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Why Can't We Talk to Each Other Anymore?

How binary thinking is dividing the K-12 world

By Kevin Bushweller — September 06, 2022 | 10 min read

Credit: Getty for Education Week

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Watching all this binary, dichotomous, either-or thinking play out in K-12 education over the past two years has been frustrating as a parent, dad, and citizen, including a recent high school graduate who is now a college student, as well as a former teacher and current education journalist who has been covering the K-12 world for more than a decade. Most of the conversations in the United States I have witnessed in my 50 years, I can't remember.

And it gave me thinking: Why do we do this? Why is it so bad now? And, most importantly, what can we do about it? Because I know that I can't stand it anymore, and I doesn't go into the way of thinking that I want my children to adopt.

Turns out, the answer to the first question begins with how our brains work. For most of us, our tendency is to jump to conclusions with limited evidence. It takes effort to do the opposite, to be open-minded and to wait for all the facts. Our desire as the opportunity to consider the nuances of a problem at least. Some of us engage in this kind of thinking more than others—but we all do it.

What impacts—if any—does rigid, either/or thinking have on schools?

"Results show responses from teachers, school leaders, and district leaders. Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding."
SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, May 2022

Thinking, Fast and Slow, a book by Daniel Kahneman, a professor emeritus of psychology and public affairs at Princeton University and the winner of the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, offers a fascinating look into what drives this way of thinking.

"The confidence that individuals have in their beliefs depends mostly on the quality of the story they can tell about what they see, even if they see little. We jump to conclusions on the basis of a small amount of evidence. They published a paper way back in 1999 titled "Unfolded and Unaware of It. How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments." The resulting theory was dubbed the Dunning-Kruger effect. Psychologist Brittany Wilson defines the effect as "a cognitive bias whereby people with limited knowledge or competence in a given intellectual or social domain greatly overestimate their own knowledge or competence relative to others in objective criteria or the performance of their peers or of the average person."

In other words, if you have read or seen on Twitter or watched on TikTok, you assume you know everything. Or at least you think that your knowledge or expertise in any social media with your friends or relatives is equal to your claims.

That sets in motion a rigid, unyielding position. Once we get locked on to a certain point of view, it becomes very, very difficult to get our brains to consider other perspectives. Instead of looking for information that challenges our point of view, we search out sources that will reinforce our point of view. Confirmation bias is the term for that. Our brains don't like to be challenged. We like to be "mentally incapable of considering others". And the social media, Twitter and TV news bubbles we lean into further cement our own biases.

That's when binary thinking kicks up the notch to all of us—a process that is playing out in unfortunate ways in K-12 education that could have serious repercussions for developing the kind of open-minded, critically thinking students who represent our democracy's future.

> We need to listen more and talk less. It is that simple.

An Illinois high school teacher who responded to a survey from the EdWeek Research Center said he has been kind of thinking a playing out in K-12 education for years, particularly since the Black Lives Matter movement. The teacher became so polarized without actually knowing what we do in their school meetings and dreamers our superintendent with bitly harm (not critical race theory) which we don't even teach. It's sad.

In that survey, 54 percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders said elected officials are now embracing rigid, binary thinking more than they did prior years. Nearly one in ten reports that 2021 and beyond the same of parents and students. Nearly one in ten said that 2021 and beyond the same of students are engaging more in binary thinking and 43 percent said the same of teachers.

Are young people more open-minded, reflective thinkers than adults? Good adults learn more important lessons from their school-production dialogue?

Chris Finn Hinds the answer to both questions is no. The Illinois Teacher of the Year is a history teacher at Benjamin Franklin High School in New Orleans. He has a lot to say about the side who wrote a book titled The 1619 Project: Born in Slavery: Slavery and the Making of America.

Finn, who is white, grew up and caught in St. Bernard Parish in Louisiana. He uncovered historical records about a reconstruction era monument orchestrated by white racketeers against Black people in that community in 1884. And he learned from that Blacks had gotten the right to vote.

In a recent phone conversation, Finn told me he brought this research to his classroom. He had white and Black students in his classes, and a few of them were the descendants of the perpetrators of the massacre or the descendants of Blacks. The students discussed the painful findings in a civil manner, and things never got out of control. Finn said he wasn't sure what kind of impact that had on what happened and also, in other words, they learned from their mistakes. The teacher records TikTok lectures about U.S. history, which are watched by people all over the world.

Then, in the spring of 2021, a bill was introduced in the Louisiana legislature that would prohibit teachers from teaching content that suggests that some persons racism and sexism in our country's past. Finn and other teachers across the state were then concerned that they could be prosecuted for teaching the 1619 Project, which published an series piece that stated, among other things, that the 1619 Project "aims to reset the country's moral compass by placing slavery and the contributions of the enslaved people of African descent at the center of our nation's story." Finn said the proposed statutes, genocide, and racism, and creating space for students to address their lingering impacts are components of true patriotism. Unlike blind patriotism, true patriotism seeks to actually improve the lives of those who inhabit this land.

In a Republican-controlled legislature, the bill never made it out of the House education committee. Finn chalks up the bill's failure to educators speaking up publicly.

"Students are much more open to have these discussions," Finn told me. "They are more willing to engage in difficult conversations."

Compared to three years ago, how much are the following people embracing rigid, either/or thinking about K-12 education or learning-related issues?

