

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Why 65% of Fourth Graders Can't Really Read

I'm Barry Weiss, and this is Honestly.

For many parents, the last few years have been eye-opening, as they saw the American education system crumble under the weight of the pandemic, school closures that went on far too long, zoom school for kids in preschool, and other stringent policies that were still just beginning to understand the devastating effects of, like, delayed language skills, falling test scores, and not to mention isolation and anxiety and depression.

But like many things during the pandemic, COVID didn't necessarily cause these structural breakdowns, as much as it exposed just how broken the system was to begin with.

And nowhere is that more clear than in our story today, about why 65% of American fourth-grade kids can barely read.

Now, we've known for some time that the state of reading in the United States is not great. Every few years, we get these staggering headlines about our poor national reading test scores, which we're always shocked by and then seem to forget.

But then came the pandemic, and parents, for the first time, came face-to-face with just how bad and ineffective the reading instruction in their kids' classrooms were.

And they started asking questions about why.

That is the subject of Emily Hanford's new podcast from American Public Media, which is called Sold a Story, where she investigates the influential education authors who have promoted a bunk idea and a failed method for teaching reading to American kids. And it's an expose of how educators across the country came to believe something that isn't true and are now reckoning with the consequences.

Children harmed, tons of money wasted, and an education system upended.

So today, I'm turning the mic over to my friend Katie Herzog, who talked to Emily about her groundbreaking reporting and what we can do to make things right. Stay with us.

Hi Emily, thank you so much for being here.

Thank you, I'm happy to be here.

Your series starts out with a Rhode Island mother named Corinne Adams, and Corinne makes a pretty disturbing discovery when her son is at home during Zoom kindergarten during COVID.

What did she find out?

So Corinne was sitting there watching her child be taught to read, as many parents were for the first time, right?

Parents were suddenly kind of in the classroom with kids.

So we sit together and I participate.

You know, I help him make sure he can unmute himself and all that stuff.

So she noticed how he was being taught to read and she thought it was kind of strange.

And what she noticed is that her son Charlie was not being taught how to sound out the words.

And Charlie was being given a lot of books with actually pretty difficult words in them

that she knew he didn't know how to sound out.

And he was being told to look at the picture, look at the first letter, think of a word that makes sense and try to come up with the word.

So I was like, OK, well, this is a new different way and I'm sure they understand what they're doing. Corinne was being told that he was doing well in school.

He was making progress. He was on level.

And then in the fall of first grade, she actually had to give him a reading assessment at home because it was COVID.

And she gave him a book he'd never seen before and Charlie was completely lost.

He didn't really know any of the words and he couldn't figure them out from the pictures.

She was being told he was fine and she thought, huh, something's wrong here.

It was just like eye popping and I went into my bedroom and cried.

He's not doing OK. And this kid doesn't know how to read the words.

And how did you start to realize that her story was not an anomaly and that this wasn't just one anecdote?

There was something bigger, widespread and more systemic going on here.

So I've been an education reporter for a long time and I started getting interested in this question of reading

and how kids learn to read and how kids are taught to do it several years ago.

So over the years, I've met a lot of parents who have had this aha moment of discovering that their kid is really struggling with reading,

even though the school is saying they're doing fine.

And I happened to be reporting soul to story right when COVID hit.

And suddenly I was hearing from a lot of parents, I was getting emails from them.

I was seeing comments on Twitter who were making this discovery.

And I would say these were probably the parents of kids who maybe weren't struggling a huge amount.

You know, these were, for years, I think I had been talking to the parents of like the kids who really struggle with reading.

But what I think was happening during COVID is more and more parents were getting a chance to see how their kids were being taught,

noticing that their kids were frustrated and sort of not putting it together in terms of how to read with the reading instruction that they were getting.

So Corinne is actually one of many parents who I found on Twitter.

She started posting about it.

So I contacted her and I contacted a number of other parents who were posting basically saying like, what is this way that my kid is being taught to read?

And I started interviewing and talking to them and found that this was actually a thing.

There are a lot of parents like Corinne out there who really noticed this problem because of Zoom school.

So you found the one good thing that came out of COVID and the one good thing to come out of Twitter.

But just how widespread is this problem? Who is this affecting? Do we know how many kids?

We have some ways to measure reading proficiency in this country.

