Marshall Memo 907

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 18, 2021

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Quotes of the Week

"When I was a kid, nobody spoke about college. There was nothing to talk about… My daughter thinks about it all the time. She knows she has money in there."

> Vaniqua Hudson-Figueroa, a Queens mother, on the $100 college savings account that was set up four years ago when her daughter was in kindergarten (it will be worth $3,000 at high-school graduation) in "Seeding Accounts for Kindergartners and Hoping to Grow College Graduates" by Tara Siegel Bernard in *The New York Times*, October 13, 2021

"People are amazingly quick to drop stereotypes when they meet an actual individual. You may distrust lawyers but Mary, who is a lawyer, seems quite nice. In general, I'd say people are much more granular, sophisticated, and complex about seeing persons than they are when seeing groups, and the more personalistic the perspective people adopt the wiser and kinder they will be."

> David Brooks in "Here's the Mindset That's Tearing Us Apart" in *The New York Times*, October 8, 2021

"Feedback is information about how we are doing that guides our efforts to reach a goal."

> Grant Wiggins (quoted in item #1)

"Feedback should be more work for the recipient than the donor."

> Dylan Wiliam (quoted in item #1)

"High-school-age students have a sixth sense for when things feel dopey, dumb, sus, cheesy, corny, basic, cringe, or 'cheugy.'"

> Stephen Sawchuk (see item #4)

"For girls in America, taking in content that seems intended to make you hate your body is an adolescent rite of passage. The medium changes but the ritual stays the same."

> Lindsay Crouse (see item #7)

1. Giving Feedback That Isn't Consigned to the Bottom of the Backpack

In this Tang Institute article, Bowman Dickson and Andy Housiaux describe every teacher's least-favorite scenario: after spending hours reading students' papers, correcting errors, and writing comments, students glance briefly at the grade, compare what they got with a few classmates, and continue to make the same mistakes on the next assignment. "It doesn't have to be this way," say Dickson and Housiaux, and provide a synthesis of the academic research on feedback that actually works.

They start with Grant Wiggins's definition: *Feedback is information about how we are doing that guides our efforts to reach a goal*. "It can come from others, oneself, or even the task itself," say Dickson and Housiaux. "It aims to improve subsequent efforts and not just correct work that has already been done." They give several examples of feedback containing evaluation, advice, and praise, each followed by teacher feedback that's far more likely to improve students' work:

- *Ineffective*: B+ You still need to master exponent rules.
- *Better*: You are confusing the two main exponent rules – when multiplying two bases you need to add the exponent, not multiply. Practice a few of these types of problems for the next homework assignment.
- *Ineffective*: Make sure your main idea paragraph relates to your topic.
- *Better*: Your first sentence is about therapy dogs, but the rest of your paragraph talks about what dogs eat and where dogs sleep. Look at the examples of effective writing on your handout and then rewrite the paragraph.
- *Ineffective*: Wow! Your lab report is really nicely done.
- *Better*: You explained your results with good scientific nuance, your methods section is appropriately detailed, and your data presentation is just as polished as the sample lab reports.

"Feedback that is delivered effectively," say Dickson and Housiaux, "will advance student learning in ways that even the most well-intentioned evaluation, advice, and praise simply cannot." They boil down the research on effective feedback to four big ideas:

• *Big idea #1: Students must engage with feedback in order to learn from it*. "Feedback should cause thinking," says British assessment guru Dylan Wiliam. "Feedback should be more work for the recipient than the donor." This means reserving classroom time for students to process the teacher's comments (often posed as questions or hints) and engage with a brief follow-up task – which might be correcting an error or writing about what they learned from

the comments, what they did well, and what they will do differently next time. Students need to learn how to be "feedback seekers," looking for it, taking it in, and following up.

• *Big idea #2: Relationships matter*. Establishing trust is an essential precursor; then the teacher can be a "warm demander," setting high expectations and conveying feedback with growth-mindset language that speaks to students' work, not their identity. Without a trusting relationship, teachers' power position, along with their gender, race, or other characteristics, can trigger stereotype threat in students. "Don't withhold criticism or overpraise mediocre work," say Dickson and Housiaux. And create a classroom culture in which mistakes are seen as an important part of learning.