"Results show responses from teachers, school leaders, and district leaders. Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding."
SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, May 2022

Yes, it is true that the divisive and bigotrous rhetoric fight of the political spectrum, which is making its way into our classrooms, is not limited to Republicans. Colorado's University associate professor of English and composition Suzanne who is Black, cites a "presuntuosal mood on the left" in his book Woke Racism: How a Prejudice of Prejudice Is Tearing Our Country Apart. Wilson writes that on racial and sexuality issues that's also a Race Baits organizations, instead, simply because they and listener questions about the value of certain policies or practices, such as anti-racism curriculum or diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

That environment, McWhorter and others suggest, has silenced many of the more moderate voices on the left and right. In K-12 schools, it means teachers, parents, the public square, leaving the right and the left to battle it out with masks, threats, and social on social media. And it "makes people left of center wonder just when and why they started being branded as backward," he writes in the book. It "makes people who have spent their entire lives fighting against the rights of a nation board of regulation that seems to have never cared about any statement, ambition, or achievement in modern society."

That leads us to a concept in social psychology called "fundamental attribution error." It's the tendency for people to place too much importance on behavior in the person's character or personality, rather than something about the circumstances or a mix of their personality and circumstances. That explains the widespread use of personal attacks by commentators on social media or at who is good at opposing viewpoints can't labour an issue without flinging personal insults at each other.

Angela Duckworth, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance, has researched, showed an unpublished manuscript with her in which she outlines how fundamental attribution error can play out in education. Duckworth is also the author of an opinion blog hosted on edweek.org.

A few years ago, a large urban school district asked her for advice in designing a program for students found personal grit and mind set in classroom classmates. During one visit, a 6th grade teacher rolled in a cart of laptops, and students picked them of the cart and returned to their desks. Students were working on the assigned activity during the observation. But two boys were just sitting at their desks, doing nothing, their laptops unopened.

Duckworth points out that if she had walked in just to a moment later that she did and was asked to assess the willingness of these two students to work on challenging tasks, she might have concluded that they lacked work ethic. In fact, the teacher had just given them a very difficult assignment. The boys, she said, had a lot, grit, or passion—they were just unlikely to their efforts, which is a trait that couldn't effort enough working hippies, and unlucky to have a teacher who didn't think it ask students to pick up and do their work.

It was not their personalities or character traits that were barriers to their engagement—it was their "situation." Duckworth explains.

Harris Sim the problem. When we engage in fundamental attribution error that focuses on laziness on a person's character or personality—without engaging in the "hard work of understanding the situational constraints that people face," Duckworth pointed out angry with that person. And that's where the problem comes calling starts at school based meetings and on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media.

That's a big reason why Chris Wejr—the principal of Shortwood Elementary School in British Columbia, Canada—ended his personal use of Twitter after being a heavy user for years. It's simply become too binary and too mean, he says.

My recalls from COVID masking quickly devolved into a binary, mean-spirited Canada during the height of the pandemic, much like it did in the United States. That aggressive tone on social media, Wejr said, "spilled into our school meetings." Wejr said it divided families, stained friendships, and created divisions among educators. Fortunately, he said, that time spent the spring of 2021.

It begins "Much of what we do in education falls into grey areas. Yet, many of the conversations we have regarding education seem to see black and white statements and fall into the category of binary, or dichotomous, thinking. Binary thinking is a dangerous place to be in, and it is very easy to get there. It is also easy to can cause us to, or, then! mentality—"Not an either-or but a both and!" It is also present engagement in the conversations we need to have."

Back then, he was talking about debates over things like learning to gender identity, sexual orientation, and, of course, COVID-19 mandates, which he said in time—in collaborative seeing. On the contrary, you could imagine adding school start times to that, etc.) Wejr observed that educators and parents in both Canada and the United States would make assumptions without evidence to support those about what we have, dig their heels in, and pick sides.

In the United States, once the pandemic started, that attention shifted to issues around remote learning, COVID masking, vaccinations, and, following the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent public protests, including the racism. It was a volatile mix that fueled frustration, fear, and anger, further connecting educational frustration across the country.

For us and most of the people I interviewed for this piece, it feels like binary is the same thinking and behaving is only going to get worse before it gets better. But what the question. How do we turn the tide in a more open-minded, collaborative direction?

For starters, we need to listen more and talk less. It is that simple. I am a caller by nature, and I have to work at listening. I have to work at it because I want to hear people out. I want to see a listen more to family, friends, and work colleagues, even people I hardly know. It is never empowering and refreshing then you can imagine. And I am getting far fewer complaints from my wife that I am interrupting her.

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Second, take a cue from Wejr and scale back the use of social media and messages of anxiety in the mean. Let me be clear, do not take the exercise approach and just dive into your social media accounts or self-medicate to the point of numbness. Instead, Wejr said, "I have found that limiting my social media provides a good dwell of social good, too. If you want to think more about why this might be a good approach, I highly recommend you read social psychologist Jonathan Haidt's book, The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion. He argues that social media platforms are actively designed to bring about our most immoral and least reflective selves.

Third, give kids opportunities to challenge their own beliefs. One of the most fascinating and powerful examples I witnessed came about as the result of the pandemic and the social and racial reckoning that followed. Finn, the Illinois teacher of the year, has started a debate podium in regular class for one or two sides with personally. The opportunity to challenge his own beliefs spread his eyes to new ways of thinking, and he continued those kind of conversations in his high school debate team. As a result, he remained the wielding a far more analytical, creative, and open-minded thinker that he would have otherwise.

"The pathway out of this is for us to realize a lot of these (polarized) debates being had are not impacting the conditions in schools for kids," said Jonathan Cohen, an assistant professor of political science, public policy, and education in Brown University's Taubman College of Leadership and Governance. Cohen's research, discussion, studying one or two grades academically, teacher shortages, and declining college substantiate times are evidence. "We are pulling energy and resources away from things that really matter," he said.

It's time to reset the sense impulses of our brains and dedicate ourselves to full-spectrum thinking. If we want students to embrace a wide array of ideas and complex thinking, we owe it to them to lead the way.

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