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We have something called the NAEP, which is the National Assessment of Educational Progress. And there's a version of this test that's been around since the early 90s. So we can see how well kids across the country are doing in fourth grade and eighth grade. They do a reading test and a math test. And this test tells us that most kids are not proficient readers in this country and the scores have not changed very much since we started giving this test back in the early 1990s. And the message from that is not very good. We know actually that only about a third of kids are proficient readers in fourth grade on that test. And there are huge gaps when you look at this by family income, by race. We have huge, huge gaps. So we know that this is actually a pretty big problem and it's been a big problem for a long time. Even though these tests come out every two years and every two years there are these headlines like, oh my goodness, American kids really aren't doing well with reading. I think there was kind of a sense that nothing could be done about it, that it was just kind of the way things were. What my reporting showed me over the past few years is that one of the things that's going on is we have an instructional problem. Kids are not being taught to read in many schools in ways that really line up with what we know about reading and how it works. And it's making it harder for a lot of kids to learn how to read. Some kids are getting the help they need outside of school, like ultimately Corinne's son Charlie, because Corinne decided to teach him herself. And I think there are a number of parents who end up doing that. There are a number of parents who end up hiring private tutors and spending thousands of dollars in some cases, getting their kids the reading instruction that they're not getting in school, which is why one of the things that I emphasize when I talk about this topic is at the end of the day this is really an equity issue. A lot of kids are not being taught what they need to know in school about how their written language works. And some kids are getting that instruction in spite of the fact that they're not getting it in school. And they're getting it because they're lucky to have parents who have time, like Corinne Adams did, to teach her son herself and or money to hire a private tutor to help them. But there are all kinds of kids who are not getting the instruction they need, and that's not public education. I think one of the first responsibilities of public school, and I think most parents would agree on this, that the one thing that they assume when they send their little kid off to school is that that kid will be taught to read. And that's one of the things that Corinne said to me. That assumption got pricked for her. She came to question that. She realized that that wasn't necessarily the case, and I think many parents are realizing that, that they trust that the schools are teaching their kids to read, but it isn't necessarily so.

Okay, well, I want to talk about how we got here.

Could you start by explaining how reading was taught in the U.S. before things went haywire?

Now, it's really difficult to get an answer to this question for two reasons.

One, I don't think there's one way that reading was being taught necessarily.

And number two, we live in a country with thousands of school systems and individual states, school districts, schools,

even individual teachers have a lot of freedom to teach the way they want.

And there's no sort of centralized system which tells you, like, this is the way that this school teaches reading

and this is the way that this school teaches reading.

But we do have a lot of information from surveys, from research studies, about some sort of general outlines and trends.

And there's always been arguments about how people read and how they should be taught, and they go back hundreds of years.

You can see actually, like, really emotional fights about it back in the 1800s when we were first establishing public schools in the United States.

And there were sort of two different ideas back then and two sort of different approaches.

One was like the whole word approach and one was the phonics approach.

So in the phonics approach, the idea is that words are made up of letters and those letters represent sounds and combinations of letters.

This is Kamari. He's in first grade and he's on Zoom with his teacher learning how to sound out words.

Kamari is looking closely at each word, trying to sound it out, and then suddenly realizing it's a word he knows.

And kids should be taught sort of from the bottom up.

So they start with letters and sounds and they learn how these letters go together to form the sounds and words.

They learn to sound out written words and to understand what the words are.

So it's like you teach kids the pieces of the language to sort of get to the whole.

And then the other approach was this whole word method, which is let's start with the whole word.

I'm going to read a little bit of this story to you and if I get stuck on a word,

I want you to try to help me figure out what that word could be.

The teacher reads the story. The kids can see the words on the screen.

They're following along as she reads.

And then the teacher comes to a word that she's covered up with a little yellow sticky note.

Okay, so we're going to stop right here on this covered word.

And the teacher says, what could this word be? Let's look at the picture.

We're going to see if the picture helps us to figure out what that word would be.

And Zelda and Ivy didn't want to eat the sandwiches, so they ran away.

And now they think their mom and dad will...

Will what?

Zelda and Ivy ran away and now they think their mom and dad will scold them, find them?

Do you think that covered word could be the word miss?

Ah, miss them.

