

Marshall Memo 1038

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
May 27, 2024

In This Issue:

1. [Concerns about incoming college students' reading and writing skills](#)
2. [Can ChatGPT accurately assess students' writing?](#)
3. [How to assess early reading: word identification or nonsense words?](#)
4. [Does Liljedahl's pedagogy have the same problems as constructivism?](#)
5. [Asphyxiation in the dorm room](#)
6. [Books about incarcerated family members](#)

Quotes of the Week

“Students are coming to college less able and less willing to read.”
Beth McMurtrie (see item #1)

“Learning happens when people have to think hard.”
Robert Coe (quoted in item #4)

“Almost any teaching method executed well is preferable to one that is executed poorly.”
Isobel Stevenson (*ibid.*)

“The students who need to do their homework don't, and the ones who do their homework are the ones who don't really need to do it... The problem, it turns out, has to do with who students perceive homework is for (the teacher) and what it is for (grades) and how this differs from the intentions of the teacher in assigning homework (for students to check their understanding).”
Peter Liljedahl in *Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics*, chapter 7

“You have some kids who are ready for algebra in fourth grade, and they should not be denied it. Others are still struggling with arithmetic in high school, and they need support.”
Pedro Noguera, quoted in [“The Algebra Problem: How Middle-School Math Became a National Flashpoint”](#) by Troy Closson in *The New York Times*, May 22, 2024

“The picture of students eagerly raising their hands to answer a question is so ingrained in our mental images of what a good classroom looks like. But eliminating this practice is one of the most important changes we could make.”
Steven Goldman in [“Better Ways to Ask – and Answer – Questions in Math Class”](#) in *Edutopia*, May 17, 2024

“Even those of us who are open to using AI in the classroom recognize that a tool capable of reducing (or eliminating) the friction that makes thinking, writing, and problem-solving

challenging is often going to be at odds with the messy and difficult process of learning... I don't assign summary and analysis because I need more summaries or analyses; I assign these projects because I want to help my students think through complex ideas and grapple with them. And I don't ask my students to write papers because the world needs more student papers; I assign papers because I want my students to go through the process of figuring out what they think. The friction is the point."

Jane Rosenzweig (Harvard College Writing Center) in ["ChatGPT Is At Odds with What Education is For"](#) in *The Boston Globe*, May 26, 2024

1. Concerns About Incoming College Students' Reading and Writing Skills

"Students are coming to college less able and less willing to read," says Beth McMurtrie in this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article. "If you design a class based on the assumption that students will do the readings, you'll get nowhere. If you make it easier, and go over what they should have read in class, students will participate. But then what are you doing, other than entertaining... like a cruise director organizing games of shuffleboard."

McMurtrie deconstructs the problem. The symptoms are students' weak vocabularies and background knowledge; limited reading stamina and ability to synthesize, summarize, and write; fragmented and distracted thinking; freezing when given challenging assignments (a 750-word essay feels long); and not seeing the point of doing much work outside of class. Why do so many students have these deficiencies? Was it having smartphones in their pockets since middle school, endless drivel on social media, reduced academic expectations during the pandemic, and facing a deeply troubling future?

We shouldn't put all the blame on Covid-19, says McMurtrie. Before that, observers noticed an increasingly transactional approach to schoolwork, with students assigned short passages rather than books, social studies and science downgraded as students prepared for high-stakes math and ELA standardized tests. "There was no room for my creative side at all in high school," said a student who studied hard and got good grades at a top-tier school in Illinois. "Reading has to be work. It has to have a grade assigned to it. I was largely deterred from reading for entertainment. I almost never read any books for fun." And there was a watering down of academic demands and loosening of deadlines, with many students getting good grades for mediocre work and heading to college unprepared for its demands – especially writing research papers.

Running parallel to this has been an increase in social isolation, loneliness, and anxiety, with many young people almost constantly on their cellphones, worrying about how their online profiles look to others, skimping on in-person interactions. When kids encounter stress

and difficulty, they lack skills and a support system. The professors McMurtrie interviewed for this article described a curious combination of idealism, anomie, and cynicism. “When asked what makes a difference,” she says, “students who have struggled with motivation often point to the same thing: having someone who is invested in their success.”

That means rigorous and meaningful work, high expectations, and relationships – in K-12 schools and college. “Students will read,” said Chris Hakala, a psychology professor at Springfield College, “if they know why they are doing it and time is taken to help them begin to develop an approach that is effective.”