• *Big idea #3: Focus on specific instructional goals*. "If students do not understand where they are aiming, they will not be able to make sense of the feedback they receive on their performance," say Dickson and Housiaux. That's why it's vital to be transparent about learning outcomes and assessment criteria, and provide exemplars of student work at different levels of proficiency. The teacher's goal is to build skills and habits of mind that will help students think differently and get better. "Feedback should change the way students think and engage with future material," say the authors, "instead of just fixing mistakes on past work." To that end, less is more; feedback should target only a few key areas.

• *Big idea #4: Separate feedback from grading*. Giving grades is a requirement in almost all schools, but teachers should be under no illusions that grades improve performance. The challenge is getting students less focused on grades and more on continuous improvement. "Teachers can encourage students to focus more on the feedback they receive by spending time explaining the difference between feedback and grades," say Dickson and Housiaux, "and then showing the ways in which students can improve by attending carefully to the teacher's feedback." Teachers also need to nudge students toward autonomy and independence, providing opportunities for and instruction in self-assessment and peer feedback versus constant dependence on teachers.

At the end of their paper, Dickson and Housiaux include six case studies showing how these big ideas play out in classrooms – a student demanding to know why a classmate got a better grade; students not improving despite copious written feedback on their work; a teacher's comment taken the wrong way by a student; a student not doing homework and failing to ask for help. Each case is followed by focusing questions on what might change a frustrating situation.

"Feedback in Practice: Research for Teachers" by Bowman Dickson and Andy Housiaux, Tang Institute at Andover, August 2021; Housiaux can be reached at ahousiaux@andover.edu.

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2. What Rigor Looks Like in an Equitable Classroom

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article with implications for K-12, Jordynn Jack and Viji Sathy (University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill) say they're troubled by the way "rigor" is interpreted by some instructors:

- It's students' responsibility to show grit and do the deep analysis and thinking.

- Otherwise, how will students succeed in the real world?
- Providing too much structure and hand-holding sells students short.
- It amounts to lowering standards and watering down the curriculum.
- If too many students are getting high grades, the class isn't rigorous.
- Weed out students who aren't up to par.

"We're not in that camp," say Jack and Sathy. These beliefs, they assert, "privilege students who already have high academic literacy or who are already adept at managing higher education's unofficial rules, routines, and structures – also known as the hidden curriculum." The result is that struggling students feel blamed, that they don't belong.

So how can teachers maintain high standards and prepare students for future success? Jack and Sathy have three suggestions:

• *Build plenty of structure into assignments*. That means making sure students are clear about what's expected – with an English assignment, for example, specifying the assignment's genre, audience, purpose, and success criteria. "Showing students the process – the nuts and bolts of how to do the assignment – is not doing the work for them," say Jack and Sathy. "In fact, you may well be asking students to do more, not less."

• *Develop a fair grading structure*. Grading on a curve (for example, only the top five percent of students get an A) creates competition for high grades and communicates exclusion. Who is most likely to succeed? ask Jack and Sathy. "Students who already do well on high-stakes tests, who have tutors, who've had test-preparation training, who have time to form a study group or who are able to complete all the practice problems because they don't have work or caregiving responsibilities." Competitive grading can be profoundly discouraging for some students and even derail their desire to pursue a major or a career.

• *Commit to inclusive teaching*. For starters, Jack and Sathy suggest that we stop using the word rigor, which too often conveys the idea that some students don't belong. Instructors' mission should be to work with all students and "invite them in." Some specific actions:

- Clearly communicate high standards and learning expectations.
- Convey the belief that all students will be successful.
- Design lessons that get all students actively engaged, including collaborative work.
- Frequently assign low-stakes tasks that allow students to put concepts and skills to work.
- Promptly give formative feedback.
- Grade students' work on mastery of learning objectives, not on a curve.

"It's Time to Cancel the Word 'Rigor'" by Jordynn Jack and Viji Sathy in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 15, 2021 (Vol. 68, #4, pp. 46-47); the authors can be reached at jjack@email.unc.edu and viji.sathy@unc.edu.

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3. A High-School Class Debates Whether *Othello* Should Be Taught

"How well does our literary canon serve our society, and how does it need to be changed?" asks North Carolina teacher Anne Beatty in this *English Journal* article.

Specifically, what about Shakespeare's *Othello*? Beatty was moved to reconsider teaching the play when an African-American student said, "All I see is another angry black man." Three years ago, Beatty decided to study the play with an honors ninth-grade class with a dual focus: the quality of the play as literature, and the issue of race. Here's how her three-week unit proceeded.

