

Marshall Memo 820

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 20, 2020

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Quotes of the Week

“Throughout my childhood, I couldn’t *wait* to grow up. I wanted to be a grownup. Being a child was just not working for me. I didn’t understand little kids. ‘Let’s play! Let’s hit each other!’ *Why do you want to do that?* Don’t you want to stay indoors where it’s safe, and read and draw?”

Cartoonist Roz Chast, quoted in “Sad Buildings in Brooklyn” by Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker*, December 30, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2TD4Fve>

“Today in America the biggest problem with education is not that it is bad. It is that it variable. In hundreds of thousands of classrooms in America, students are getting an education that is as good as any in the world. But in hundreds of thousands of others, they are not.”

Dylan Wiliam (see item #1)

“The big mistake we have made in the United States, and indeed in many other countries, is to assume that if we want students to be able to think, then our curriculum should give our students lots of practice in thinking. This is a mistake because what our students need is more to think *with*.”

Dylan Wiliam (*ibid.*)

“Background knowledge of a topic is the most significant driver of reading comprehension.”

Robert Pondiscio (see item #2)

“An excellent education is not just what gets taught today. It’s the cumulative effect of a coherent, cumulative, thoughtfully sequenced, and knowledge-rich curriculum that broadens and deepens over time, within and across grades... This vision is fundamentally incompatible with an approach that treats curriculum as fungible or disconnected, a series of audibles called at the line of scrimmage.”

Robert Pondiscio (*ibid.*)

1. Dylan Wiliam on Two Strategies That Really Work in Schools

“Today in America,” says assessment guru Dylan Wiliam in his latest book, “the biggest problem with education is not that it is bad. It is that it variable. In hundreds of thousands of classrooms in America, students are getting an education that is as good as any in the world. But in hundreds of thousands of others, they are not.” Wiliam argues that these recent initiatives in U.S. schools are not the best ways to solve the problem of variability:

- Recruiting “smarter” people as teachers (they aren’t necessarily effective with kids);
- Focusing on firing “bad” teachers (although of course the very worst need to go);
- Using infrequent classroom observations (“Good teachers have bad days and bad teachers have good days,” says Wiliam);
- Using test scores to evaluate teachers (“Every teacher builds on the foundations laid by those who taught their students previously.”);
- Merit pay for the “best” teachers (there aren’t reliable ways to identify them);
- Reducing class size (except in the lower grades, if effective teachers are available);
- Copying the practices of other countries (many of their ideas don’t travel well);
- Expanding school choice (there are several challenges and scaling up is problematic).

So what does work? Wiliam believes two approaches will bring more good teaching to more students more of the time, with particular benefits for the least advantaged:

- *A knowledge-rich curriculum* – Students enter school with significant differences in vocabulary, processing power, and working memory. However, says Wiliam, “The differences in people’s intelligence and differences in the capacities of their short-term working memories (which undoubtedly exist) matter very little if they have the same extensive knowledge. Education can’t do much for intelligence or working memory, but it can have a massive impact on long-term memory.” That’s why a curriculum rich in knowledge closes achievement gaps.

“The big mistake we have made in the United States, and indeed in many other countries,” Wiliam continues, “is to assume that if we want students to be able to think, then our curriculum should give our students lots of practice in thinking. This is a mistake because what our students need is more to think *with*. The main purpose of curriculum is to build up the content of long-term memory so that when students are asked to think, they are able to think in more powerful ways because what is in their long-term memories makes their short-term memories more powerful. That is why curriculum matters.”

Wiliam lists these desiderata for a high-quality curriculum: (a) it’s well aligned with the aims of K-12 education; (b) it has a carefully structured sequence for building knowledge (for example, it’s easier for students to understand how to find the area of a triangle if they’ve first

learned how to find the area of a parallelogram); (c) the pacing of knowledge acquisition avoids overloading short-term memory; (d) material is distributed over weeks, months, and years with review built in; and (e) students have frequent opportunities for self-testing so knowledge is firmly embedded in long-term memory.

• *Improving the teachers we have* – “Schools and districts need to focus on the idea that all teachers need to get better,” says Wiliam, “not because they’re not good enough but because they can be even better. Moving the focus from evaluation to improvement also changes working relationships in a building. Where teachers are in competition, either because they are seeking scarce bonuses or to avoid sanctions, then they are unlikely to help each other. In contrast, when it is expected that all teachers improve, cooperation is encouraged and even expected.”

Teacher teamwork has the greatest potential to improve teaching and learning, says Wiliam, so the most important job of school leaders is fostering a professional environment that supports frequent team collaboration. Foundational conditions include: order and discipline; addressing teachers’ basic concerns; time and resources for professional development; a culture of trust and respect; a “press” for student achievement; and reorienting teacher evaluation to focus on improving instructional practices.