[“Is This the End of Reading?”](#) by Beth McMurtrie in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 24, 2024 (Vol. 70, #19, pp. 26-35)

[Back to page one](#)

2. Can ChatGPT Accurately Grade Students’ Writing?

In this Hechinger Report Proof Points article, Jill Barshay describes a recent study by Tamara Tate (University of California/Irvine) and a seven-member research team comparing ChatGPT and human scoring of 1,800 middle- and high-school history and English essays. The researchers found that the chatbot was “roughly speaking, probably as good as an average busy teacher” and “certainly as good as an overburdened below-average teacher.” Some observations on the study:

- AI can assess students’ writing much more quickly than a secondary-school teacher, who might need as much as 50 hours to grade essays from six classes of 25 students.
- Using AI scoring, the teacher could give more writing assignments, which would give students more practice – a key factor in improving proficiency.
- Comparing AI to human scoring revealed some variation – but there’s also variation in the scores given to the same essay by teachers in different classrooms.
- That said, the researchers believe AI isn’t currently accurate and reliable enough to give grades on high-stakes assignments affecting a student’s final grade – but it’s improving.
- How helpful is AI feedback on students’ writing? If it’s just a score, students’ writing is unlikely to improve. Human scoring can look for specific areas and see trends among students, suggesting targeted instruction.
- An important variable is how much teacher training is involved in using the app. In the study, teachers just fed their students’ writing and a rubric into ChatGPT, so very little PD time was required.
- Accuracy can be improved by inputting sample essays to “train” the app around the teacher’s criteria for a high-quality essay – but this means more teacher PD.
- One idea, suggests Tate, is to use AI to grade successive drafts of an essay and challenge students to track their progress and make improvements. “We know that a lot of students aren’t doing any revision,” she says. “If we can get them to look at their paper again, that is already a win.”

“That does give me hope,” Barshay concludes, “but I’m also worried that kids will just ask ChatGPT to write the whole essay for them in the first place.”

[“AI Essay Grading Is Already As Good as an Overburdened Teacher, but Researchers Say It Needs More Work”](#) by Jill Barshay in *The Hechinger Report*, May 20, 2024; Barshay can be reached at barshay@hechingerreport.org.

[Back to page one](#)

3. How to Assess Early Reading: Word Identification or Nonsense Words?

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) fields a question from an assistant superintendent about whether to use reading assessments with nonsense words or word identification. “Opinions are varied and passionate,” says the administrator.

“I feel your pain,” says Shanahan. People seem to have strong feelings on the subject, especially the DIBELS nonsense word section. “Remember this is about trying to do what’s best for kids.”

Word identification tests have been around for more than a century, says Shanahan, but there have been concerns about whether they accurately measure students’ mastery of phonics. Because word ID tests include frequently used words with irregular spellings – *the, of, done* – students can do well on the assessment by having memorized words rather than being able to sound them out. The same is true of decodable words to which students have had frequent exposure. In other words, students can do well on a word identification test and still have weak phonics skills.

Nonsense word tests were developed to answer this shortcoming. No matter how much reading and word-memorizing students have done, there’s no way they would have been exposed to words like *dop, lan, and sepe*. “At first blush,” says Shanahan, “the nonsense test appeared to do a terrific job of assessing decoding ability, perhaps more valid than the traditional word identification test.” But over time, two problems with nonsense word tests have emerged.

First, some teachers, in an attempt to boost their students’ scores on the test, use time in the literacy block to drill students on nonsense words. “This teaching is a waste of time for producing readers,” says Shanahan, and urges researchers and school district administrators to be vigilant for this kind of test prep and discourage teachers from doing it. By teaching nonsense words, teachers aren’t teaching useful reading skills. What’s more, they’re inflating their kids’ performance on the nonsense word test, making the data less diagnostic and helpful. To the unwitting principal, the DIBELS scores may say that the teacher is doing a great job, but the opposite is true.

Second, says Shanahan, there is more to decoding than pronouncing letter patterns; phonics is also about understanding words in a text. Saying nonsense words measures basic phonics skills, but it doesn’t help students deal with the irregularities of English orthography and understand an unfamiliar word in a sentence. As explained by Richard Venezky, “If a word is totally unknown, the reader has little basis for deciding whether any particular pronunciation is correct or not.”

The non-phonetic oddities of the English language have led some experts to throw up their hands and say that phonics is not a good use of instructional time. “But as Venezky points out,” says Shanahan, “readers don’t need to arrive at exact pronunciations. Reasonable approximations are good enough and then the readers make adjustments and consider alternatives based on their knowledge of the English language” – and the meaning of the sentence.