Could it be the word miss? Because now that they're gone, maybe their parents will miss them?
The teacher asks the kids to think about whether miss could be the word,
using the strategies they've been taught.
Let's do our triple check and see. Does it make sense? Does it sound right?
How about the last part of our triple check? Does it look right?
Let's uncover the word and see if it looks right.
The teacher lifts up the sticky note and indeed, the word is miss.
It looks right too. Good job. Very good job.
Go ahead and click on the next slide so you can practice.
Kids don't need to understand the pieces of the words.
Let's start with the whole words, because that's eventually what we're trying to get to.
And that's the most interesting thing. We want to get to the whole words and the meaning.
Let's do sort of more of a top-down approach.
Let's start with sort of the words as whole, sentences, paragraphs, the meaning.
If we focus on the meaning of the story, kids will figure out what they need to know
about the letters and sounds and the words and how they work.
So this was a big debate for a really long time.
And then in the 1960s, this kind of new twist of an idea came along,
and it came to be known as whole language, which is a little bit different than the whole word
method.
But the idea was let's focus on the goal here, which is meaning, having kids comprehend text.
Let's sort of start there and not waste time on sort of the little rules around
spelling patterns and how they work, because that will be sort of boring and rote
and might distract kids from what might ultimately motivate them to want to read,
which is sort of the meaning of the story.
But you encounter the fact that what are you going to do about the words?
How do you help kids sort of know what those words are?
So in the 1960s, there was sort of this other theory that came around about reading and how it
works,
which is we don't actually need to sound out the words or know these little pieces,
but we can get the words through these other clues or cues.
We can kind of predict what we're reading as we're reading.
If we're focusing on the meaning, we can sort of predict the words,
and we can use clues that the words provide us, a letter, some of the letters,
the sort of context, the meaning.
With a little kid in a book, they could use something like the picture.
Check the picture.
And you see these poor kids struggling over very simple words,
and the teachers instead of saying, sound it out, they're telling them to use basically anything else.
Wonderful. Let's close our books for a minute.
And so whole language took off.
So this whole language theory of reading became really popular in the 1970s and 80s
by a teacher and researcher named Marie Clay.
I went into classrooms, I recorded exactly what children were saying and doing,

and this gave me new insights for building almost a new theory of how our children were learning to read.

She was appointed a dame by the Brits in 1987.

Bill Clinton in 1998 was singing her praises.

She was even inducted into some sort of international reading hall of fame, which is apparently a thing that exists.

Why did she and her method become so popular?

Marie Clay herself, I think one of the reasons that she has been such a powerful influence in reading and how it's taught in the United States and around the world,

is because not only was she a researcher, someone with a theory about how reading works, but she developed a program that became very influential called Reading Recovery.

So Reading Recovery is a program that's just for kids in the equivalent of first grade, who are the lowest readers in their class.

And the idea is that they get one-on-one help with a highly trained reading teacher over the course of many, many weeks and even months,

like 12 to 20 weeks of one-on-one instruction every school day,

which is actually the amount of instruction that some kids really need.

Some kids really need a lot of very intense, direct instruction.

And I think one of the things that Marie Clay identified

that a lot of people surprisingly weren't talking about as much as you would think back then is how important it is to catch kids early,

that when they're struggling with reading, we really need to intervene quickly.

And I think a lot of the idea back then was, well, it'll just come in time, just let kids develop.

And Marie was saying, no, no, no, it's really important to catch kids early.

And then what happened in the 1970s and 80s

is there was this gigantic explosion of research on how our brains read.

How do we even do that?

And a big takeaway from that is that skilled readers are actually really good at this letters and sounds thing.

They actually know the words sort of instantly and accurately.

They store, actually, when you're a good reader,

you can actually sort of store, remember the written forms of like tens of thousands of words in your mind.

But you didn't like memorize those.

You didn't like sort of take a picture of them.

You actually sounded those words out at some point when you were like a little kid

or even as an older adult when you're coming across a word you've never seen before.

You sound out the word.

You connect the pronunciation of the word with the spelling and the meaning of the word.

And you sort of link those things tightly.

And it's through like the linking those three things,

the spelling, the meaning and the pronunciation that you kind of like get this word into your brain.

And that's actually the hallmark of being a skilled reader

because you don't have a problem with the words.
It doesn't take you a long time to figure out the words.
They're instantly there for you.
And what you're doing when you're reading,
you are actually using your brain, your cognitive power, your energy,
your focus, your attention on the meaning of what you're reading
rather than trying to figure out the words.
And it became clear that this idea that people predict the words as they read,
that they're using clues to figure out what they are,
that they're sort of looking at a word and being like,
it could be this word, it could be that word,
that that is in fact exactly the way that struggling readers read.
So it turns out that the way kids are taught matters.
And that if we teach kids the habits of struggling readers,
which is what is happening in some classrooms in this country,
we're actually making it harder for many kids to learn how to read.
But Marie Claire became very influential with this reading recovery program
that spread all over the world and came to the United States.
There were people who were followers of hers, many,
but there were two really prominent ones.
Their names were Irene Fountas and Gay Sue Pinnell.
So we cannot count on science and must accept its findings tentatively.
They're education professors, they're still alive,
and they thought we should take these ideas
and use them for all kids in the whole classroom.
Use an easel, small chalkboard, white dry erase board,
or magnet letters to involve children in working with words and parts of words.
Word work is an optional part of the lesson.
It'll be very important for some readers.
You will want to include it for children who need to solve words more quickly
as they read text.
And these two women, Fountas and Pinnell,
I think many of the ways that kids are taught to read
actually have to do with their success in the late 90s and early 2000s
in writing books and eventually curriculum materials
that became very popular in schools
and sort of spreading this particular idea of how to teach reading.
And again, they weren't the only ones who were selling this idea.
There were many others,
but they kind of became what I found in my reporting
as sort of like the brand name version of it.
You know, they were kind of like experts that lots of schools looked to
for how to teach reading,
and their theory came along with books for kids to read,

an assessment system to tell you where kids were reading
and an intervention system to help kids who were still struggling
in first and second and third grade.

