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IDEOLOGY AND PUBLIC OPPOSITION TO THE 'NEW MATH' REFORM MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES (1960 TO 1980)

Summary: This study explores public opposition to the American New Math reform movement through an analysis of readers' letters published in major American newspapers from 1960 to 1980. The findings identify key themes in the public debate about the New Math curriculum, revealing that opposition extended beyond specific pedagogical criticisms to reflect broader ideological dispositions, including distrust of academic elites and nostalgia for traditional notions of authority. The study demonstrates that these ideological themes in letters critical of New Math aligned with the central messaging of the rising conservative movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This investigation of ideology in the public response to New Math suggests that educational reforms, regardless of their merits, may fail to gain lasting public support when they conflict with dominant cultural and political values.

Keywords: New Math, Modern Mathematics, history of curriculum reform, sociology of science, science communication, discourse theory

Introduction

The New Math movement of the 1950s and 1960s emerged as a complex educational reform initiative shaped by Cold War anxieties and evolving political priorities. While international in scope, the 'New Math' movement varied significantly in implementation across countries and even within the United States, leading some to argue it never truly existed as a unified movement[1]. In the United States, the movement accelerated with funding from the National Defense Educa-

[1] R. Davis, *Changing School Mathematics*, [in:] *A History of School Mathematics*, vol. 1, ed. by G.M.A. Stanic, J. Kilpatrick, NCTM, Reston, VA 2003, p. 623–646.

tion Act of 1958 and the formation of the School Mathematics Study Group. Initially focused on secondary school curriculum, the reforms gained broader public attention around 1962–1964 as they expanded to the lower grades.

While the New Math movement initially emerged from Cold War imperatives, its political context shifted significantly in the mid-1960s. Under President Lyndon Johnson's 'Great Society' program, federal involvement in social matters, including education, increased dramatically. This expansion was buoyed by a period of broad optimism about the government's power to effect social change, leading to landmark legislation such as the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Voting Rights Act (1965), and amendments to the Social Security Act that established Medicare and Medicaid (1965). After its initial funding through the 1958 National Defense Education Act, the New Math movement continued to receive substantial federal support, with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 providing one of several funding streams.

Widespread support for Johnson's programs, however, proved short-lived. Social and economic instability in the late 1960s and early 1970s led to the growing prominence of voices on the political right who were critical of Johnson's programs. Capitalizing on this shift, Richard Nixon, in his successful presidential campaigns of 1968 and 1972, ran on a populist message that sowed broad distrust in political, cultural, and business elites and called for a return to traditional societal values. Against this backdrop, the term 'New Math' faced public criticism and eventually fell out of use in both education circles and by the general public. A critical question that this study investigates is whether and how the downfall of New Math was connected to this political and cultural backdrop.

In the United States, because decisions about educational laws and policies are often made in the political sphere, debates about education frequently intersect with politics. While education scholars lament the poor quality of public debates about education[2], political scientists understand that people typically form opinions about complex issues with limited information. As Arthur Lupia notes, '[T]he existence of the badly informed voter is now a central part of political science's intellectual heritage'[3]. Building on this insight, this study examines how themes from Nixon's political campaigns filtered into public opinions about New Math, investigating the connection between the movement's downfall and the rise of conservatism.

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[2] E.g., J.T. Fey, A.O. Graeber, *From the New Math to the Agenda for Action*, [in:] *A History of School Mathematics*, vol. 1, ed. by G.M.A. Stanic, J. Kilpatrick, NCTM, Reston, VA 2003, p. 521–558 (p. 523); J.N. Payne, *The New Math and Its Aftermath, Grades K-8*, [in:] *A History of School Mathematics*, vol. 1, ed. by G.M.A. Stanic, J. Kilpatrick, NCTM, Reston, VA 2003, p. 559–598 (p. 575–576).

[3] A. Lupia, *Shortcuts versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections*, "American Political Science Review" 1994, vol. 88, p. 63–76 (p. 63).

Previous analyses have attributed New Math's demise to structural obstacles within the U.S. education system[4] and to the flawed pedagogical approach of the reforms[5]. Christopher Phillips took a broader view by linking the movement's trajectory to broader political shifts – specifically, its rise under the Johnson administration and decline with the rise of conservatism[6]. While Phillips has provided valuable insights into New Math's relationship with its social-political context, his study did not include an analysis of the public discourse. This study addresses the gap in research while also testing Phillips' argument about the connection of politics to the downfall of New Math through an analysis of published opinion letters.