Nonsense words can tell teachers if students have mastered certain spelling patterns, he continues, “but they prevent students from any kind of self-evaluation and adjustment of pronunciation, key aspects of decoding.” That means the data from nonsense word tests aren’t likely to predict later reading achievement as measured by oral or silent reading comprehension assessments.

So what is the best choice of reading assessments for the assistant superintendent who wrote for advice? Shanahan draws on a number of recent studies to make these points:

- The research track record for both word identification and nonsense word assessments is quite solid, and they are interchangeable and correlate well with other reading assessments early in students’ reading trajectories.
- For kindergarten and first grade, nonsense words give a slightly better sense of students’ phonics progress – provided teachers haven’t engaged in the inappropriate practice of drilling nonsense words.
- But for higher-achieving students, for students in the latter part of first grade, and in second and third grades, word identification tests are a better measure of reading growth, especially if they include lots of phonetically regular words.

“As kids’ reading advances,” says Shanahan, “leaving out those word identification skills that Venezky noted becomes a real problem.”

[“Which Should We Use, Nonsense Word Tests or Word ID Tests?”](#) by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, August 26, 2023; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

[Back to page one](#)

4. Does Liljedahl’s Pedagogy Have the Same Problems as Constructivism?

In her latest online Coaching Letter, Isobel Stevenson addresses concerns that some educators have expressed about implementing Peter Liljedahl’s *Building Thinking Classrooms* model of teaching mathematics (which involves students working in groups of two or three, standing up, solving challenging problems on erasable whiteboards, sharing one marker; see Memos 976, 992, and 1013 for articles on this approach). One concern that’s popped up in online forums is that with new and unfamiliar material, students need direct instruction and explicit guidance – a common critique of constructivist, project-based, minimally guided pedagogy.

Stevenson argues that this point does not apply to *Building Thinking Classrooms*, because using Liljedahl’s approach:

- *There is plenty of explanation, just not at the beginning of the class.* A flaw of constructivist pedagogy, says Stevenson, “is that it often requires students to construct meaning with inadequate background knowledge to do so effectively and efficiently, or at all.” In a Liljedahl classroom, students get some essential background information up front, with explanations and concept extension deeper in the class period, or in the “consolidation” at the conclusion.

- *Students get significant support.* The problems they’re asked to tackle are challenging but within their zone of proximal development, and the teacher circulates giving hints and extensions, drawing students’ attention to strategies being used by other groups, and occasionally calls the class together to talk through a common error or misconception.

- *Students’ work on the whiteboards is visible.* “We have a lovely, simple way of knowing what all students are thinking,” says Stevenson. Each group can see its problem solving as it emerges, other groups can check it out, and the teacher circulates and sees the whole class’s emerging struggles and solutions in real time.

- *Tasks are presented as puzzles so there’s feedback in the task itself.* “Students can often discern for themselves whether they are on the right track,” says Stevenson, “or they can look around the room and see what others are doing.” There’s plenty of room for choice and agency.

- *Students’ cognitive capacity is not overloaded.* That’s true if the teacher chooses tasks at the Goldilocks level of difficulty, gives support and hints as students work, and the peer dynamic within each group keeps all students in the game. Scaffolding and support are built into the Thinking Classrooms pedagogy.

Actually, says Stevenson, constructivist, minimally guided instruction is not an everyday thing in U.S. classrooms. It’s much more common for well-meaning teachers to “over-explain, over-scaffold, and to rescue students in such a way that they are required to do less thinking than the instructional design ostensibly intended.”

Stevenson goes on to describe several features of Liljedahl classrooms (not just mathematics) that get more students thinking more of the time:

- Assigning random student groupings every day – This gets students working with all their classmates and avoids the unconscious biases involved in some teacher groupings.
- Formative assessment – “Asking students to make their thinking visible on whiteboards around the room while they are working,” says Stevenson, “means that the teacher has a huge amount of easily accessible information on which to base decisions about what to do next.”
- Feedback – Students get real-time correctives and ideas from their groupmates, other groups, and the teacher.
- “Learning happens when people have to think hard,” says Robert Coe. In a *Building Thinking Classrooms* lesson, students are given challenging problems.
- Engagement – The small-group structure of these classes gets all students wrestling with problems, not just sitting back watching the teacher explain and call on a few students.

- Framing content as puzzles – This adds an element of challenge and uncertainty, which taps into the brain’s reward system and sparks motivation and a desire to take on challenging work, says Stevenson.