And they really created a very powerful publishing
and professional development series of projects, I guess,
that really helped get this idea into schools all over the country.
I want to get back to Fountas and Pinnell in just a minute,
but first, it was pretty clear by the 1990s
that this method of reading just wasn't working for most students.
And yet here we are, 30 years later,
talking about the problems that this continues to pose in schools.
And like much of the rest of our current dysfunction,
one reason that reading instruction has been faltering so much for so long
is because reading became politicized specifically during the Bush administration.
How did that happen?

So actually under Bill Clinton, who was a Democrat,
there was the beginning to be a recognition
that there was this huge body of scientific research about reading and how it works,
that a lot of teachers and people in schools didn't know,
and reading instruction was not being informed by the findings of this research.
And there was actually under Bill Clinton, a big panel was convened
to sort of try to end the reading wars,
like now we know a lot about reading and how it works,
so let's stop fighting about which way is best.
Let's really look at this evidence and base it all on this scientific evidence.
So that was actually started under Bill Clinton,
and there was this huge panel that came out in 2000,
and the findings of this national reading panel
really tilted in favor of how important it is
to give kids phonics instruction,
not the only thing, but that that is such a foundational core thing,
that kids learning how to sound out those written words,
connect the spelling to the meaning and pronunciation,
is this essential part of becoming a good reader that happens when kids are 5, 6, 7 years old,
and the kids have to get good at that by the time they're in like second grade.
And there was a real consensus about that in this national reading panel report,
and it discredited a lot of the things about the whole language movement.
So the whole language movement really started to be discredited by the end of the 1990s.
And so then George Bush came along,
and George Bush has an interesting family history,
and that there is a history of reading problems in George Bush's family.
His brother had a really difficult time learning how to read.
His mother became one of the many mothers out there
who noticed that her child was struggling

and had to figure out what to do about that.
He wasn't getting the help that he needed in school.
I can tell you that almost everything I care about would be better
if more people could read, write, and comprehend.
So is it possible?
I don't know, but I hope it's possible,
and I hope everyone will make it their business to see it's possible.
She became a huge advocate for better reading instruction and for literacy programs,
and her son George Bush carried this passion into his presidency.
We will launch a new initiative called Reading First.
This is George W. Bush at a campaign stop in September of 2000.
He tells the crowd that if he's elected president,
he'll spend \$5 billion on reading programs.
But we will only support effective programs, effective reading strategies.
Four months later, George W. Bush was president of the United States.
In his first week in office in the Roosevelt Room of the White House,
President Bush began laying the groundwork for his Reading First initiative.
It means we're going to have scientific-based knowledge
in the cornerstone of our curriculum,
and that's why I appreciate Reed Lyon and others.
And he passed something called Reading First,
which was billions of dollars to try to get this research into schools,
and then the Twin Towers were hit and the Iraq War,
and a lot of things about George W. Bush's presidency changed.
But that initiative continued for many years.
We spent billions of dollars trying to get this research into teachers' hands.
I have come across many teachers who have told me that their lives were changed by that,
that they learned for the first time how kids learned to read,
that they hadn't known this, and they were given good materials,
and it was really exciting.
And yet, that initiative, for a variety of reasons, really ended up falling apart.
And I think, ironically, paving the way for the next 10 years or so,
where this idea that was supposed to be sort of batted down and batted away by the research
actually kind of flourished and took hold in American schools like never before.
And it's in recent years where people have looked up and around and said,
oh, wait a minute, we had this big effort to try to bring this research into schools,
and yet, many schools are still not teaching in ways that line up with this evidence.
What happened with that?
And this is big business, right?
Like in the early 2000s, the two women that you mentioned a moment ago,
Irene Fountas and Gaye Soupanel,
they came up with a version of Marie Clay's work called Guided Reading,
and they sold it to a much larger audience.
So the curriculum was for any grade level, not just for the first years in school.

