Marshall Memo 814

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 2, 2019

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Quotes of the Week

"Instead of asking, 'Does anybody have any questions?', I now say, 'Ask me a question' or – better still – 'Ask me two questions.' This seems to elicit a greater frequency and quality of questions than my previous attempt."

Craig Barton in *The ResearchED Guide to Education Myths* (John Catt, 2019, p. 15)

"The video game model contains replicable elements – goal buy-in, achievable challenge, frequent assessment of progress – that can be applied in the classroom to promote engaged attention, sustained effort, and perseverance."

Jay McTighe and Judy Willis in *Understanding by Design Meets Neuroscience* (ASCD, 2019, p. 20)

"Grades help enhance achievement and foster learning progress *only* when they are paired with individualized comments that offer guidance and direction for improvement."

Thomas Guskey (see item #1)

"Citizenship isn't hypothetical, emanating from a knowledge base derived from instruction; it's lived; experienced. Student-centeredness needs to be woven in."

Tom Sherrington (see item #2)

"With nearly 35 million children across the country at risk for toxic stress, what if the person giving the biggest daily dose of healing treatment for toxic stress isn't a doctor or a therapist, but a teacher?"

Jim Hickman and Kathy Higgins (see item #4)

1. Thomas Guskey on Grades and Comments

"Are comments on student work superior to grades?" asks assessment guru Thomas Guskey (University of Louisville/University of Kentucky) in this article in *Phi Delta Kappan*. "It depends… The research on this issue is far more complicated and more highly nuanced than most writers acknowledge." Guskey cites several studies that provide helpful guidance for K-12 educators.

• *A 1958 study by psychologist Ellis Page* – Secondary-school teachers gave numerical scores on their students' assessments and then converted the scores into A, B, C, D, F grades. Three randomly-selected groups of students then got their papers back with:

- Numerical and letter grades only;
- Numerical, letter grades, and standard comments for each grade: A: Excellent! Keep it up. B: Good work. Keep at it. C: Perhaps try to do still better? D: Let's bring this up. and F: Let's raise this grade!
- Numerical score, letter grade, and individual comments based on each teacher's personal reactions and instructional priorities.

Page compared the impact of these three approaches by looking at how students did on their very next assessment. Here's what he found: students in the first group did no better; students in the second group did significantly better than those in the first; and students in the third group did better still. The conclusion (which has been confirmed by subsequent studies): grades are helpful only if they're accompanied by teachers' comments.

What's striking about this study is that the standard, boilerplate comments given to the second group of students had such a positive impact. The comments involved very little work for teachers, but made almost as much difference as the much more time-consuming individualized comments given to the third group of students. Guskey believes a little-recognized insight from Page's study is the *nature* of the standard comments. First, each of these seemingly robotic comments communicated the teacher's high expectations and the importance of students' continued effort. Second, all the comments made clear that the teacher was on students' side and willing to partner with them to improve. Instead of saying *You must raise this grade*, the comment was *Let's raise this grade!* – conveying, *I'm with you in this, we can do it!* In other words, says Guskey, "The message teachers communicate in their comments may be what matters most."

• *Benjamin Bloom's mastery learning* – In the late 1960s and 1970s, Bloom promoted the idea that on formative assessments, students should receive a grade of *Mastery* or *Not Mastery*. Bloom defined Mastery as the clearly described level of performance that teachers

believe would deserve an A, which then becomes the standard of mastery for *all* students. Students scoring below Mastery on formative assessments are in a temporary state, *not there yet,* and should receive diagnostic and prescriptive instruction from the teacher and additional chances to demonstrate mastery. Bloom believed that with sufficient time and skillful corrective instruction, 95 percent of students can achieve Mastery. In short, Bloom believed in comments to guide under-par performance to mastery grades, guided by clear expectations up front.

• *Ruth Butler's 1988 study* – Fifth and sixth graders took a test and were then divided into three groups, each receiving a different type of feedback:

- Grades from 40 to 99 based on students' relative standing in the class (norm-referenced or competitive grades);
- Individual comments on students' performance on the objective (criterion-referenced or task-focused);
- Both competitive grades and task-oriented individual comments.

The study found that students in the second group did best, indicating that competitive grading is not an effective practice, and task-focused comments can boost learning by giving students specific information on their performance and suggestions for improvement. What's interesting is that the competitive-grades approach *benefited* high-performing students, maintaining their interest and motivation, while undermining the interest and motivation of low-performing students.