Theoretical basis of the study

Scholarly analysis of the public perception of New Math has been scarce. Despite this lack of analysis, scholars of the American New Math movement have, with few exceptions[7], coalesced around the view that there was a broad public rejection of New Math:

- 'To the public and to most elementary school teachers, new math came to mean that students could not do anything with accuracy'[8].
- '[T]here developed a public perception that the new math was a clear failure'[9].
- New Math became a 'roundly condemned failure only a decade after its widely hailed – if hastily executed – debut'[10].

These claims of widespread opposition remain largely untested. Whether or not the critical voices represented a broad public consensus, a rising drumbeat of vocal opposition did clearly emerge in the public discourse in the late 1960s and early 1970s, coinciding with the rise of conservatism. This raises important questions about the nature of this opposition: Did it stem from specific pedagogical concerns about New Math, broader ideological resistance to reform itself, or some combination of these factors?

Discourse theory provides a framework for navigating the complexities of public opinion and cultural narratives. By applying discourse theory to mass me-

[4] R. Davis, *Changing School Mathematics*, p. 644–645.

[5] M. Kline, *Why Johnny Can't Add: The Failure of the New Math*, Random House, New York 1974.

[6] C.J. Phillips, *The New Math: A Political History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2014.

[7] R.W. Hayden, *A History of the 'New Math' Movement in the United St*ates, PhD thesis (unpublished), Iowa State University, Ames 1981, p. 241–245 (arguing that New Math ended as a reform movement when key figures died and it lost momentum).

[8] J.N. Payne, *The New Math*, p. 590.

[9] J.T. Fey, A.O. Graeber, *From the New Math*, p. 533.

[10] C.J. Phillips, *The New Math*, p. 143.

dia artifacts, researchers can uncover and describe dominant narratives within public discourse. This approach has been successfully employed in various cultural contexts[11]. Rather than presenting monolithic descriptions of public opinion, discourse analysis allows us to identify themes, opinions, and assumptions circulating within a culture, acknowledging that these elements may sometimes be in tension with each other. Discourse theory also recognizes that mass media texts actively construct narratives rather than simply reflecting them passively. Broadly publicized messages shape the conversation by 'provid[ing] the boundary conditions and overall patterns within which the processes of personal and group mediated selection, interpretation, and interaction go on'[12]. Consequently, examining dominant themes in mass media messages provides insight not only into the discursive landscape of a particular time and place but also into the socially constructed reality surrounding a specific topic – in this case, the perceived failure of New Math. Through discourse analysis of mass media artifacts, we can, therefore, examine how opposition to New Math was constructed and how it entered into the public consciousness while remaining agnostic about how universal this opposition was.

Methodology

This study analyzes 'letters to the editor' about New Math published in major American newspapers from 1960 through 1979. These letters offer concise, opinionated perspectives that provide valuable insight into key arguments circulating at the time, though their use requires careful consideration of selection biases. For one, editorial choices likely balanced opposing viewpoints rather than reflecting their true proportions in public opinion. Additionally, the letter writers themselves were not representative of the general public. Many identified themselves as mathematics professors, teachers, or students, and all presumably had above-average engagement with the news and strong opinions on the subject. Rather than viewing these biases as limitations, however, this study treats these engaged writers as active contributors to the construction of public narratives around New

[11] Ahmad El-Sharif, for example, examined themes in Jordanian cultural artifacts following a 2015 LGBTQIA-themed event to reveal dominant narratives about homosexuality. Edward Larkey analyzed Austrian pop and folk music to identify cultural concerns about the Americanization of Austria. A. El-Sharif, *Addressing the Question of Homophobia in Jordanian Public Discourse*, "International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature" 2017, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 47–65; E. Larkey, *Americanization, Cultural Change, and Austrian Identity*, [in:] *From World War to Waldheim: Culture and Politics in Austria and the United States*, ed. by D.F. Good, R. Wodak, Berghahn Books, New York 1999, p. 210–235.

[12] G. Gerbner, *Mass Media Discourse: Message System Analysis as a Component of Cultural Indicators*, [in:] *Discourse and Communication: New Approaches to the Analysis of Mass Media Discourse and Communication*, ed. by T.A. van Dijk, De Gruyter, Berlin 1985, p. 13–25 (p. 14).