And they basically argued that you could teach reading without phonics, without making kids learn how to sound out words. And their books became enormously successful. They became the guide on reading instruction, and these women became very, very wealthy themselves. You say in the podcast that Penel drove a Maserati, and Fountas had a \$3 million house in 2006. Did that, at the time, did that raise alarm bells for anyone? There's a lot of money in education, many billions of dollars. And of course, there's nothing wrong with making money. There's schools need materials, they need programs, they need professional advice. We need to spend money on these things in schools. So I don't think it's the fact that they made money. What I wanted people to focus on is what they made money on. And the sort of irony of the fact that they made a lot of money on an idea that had been shown not to be right by cognitive scientists years before they actually started selling it. So that is the problem. It's not the money itself, but where are the checks and balances in the system to make sure that people are not selling things to schools that are based on ideas that aren't right and that are making it harder for some kids to learn how to read. So education is a so many billion-dollar industry, and these women have made many millions of dollars from this work. And the question really is, why? Why were they able to make that money and sell that material when there was so much evidence that there were other ways to be teaching reading that would be much more effective for kids? And I think this is a question not just accountability for them, but for all of us. Why do the systems allow things to be sold that are not based on good evidence? So I think some of this really goes back to the fact that many teachers, when they're in college, when they're preparing to teach, they are not taught a lot about this scientific research on reading. And that gets into another sort of institutional question about influence. And it really is that schools of education writ large in this country. Many of them were quite invested in the people in them in this whole language movement that I talked about in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. And there definitely are exceptions, but in many schools across the country, teachers are just not taught the scientific research. Many of their professors don't know about it or resist it because it sort of doesn't go with beliefs that they have about how teaching little kids to read should look like. I make this point in an earlier documentary, but what happens on a lot of college campuses,

you have the school of education and across the quad are like the cognitive scientists, and they're not communicating with each other. They're sort of putting out different ideas about reading and how it works. It was a little bit treated like he said, she said for a long time, well, like you have your way of doing it and I have my way of doing it, and I'll just keep doing it my way and you keep doing it your way. And I know this just from interviewing so many teachers and looking at surveys of teachers is that teachers just aren't, in some cases, taught much of anything about how to teach reading. And then they get into schools and they think, whoa, I have no idea how to teach these little kids to read. And there's a real urgency around that because they want to teach these kids to read. They need to teach these kids to read and they don't know how. And so they're desperate for advice. And these two women that we mentioned, Irene Fountas and Gaysu Penel and Mari Clay, and many others, there's really a whole industry of people out there who are selling advice on how to teach reading. They'll come into your school and do professional development. They'll make books that are sort of advice for teachers. And this stuff really took off, I think, because teachers didn't know. They didn't know enough to be wise consumers of what they were buying. They didn't know that what they were buying contained ideas that cognitive science had shown not to be so. They desperately needed advice. Some of these women, there's another woman who I talk about in the podcast, whose name is Lucy Cohens and she's a professor at Teachers College, Columbia. I think these people, Lucy Cohens in particular, I think, but Gaysu Penel, Irene Fountas, Mari Clay and many others, people really looked up to them. People in schools really looked up to them. They really trusted them. They really believed what they were saying, partly because they were answering questions that teachers needed answers to, and they were doing it in a way that teachers understood. They were all people who had been teachers. They sort of understand what teachers need. They sort of speak the language of teachers. They give them materials in a way that teachers can really use, as opposed to sometimes some of these more traditional textbooks that come to teachers and don't really seem to fit with the kind of way that they want to teach kids, or they sort of came along speaking their language. And so I think a lot of people just became enamored of a certain group of people who were telling them how to do this and sort of wooed by them. And I think it's taken a number of parents raising questions,

reporting done by me and others, research by scientists to say,
hey, wait a minute here.
Look, we've got a problem here.
Let's back up and question the assumptions.
Question what you're buying from certain people.
Look at where these ideas came from.
What is this based on?
And what's wrong with that?
There's a problem here.
Yeah, it seems like people really do treat these reading experts,
maybe so-called experts as heroes.
At one point in your series, Penel compared Marie Clay to Isaac Newton.
She said that she keeps a copy of a first edition of Marie Clay's book locked up in her house.
Another person you quoted in the series said that,
If Beyonce came and gave a private concert in my district,
it would not have been a bigger deal for many of my teachers.
Teachers think of Lucy Calkins higher than Beyonce.
And it's interesting to me that how we teach reading, it seems like a fad,
but why are we following fads or icons or influencers
when it comes to children's education instead of the research?
I think this question, I mean, I get asked this a lot.
Sort of like, why is this question of how children are taught to read so emotional?
You know, why have we had reading wars?
I mean, what?
A war about reading?
Why?
I think it has to do with how important it is.
We all know this.
Any parent knows this.
And this is why getting back to the equity issue,
it's like any parent who notices that their little child is struggling with learning to read
when they're six or seven years old and they can do something about that,
they're going to do it.
If it means taking out credit card debt or mortgaging their house
or borrowing from grandparents, you know, they're going to make that happen.
So this has been a war because it's so critical and everyone knows it.
I also think that there are a lot of myths about reading that are easy to believe
because of our own experiences, right?
I just think this is rife with confirmation bias.
Like this is just an area where there's just so much vulnerability to confirmation bias.
And I'll give myself as an example.
I've been an education reporter for a long time.
Since 2008, I've been just covering education.
I didn't think about this question of how kids are taught to read at all.