Guskey adds that the nature of the comments is the key factor. In Butler's study, they were task-oriented and instructionally helpful. Additional research by John Hattie and Helen Timperley reinforces the idea that it's the *quality, nature, and content* of teachers' comments that make a difference.

• *Guskey's conclusions* – First, he says, grades – whether they are letters, numbers, symbols, words, or phrases – are not inherently good or bad: "They are simply labels attached to different levels of student performance that describe in an abbreviated fashion how well students performed."

Second, grades should always be based on learning criteria that the teacher has clearly spelled out. Grades that compare students to their peers do not move learning forward. In fact, says Guskey, "Such competition is detrimental to relationships between students and has profound negative effects on the motivation of low-ranked students, as the results from the Butler (1988) study clearly show."

Third, assessments must be well-designed, meaningful, and authentic, and grades should reliably and accurately measure the learning goals and provide useful information to guide teachers and students to improve learning.

Fourth, grades by themselves are not helpful. "Grades help enhance achievement and foster learning progress," says Guskey, "*only* when they are paired with individualized comments that offer guidance and direction for improvement." And of course those comments must be followed up with time and support for students to improve their work.

Fifth, students and families must understand that grades don't reflect *who* students are, but their *temporary location* on the learning journey. "Knowing where you are is essential to understanding where you need to go in order to improve," says Guskey. This metacognitive awareness also makes students better judges of their own work and increasingly self-sufficient as learners.

Finally, Guskey sums up the collective wisdom of researchers, especially Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues, on effective comments on students' tests, essays, products, performances, or demonstrations:

- Always begin with what the student did well, recognizing accomplishments or progress.
- Identify the areas that need improvement.
- Offer specific guidance on steps the student needs to take to meet the learning criteria.
- Communicate confidence in the student's ability to achieve at the highest level.

"Grades Versus Comments: Research on Student Feedback" by Thomas Guskey in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2019 (Vol. 101, #3, pp. 42-47), available at https://bit.ly/2P3DSnW for PDK members, or for purchase; Guskey can be reached at guskey@uky.edu.

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2. Teacher-Led versus Student-Centered Classrooms: Either-Or?

In this chapter in *The ResearchED Guide to Education Myths*, British educator/writer Tom Sherrington addresses the widespread belief that teacher-led instruction and student-centered learning are opposites. Looking at schools in this way, one polarity is command and control: quiet classrooms; the teacher is responsible for what students need to learn; instruction is focused on subject-area content; failure is seen as a bad thing; learning is shallow and memorized. On the other side is student engagement and empowerment: classrooms are busy, even chaotic; learners are self-aware and advocate for their own needs; teachers lead, coach, and inspire learners to find passion in the subject matter; failure is recognized as a powerful learning moment; learning is deep and passionate.

Implicit in the second description is a sharp critique of traditional, teacher-led instruction, but there's plenty of criticism on the other side: students don't know enough about the curriculum to make good choices about what to learn; the opportunity costs of inquiry and problem-based learning are too high; student agency is not necessary or relevant in the classroom; and student group work and projects are inherently low-level and ineffective, with students acquiring misconceptions or incomplete and disorganized learning.

Proponents of these opposing camps tend to declare, "It is clear that…" and "The evidence almost uniformly supports…" In this dichotomy, says Sherrington, "the opposition is explicit, unequivocal – and utterly ludicrous… In reality, in a school curriculum that is rich and broad, leading to deep learning, both teacher-led learning and student-centeredness will be woven together, blended and sequenced, integrated in a proportionate manner." He identifies the common ground by posing three questions:

• *When is teacher-led instruction most and least effective?* Novice learners need firm teacher guidance, says Sherrington, while students who have mastered the basics can work

with less explicit guidance. Teacher scaffolding can make projects and group work effective learning vehicles. And good teachers gradually taper off the amount of structure and guidance they give students as they become more proficient and independent.

• *What is the role of student engagement in teacher-led instruction?* "Teachers cannot be said to have undertaken successful instruction unless their students, as individuals, have secured successful learning," says Sherrington, "and this requires their active involvement, their mental engagement, their conscious effort, and active schema-building… Essentially, effective instruction depends on teachers being guided by their students' responses; they will adapt, adjust, push on, re-teach, provide more supports, take scaffolds away, give more or less feedback, follow different lines of reasoning – all driven by students."