Math, with their published opinions providing a window into the dominant arguments in circulation during this period.

Some letter writers captured by the study did not indicate their backgrounds, and these are of interest too. The views and factual understanding held by letter writers who had no personal or professional experience with New Math were likely shaped by mass media and are therefore particularly interesting for understanding the broader public discourse. Their letters offer a window into how mathematical reforms were perceived and discussed by engaged citizens outside of school settings and academic circles, revealing more clearly the themes that emerged, circulated, and then finally coalesced in the public discourse.

The study utilized the ProQuest Historical Newspapers database to identify letters to the editor mentioning New Math in U.S. newspapers from 1960 through 1979. The search terms 'new math' or 'modern mathematics' within the 'Letters to the Editor' section resulted in a sample of 163 letters. (All letters captured by the search were included in the study.) The letters appeared across 13 different publications within the database's approximately 15 representative newspapers from major American metropolitan areas[13].

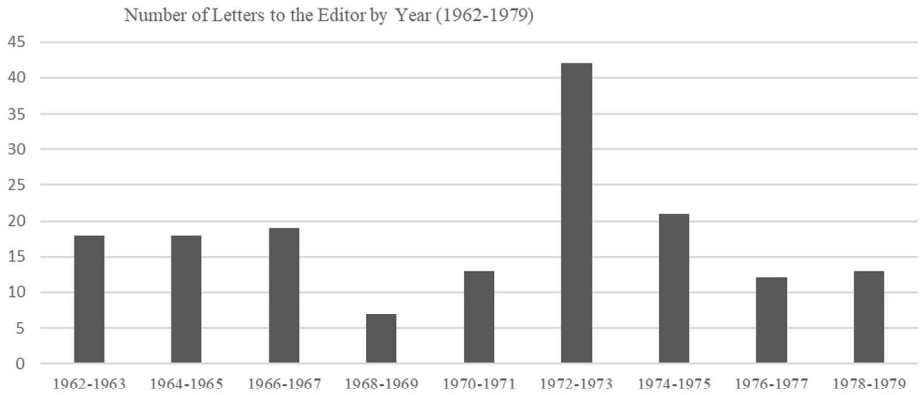

Fig. 1. Chart showing the total number of letters included in the study by year.
Note: Author's compilation.

The earliest letters in the study were from 1962, which corresponds to the widespread rollout of curriculum reforms. There was also a notable surge of let-

[13] The 163 letters were published in the following papers: "Austin-American Statesman" (5), "Baltimore Sun" (4), "The Boston Globe" (13), "Chicago Daily Defender" (3), "Chicago Tribune" (32), "Christian Science Monitor" (6), "Hartford Courant" (10), "Los Angeles Times" (23), "The Michigan Chronicle" (1), "Newsday" (19), "The New York Times" (17), "The Wall Street Journal" (7), "The Washington Post" (23).

ters in 1972, coinciding with increased public interest in education during that year's presidential election (see Fig. 1).

Letters were coded for embedded arguments/opinions and for the writer's declared background. After reviewing the arguments for commonalities, the analysis settled on two particular recurring ideological themes because those themes were well aligned with the rise of conservatism: (1) a distrust of perceived academic/cultural elites, and (2) a desire to return to traditional hierarchies of power and authority. This approach, grounded in discourse analysis, aims to uncover how public discourse around New Math reflected the broader social and political dynamics that came to dominate the era.

Findings

Overview of the public discourse about New Math

What is mathematics? The junior high textbook series produced by the School Mathematics Study Group begins by answering this fundamental question. Its answer challenged a common adult view – formed through their own schooling – that mathematics classes were primarily for learning procedures and formulas with a focus on practical applications. The SMSG textbook begins with a brief anecdote in which a mathematician is asked, 'Don't you get tired of adding columns of figures all day long?'. The mathematician responds that such computations 'can best be done by machine' and that his job is 'mainly logical reasoning'[14]. Indeed, New Math reforms were intended to prioritize mathematical structure, reasoning, and understanding over rote skills. This fundamental aim was understood both by its promoters and detractors of New Math in the letters included in this study, even when they understood little else. One letter writer in 1972, for example, complained about the emphasis of the reforms on reasoning over drill when she endorsed the common view that New Math devoted 'too much time to confusing, useless theory and too little to basic drill'[15].