For teacher team meetings to have the greatest benefit for students, Wiliam believes they need to be tightly structured and spend most of the time looking at evidence of student learning (from classroom assessments or samples of student work). He and his colleagues have developed the following steps for once-a-month 75-minute team meetings (with one member serving as timekeeper and facilitator). The focus is always on looking at student work and assessment evidence and thinking of the best ways to adapt instruction to meet students’ needs in real time. Here’s the structure:

- The teacher responsible for running the meeting outlines the meeting’s aims, including the student learning intentions and criteria for success (5 minutes).
- The team does a warm-up activity, perhaps sharing something a student said that made them smile, something a colleague did to support their work, something they’re looking forward to, or something that’s bugging them (5 minutes).
- Each teacher reports on an instructional change they promised to try in their classrooms at the previous meeting with evidence of how it went, and colleagues share ideas and suggestions (25 minutes).
- The team discusses a new article, book chapter, or video on formative assessment (20 minutes).
- Each teacher shares a classroom practice they are going to implement over the coming month (15 minutes).
- The team wraps up by reviewing whether the meeting’s goals were met – and if not, what action needs to be taken (5 minutes).

Wiliam says this protocol has been dramatically successful in improving teaching and learning in hundreds of schools across the U.S.

Educators often voice two concerns about structuring team meetings this way. First, will having the same sequence be monotonous? Not so, says Wiliam; a familiar structure with different content keeps things on track and saves time that might be taken up repeatedly inventing new structures. Second, don't teachers need an outside facilitator to stay on task? "Our experience," says Wiliam, "is that teachers really can do it for themselves." He points to three reasons for not depending on teacher coaches as facilitators: (a) pulling good teachers out of the classroom to serve as coaches often results in a net loss of a school's instructional capacity; (b) coaching positions are often the first to be cut in hard budget times; and (c) coaches don't always have credibility. "Even when teachers come from the district," says Wiliam, "as soon as they stop teaching and become coaches, many teachers regard the coaches as being out of touch with the realities of teaching."

What makes this meeting structure so successful? First, says Wiliam, "focusing on classroom assessment seems to be a smart place to begin the conversation with teachers... All teachers in America would probably agree that it is part of their day job to find out whether students have learned what they have been taught." Second, research points to the power of formative (on-the-spot) assessments to improve teaching and learning by adjusting instruction minute-by-minute and day-by-day, and that is always the heart of these teacher meetings. And third, says Wiliam, "when we develop teachers' ability to use real-time assessment to adapt their instruction to their students' learning needs, those skills can be applied in all their teaching."

Boosting these skills involves changing teachers' daily practice, which can be challenging. Wiliam believes this "is most likely to be achieved through regular meetings where teachers promise to their peers what they are going to try out in their classrooms and are held accountable for making those changes."

Creating the Schools Our Children Need by Dylan Wiliam (Learning Sciences International, 2018); Wiliam can be reached at dylanwiliam@mac.com.

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2. Another Problem with Random Lesson Plans from the Internet

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Robert Pondiscio comments on the recent Fordham Institute report (summarized in Memo 816), which found that the "supplemental materials bazaar" of online curriculum materials often provides mediocre worksheets and lesson plans that are poorly aligned to standards. The fact that almost all teachers are scouring Pinterest and Google for ideas is a sign of a deeper problem, says Pondiscio. It means that teachers (a) don't find a lot of the published curriculum materials supplied by schools very engaging for their varied students; (b) see their job as teaching a curriculum of content-neutral *skills* (like finding the main idea and critical thinking), and (c) regard *knowledge* as "a mere delivery mechanism, just a ploy to keep students' attention while they practice and master a 'skill.'"

"But cognitive skills are not content-neutral," Pondiscio says; "they are 'domain-specific.' Background knowledge of a topic is the most significant driver of reading

comprehension. Neither is it possible to train students to be all-purpose critical thinkers or problem solvers. These modes of thinking are intertwined with content knowledge... When teachers are encouraged to view every lesson as a one-off, either explicitly or tacitly, curricular coherence is lost. This is how kids wind up studying the environment multiple times and the Bill of Rights never.

“Coherence matters and must be attended to,” Pondiscio concludes. “An excellent education is not just what gets taught today. It’s the cumulative effect of a coherent, cumulative, thoughtfully sequenced, and knowledge-rich curriculum that broadens and deepens over time, within and across grades... This vision is fundamentally incompatible with an approach that treats curriculum as fungible or disconnected, a series of audibles called at the line of scrimmage.”