Of course the devil is in the details when it comes to implementing Liljedahl’s approach, she concludes. “Almost any teaching method executed well is preferable to one that is executed poorly. One of our problems in education is that we dabble. We ask teachers to implement new programs with insufficient schema-building or opportunity to develop and practice new skills... Clarifying what high-quality instruction means, and then providing the support for learning about it and teaching it, are leadership responsibilities. Teachers are doing the best they know how to do with what they have, so if instruction is lacking then that is a failure of direction, clarity, coherence, capacity, and support more often than unwilling teachers.”

[“On Understanding Before Opining”](#) by Isobel Stevenson in Coaching Letter #198, May 20, 2024; Stevenson can be reached at isobelstevenson@substack.com.

[Back to page one](#)

5. Asphyxiation in the Dorm Room

In this *New York Times* article, Peggy Orenstein reports on a troubling trend in teenage sex: choking. In a recent study by Dr. Debby Herbenick (Indiana University) of 5,000 students at a major Midwestern university, two-thirds of the women said a partner had choked them during sex, with many reporting that it was more frequent than in their earlier teen experiences. In Orenstein’s interviews with adolescents over the last decade (she’s the author of *Girls and Sex* (2016) and *Boys and Sex* (2020)), she’s seen an alarming increase in reports of strangulation during sex. “How come boys all want to choke you?” asked a 16-year-old girl at an independent high school. “Why do girls all want to be choked?” asked a 15-year-old boy at the same school.

What was once limited to pornography has migrated to mainstream media, says Orenstein, rendering “the once appalling appealing.” The book *Fifty Shades of Grey* and TV shows including “Euphoria,” “The Idol,” “Mean Girls,” and the song “Lovin On Me” have contributed to normalizing the idea. All this creates peer pressure to conform: a male college freshman feared that refusing to engage in the practice would make him seem like a “simp;” a high-school girl who complained to her friends about her boyfriend choking her was called “vanilla.” This is an alarming development, says Orenstein, “with health consequences that parents, educators, medical professionals, sexual consent advocates, and teens urgently need to understand.”

Trends like this, she’s noticed, have a pattern: “Those that involve basic physical gratification... tend to favor men. Those that might entail pain or submission, like choking, are generally more for women. So, while undergrads of all genders and sexualities in Dr. Herbenick’s surveys report both choking and being choked, straight and bisexual young women are far more likely to have been the subject of the behavior; the gap widens with

greater occurrences.” Consent was rarely involved, and young women frequently had moments when they couldn’t breathe or speak – and sometimes worried they might die.

Strangely, choking has become so accepted that few young women in the study, even those who felt uncomfortable and fearful, named it as an assault. And a significant number said they requested it and were enthusiastic. It’s exciting to feel so vulnerable, a college junior told Orenstein. “The power dynamic turns her on; oxygen deprivation to the brain can trigger euphoria.” But mutual gratification was not part of the dynamic. A male student, asked by Herbenick whether he would take steps to ensure that his partner had an equal measure of satisfaction, said, “Why would I do that?”

Neuroscientist Keisuke Kawata (Indiana University School of Public Health) is an expert on C.T.E., the degenerative brain disease most commonly associated with professional football players. He sees a similarity with sexual strangulation, though the mechanism of brain damage is oxygen-blocking pressure to the throat in light, repeated bursts of a few seconds each. Young women might experience lightheadedness, “cloudiness,” headaches, neck pain, ear ringing, or temporary loss of coordination, but if the symptoms resolve, all seems well. “But as with those N.F.L. players,” says Orenstein, “the true effects are silent, potentially not showing up for days, weeks, even years.”

And indeed, Dr. Kawata and his colleagues found that undergraduate women who have been repeatedly choked, compared to those who had never had that experience, showed a long-term reduction in cortical folding in their brains. They had widespread cortical thickening, which is associated with a heightened risk of later-onset mental illness. They needed to work far harder to complete simple memory tasks, and there were other brain effects, including anxiety, sadness, and loneliness. This raises the possibility that choking may be a contributing factor in the increase in these problems among young women.

“The physical, cognitive, and psychological impacts of sexual choking are disturbing,” says Orenstein. “So is the idea that at a time when women’s social, economic, educational, and political power are in ascent... when #MeToo has made progress against harassment and assault, there has been the popularization of a sex act that can damage our brains, impact intellectual functioning, undermine mental health, even kill us. Nonfatal strangulation... has somehow been eroticized and made consensual, at least consensual enough. Yet the outcomes are largely the same: women’s brains and bodies don’t distinguish whether they are being harmed out of hate or out of love.”