While critics complained about New Math's lack of focus on basic skills, supporters defended the approach. As one mathematics tutor and computer science teacher explained, the curriculum allowed students to 'truly understand mathematics rather than memorize operations like automatons'[16]. He added that if students understand the 'foundations of mathematics, they will learn multiplication tables whenever they perceive the need to do so'. Another advocate of New Math, a professor of mathematics at the University of Washington, asked, 'Would it not be more efficient and cheaper to supply a mini-computer to each child and spend

[14] SMSG, *Mathematics for Junior High School: Student's Text*, vol. 1, Yale University Press, New Haven 1960, p. 1 (emphasis in original).

[15] B. Grant, *Basic Skills Absent*, "The Washington Post" 24.11.1972, p. A29.

[16] R. Muller, *It Makes Fewer 'Math Haters'*, "The Washington Post" 24.11.1972, p. A29.

his time in school teaching him how to think?'[17]. These supporters envisioned a world where the conceptual understanding New Math provided would liberate students from the need to learn skills by rote.

Some critics of New Math worried that the highly abstract nature of the curriculum was too far removed from the educational needs of ordinary children. One letter writer expressed this sentiment when he said that while New Math may 'enable [students] to chart a path to the moon', they will not be able to 'figure out their paycheck' when they graduate[18]. Some also expressed related frustration with the teaching of newly introduced topics, vocabulary, and notation that were meant to give students an understanding of the underlying structure of mathematics. One woman, for example, asked why a child should have to be 'utterly frustrated by other number bases, clock arithmetic, and set theory, which he'll never meet again outside a textbook?'[19]. This sentiment did not always come from a place of ignorance. An applied mathematician who worked in Washington, D.C. argued that 'set theory is of great importance for pure mathematicians, of slight importance to applied mathematicians, and of no importance for scientists, engineers, accountants, housewives, businessmen, and surveyors'[20]. A related, recurring theme among the criticisms of New Math was that the needs of 'brighter students' were prioritized over ordinary students. As one letter explained, 'the opportunity for slower students to learn basic arithmetic was sacrificed so that brighter students could be given a broader foundation in mathematical theory'[21].

The opposition to New Math grew louder in the late 1960s, and there was a call to go back to traditional mathematics. While some letter writers called for more attention to arithmetic skills, it was also common to make a broader, often nostalgic call to go 'back to basics' or 'back to fundamentals' or 'back to the three R's'. For some, this call reflected a fundamental disagreement about the proper goal of mathematics classes – to teach discrete procedures rather than to build a broader, connected understanding. One mother expressed this view when she argued that New Math makes things 'long, drawn-out and complicated', defeating the whole purpose of learning mathematics which, to her way of thinking, was 'supposed to be a fast, short, easy way to find an answer to a problem'[22]. To members of the public who held the most extreme views, narrow arithmetic skills were the only proper focus of a mathematics program because most graduating students would only need to balance a checkbook and would never need college-

[17] C. Allendoerfer, *New Math – The Last Word*, "The Wall Street Journal" 13.06.1973, p. 20.

[18] M. Marrello, *Bring Back the Old Math*, "Chicago Tribune" 30.05.1973, p. 22.

[19] J. Oxreider, *Changes Needed*, "Los Angeles Times" 21.06.1969, p. A4.

[20] L. Katz, *Adding Is to Eating*, "The Washington Post" 24.11.1972, p. A29.

[21] G. Tomlinson, *Old Things in a New Order*, "The Washington Post" 28.11.1972, p. A19.

[22] J. Carpenter, *Mother Praises Turn Away from New Math*, "Los Angeles Times" 7.01.1966, p. A4.

level mathematics. As one argued, 'It's time we quit worrying about new math and teach plain old addition and subtraction. After all, the value of "x" is not as important as how much remains in the checking account'[23].

Some who supported the need for mathematics reform were still critical of the implementation of New Math. People who made these arguments were sometimes speaking from professional experience, including teachers, school superintendents, and major figures in the reform movement. Some, including one high school senior from California in 1966, argued that teachers were not sufficiently trained to understand and implement the curriculum[24]. This student noted that while he found the textbooks easy to understand, he had seen teachers confuse students due to their own lack of understanding. Among the letters captured by this study's random sampling were contributions from two major figures in the reform movement, who were both frustrated by the obstacles to successful implementation. In his 1965 letter to "The New York Times", just as the movement was reaching its apex, Max Beberman criticized commercial textbook publishers who sold low-quality materials loosely based on the work of government-funded groups[25]. Robert Davis, looking back at the reform movement from the year 1973, wrote a letter to "The New York Times" arguing that the decentralization of the United States educational system had made effective implementation impossible[26].