Checking for understanding and fine-tuning instruction in real time is at the heart of good teaching, and is entirely compatible with instruction where the teacher is "in charge." The ultimate goal, after all, is students who can learn and function on their own – but it's a myth that independence will emerge in most students without strong and thoughtful teacher guidance. "Teacher-led instruction," says Sherrington, "formulated with student thinking at its core, is vital to the process – not exclusively, but often predominantly."

• *Where is the middle ground?* Sherrington believes that every curriculum unit should include an artful blend of teacher-led and student-centered instructional strategies. Some examples:

- *Collaborative learning* – Learning is social, and students benefit from opportunities to work together, airing their ideas, testing hypotheses, and assessing each other's learning. With teacher structuring and active monitoring, small-group and pair work can be highly productive, "not as vehicles for making discoveries," says Sherrington, "but as a means of practicing recently learned content and skills."
- *Open-ended tasks and projects* – A few times each year, students can benefit enormously from producing a piece of extended writing or engaging in a learning task where the outcome is not predetermined. The key, says Sherrington, is the teacher modeling some elements, determining success criteria, giving feedback, and providing some direct instruction.
- *Co-construction* – Over time, as students gain proficiency and confidence, Sherrington believes students should increasingly make decisions about their learning. "When I hear teachers suggest that students can't really guide their learning," he says, "because how could they know enough to do so? – I almost feel sorry for them because it suggests they've never met the kind of students that I have who most certainly could. You only have to reflect on your own education to consider when, as a teenager growing up, you started to form legitimate academic interests and preferences; you started asking questions that you wanted answers to; you felt ready to make choices about what to study." Again, the key is teacher standard-setting, guidance, nudging, directing, and monitoring.
- *Education for citizenship* – There's certainly a need for direct instruction about government and civics, says Sherrington, but "citizenship is something you do; it's not

just something you learn about… If students don't develop the sense that their voice matters at school, how are they going to find their voice as citizens in the wider world where the stakes are much higher? Citizenship isn't hypothetical, emanating from a knowledge base derived from instruction; it's lived; experienced. Student-centeredness needs to be woven in." And that means students debating, expressing opinions, presenting ideas, and organizing themselves and others.

"Myth: Teacher-Led Instruction and Student-Centered Learning Are Opposites" by Tom Sherrington in *The ResearchED Guide to Education Myths* (John Catt, 2019, p. 71-82)

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3. What Makes a Great Team?

In their new book, *Nine Lies About Work* (subtitled "A Freethinking Leader's Guide to the Real World"), Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall report what they learned questioning hundreds of people about their workplace teams. Eight statements consistently described teams that were productive and innovative and had high customer satisfaction, low voluntary turnover, and few lost work days:

- I am really enthusiastic about the mission of my organization.
- At work, I clearly understand what is expected of me.
- In my team, I am surrounded by people who share my values.
- I have the chance to use my strengths every day at work.
- My teammates have my back.
- I know I will be recognized for excellent work.
- I have great confidence in my organization's future.
- In my work, I am always challenged to grow.

Buckingham and Goodall also noticed that leaders in highly successful organizations had regular check-in meetings with their people, asking two simple questions:

- What are your priorities for this week?
- How can I help?

Nine Lies About Work by Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall (Harvard Business Review Press, 2019, pp. 18-19)

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4. Trauma-Informed Schooling

In this article in *Education Week*, Jim Hickman (Center for Youth Wellness) and Kathy Higgins (Alliance for a Healthier Generation) say that a lot of students' restlessness and acting-out behavior in classrooms stems from highly disturbing experiences at home: abuse, neglect, abandonment, divorce, witnessing violence, parental addiction, and more. Students with toxic stress have abnormal levels of certain hormones, which changes brain architecture and makes it more difficult to "do school." Toxic stress can also lead to asthma and diabetes and, later in life, heart disease and cancer.

"But the science also tells us that two things are clear," say Hickman and Higgins: "Early intervention improves outcomes, and safe, stable, nurturing relationships can be healing for children. With nearly 35 million children across the country at risk for toxic stress, what if the person giving the biggest daily dose of healing treatment for toxic stress isn't a doctor or a therapist, but a teacher?"

Fortunately, children's brains are highly malleable and certain low- and no-cost school conditions can "rewire" students' brains for better human connections and feelings of trust and security. (Of course in some situations, traumatic events at home require immediate intervention.)

• *Sensitize all adults in the school*. "Trauma-informed teaching is less about following a checklist than adopting a new way of doing business as a school," say Hickman and Higgins. Shared values include safety, trust, collaboration, choice, empowerment, and equity.

• *Nurture long-term, secure relationships with students*. These support academic, cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development and help overcome trauma.