I didn't know anything about it.
I should have known.
Just like teachers should have known, really.
And we all should have known, including me.
I should have known more about little kids and how they learn to read.
And I have two little kids, or I had two little kids.
They're now 22 and 19.
But I had two little boys and they learned to read pretty easily.
One really easily.
He was like reading in kindergarten and I had no idea how he learned how to do that.
I think I learned to read pretty easily.
I really don't remember very much at all about learning how to read.
I don't remember it being very difficult.
But I think a lot of us assume that learning to read did just kind of happens.
If you're read to enough, if you want to read, if you have access to books,
right?
So if children are in a literate environment, they will learn how to read.
That it's kind of a natural process.
And I just assumed reading happened.
And it leads to this assumption that I was referring to earlier,
that if kids aren't reading, if they are struggling,
then it must be a problem in their home.
It must be that their parents didn't read to them enough.
It must be that they're poor.
They didn't get enough access to books.
And those can definitely contribute.
Those actually turn out, when you know something about reading,
those turn out to be very big factors.
But at the end of the day, the issue here is that just surrounding those kids with books
wouldn't necessarily solve their problem.
Just making sure, you know, motivating kids to want to read
does not mean they will learn how to do it.
Kids need instruction.
And like I said, some kids need a lot.
So I just assumed, because it was easy for me,
that it must be pretty easy for lots of other people.
And what I've learned is that it's not.
And that people's assumption about reading and how it works
is checked very quickly when their own child struggles.
And you know what is especially painful is when this happens for teachers.
And this is happening to a lot of teachers across the country.
It is the aha moment that they're having, or that they had long ago.
And it is a very painful one.
And it's this.

I've been teaching first grade for 10 years.
And now I have a child, and she went to school,
and it's the end of first grade, and she's really not reading.
And it's really hard, and she's really frustrated,
and I'm trying to teach her, and I have no idea how.
And I'm a first grade teacher, and I don't know how kids learn to read.
I don't know how to teach this child how to do it.
I can't tell you how many teachers I've talked to who've told me that.
And then they cry.
And they're desperate because they have to fix this problem for their daughter,
who they know needs help really quickly.
And then they start seeing the faces and remembering the names
of all the children that they've taught over those 10 years
who were struggling and who they didn't actually know how to help.
And who actually, at the end of the day, some of them dismissed as kind of a harsh word,
but they explained it to themselves.
Teachers explained it to themselves by saying,
oh, well, I guess he wasn't read to enough when he was little,
and there's not much I can do.
Or I guess she must have a disability, and maybe she does.
But what we know from lots of research is that even kids with reading disabilities
can learn how to read if they're taught how to do it.
So that's when these teachers' assumptions are checked and they realize, like,
whoa, there's a lot of stuff I don't know here.
I need to learn something more about kids and how they learn to read
and why some kids struggle.
And I did figure out a way to teach the kids in my class,
and they've learned it through the hard lesson of their own child who couldn't read.
As you report, 65% of fourth graders in the US are not proficient readers.
Why did it take so long for this story, really the scandal, to come to the public's attention?
Well, like I said, you know, every time we get these test scores and they're disappointing,
there are headlines and it's shocking.
But I think we've gotten used to the problem.
I think because at the end of the day, we're kind of explaining away these poor reading scores
as if poverty can explain it all.
And I don't think poverty explains it all.
In fact, I think the problem actually maybe when you look at those test scores,
it maybe has more to do with wealth.
It's the question of who's getting the instruction they need,
and a lot of that's being driven by wealth.
And so I think it's really important to recognize that this is an instructional issue
that we can do more about.
Now that said, it's not only an instructional issue.
Poverty definitely does play a role when kids, if kids grow up in a home poor or not,

where they're not being read to a lot, where they're not being talked to a lot, where they're not sort of accumulating really good skills with language and getting background knowledge.

All of those things play a really key role in a child's ultimate ability to get to where we want, which is to be a person who can comprehend a text.

So it's not just your ability to read those words.

You've got to know what the words mean.

You've got to have a way of putting it together.

Comprehension is a complex thing.

So when you look at those reading scores, it's not just instruction that you're seeing.

You're seeing many issues.

I think another thing is that the tests themselves are kind of problematic.

One of the things that we've decided in this country is that we don't tell schools what to teach or how to teach it.

We're a very local, controlled country.

It's actually written into the establishment of the U.S. Department of Education that the federal government cannot tell schools what curriculum to use.

And so what it means is that we haven't agreed in this country on what we want our kids to know.

And any time we go into that debate, it's a mess, right?

We just let culture wars come right up.

There's so much knowledge out there.

How are we going to decide what it is we think children should actually know?