What is to be done? Orenstein has suggestions for adults who are in a position to influence teens’ choices:

- *Parents* – They need to figure out how to give their teens relevant information in a way they can hear, she says. “Reiterate that they want them to have a pleasurable sex life – you have already said that, right? – and also want them to be safe. Tell them that misinformation about certain practices, including choking, is rampant, that in reality it has grave health consequences. Plus [for boys], whether or not a partner initially requested it, if things go wrong, you’re generally criminally on the hook.” And at the beginning of a sexual relationship, young women need to be clear about what they’re not comfortable with.

• *High-school health teachers* – Shafia Zaloom (Harvard Graduate School of Education) suggests grounding discussions in mainstream and social media and deconstructing gender norms, power dynamics in relationships, and “performative” trends that aren’t healthy – especially putting pressure on someone’s neck or chest.

• *Pediatricians* – Like other adults, they have difficulty talking to teens about sex (the typical conversation lasts 40 seconds), but they do give advice on seat belts, biking with a helmet, and other hazards. As authoritative and non-parental purveyors of medical information, they’re ideally positioned to convey a clear message about the problems choking can cause. In addition, says Orenstein, “They should emphasize that if, for any reason – a fall, a sports mishap, or something else – a young person develops symptoms of head trauma, they should come in immediately, no judgment, for help in healing.”

• *The media* – The European Union is now requiring age verification on major porn sites and the U.S. should follow suit. Social media platforms should be pushed to ban content promoting unsafe practices, including choking. Movies and other entertainment media need to stop glamorizing and making light of the practice, says Orenstein, “using it to signal female characters’ complexity or sexual awakening.”

She concludes: “Young people’s sexual scripts are shaped by what they watch, scroll by, and listen to – unprecedentedly so. They deserve, and desperately need, models of interactions that are respectful, communicative, mutual, and at the very least, safe.”

[“The Troubling Trend in Teenage Sex”](#) by Peggy Orenstein in *The New York Times*, April 12, 2024

[Back to page one](#)

6. Books About Incarcerated Family Members

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Alabama children’s librarian Rachel Owens recommends books that can comfort and unburden students who have family members who are incarcerated:

Picture books:

- *Mango Moon: When Deportation Divides a Family* by Diane De Anda, illustrated by Sue Cornelison, kindergarten-grade 4
- *Milo Imagines the World* by Matt De La Peña, illustrated by Christian Robinson, kindergarten-grade 3
- *My Brother Is Away* by Sara Greenwood, illustrated by Luisa Uribe, kindergarten-grade 3
- *See You Soon* by Mariame Kaba, illustrated by Bianca Diaz, kindergarten-grade 2
- *Dad Bakes* by Katie Yamasaki, kindergarten-grade 4

Middle grades:

- *The Swag Is in the Socks* by Kelly Baptist, grade 3-7
- *Not an Easy Win* by Chrystal Giles, grade 3-7
- *Hands* by Torrey Maldonado, grade 5 and up
- *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* by Janae Marks, grade 4 and up

- *Lo and Behold* by Wendy Mass, illustrated by Gabi Mendez, grade 4-7
- *Tito the Bonecrusher* by Melissa Thomson, grade 3-6
- *Born Behind Bars* by Padma Venkatraman, grade 5 and up

Young Adult:

- *This Is My America* by Kim Johnson, grade 9 and up
- *An Appetite for Miracles* by Laekan Zea Kemp, grade 9 and up
- *Concrete Rose* by Angie Thomas, grade 9 and up

Nonfiction:

- *Far Apart, Close in Heart: Being a Family When a Loved One Is Incarcerated* by Becky Birtha, illustrated by Maja Kastelic, preschool-grade 3
- *Disappearing Act: A True Story* by Jiordan Castle, grade 8 and up
- *Hey, Kiddo* by Jarrett Krosoczka, grade 8 and up
- *Dear Dad: Growing Up with a Parent in Prison – and How We Stayed Connected* by Jay Jay Patton with Kiara Valdez, illustrated by Markia Jenai, grade 5-8

“When a Parent Is ‘Away’” by Rachel Owens “When a Parent Is ‘Away’” by Rachel Owens in *School Library Journal*, May 2024 (Vol. 70, #5, pp. 42-45)

[Back to page one](#)

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and 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
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Ed (formerly Ed. Magazine)
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education