“Digging in the Dirt for Quality Curriculum” by Robert Pondiscio in *The Education Gadfly*, January 15, 2020 (Volume 20, #2), <https://bit.ly/2uj1Dl4>
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3. Restorative Justice: Avoiding Mistakes and Implementing It Well

In this National Education Policy Center report, Anne Gregory (Rutgers University) and Katherine Evans (Eastern Mennonite University) report on the implementation of restorative justice in K-12 schools. This initiative has pushed back on the “zero tolerance” emphasis of the late 1990s and early 2000s, which often involved suspending and expelling students for non-safety-threatening behaviors. Restorative justice aims to “meet the needs of those harmed, to repair the harm, and to restore relationships for all affected by an incident.” Many schools implementing restorative justice report positive results: a good reception by students and staff, improvements in school climate, fewer suspensions, and a narrowing of racial disparities in exclusionary discipline.

But there have been implementation “stumbles,” say Gregory and Evans: some teachers say students aren’t being held accountable for misconduct and that administrators aren’t supporting teachers who are struggling with student behavior. The authors identify five mistakes that have led to less-than-effective implementation of restorative justice:

- Top-down district-level mandates leading to poor understanding of the program’s basic principles and reluctant compliance – or active resistance;
- An incomplete model emphasizing student participation in classroom circles and conferences without broader implementation outside the classroom;
- Not explicitly addressing racial issues underlying student discipline;
- Using a “train and hope” approach, without the follow-up coaching and support needed to ensure thoughtful implementation;
- Not providing enough resources and time.

Based on their study, Gregory and Evans make the following recommendations for successful implementation of restorative justice:

- *Adopt a “principle-based, comprehensive, and equity-oriented” approach.* This involves: (a) being true to the underlying values of restorative justice – respect, dignity, and mutual concern for all members of the community – and a commitment to the value of each person; (b) in addition to what students do, focusing on staff behaviors, including: pedagogical choices, curriculum decisions, policies and procedures, and how schoolwide decisions are made; and (c) naming discipline disproportionalities by race, ethnicity, religion, social class, language, culture, sexuality, and gender expression. “Sole focus on a reduction in suspensions and expulsions will not address the systemic and structural inequalities that impact students’ social, emotional, and academic well-being,” say Gregory and Evans.

- *Implement restorative justice with a strategic, long-term focus.* This involves: (a) fine-tuning the program to the particular strengths and needs of the school and district, and being adaptive over time; (b) strategically rolling out restorative justice to maximize buy-in and respond to educators’ and families’ questions and critiques; and (c) including long-term professional development and capacity-building that accounts for staff turnover.

- *Evaluating implementation over a minimum of 3-5 years.* This involves: (a) learning from implementation errors in other districts; (b) using a mixed-methods approach that includes all stakeholders; and (c) remaining true to basic principles of relationship building, repairing harm, and promoting justice and equity.

“The Starts and Stumbles of Restorative Justice in Education: Where Do We Go from Here?” by Anne Gregory and Katherine Evans in a National Education Policy Center report, January 2020, <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/restorative-justice>; the authors can be reached at annegreg@gsapp.rutgers.edu and kathy.evans@emu.edu.

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4. Are Asians Smarter at Math?

In this *Harvard Educational Review* article, Niral Shah (University of Washington) asks why the common belief that Asians are good at math is problematic. “After all, what could be harmful about being positioned as *good* at something?” he asks. “Further, being positioned as mathematically capable seems especially beneficial, given how mathematics is positioned as a gatekeeper to success in a STEM-driven global economy.”

Actually, it is a problem, says Shah, and for him it’s personal. In elementary school, he was subject to racist bullying. Good at math, he was often tracked into advanced classes. When teachers handed back a test paper with a good grade, Shah tucked it away, knowing that high marks would “ignite the ire of certain classmates, and anti-South Asian racism would follow me onto the playground.”

There’s a long history behind such experiences. In the mid-1700s, Asians were described by the German scientist Johann Blumenbach as “mongoloid” – intellectually inferior to Caucasians; there are echoes of this stereotype in the pejorative adjective that is sometimes used for people with Down syndrome. During the 1800s, many Americans saw Asian immigrants as a “national threat,” leading to legislation restricting entry from certain countries.

This illusory threat became real during World War II (the “yellow peril”), leading to the unjust internment of Japanese-Americans.