• *Emphasize belonging and safety*. Something as simple as greeting students at the door every day helps develop these feelings.

• *Carve out one-on-one time*. A few moments of private time with a teacher or counselor communicates caring and soothes students.

• *Create "safe" corners in classrooms*. There kids can take a break and regroup, which is especially important for those who are frequently triggered to a fight-or-flight reaction.

• *Be predictable*. This means sticking to the daily schedule – and also adults' smiles and calm and consistent vocal rhythms.

• *Attend to nutrition and movement*. "Study after study shows that healthy students perform better on tests, attend school more often, and behave better in class," say Hickman and Higgins. Schools can make a big contribution by providing healthy food and regular recess and physical education classes.

• *Prompt empathetic verbal interactions*. Signs on classroom walls can encourage "talk moves" like *What do you think?* and *I heard you say X – can you explain that?*

• *Encourage curiosity*. Getting students to use stems like *I wonder…* and *I notice…* helps engage them with others and reveals gaps in their knowledge and relationships.

• *Teach and model social-emotional skills*. Most SEL programs include ways that students can name emotions, calm themselves, work out conflicts, and practice mindfulness.

"10 Simple Steps for Reducing Toxic Stress in the Classroom" by Jim Hickman and Kathy Higgins in *Education Week*, November 27, 2019 (Vol. 39, #14, p. 19), https://bit.ly/2LaVjBS; Hickman can be reached at info@centerforyouthwellness.org.

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5. An Analysis of Adolescent Stress

In this *Phi Delta Kappan* interview conducted by editor Rafael Heller, developmental psychologist Emma Adam (Northwestern University) says that middle and high schools need to do more to help students manage and reduce stress in their lives. Adam makes several

points:

• Students' classroom performance in school is profoundly influenced by out-of-school factors, especially growing up in a dysfunctional home and/or in poverty.

• Sleep is a big issue for adolescents: during-the-day stress degrades the quality of sleep. In addition, they wake up with less energy for school, which makes school more stressful – which keeps them from sleeping well the next night.

• Social exclusion, amped up by social media, has a major impact on teens' emotional state, sleep, health, mood, and attention. "That's especially true for students of color," says Adam, "who often go through the entire day, every day, with their cortisol levels on simmer, constantly on alert for microaggressions, discrimination, and other threats."

• The stress of taking tests has a significant impact on test scores, especially for students who already have an elevated level of tension. Researchers found that students with especially low levels of cortisol also did poorly on tests. Those who performed best had a Goldilocks level of arousal – not too low, not too high. "The research evidence in this area," says Adam, "ought to cast serious doubt on the assumption that tests are accurate measures of student knowledge and achievement."

• It's urgent that schools take adolescent stress seriously and direct struggling students to appropriate services, which are often available in the school and community.

"Stress Gets Under Your Skin: A Conversation with Emma K. Adam" by Rafael Heller in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2019 (Vol. 101, #3, pp. 32-36), available to PDK members or for purchase at https://bit.ly/2YgBK0s; Adam can be reached at ek-adam@northwestern.edu.

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6. The Impact of Racial Attitudes and Beliefs in Schools

"As the racial/ethnic makeup of the U.S. student population becomes increasingly diverse, the teaching force has remained primarily white," say David Quinn and Ashley Stewart in this *Elementary School Journal* article. In 2012, 82 percent of public school teachers were non-Hispanic white while 49 percent of students were black and brown. Quinn and Stewart note that many white educators are uncomfortable discussing race in their classrooms, but are increasingly called upon to do so because race has been a hot topic in recent years, and incidents of racial harassment in schools have spiked since 2016. "Students are coming to school with issues on their minds," say Quinn and Stewart, "such as the empowerment of white supremacists, disproportionate use of police force, and the president's denigration of immigrants of color. Teachers must have the comfort and skill required to address these issues appropriately."

The researchers analyzed the racial attitudes of white PreK-12 educators and found some reassuring news, including disbelief of some historical racial stereotypes. The study then zeroed in on racial microaggressions as an area where white educators' underlying beliefs and attitudes can cause problems. Microaggressions have been defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional,

that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group." Three examples:

• *Stereotyping* – A teacher expresses surprise that a black student scored at the Advanced level on a state test. Unconscious biases can also surface with disciplinary infractions and when referring students to advanced or "gifted" classes.

• *Racial beliefs* – A teacher tells a student who reported a racial slight that he is being overly sensitive, reflecting the teacher's belief that prejudice and racial discrimination are no longer serious problems in America. Differences in teachers' and students' beliefs can also come up in classroom discussions of affirmative action or the distinction between free speech and hate speech.