The first half of each class was devoted to studying the play – characters, language, motifs; the second half focused on race. "Each day," says Beatty, "when we transition from Shakespeare (back then) to racism (right now), the room's energy shifts into a cocktail of giddiness, relief, and apprehension." Students are eager to talk about the issue, but hesitant to share; when they do, their personal anecdotes create a tricky dynamic. Seeing the need for ground rules, Beatty adopted Glenn Singleton's Four Agreements: *Stay engaged. Speak your truth. Experience discomfort. Expect and accept non-closure*.

After asking students to share family dynamics on race (some said it was never talked about, others that it was talked about all the time), the class discussed definitions of racism and how it was evident in the play: blatantly racist descriptions of Othello; assumptions about his magical ability to trick Desdemona into marrying him; and whether students of color can learn about racism in a play written from the oppressor's point of view.

Beatty then had students complete brief writing prompts on their experiences and views on race and the literary canon: first encounters with racism (there were lots of stories about hair and food); reactions to books they'd been assigned in English classes, including books about people different from them; feelings about Shakespeare; and their opinions on books in the canon and who gets to decide what belongs and what doesn't. One student wrote, "While reading books about different stories is good, when 'valuable' stories (usually confusing) are pushed onto you and you are told they have a 'greater meaning' it lessens the experience of reading the book." This led straight back to the question of whether *Othello* belongs in the canon.

Next, students read a selection of articles, including one by an African-American actor on his changing view of playing the part of Othello, another about white actors playing Othello in blackface; and watched a video about a Shakespeare production. *What did you notice?* asked Beatty. *What surprised you? Did you disagree with anything?* "As students analyze the implications of dehumanization, evil, and criminality in Shakespeare's language describing Othello," says Beatty, "the jump from Shakespeare in the first half of class to contemporary racism in the second begins to feel not like a jump at all." Students do more writing in response to articles and artifacts, making observations and forming judgments.

Finally the class returns to the essential question of the unit. "Armed with an understanding of the play and (for some more than others) an appreciation of its literary merit," says Beatty, "students understand why people choose to teach it. If I did my job well, they glimpsed the beauty and richness of Shakespeare…Across four hundred years, Shakespeare calls out the dangers inherent in spinning a reality out of lies, grudges, and envy; he reminds us of the real, violent consequences that a false reality can bring to people's lives. Iago has something to teach us."

The class's rich discussion of race in America focuses students on the troubling narrative in the denouement of the play: an angry, violent black man killing an innocent white woman. Students read arguments for and against teaching the play and make their closing arguments in a Socratic seminar, with classmates taking notes. Finally, they write an essay in which they are asked to respond to the essential question, include some analysis of the play, and provide a synthesis of at least three other sources.

What did students say? They came down on both sides, with some arguing for teaching the play, others saying the dangers of perpetuating racist views outweigh the literary merits and historical importance. All agreed that if the play is taught, it must be accompanied by an open discussion of race. "Most satisfying," says Beatty, "is that students see this question as central to their lives, and their voice as worthy of weighing in. Revamping this unit reminded me of a piece of wisdom from an Advanced Placement trainer: the best questions to ask are the ones you do not know the answer to. Let's invite our students into the asking, and let's wrestle with these difficult questions alongside them."

Beatty has continued to teach this unit, incorporating one student's suggestion to teach a contemporary book alongside *Othello* (she's used *The Hate U Give, The Bluest Eye,* and *Homegoing*, as well as James Baldwin's "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew." She believes a similar approach would work with other canonical works that have been challenged for their depiction of marginalized people, including *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, To Kill a Mockingbird,* and *Heart of Darkness*.

"Challenging the Canon: Teaching *Othello* as a Questionable Text" by Anne Beatty in *English Journal,* September 2021 (Vol. 111, #1, pp. 32-39); Beatty can be reached at anne.p.beatty@gmail.com.

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4. Why Is Social-Emotional Learning More Challenging with Adolescents?

"High-school-age students have a sixth sense for when things feel dopey, dumb, sus, cheesy, corny, basic, cringe, or 'cheugy,'" says Stephen Sawchuk in this *Education Week* article. "Nowhere are the pitfalls greater than in well-intentioned social-emotional learning programs for secondary students." When handled poorly, they're seen as patronizing and not speaking to students' real priorities: identity, competence, agency, status with peers, and committing to goals. To be successful, says Sawchuk, an SEL program for older students has to be less theatrical than at the elementary level and give adolescents the opportunity "to exercise their relationship and self-regulation muscles."