In addition to the criticisms outlined above, approximately half of the sampled letters included no criticism at all, with many writers enthusiastic about a curriculum that emphasized mathematical reasoning and intellectual challenge. Even in the 1970s, when critical voices were at their most forceful, some members of the letter-writing public were equally as forceful in support. While this study does not aim to quantify public support and opposition to New Math, the letters overall do hint that there could be a more complex picture of the public opinion of New Math than has been suggested in previous scholarship. While these positive responses merit their own study, this analysis focuses on the critical letters, which consistently voiced three main substantive (i.e., non-ideological) concerns: that New Math was too abstract, that it neglected basic skills, and that it suffered from poor implementation. While the selection bias of the letters makes it impossible to say what the majority of the public understood or believed about New Math, the consistency of these criticisms suggests they did represent widespread concerns within the broader public discourse.

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[23] M. Chambers, *Treat Education as Important*, "Austin-American Statesman" 20.11.1979, p. A7.

[24] M. Fiske, *Mother Praises Turn Away from New Math*, "Los Angeles Times" 7.01.1966, p. A4.

[25] M. Beberman, *Math Teacher Explains View*, "The New York Times" 23.01.1965, p. 24. Similar arguments were made by M. Parvin, *Modern Mathematics*, "The New York Times" 1.02.1965, p. 22 and G. Greenough, *The Problems of 'New Math'*, "Los Angeles Times" 21.06.1969, p. A4.

[26] R. Davis, *School Mathematics: What Went Wrong?*, "The New York Times" 28.08.1973, p. 34.

Distrust of elites

In addition to the various substantive criticisms of New Math among the letters in this study, there were ideological themes running through the letters that aligned closely with the political backdrop of the era. While Richard Nixon had been running for office for decades, his 1968 presidential campaign marked a shift in his language. The late 1960s were a time of social unrest and economic instability, and Nixon capitalized on the perception that the nation's problems were a result of Lyndon Johnson's policies, which had expanded the reach of the federal government into social matters, including civil rights, poverty, medical care, and education. Emphasizing populism and employing anti-establishment rhetoric, Nixon appealed to what he called the 'great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans', and 'the quiet voice in the tumult'[27]. He argued that ordinary people had been failed by the policies of their leaders in Washington and that it was time to shift power back away from those leaders and back to cities and states. Nixon's anti-elite messaging harnessed and amplified existing sentiments, giving voice to a widespread but often unarticulated frustration with the perceived power of intellectual and bureaucratic elites. Anti-elite rhetoric resonated with many Americans who felt their traditional values and practical concerns were being overlooked by an increasingly disconnected class of policymakers and academics, and this rhetoric appeared frequently in letters criticizing New Math.

Of the 163 letters mentioning New Math in this study, 44 expressed reservations or distrust toward academic, business, and government elites. The timing of the letters, as reflected in Fig. 2, roughly coincided with the rise of the conservative movement, and there is evidence of a meaningful connection between these phenomena. The letters reveal how New Math became entangled with broader conservative critiques of expertise and authority, particularly regarding government intervention in social matters.

The anti-elitism sentiment in the letters often manifested as criticism that curriculum reformers were disconnected from the practical concerns of teachers. One self-described 'mere teacher' derided 'educational theorists in their splendid little cocoons in schools of education... who have never had a day of practical experience in a classroom'[28]. Similarly, one letter referred to New Math as 'theoretical hogwash'[29]. Another letter-writer compared New Math reformers to out-of-touch Ford executives who marketed the Edsel – an over-hyped commercial

[27] R. Nixon, *Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida* [speech given in Miami, Florida, 8.08.1968], https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-miami [accessed 1.01.2026].

[28] J. Griffin, *Teacher Discourses on Modern Math*, "The New York Times" 16.02.1965, p. 34.

[29] P. Marson, *Back to Educational Basics*, "The Boston Globe" 26.09.1969, p. 18.