And when you look at something like a fourth grade reading test, what's being tested there is not just a child's ability to read the words.

It's really a knowledge test, right?

Those tests include all kinds of reading passages that kids then have to answer questions about.

And what we know from the research is that, for example, there's a very famous study, and this example gets used a lot, and it's known as the baseball study, and I may misdescribe how they did it.

But essentially, the big takeaway of that is you could have a kid who is a really good reader, like you take a really good reader and a not very good reader, and you give the really good reader who knows nothing about baseball, a passage about baseball, and their comprehension of that text might not be very good, because they just don't know a lot of the terminologies that's being used in a passage about baseball. You give a passage about baseball to a kid who's not a very good reader, but knows a lot about baseball and has maybe actually been seen a lot of texts about baseball, so maybe has sort of memorized some of the words you'd see in a text about baseball, ball, and bat, and homerun, and pitcher, and understand some things about how baseball works. You give that kid a passage about baseball, and their reading comprehension might actually be kind of good,

even though they can't actually read the words that well, because they can actually get the gist of it from the words they know and do a certain amount of guessing and filling in with the context, right? And they've got the background knowledge to fill in the gaps.

So those fourth grade reading tests depend a lot on the passages that kids get and whether or not they know anything about them.

It's not a pure test of a child's reading ability, because reading ability isn't purely one thing.

Reading ability is actually, I like to talk about this equation, which researchers came up with back in the 1980s when I was in high school, because they were trying to disentangle all the stuff that's really contentious in the debates about reading, and everyone was really fighting about phonics instruction and then teaching kids the skills of reading words back then.

This was sort of the height of the whole language movement.

And researchers were really trying to kind of like understand all of the pieces of reading.

And they came up with this equation, essentially, called the simple view of reading.

And I think it's really helpful when people understand this simple view of reading.

The simple view of reading does not say that reading is simple.

The simple view of reading is a simple way of understanding this really complex process.

And you have to picture it. It's not very hard, but it's like a multiplication.

It's multiplication.

So it's reading comprehension, which is the goal, is the product of two things.

So one is your ability to read the words, the printed words, to decode them, to know what they are, times your language comprehension, which is like all the words you know the meaning of.

But even more than that, it's sort of your background knowledge and like the stuff you know.

So your reading comprehension is a product of two things.

Your ability to actually read the words, know what the words say, times, not plus times, your language comprehension, which is like your ability, nothing to do with reading printed words.

That's if someone's talking to you or reading out loud to you.

Do you understand what they're saying?

So it's a product of those two things.

It's really important to understand that it's a product because what you know is zero times anything is zero.

So a kid with great language comprehension knows all kinds of stuff, but they have zero ability to read the words.

This is like a three or four-year-old before they know anything, zero.

Their reading comprehension is going to be zero.

But the other thing is true, too.

You've got really good ability to read the words, but your language comprehension isn't very good.

Your reading comprehension isn't going to be very good.

My reporting has focused a lot on one part of the equation, the written words part, because I think we're really getting that wrong in many schools, and that's a big problem.

Language comprehension really matters,

and at the end of the day is probably something that schools will have less influence over, because that actually is greatly affected by your background,

like your parents' level of knowledge,

by whether or not you get to go on a vacation to Paris,

you go to the movies, you go to museums, you know a lot of stuff, which is really going to help you with your reading comprehension and tends to be pretty tightly wound in with your parents' educational background and your family income.

And schools are actually going to have less of an effect on that. You just have to do better on that side of the equation, too.

But this reading the words part is something that schools can have a huge impact on, and right now many schools are getting it very wrong.

And so it's very important to get that right.

It's only half the equation.

It's not going to solve all the problems, but I think it would get us a long way in going there.

And one of the things I like to point out a lot is when it comes to a kid's language comprehension, the best way that you as an adult increase your language comprehension and your knowledge and your ability to understand language is through reading.

As you become older, a lot of what you know, even words you know, is through reading, not through conversation with other people.

So the best gift we can give to a little kid, especially from a kid who might be from a more disadvantaged background, is early on to give them the ability to read the words.

Because we then give them the ability to learn anything and everything.

They might not, and they might still be disadvantaged by weaknesses they have in sort of their background knowledge, but we are giving them like sort of their best bet for catching up.

And we are actually giving ultimately actually like true equity in education.

I think true equity in education really begins in kindergarten and first grade with really teaching kids how their written language works, the thing they don't know.

They come to school knowing how to talk.

They come to school knowing the meaning of lots of words.

The thing that most of them don't know how to do it all or very well is how to read the words.

And so if the focus is on getting them to read the words, we just got their education off to such a more solid start than so many kids are getting today.

And I think that could make a huge difference.

It's not going to solve all the problems.

