Marshall Memo 992

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 26, 2023

In This Issue:

1. The controversies swirling around reading in the U.S.
2. The non-thinking math classroom – and how it can change
3. What is the best way for students to spend class time? It depends
4. A call to rethink New York City's teacher-evaluation process
5. The effect of the four-day week on Oklahoma high schools
6. Marilyn Burns on a well-framed fractions problem
7. Recommended superhero graphic novels and trade books
8. Online resources on women's suffrage

Quotes of the Week

"Thinking is a necessary precursor to learning, and if students are not thinking, they are not learning."

Peter Liljedahl (see item #2)

"The goal is to get a good grade. Improvement be damned."

Jeremy Kaplan on teachers' attitude when a supervisor scores a lesson (see item #4)

"One of the main projects of American education over the past half-century and more has been to unwind the legacy of oppression that denied so many people full access to the benefits of learning."

A.O. Scott (see item #1)

"Reading is supposed to teach us who we are and help us forget ourselves, to enchant and disenchant, to make us more worldly, more introspective, more empathetic, and more intelligent. It's a private, even intimate act, swathed in silence and solitude, and at the same time a social undertaking. It's democratic and elitist, soothing and challenging, something we do for its own sake and as a means to various cultural, material, and moral ends… It's not only good; it's good for you."

A.O. Scott (*ibid*.)

"Great if kids also get to choose books to read on their own. But more important is to, without fail, have shared books that they read and experience together in class so they are connected, and feel belonging, and understand that there is something in a book that cannot be found anywhere else. If the book is going to survive, it will be because we make it social."

Doug Lemov in "Looking Around During the Movie: Why Sharing Stories is Important" in his *Field Notes*, June 19, 2023

1. The Controversies Swirling Around Reading in the U.S.

In this *New York Times Book Review* article, A.O. Scott lists the battles being waged on literacy: a campaign to re-emphasize phonics in elementary classrooms; attempts to ban books on race, gender, and history from schools; a decline in the number of English majors in universities; and attacks on the literary canon ("Is anyone reading *Paradise Lost* anymore?" asks Scott. "Are you?").

And on top of all that, there are emojis, acronyms, TikTok, and "the dark enchantments of generative A.I.," says Scott. "A quintessentially human activity is being outsourced to machines that don't care about phonics or politics or beauty or truth. A precious domain of imaginative and intellectual freedom is menaced by crude authoritarian politics. Exposure to the wrong words is corrupting our children, who aren't even learning how to decipher the right ones. Our attention spans have been chopped up and commodified, sold off piecemeal to platforms and algorithms. We're too busy, too lazy, too preoccupied to lose ourselves in books."

Of course many of these fights aren't new. Book bans have cropped up repeatedly, as has the back-to-phonics movement and the supposed death of literary studies. "But the fact that the present situation has a history doesn't mean that it isn't real," says Scott. "When the same cluster of problems resurfaces in every generation, something is going on. And even as it seems to overlap with other areas of perpetual contention – social inequality, identity politics, schooling, technology – the reading crisis isn't simply another culture-war combat zone. It reflects a deep ambivalence about reading itself, a crack in the foundations of modern consciousness."

What exactly is reading, and what is it for? asks Scott. It's "an activity whose value, while broadly proclaimed, is hard to specify. Is any other common human undertaking so riddled with contradictions? Reading is supposed to teach us who we are and help us forget ourselves, to enchant and disenchant, to make us more worldly, more introspective, more empathetic, and more intelligent. It's a private, even intimate act, swathed in silence and solitude, and at the same time a social undertaking. It's democratic and elitist, soothing and challenging, something we do for its own sake and as a means to various cultural, material, and moral ends… It's not only good; it's good for you."