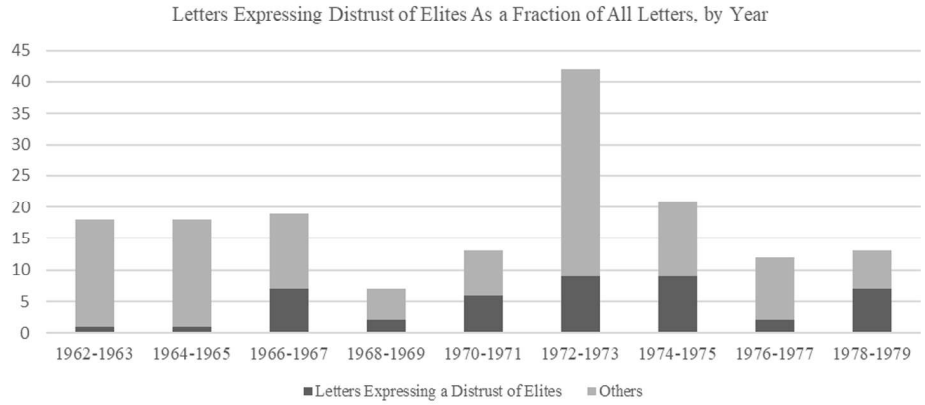

Fig. 2. Letters expressing distrust of elites, by year, as a fraction of all letters.
Note: Author's compilation.

failure – as the car of the future[30]. Several associated New Math with another perceived failure of academic elites who were disconnected from the experiences of real teachers and children – the 'look-see' reading method[31]. Some referred to academic elites by derisive names that mocked their self-perceived intellectual superiority. They were called 'the articulate few', 'crackpot Utopians', and 'men with degrees who think they are experts'[32].

Some opponents of New Math expressed a darker distrust of academic researchers, implying that academics were motivated by prestige or money and showed a callous disregard for harm to teachers and children. Critics accused education professors and state education officials of 'thriving on federal and foundation monies' to 'justify their own existence'[33]. One writer dismissed educational reforms as 'faddish panaceas' contrived by 'academicians who have wrested another grant from a foundation or the Office of Education'[34]. Others alleged that

[30] A.M. Rausch, *Edsel Education*, "Chicago Tribune" 7.02.1970, p. S14.

[31] A former high school teacher, *The Third 'R*, "Chicago Tribune" 24.06.1962, p. C16; R. Lichtblau, *Problems Facing City's Teachers*, "The New York Times" 8.09.1966, p. 46; W.P. Bebbington, *Education Is Learning*, "Christian Science Monitor" 16.08.1967, p. 16; A.M. Rausch, *Edsel Education*, p. S14; V. Wymond, *Past Results Lacking*, "Christian Science Monitor" 2.05.1970, p. 22; A. Johnson, *Schools Then and Now*, "Chicago Tribune" 19.03.1973, p. 24; C.E. Greenwood, *Botching the Works*, "The Wall Street Journal" 11.06.1973, p. 14.

[32] W.P. Bebbington, *Education Is Learning*, p. 16; P. Marson, *Back to Educational Basics*, p. 18; M. Friedman, *The 'Experts' and Education*, "Newsday" 9.03.1978, p. 73.

[33] C.E. Greenwood, *Botching the Works*, p. 14.

[34] J. Messerli, *Our Teachers and Learning in the Classroom*, "The New York Times" 28.07.1975, p. 20.

academic elites were brainwashing teachers to test new theories[35]. Multiple letters decried 'experiments' on children treated as 'guinea pigs'[36], with one claiming academics 'enjoy a unique freedom to experiment on a captive population'[37]. Reformers were labeled 'so-called educators'[38], 'engineers of disaster'[39], and 'propagandists'[40]. In two cases, the distrust of elites veered into paranoid, conspiratorial thinking. One letter-writer argued in a rant that New Math was part of a plan by the Lyndon Johnson administration to prevent poor children from learning their basic arithmetic skills – a deliberate effort 'to keep disadvantaged people from acquiring their share of the needs and technologies to survive'[41]. Another said cryptically, referring educational reforms including New Math, 'So many irrational changes have been made one suspects the existence of a master plan'[42].