Sawchuk says there's little good research on social-emotional learning for secondary students. From anecdotal evidence, it seems wise to take an indirect approach, integrating SEL into the school's overall program – "a little like sneaking kale into a fruit smoothie." He summarizes several insights from his reading and reporting:

• *Integrate SEL into academic learning*. There are opportunities in English, social studies, science, art, and other classes to address empathy, growth mindset, persistence, self-management, ethical decision-making, disagreeing constructively, and persuading others.

• *Aim for coherence across classrooms*. Students can get very different SEL messages as they move from class to class: the ELA teacher may allow multiple re-takes and revision opportunities while the history teacher doesn't; the health teacher may have advice on how to succeed while the math teacher espouses a very different approach. It's helpful if teachers agree on some of the key SEL skills and implement model lessons across grades, as the Washington, D.C. schools have done with their ELA/social studies Cornerstone lessons.

• *Foster a positive school climate*. "Schools' dress codes and conduct manuals," says Sawchuk, "…can convey a quiet authoritarianism that undercuts some of the values schools purport to care about, like fostering citizenship and independence."

• *Enhance extracurricular and out-of-class opportunities*. Activities like debate, theater, chorus, athletics, cheerleading, clubs, service learning, and studio arts are rich with opportunities to develop social-emotional skills, says Sawchuk.

• *Consider peer mentoring and restorative justice programs*. A peer leader in a KIPP New York City high school's freshman transition program said, "We talked a lot about organization, about making friends and reaching out to teachers – just learning how to manage yourself and be independent, because you're in transition from a place in middle school where your hand is being held. In high school, you either do the work or you don't."

"Why High-School SEL Programs Feel 'Lame' – and How to Fix Them" by Stephen Sawchuk in *Education Week*, October 13, 2021 (Vol. 41, #9, pp. 13-16)

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5. PLCs' Focus on Standards; Necessary But Not Sufficient

In this article in *All Things PLC Magazine*, teacher/writer William Ferriter, who works in a school that has enthusiastically embraced professional learning community work, describes his shock when he heard two respected educators say that the PLC movement "harms children." How so? By turning classrooms into test-prep factories, they said, and not preparing students for tomorrow's world. Thinking this over, Ferriter has three reactions.

First he acknowledges that the PLC model has been misunderstood in some schools, putting too much emphasis on raising scores on high-stakes assessments. This narrows the curriculum, distorts pedagogy, and crowds out vitally important life skills – selling students short.

Second, Ferriter says that "ensuring every student masters the essentials in the required curriculum is a foundational part of the work of collaborative teams." Schools must teach the curriculum their communities have defined as important. That means clarifying standards, teaching to them, developing common assessments, and intervening when students aren't successful. "There is nothing inherently evil about this work," he says, "and teams who engage in it are certainly not harming children."

Third, says Ferriter, PLC teams need to go beyond a knowledge- and-skill-based curriculum and teach higher-level skills and dispositions, even if they're not assessed on state tests. For students to be successful after graduation, they must be able to think critically, work with others, solve complex problems, and be comfortable with uncertainty. Focusing on this

broader array of learning goals will increase the chance that PLC work will be effective. For example, Ferriter's eighth-grade science team, working toward a state test almost entirely focused on factual knowledge, spent last year doing an extensive study of how critical thinking could be integrated into their curriculum.

"First Thing: Do PLCs Harm Children?" by William Ferriter in *All Things PLC Magazine*, Fall 2021 (pp. 4-5)

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6. Clarifying the Definition of SMART Goals

This *All Things PLC Magazine* feature quotes from Anne Conzemius and Jan O'Neill's book on SMART school teams. Their definition is helpful because the meaning of the R in SMART is often taken to be "Relevant" or "Realistic," which is duplicative of other letters and misses the all-important feature of focusing teacher teams on actual student learning. Here's how Conzemius and O'Neill define SMART goals:

• **S**trategic and **S**pecific – Linked to district priorities and part of a larger vision of success focused on students' needs.

• **Me**asurable – The goal specifies how teachers will know that the desired learning was accomplished. "Measurement can and should occur in a number of different ways using a variety of different tools and strategies," say Conzemius and O'Neill.

• **At**tainable – The learning outcome is within the realm of teachers' influence and control, and doable given current resources.

• **R**esults-oriented – Aimed at specific student learning outcomes that schools can measure or observe; this could be a percentage of students who improve in a certain area, or a demonstration of learning defined by the teacher.