Reading is a relatively recent invention, less than 6,000 years old, and only recently have the masses gained access, thanks to Gutenberg's 1455 "killer app," the printing press. But right away the ruling classes were anxious about working people learning to read, lest they see beyond their lives of hard labor and obedience. "Nowhere was this brutal notion pursued with

more ferocity than in the American South," says Scott. Frederick Douglass described in vivid terms why enslaved people were denied reading instruction, yet he learned and became one of the leading writers, orators, and intellectuals of his time.

Scott describes his own children's elementary classrooms in a diverse, progressive Brooklyn public school in the early 2000s. The Teachers College curriculum was in full bloom, with kids "encouraged to think of themselves as writers and readers and to draw pictures of themselves absorbed in these activities. There were parent-attended 'publishing parties' when writing projects were completed. The rooms were furnished with well-stocked, low-slung bookshelves and carpeted risers where young readers could curl up with 'just-right books,' selections matched to their interests and levels of proficiency. The point was not only to teach basic skills… but also, and more urgently, to instill in the children a familiarity and comfort with books and what was inside them that would make them lifelong bibliophiles."

"It is hard to imagine a scene of instruction," Scott continues, "more completely antithetical to the ones recalled in Douglass's *Narrative*. That isn't an accident. One of the main projects of American education over the past half-century and more has been to unwind the legacy of oppression that denied so many people full access to the benefits of learning. My children's classrooms embodied a central ideal of this project: to institutionalize the sense of freedom that Douglass had gained through struggle and oppression."

Of course, a school needs to have rules, says Scott, to some degree regulating students and curtailing their intellectual elbow room: "Schools exist to stifle freedom, and also to inculcate it, a dialectic that is the essence of true education. Reading, more than any other discipline, is the engine of this process, precisely because it escapes the control of those in charge." There's no way to limit students to "just right" books or to be sure they'll read them in the "right" way.

Scott contrasts one set of words used to describe readers – *voracious, compulsive, promiscuous* – with more-negative descriptors – *bookworm, bookish, book-smart.* We shouldn't have to choose between these polarities, he says. All those words describe many classrooms, households, English departments, and bookstores. The chaotic dialectic of reading never ends, he concludes. "Or rather, it will end when we stop reading. Which is why we can't."

"The Reading Crisis: Book Bans, Chatbots, Pedagogical Warfare. Does Literacy Have a Future?" by A.O. Scott in *The New York Times Book Review*, June 25, 2023

Back to page one

2. The Non-Thinking Math Classroom – and How It Can Change

"Thinking is a necessary precursor to learning, and if students are not thinking, they are not learning," says Peter Liljedahl (Simon Fraser University, Canada) in his 2021 book, *Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics*. A lot of what students are doing in classrooms is "studenting," he says, summing up 15 years of research, classroom observations, and experimentation with an intrepid group of mathematics teachers determined to find a better way.

The standard math lesson, Liljedahl found, is remarkably similar from classroom to classroom and school to school:

- The teacher explains how to perform a skill or operation – for example, multiplying 2-digit numbers – and does two or three examples on the board.
- The teacher says something like, *Now you try one* and writes a new problem on the board.
- Students work on the problem for a little under five minutes.
- The teacher then goes over the problem.

In numerous classrooms, says Liljedahl, these steps are a "foundational and central part of instruction," and for many teachers, "part of the fabric of what it means to teach." Asked what they expect students to do when given a problem to try on their own, teachers say that students should see if they can do it, and learn from their mistakes if they can't.

When Liljedahl closely observed what was happening in scores of classrooms and interviewed students, he found they engaged in five different activities during the now-you-try-one segment of a lesson:

- Trying it on their own – putting their heads down and reasoning their way through the new problem – in other words, thinking;
- Slacking – not attempting to do the problem, either because they didn't know how or didn't care – checking their phones, talking to other slackers, or staring into space;
- Stalling – not attempting the task, filling the time sharpening a pencil, getting a drink of water, going to the bathroom, or "endlessly rooting in their backpack for some vital piece of equipment;"
- Faking – pretending to do the task – studiously looking at the board, flipping through the textbook, appearing to ponder, pretending to write something – but actually doing nothing because they didn't know what to do or were killing time till the teacher went over it;
- Mimicking – attempting and often completing the task by recreating the solution strategy the teacher had just demonstrated – but if the new problem didn't exactly match the ones they'd just seen on the board, these students were lost.