Some letter writers expressed a general skepticism of federal authority and linked New Math to other controversial government initiatives. One writer argued that the public had lost its trust in public schools and that the whole system should be dismantled[43]. Another saw parallels between New Math experts and military leaders, connecting both to a broader crisis of public confidence in government authority following failures in Vietnam[44]. Others discussed New Math alongside the Supreme Court's controversial school integration decisions, treating both as examples of unwelcome federal intervention in education[45].

New Math also became a broader metaphor for obfuscation or trickery by cultural elites, as reflected in two letters in the study. One referred to American oil companies as the 'enemy within', allegedly tricking the public with false data about imports and supply: 'This must be the new math, which most of us fail to understand'[46]. Another suggested that economists were lying about inflation data, asking, 'What kind of "new math" are the economists using when they tell us

[35] J. Carpenter, *Mother Praises Turn Away from New Math*, p. A4.

[36] A former high school teacher, *The Third 'R*, p. C16; J. Carpenter, *Mother Praises Turn Away from New Math*, p. A4; W.P. Bebbington, *Education Is Learning*, p. 16; P. Marson, *Back to Educational Basics*, p. 18; C.W. Reade, *More on New Math*, "The Wall Street Journal" 12.06.1973, p. 26; A. Owen, *Education*, "Austin-American Statesman" 18.04.1975, p. 5; S. Schulsinger, No Title, "Los Angeles Times" 26.10.1975, p. 62.

[37] C.W. Reade, *More on New Math*, p. 26.

[38] A.M. Rausch, *Edsel Education*, p. S14.

[39] S. Schulsinger, No Title, p. 62.

[40] J. Griffin, *Teacher Discourse on Modern Math*, p. 34.

[41] H. Wilson, *Angry Customer*, "Chicago Daily Defender" 30.03.1970, p. 15.

[42] A. Johnson, *Schools Then and Now*, p. 24.

[43] V. Wymond, *Past Results Lacking*, p. 22.

[44] R. Martwick, *Education on the New Math*, "Chicago Tribune" 18.06.1973, p. 28.

[45] A. Johnson, *Schools Then and Now*, p. 24; S. Schulsinger, No Title, p. 62; C. Baldino, *Master Plan Spreads Tech Schools Too Thin*, "The Hartford Courant" 17.11.1975, p. 14.

[46] M. Fluhr, *Oil Figures Won't Compute*, "Newsday" 22.06.1979, p. 73.

about the rate of inflation?'[47]. In both cases, the term 'New Math' is used with contempt for those perceived to hold power and manipulate information.

The sentiment that cultural elites – especially in academia – were a cause for skepticism and even suspicion was widespread in the letters in this study, encompassing 27% (44 of 163) of the letters. This sentiment was more common among those letter writers without personal or professional experience with New Math. Of the 163 letters, 64 (39%) were written by self-designated professionals in mathematics or education or parents and children with personal experience. Yet only 7 of these 64 letters (11%) expressed distrust of elites, compared to 37 of the 99 letters (37%) from those without direct experience. Indeed, those without direct experience with New Math were more than three times as likely to express distrust of elites in their letters. This stark contrast suggests that people were far more likely to have absorbed this ideologically-infused view if they received their information from the media rather than from personal or professional experience.

Desire for traditional hierarchies of power and authority

In his 1968 Republican nomination acceptance speech, Richard Nixon depicted an America in crisis under Johnson's leadership. Declaring 'unprecedented lawlessness' in the nation, he proclaimed, 'We see cities enveloped in smoke and flame. We hear sirens in the night […] We see Americans hating each other; fighting each other; killing each other at home'[48]. Nixon's campaign juxtaposed these immediate concerns about civil unrest against an idealized American past of social order. This rhetoric of returning to traditional hierarchies of power and authority was echoed in debates about mathematics education.

The controversy surrounding New Math reveals a disconnect between educational reality and public perception. The New Math curricula were, in fact, highly structured, with students following specific, prescribed methods. Nothing about New Math's pedagogical approach implied a change in classroom management or encouraged unruly student behavior. Still, some critics conflated New Math with what they saw as declining academic standards and classroom discipline. This misalignment is particularly telling – New Math became a symbol onto which critics projected broader cultural anxieties.

Letter writers who were critical of New Math frequently expressed their opposition through nostalgic appeals to traditional mathematics instruction, emphasizing the virtues of repetition and drills. A former teacher fondly recalled the mathematics of '40 years ago', insisting that 'a little exercise is good for the

[47] G. Cramer, *The Cost of Beans*, "Chicago Tribune" 13.02.1976, p. A2.

