Books

This *Council Chronicle* article lists the 2024 Orbis Pictus winner and honorees for outstanding nonfiction for children (click the link below for cover images and brief summaries). This award commemorates the first children's book, which was published in 1658.

Winner:

- *Border Crossings* by Sneed Collard III, illustrated by Howard Gray

Honor books:

- *The Fire of Stars: The Life and Brilliance of the Woman Who Discovered What Stars Are Made Of* by Kirsten Larsen, illustrated by Katherine Roy
- *Game of Freedom: Mestre Bimba and the Art of Capoeira* by Duncan Tonatiuh
- *Hidden Systems: Water, Electricity, the Internet, and the Secrets Behind the Systems We Use Every Day* by Dan Nott
- *Indigenous Ingenuity: A Celebration of Traditional North American Knowledge* by Deidre Havrelock and Edward Kay, illustrated by Kalila Fuller
- *Ketanji Brown Jackson: A Justice for All* by Tami Charles, illustrated by Jemma Skidmore

Recommended books:

- *The Bees of Notre Dame* by Meghan Browne, illustrated by E.B. Goodale
- *Benito Juárez Fights for Justice* by Beatriz Gutierrez Hernandez
- *Breaking the Mold: Changing the Face of Climate Science* by Dana Alison Levy
- *Cool Green: Amazing Remarkable Trees* by Lulu Delacre

- *On the Tip of a Wave: How Ai Weiwei's Art Is Changing the Tide* by Joanna Ho, illustrated by Cátia Chien
- *Polar! Wildlife at the Ends of the Earth* by L.E. Carmichael, illustrated by Byron Eggenschwiler
- *Stars of the Night: The Courageous Children of the Czech Kindertransport* by Caren Stelson, illustrated by Selina Alko
- *This is Tap: Savion Glover Finds His Funk* by Selene Castrovilla, illustrated by Laura Freeman

"Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children" in *Council Chronicle*, December 2023 (Vol. 33, #2, pp. 12-13)

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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 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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- All back issues (Word and PDF) and podcasts
- An easily searchable archive of all articles so far
- The "classic" articles from all 20 years

## *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