"When we interviewed the teachers in whose classrooms we were doing the studenting research," says Liljedahl, "all of them stated, with emphasis, that they did not want their students to mimic. Ironically, 100% of the students who mimicked stated that they thought that mimicking was what their teacher wanted them to do. They were reading the demonstration of an analogous example prior to the now-you-try-one tasks as an invitation to mimic."

How many students were engaged in each type of behavior? Only about 20 percent were thinking through the problem on their own – as the teacher intended and expected. A little over half were mimicking, and the rest were slacking, stalling, or faking. In other words, about *80 percent of students* were not engaging in real thinking. This troubling finding held true in Liljedahl's observations of standard math lessons, note-taking, and homework.

"Everywhere I went," he says, "irrespective of grade or demographic, classrooms looked more alike than they looked different." Here were the essential components:

- At the front is a teacher's desk, a vertical writing space for the teacher, and a vertical projecting space.
- Desks or tables are usually oriented toward the teacher.
- Students sit and the teacher stands.
- Students write on horizontal surfaces while the teacher writes on vertical surfaces.
- Lessons follow the same pattern: a teacher-led activity, a whole-group or small-group discussion, individual work, and a wrap-up by the teacher.

"These normative structures that permeate classrooms in North America, and around the world, are so robust, so entrenched, that they transcend the idea of classrooms norms," says Liljedahl, "and can only be described as institutional norms – norms that have extended beyond the classroom, even the school building, and have become ensconced in the very institution of *school*. Much of how classrooms look and much of what happens in them today is guided by institutional norms – norms that have not changed since the inception of an industrial-age model of public education."

Liljedahl and his colleagues set about figuring out how to change math lessons in ways that would get more students thinking more of the time. They found that the answer often came by doing the exact opposite of institutional norms – for example, having students work standing up in randomly selected, heterogeneous groups; write on vertical surfaces; and attack problems about which they had some background knowledge but didn't know the solution. The rest of Liljedahl's book is organized around the areas in which they propose changes:

- What types of tasks students are given (to spark thinking *and* learn the required curriculum);
- How we form collaborative groups (the ideal group size for primary grades is two, for grade 3 and above, three – and students share one marker per group);
- Where students work (mostly standing up, writing on erasable whiteboards);
- How we arrange the furniture;
- How we answer questions;
- When, where, and how tasks are given;
- What homework looks like;
- How we foster student autonomy;
- How we use hints and extensions;
- How we consolidate a lesson;
- How students take notes;
- How we choose to evaluate;
- How we use formative assessment;
- How we grade.

A short summary of the Thinking Classroom is in Memo 976 (Jennifer Gonzalez's interview with Liljedahl); for the full story, read the book!

Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics by Peter Liljedahl (Corwin, 2021); Liljedahl can be reached at liljedahl@sfu.ca.

Back to page one

3. What Is the Best Way for Students to Spend Class Time? It Depends

In this Hechinger Report article, Jill Barshay reports on a new U.K. study of 250 secondary school teachers in high-poverty schools. The researchers had two conclusions:

• High-school ELA and math teachers spent class time in surprisingly similar ways – mostly on all-class discussions, using the whiteboard, and gauging student understanding. Students in both subjects spent less time using textbooks or copying from the whiteboard (see detailed charts in the article link below).

• Math teachers who deviated from this pattern and had students spending more time working independently on practice problems got higher test scores on the math GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams. English teachers whose students spent more time on group work and all-class discussions got higher scores on the English GCSE.

The authors conclude that perhaps there isn't one best way to teach; rather, the optimal teaching method may be subject-specific, with students learning more in math when they're immersed in working on problems, and students learning more in ELA when they do group work and engage in all-class discussions.