[48] R. Nixon, *Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida* [speech given in Miami, Florida, 8.08.1968].

brain'[49]. Others made explicit connections between perceived mathematical rigor and moral character. One writer argued that without 'drill and dull routine', students would be ill-prepared for real-world challenges, advocating for and asserting that 'there is a definite place for a certain amount of rote learning for children, whether it's the multiplication tables or the Ten Commandments'[50]. A Unitarian minister went further, drawing a connection between traditional mathematical instruction and the kind of personal discipline that, he believed, builds moral character. New Math, by contrast, was a symptom of modern society's addiction to instant gratification. The writer compared New Math to 'instant coffee, instant dinners, and instant hair-dos' and lamented that children were learning they 'can get the results without the effort'[51].

Some critics focused on what they perceived as New Math's threat to traditional classroom authority structures. Three writers explicitly grouped New Math with other educational reforms aimed at increasing student autonomy, such as open classrooms and the inclusion of elective courses in a high school program. One declared these innovations failures and demanded 'more fundamental learning and discipline'[52]. Another saw these reforms as symptoms of America's deteriorating 'spiritual relationship with God', warning of impending national instability[53]. A third drew direct connections between student autonomy and classroom misconduct, claiming 'cheating becomes rampant'[54].

For some letter writers, these concerns about mathematical instruction were linked explicitly to anxieties about classroom behavior. One writer characterized New Math as part of a broader 'children's liberation' movement that had produced 'total lack of discipline causing chaos in our schools'[55]. Another yearned for the schools of fifty years prior, when '[d]iscipline was better' and '[b]asic subjects received top priority'[56]. While most critics remained vague about their definition of 'discipline', one parent's perspective was unsettlingly clear: she relocated her children away from a district because it used New Math and did not discipline children sufficiently, preferring a district where 'paddles are in the rooms and the teachers are allowed to use them' because 'it's surprising how much more effective teaching can be done'[57].

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[49] A former high school teacher, *The Third 'R*, p. C16.

[50] M. Wheeler, *Needed: Old Fashioned Teaching*, "Christian Science Monitor" 8.08.1978, p. 22.

[51] D. Kuby, *Responsibility for Addictions of Youth*, "The New York Times" 3.04.1967, p. 32.

[52] P. and D. Diehl, *Test Scores Reflect Success of Programs*, "The Hartford Courant" 29.09.1976, p. 18.

[53] A. Owen, *Education*, p. 5

[54] M. Saltz, *Back to Educational Basics*, "Newsday" 11.07.1974, p. 77.

[55] S. Schulsinger, No Title, p. G2.

[56] A. Johnson, *Schools Then and Now*, p. 24

[57] N. Click, *Losing Battle*, "Austin-American Statesman" 27.09.1976, p. A6.

Of the 163 letters analyzed, fifteen explicitly connected New Math to perceived educational and behavioral permissiveness. These letters were written between 1967 and 1978, with the first coinciding with Nixon's political ascendancy. While this theme was less prominent than anti-elitism, its consistency suggested a significant undercurrent in public debate. Notably, thirteen of these fifteen discipline-focused critics had no direct experience with New Math, either personally or professionally. This distance between criticism and actual experience underscores how New Math became a lightning rod for broader social and political anxieties.

Discussion

The analysis of letters to the editor reveals that opposition to New Math was significantly shaped by the broader political climate of the late 1960s and 1970s, often independent of the curriculum's actual merits or shortcomings. Just as Nixon's rhetoric framed Johnson's programs as failures stemming from overreach by disconnected elites, New Math became characterized as another example of academic experts imposing impractical reforms on ordinary Americans, reforms that lead to societal instability and unrest. The fact that it was critics without direct experience of New Math who tended to express these sentiments suggests how effectively such political narratives shaped public understanding. Through repeated circulation of these themes in public discourse, a constructed reality emerged where New Math's perceived failure was interpreted through the same lens as the broader conservative critique of progressive governance – as an example of elite overreach and declining traditional authority. This analysis demonstrates how educational reforms, regardless of their specific content, can become powerful symbols in broader cultural and political debates. The public discourse around New Math ultimately reflected and reinforced the rising conservative movement's central themes rather than engaging substantively with the mathematical and pedagogical issues at stake.

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