In the 1950s, the “model minority” narrative emerged, with Asians seen as possessing the attributes of diligence, family values, respect for education, and self-sufficiency. This was reinforced as immigration laws (especially the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act) gave specific preference to highly educated professionals with specialized skills, and, says Shah, an “intentionally curated, higher socioeconomic demographic began to attend elite educational institutions and accumulate wealth.” In addition, he says, there was self-selection of Asian-Americans into math-intensive careers in response to racist exclusion from nontechnical fields.

During the Civil Rights movement, whites sometimes compared Asian Americans favorably to the protestors, says Shah: “obedient and politically quiescent, as a rebuke to ‘unruly’ non-Asians of color. In other words, Asians are ‘good’ minorities because they don’t cause trouble – why can’t *you* be more like them?... The weaponizing of Asian people as a ‘solution’ against other people of color unmasks the ‘model minority’ discourse as false praise designed to uphold white supremacy.” The contrast between these supposed Asian qualities – quiet, disciplined, apolitical – with stereotypical white American traits (outspoken, assertive) positioned Asians as “forever foreigners” who were subtly threatening and would never achieve full personhood. “Thus,” Shah concludes, “the centuries-old discourses of subpersonhood and national threat have not disappeared.”

Back to the belief that Asians are innately good at math: it’s simply not true, says Shah. “Every human being has the capacity for mathematical problem solving.” So why is the narrative so widely accepted? With over 4 billion people in Asia and 21 million Asian Americans, “the idea that all or most of these people are mathematical savants is patently absurd,” he says. “And further, given that race is a fabricated social construction (the opposite of a biological trait), why should we expect mathematical ability to align so neatly with one racial group and not others?”

Okay, but what about the test scores? True, the seven top-scoring nations on the 2015 PISA tests were Asian – but so were those ranked 22nd, 45th, 56th, and 66th (out of 73 countries). And how about this: four of the ten top-performing nations on the 2015 PISA reading tests were in Asia – so why isn’t there a racial narrative about Asians being innately good at reading? A closer analysis shows that high test scores in countries like Singapore and South Korea are the result of systemic investments in teacher training and high-quality curriculum – the lack of which explains why other Asian nations haven’t done as well.

Within the U.S., Asian student achievement in math is high, but studies show lots of variation within Asian economic, cultural, and immigration-based subgroups, putting the lie to the race-based stereotype. Shah also disposes of Malcolm Gladwell’s hypothesis that Asian mathematical prowess is explained by the fact that the painstaking process of growing rice built the habits of mind needed for mathematical performance: What about the rice-growing nations with low scores? asks Shah. And the idea that Asian number systems make counting and computation easier? Again, what about variations among Asian nations? “The truth,” Shah

concludes, “is that in places where Asian people are excelling in mathematics, the most plausible explanations are social and political.”

But even if it’s untrue, what is the harm in believing that Asians are better at math? Shah lists four problems:

- The narrative can place undue pressure on Asians to perform at a very high level.
- It can limit Asian people’s educational and employment prospects and constrain the identities they can develop.
- It can lead educators and policymakers to assume that Asians are all doing fine in STEM fields and don’t need help.
- It harms non-Asians of color through invidious comparison to the “model minority.”

But the most important harm, Shah believes, is the narrative’s threat to Asian personhood. In the broader human context, being good at mathematics is not such a good thing. Specifically:

- Math can be seen as elitist and exotic, and mathematicians as antisocial and deviant.
- School mathematics can be seen as devoid of creativity and emotion.
- Asians can be seen as “mongoloid androids” – smart but not capable of reason, technical but not creative.

“Since its conception,” Shah concludes, “race has always been fundamentally about personhood, who qualifies as a full human being and who does not.” The racially based “compliment” about mathematical ability threatens Asians’ claim to full personhood. “The problem for all people of color is deviance; either too much or too little, they never seem to have just the right amount of the ‘right stuff’ to qualify as human beings.”

“‘Asians Are Good at Math’ Is Not a Compliment: STEM Success as a Threat to Personhood” by Niral Shah in *Harvard Educational Review*, Winter 2019 (Vol. 89, #4, pp. 661-686), <https://bit.ly/3auXtra>; Shah can be reached at niral@uw.edu.

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5. Sixth Graders Use Quick Writes to Explore Social Justice

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Canadian educators Sarah Driessens (Lakehead University) and Michelann Parr (Nipissing University) report on their six-month observation of how a teacher used quick writes to get her 27 sixth graders exploring social justice issues. The teacher regularly presented a provocative quote, image, piece of writing, video, or painting and asked students to briefly write about it in their notebooks, followed by a class discussion and often a more-extensive writing project. An example: *What do you make of Martin Luther King Jr.’s statement, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”*

Quick writes were an important part of the teacher’s pedagogy, say Driessens and Parr, “allowing students to get their ideas down in a low-risk, nonthreatening way... as a rehearsal for oral discussions about tricky issues.” Students were told not to worry about grammar, spelling, or punctuation – just get down in writing what came to mind without interruption. “Engaging students through quick writes,” say the authors, “offers a low-risk way to help combat potential insecurities around writing, develop strategies for writing, and strengthen

students' confidence as writers. Not only do students begin to see the power of their voices, but quick writes may also help students negotiate a sense of self and world as they come to terms with the complexities of social life."