The U.K. researchers concede that their findings come from correlations and don't prove causation. In addition, it's unclear what the more-successful math teachers "are doing during the long stretches of independent work time," says Barshay. "Some may be milling about offering hints and one-to-one help. Others might be kicking back at their desks, catching up on e-mail or drinking a cup of tea while students complete their homework in class. Even teachers who devote most of their class time to independent work may begin class with five or 10 minutes of lecturing. It's not as if students are magically teaching themselves math, muddling through on their own."

Clearly, more research is needed on the most effective uses of class time in different subjects, Barshay concludes; perhaps artificial intelligence will help with this.

"Proof Points: The Best Way to Teach Might Depend on the Subject" by Jill Barshay in The Hechinger Report, June 19, 2023; Barshay can be reached at barshay@hechingerreport.org. The full study is "Teachers' Use of Class Time and Student Achievement" by Simon Burgess, Shenila Rewal, and Eric Taylor in *Economics and Education Review*, June 2023.

Back to page one

4. A Call to Rethink New York City's Teacher-Evaluation Process

In this *Chalkbeat* article, New York City assistant principal Jeremy Kaplan says his favorite moment when he chats with teachers after a classroom visit is when he asks, "What do you think went well?" or "What would you do differently?" and they say, "That's a good question," and the conversation gets interesting. "In these moments," says Kaplan, "the teacher is thinking and, in the process, they are becoming a better teacher… The best and most efficient way to improve someone's performance in any field is to facilitate their own thinking, not tell them what to do."

As much as he loves observing classes and debriefing with teachers, Kaplan is highly critical of New York City's evaluation process. That's because it requires him to give 4-3-2-1 scores (Highly Effective, Effective, Developing, Ineffective) on components of the Danielson rubric after every classroom observation. Lots of administrators' PD time has gone to "norming" each other's scores after group visits to classrooms. The rationale for this approach is that there's a "correct" score for a specific piece of instruction – and that rating teachers will nudge them to improve their practice.

"I have come to the conclusion that this premise is wrong," says Kaplan. Scoring every observation "makes teacher development more difficult… It hinders teacher growth." Why? Citing a 2014 *Chalkbeat* article and his own experience, Kaplan says getting scored 4-3-2-1 on every classroom observation puts teachers on the defensive, making them more likely to push back on any rating below Highly Effective, explain away problems, point to a student's chronic absenteeism or a class's low academic level, or say the observer didn't see the end of the lesson. "The goal is to get a good grade. Improvement be damned."

The same teachers' reactions are totally different in lesson debriefs that aren't rubric-scored. When Kaplan does off-the-record classroom visits, teachers are candid about teaching mistakes they may have made and open to suggestions on how to improve. "Sometimes a teacher will ask me to observe something new that they are trying," says Kaplan. "Taking risks is more likely to happen when evaluation is not in the picture. This is how teachers improve… The best feedback is descriptive, not value judgments." He's found that frequent informal visits and debriefs build trust and continuously improve teaching and learning; scoring undermines that dynamic.

At the end of each school year, there needs to be an overall evaluation of the teacher's work for officials downtown. Kaplan suggests that in June, the teacher and supervisor meet to reflect on the year's visits, debriefs, and other points of contact, discuss rubric scores that fairly and accurately sum up the year, and finalize the detailed report that goes in the teacher's personnel file. At this point, rubric scoring seems appropriate – but not during the year, when teaching is a work in progress and can be fine-tuned, and improvement and good performance can be praised and appreciated.

"Why NYC Teacher Evaluations Don't Yield Meaningful Feedback" by Jeremy Kaplan in *Chalkbeat*, June 23, 2023; Kaplan can be reached at jeremykap@hotmail.com.