• **Ti**me-bound – Having a specific date by which the learning will be completed helps make the goal a priority and determine if it's attainable.

"Words Matter: What Are SMART Goals?" by Anne Conzemius and Jan O'Neill in in *All Things PLC Magazine*, Fall 2021 (p. 41); this comes from their book *The Handbook for SMART School Teams: Revitalizing Best Practices for Collaboration* (Solution Tree, 2nd edition, 2014)

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7. Instagram and Teen Girls

In this *New York Times* article, Lindsay Crouse (Opinion) reports on recent *Wall Street Journal* revelations of Facebook's internal research on the impact of their Instagram app. According to the Facebook survey, "Thirty-two percent of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse." Here's an example of how this plays out with a 13-year-old girl. She's beginning to feel anxious about her appearance; she follows some diet influencers on Instagram and the algorithm suggests more-extreme dieting accounts;

she follows more eating-disorder content, gets caught up in a feedback cycle of hating her body, and becomes increasingly depressed.

"Anybody who has ever spent time as a teenage girl is unlikely to find any of these revelations particularly surprising," says Crouse. "For girls in America, taking in content that seems intended to make you hate your body is an adolescent rite of passage." For previous generations, it was magazines with images of impossibly thin models. "If magazines left girls with the distinct impression that our bodies and faces were being constantly appraised, assessed, and compared, that impression was confirmed by our experiences in the world," says Crouse. "The body positivity movement may have helped, but girls still internalize the message that part of their success in life will rest upon their ability to be admired for their appearance."

Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms turbocharge what magazines did in a new medium. (The idea for Facebook was cooked up in Mark Zuckerberg's Harvard dorm room, where he had friends rate female classmates on how "hot" they were.) Instagram's message to young women, says Crouse, goes something like this: "You are riddled with flaws and imperfections. We will tell you what to buy, and what to do, to fix yourself." Images of celebrities, peers, and girls themselves get rated with "likes" and comments in a gamified environment not unlike a high-school cafeteria. And hundreds of billions of advertising dollars flow to the beauty and weight-management industry.

"Girls themselves often know Instagram is not good for them," says Crouse, "but they keep coming back. That's because social media is addictive." According to Derek Thompson, it's "attention alcohol. Like booze, social media seems to offer an intoxicating cocktail of dopamine, disorientation, and, for some, dependency."

Facebook has pledged to do better, and Mark Zuckerberg is now the father of girls. But, says Crouse, what's "more telling than what Silicon Valley parents say is what they do. Many of them have long known that technology can be harmful. That's why they've often banned their own children from using it."

"For Teenage Girls, Instagram Is a Cesspool" by Lindsay Crouse in *The New York Times*, October 9, 2021

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8. Recommendations for Young Adult Nonfiction

"We are truly in a golden age of YA nonfiction," says Sarah Hannah Gómez in this *School Library Journal* article. "Today's offerings prove that works about real people and events are as immersive and gripping as the best novels." Her recommendations:

Single-subject memoirs and biographies

- *Shout* by Laurie Halse Anderson, grade 8 and up
- *Apple: Skin to the Core* by Eric Gansworth, grade 7 and up
- *Passport* by Sophia Glock, grade 9 and up
- *Hurricane: My Story of Resistance* by Salvador Gómez-Colón, grade 6 and up
- *A Face for Picasso* by Ariel Henley, grade 8 and up
- *All Boys Aren't Blue: A Memoir-Manifesto* by George Johnson, grade 8 and up

- *High School* by Sara Quin and Tegan Quin, grade 9 and up
- *From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry: The Killing of Vincent Chin and the Trial That Galvanized the Asian-American Movement* by Paula Yoo, grade 8 and up

Collective Biographies

- *Girlhood: Teens Around the World in Their Own Voices* by Masuma Ahuja, grade 7 and up
- *African Icons: Ten People Who Built a Continent* by Tracey Baptiste, grade 4-8
- *Notable Native People: 50 Indigenous Leaders, Dreamers, and Changemakers from Past and Present* by Adrienne Keene, illustrated by Ciara Sana, grade 8 and up

Extrapolated Histories

- *Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts* by Rebecca Hall, illustrated by Hugo Martínez, grade 8 and up
- *And We Rise: The Civil Rights Movement in Poems* by Erica Martin, grade 7 and up

"Changing the Narrative" by Sarah Hannah Gómez in *School Library Journal*, October 2021 (Vol. 67, #10, pp. 48-50)

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 50 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education