• *Affective orientation* – A white teacher doesn't acknowledge or make eye contact with students of color and the teacher's body language communicates discomfort. Quinn and Stewart found that, despite progress in expressed attitudes on racial intermarriage and integrated neighborhoods, "white educators express more social distance from minoritized groups and more collective resentment… Comfort levels in cross-racial interactions are detectable, and teachers' higher levels of comfort and feelings of closeness toward some racial groups over others will likely negatively affect relationships with students, potentially triggering stereotype threat or expectancy effects."

"Through future research," the authors conclude, "we must develop a greater understanding of how interventions can raise educators' awareness of problematic attitudes, how these attitudes affect their students, and how educators can take control of monitoring and improving their attitudes."

"Examining the Racial Attitudes of White Pre-K-12 Educators" by David Quinn and Ashley Stewart in *Elementary School Journal*, December 2019 (Vol. 120, #2, pp. 272-299), https://bit.ly/2r8eGoh; Quinn can be reached at quinnd@usc.edu.

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7. Award-Winning Nonfiction Children's Books

In this children's literature review in *Language Arts*, Mary Ann Cappiello and six colleagues list the nonfiction books recognized by the 2019 Orbis Pictus Award. See the link below for a description and the cover image of each book.

- *Between the Lines: How Ernie Barnes Went from the Football Field to the Art Gallery* by Sandra Neil Wallace, illustrated by Bryan Collier (Simon & Schuster, 2018)
- *Champion: The Comeback Tale of the American Chestnut Tree* by Sally Walker (Henry Holt, 2018)
- *Pass Go and Collect $200: The Story of How Monopoly Was Invented* by Tanya Lee Stone, illustrated by Steven Salerno (Henry Holt, 2018)
- *The Secret Kingdom: Nek Chand, a Changing India, and a Hidden World of Art* by Barb Rosenstock, illustrated by Claire Nivola (Candlewick, 2018)
- *Thirty Minutes Over Oregon: A Japanese Pilot's World War II Story* by Marc Tyler Nobleman, illustrated by Melissa Iwai (Clarion, 2018)

- *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* by Traci Sorell, illustrated by Frané Lessac (Charlesbridge, 2018)
- *Boots on the Ground: America's War in Vietnam* by Elizabeth Partridge (Viking, 2018)
- *Facing Frederick: The Life of Frederick Douglass, a Monumental American Man* by Tonya Bolden (Abrams, 2018)
- *Game Changers: The Story of Venus and Serena Williams* by Lesa Cline-Ransome, illustrated by James Ransome (Simon & Schuster, 2018)
- *Joan Procter, Dragon Doctor: The Woman Who Loved Reptiles* by Patricia Valdez, illustrated by Felicita Sala (Knopf, 2018)
- *Nothing Stopped Sophie: The Story of Unshakable Mathematician Sophie Germain* by Cheryl Bardoe, illustrated by Barbara McClintock (Little, Brown, 2018)
- *Otis and Will Discover the Deep: The Record-Setting Dive of the Bathysphere* by Barb Rosenstock, illustrated by Katherine Roy (Little, Brown, 2018)
- *Something Rotten: A Fresh Look at Roadkill* by Heather Montgomery, illustrated by Kevin O'Malley (Bloomsbury, 2018)
- *What Do You Do with a Voice Like That? The Story of Extraordinary Congresswoman Barbara Jordan* by Chris Barton, illustrated by Ekua Holmes (Beach Lane, 2018)

"Children's Literature Review: 2019 Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction" by Mary Ann Cappiello, Seemi Aziz-Raina, Amina Chaudhri, Denise Dávila, Daryl Grabarek, Jennifer Graff, and Julie Waugh in *Language Arts*, November 2019 (Vol. 97, #2, pp. 113-212), https://bit.ly/35P1T90

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8. Short Items:

a. The growth of New York City – This animated graphic shows every stage of the city's population and infrastructure growth: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6U7YFPrz6Y

"The New York City Evolution Animation" October 25, 2019

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b. A little-known fact about Central Park – In this *New York Times* article, Brent Staples describes how a 19th-century African-American village in mid-Manhattan was razed when Central Park was created.

"The Death of the Black Utopia" by Brent Staples in *The New York Times*, November 28, 2019, https://nyti.ms/2Y9THh5

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If you have feedback or suggestions, please e-mail kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 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