Back to page one

5. The Effect of the Four-Day Week on Oklahoma High Schools

In this article in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Emily Morton (Northwest Evaluation Association) says that by 2019, over 650 public school districts in 24 states had shifted to a four-day-a-week schedule. Focusing on high schools in Oklahoma (which are predominantly rural), Morton reports on how four-day weeks affected students' ACT scores, attendance, and in-school disciplinary incidents. Her findings:

- No detectable effect on ACT math and English scores;

- No detectable effect on student attendance at any grade (this finding is complicated by the way absences and students taking part in out-of-school activities are recorded);
- No detectable effect on alcohol, drugs, vandalism, weapons, school bus, and truancy incidents;
- A 39 percent decrease in bullying incidents;
- A 31 percent decrease in student fighting incidents.

Reducing bullying and fighting were not part of the original rationale for the four-day weeks. Morton believes these decreased because of improved student morale, less stress, more sleep, and generally improved school climate, but says more research is needed.

Ironically, four-day school weeks were no longer possible in most Oklahoma schools as of the 2022-23 school year because they did not meet State Department of Education requirements for cost saving and achievement.

"Effects of 4-Day School Weeks on Older Adolescents: Examining Impacts of the Schedule on Academic Achievement, Attendance, and Behavior in High School" by Emily Morton in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, March 2023 (Vol. 45, #1, pp. 52-78); Morton can be reached at emily.morton@nwea.org.

Back to page one

6. Marilyn Burns on a Well-Framed Fractions Problem

In this *MBMath* article, math guru Marilyn Burns describes a lesson in which she got fourth graders thinking about fractions. She asked them to draw and label representations of two fractions: 4/5 and 5/4. She then asked them which fraction was closer to one. Click the link below for children's drawings and full details on the lesson.

"Representing 4/5 and 5/4: A Fractions Lesson" by Marilyn Burns, in *MBMath*, June 20, 2023

Back to page one

7. Recommended Superhero Graphic Novels and Trade Books

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Brigid Alverson touts these current and upcoming graphic novels and trade paperbacks featuring Marvel and DC superheroes:

- *Miles Morales: The Avenging Angel* by Brian Michael Bendis and Jason Latour, grade 5-9
- *Fann Club: Batman Squad* by Jim Benton, grade 3-7
- *Thor and Loki: Midgard Family Mayhem* by Jeffrey Brown, grade 4 and up
- *Shuri and T'Challa: Into the Heartlands* by Rosanne Brown, illustrated by Dika Araújo, Natacha Bustos, and Claudia Aguirre, grade 3-7
- *Gotham Academy* by Becky Cloonan, illustrated by Karl Kerschl, grade 7 and up
- *Rocket and Groot: The Hunt for Star-Lord* by Amanda Deibert, illustrated by Cameron Jacobsen Kendell, grade 1-3
- *Captain Marvel: Game On* by Sam Maggs, illustrated by Sweeney Boo and Mario del Pennino, grade 5-9

- *Shazam! Thundercrack* by Yehudi Mercado, grade 3-7 and up
- *Clark & Lex* by Brendan Reichs, illustrated by Jerry Gaylord, grade 3-7
- *Thor & Loki: Double Trouble* by Mariko Tamaki, illustrated by Gurihiru, grade 4 and up

"Supes du Jour" by Brigid Alverson in *School Library Journal*, June 2023 (Vol. 69, #6, pp. 34-37)

Back to page one

8. Online Resources on Women's Suffrage

In this *Social Education* article, Cheryl Lederle (Library of Congress) recommends these free online collections on women's successful struggle for the vote:

- Susan B. Anthony Papers
- Carrie Chapman Catt Papers
- Elizabeth Cady Stanton Papers
- Mary Church Terrell Papers
- National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) Collection
- Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party
- Women's Suffrage in Sheet Music Collection

Sidebar in "Launching Student Learning About Women's Suffrage with a Suffragist's Poetry" by Cheryl Lederle in *Social Education*, May/June 2023 (Vol. 87, #3, pp. 178-183)

Back to page one

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 48 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

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

Subscriptions:

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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