The teacher's broader agenda was developing critical literacy, which included learning to question and challenge issues related to privilege, power, and inequity; envisioning a fairer, freer, more equal and democratic world; considering multiple viewpoints; and getting involved in promoting social justice. The following excerpts from students' quick-write responses to the Martin Luther King Jr. quote show how this played out:

- *Being rude or mean back doesn't solve anything.*
- *2 wrongs have never made a right and they never will.*
- *Show care and empathy.*
- *You can't make a negative number like -3 a positive by adding more negative numbers. You need something positive to make that number positive.*
- *If you bullied them back you would only create more bullying and more hate.*
- *If something is going on in your life that is sad people should cheer you up and take away the darkness with light and you should do the same.*

When students finished their quick writes, the teacher pushed their thinking with three books about King's life, and then asked them to write an essay on their dream for a better world and how to make it a reality. For more than a week, students worked on drafting and revising their paragraphs, many exploring themes of forgiveness, equality, and helping others.

"Invitations to write," conclude Driessens and Parr, "grounded in critical literacy, provide agency to students by cultivating a safe space for them to discuss their passions, concerns, and dreams for a better world. They also demonstrate how teachers can carefully craft instructional time in an effort to cultivate students' critical minds while strengthening their literacy skills... Through the support of a committed, dedicated, indefatigable teacher, this group of sixth graders developed and emerged as critically literate beings."

"Rewriting the Wor(1)d: Quick Writes as a Space for Critical Literacy" by Sarah Driessens and Michelann Parr in *The Reading Teacher*, January/February 2020 (Vol. 73, #4, pp. 415-426), <https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/trtr.1862>; the authors can be reached at sdriessn@lakeheadu.ca and michelap@nipissingu.ca.

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6. Should Students Lead IEP Meetings?

In this article in *School Administrator*, Lynda Van Kuren describes a third grader with multiple disabilities standing in front of his IEP team and telling about his strengths and weaknesses. This experience, said the boy's mother, gave him a better understanding of how he learns and built his self-efficacy as he took an active part in formulating his learning plan. Student involvement in special education meetings (always age- and disability-appropriate) makes it more likely that the student will make full use of accommodations (like taking a break during a high-stakes assessment) and will advocate for changes when they are warranted. In addition, student-led IEP meetings foster self-determination, which is associated with positive

outcomes for students with disabilities.

Jennifer O'Malley, a California district special education director, sees another advantage: "The difference we've seen with student participation in IEP meetings, and especially student-facilitated IEP meetings, is that even when there is a disagreement, there's a higher rate of efficacy among team members. There's robust discussion, people have been heard, and they aren't leaving with animosity." There are also benefits for teachers, according to upstate New York special education director Rocco Nalli: "Hearing the voice of the student and using that information helps teachers have a better understanding of their kids and ensures the students get the most from the supports we provide." He continued, "After the first year, we were sold. It's a game-changer. When the student leads the IEP meeting, everything is centered around the student. Both the school and the parents listen to the child, and we're all proud to see how phenomenally well students do with this process."

For student-led conferences to have maximum impact, there needs to be good orientation and training of educators, students, and parents up front and follow-up afterward. "If we stop with the meeting," says Catherine Fowler of the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, "we're losing the point. Student-led IEP meetings are a tangible, meaningful way to develop critically important skills. But if all we do is the student-led IEP meeting, we miss an opportunity. It has to fit within the broader school climate that supports students in decision making in many different ways."

"Students Directing Individualized Education Programs" by Lynda Van Kuren in *School Administrator*, January 2020 (Vol. 77, #1, pp. 35-39), no e-link available; Van Kuren can be reached at Lvankuren4@gmail.com.

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7. Short Item:

A website to build critical thinking about online content – The Civic Online Reasoning website <https://cor.stanford.edu> has free resources to help develop students' ability to look critically at material on the Internet.

"Civil Online Reasoning" website. If you have questions, e-mail Sam Wineburg at wineburg@stanford.edu.

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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 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
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Essential Teacher
Exceptional Children
Go Teach
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
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Education Gadfly
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 Magazine