It's not going to make everyone proficient on the NAEP test, but it's going to help.

And Emily, what sort of pushback have you gotten from this view?

There's plenty of emotional response to this reporting.

Certainly some of it has been pushback from people who are unhappy with or uncomfortable with some of what I've said in the podcast.

There are certainly people who really believe in this idea that I took on.

But what I'm hearing a lot of is from teachers and parents, but I'm hearing from a lot of teachers and other educators who just didn't know this.

And they're just, it's shocking and difficult, and many of them, it's hard to accept what you didn't know.

And the stuff that you didn't know maybe was, in some cases, I think, harming some kids. I mean, I think some teachers are really coming to grips with a very difficult thing, which they were teaching to read in a way that was actually making it harder for some of their kids to learn how to read. And they feel really awful about that, and it's difficult. But I hear from them, and they say thank you, because they want to teach kids how to read. They want to help. They never didn't want to do that. They always did. I don't think there are teachers out there who want, they don't want to harm kids. They want kids to learn how to read. And so I think for the most part, I'm getting a lot of, you know, gratitude from teachers and parents, parents who didn't know, parents who didn't know they were struggling, parents who kind of had a gut level feeling. Many teachers who had a gut level feeling, I got to tell you that, that a lot of teachers are like, ah, yeah, I kind of knew there was a problem. I knew something wasn't right. Why didn't I listen to my gut? And that gets back to what we were talking about before. I think they would look up and say, well, everyone else is doing it this way. And there are these people telling me that this is the right way. So I guess they're right and I'm wrong. It's kind of harrowing, like lots of people are saying that. I sort of had a gut level feeling, but I did what I was being told to do. You know, in some cases they're being handed this curriculum and these assessment systems and these intervention programs. This is what their school district bought. This is what's been adopted by their school system. This is what they're supposed to do. Many teachers tell me they're rule followers. I think maybe teaching attracts people who are rule followers. They work within systems. They were doing what they were supposed to do and they were doing the best with what they knew. And now a lot of them know better. And that's become a little bit of a saying among teachers out there who are talking about the science of reading stuff. Know better, do better comes from Maya Angelou. Know better, do better. And Lucy Calkins did eventually admit that she got some things wrong. It's a bit infuriating that she didn't understand this faster given how much research there was. What did you make of her apology?

Yeah, I don't know that she would think of it as an apology.
I think she would say that she has recognized that she had some things wrong about how little kids learn to read.
I applaud her for being public and vocal about that.
She is selling a new curriculum now.
She has revised her materials to take out some of the stuff that my reporting and others have pointed out wasn't right.
But now schools are buying a new version of her curriculum so you can make of that what you want.
I did all this reporting for several years and I don't think money is at the end of the day the thing that has really been motivating people the most here.
I don't think Lucy Calkins was trying to make money off of a wrong idea.
I really don't.
I think it's actually harder for people to say they made a mistake because of what it takes to say that.
So I applaud her for saying that.
And again, I think belief more than money is what has been motivating things here.
But I do think that when people make money off things or when they get other kinds of affirmation that what they're doing is right and people buying your materials is one very strong kind of affirmation, it's even harder to look in the mirror and say, oh, maybe I wasn't right even though all these people were buying it because they thought I was right.
Whoops, I wasn't right.
So, you know, making money off something I think can be one of many reasons why it's hard for people to unbelieve something they believe in.
But it's very hard just look around at our world.
It's just very hard for human beings in general to stop believing in something they believed in.
That's very, very hard to do.
Absolutely. Anything from Foundas and Penel?
So Foundas and Penel have responded before the podcast, some of my earlier reporting and this sort of general conversation that's been happening on social media and out in the world and in state legislatures and school systems across the country that are really rethinking reading instruction and policies around reading.
So they have responded essentially saying that Mary Clay has been misunderstood and that they have been misunderstood, that I have misunderstood them, and that they still believe in those ideas.
So I would say they have responded by essentially doubling down on their beliefs.
We know that an estimated 5 to 15% of Americans are diagnosed with dyslexia.
Do you think it's possible that there's been an overdiagnosis or a misdiagnosis with some of those people when really the core issue is flawed reading instruction?

Yes, I do, and I think a lot of reading scientists and a lot of dyslexia specialists think the same thing.

That is not to say that dyslexia isn't real.

Some people take that comment to say that and we have tons of evidence that dyslexia is a real thing.

But essentially, reading the sort of ability and how easy it is for you to get this whole written language thing is on a continuum, right?

From one end of people who there are I think even a few examples of kids who really need virtually no instruction at all.

They essentially teach themselves to read very rare.

And then it goes to this all the way to the other end of people who really, really, really struggle with this and even tons of great instruction.

They're probably never going to be really great readers.

And in fact, many people with dyslexia are always going to be kind of slow and laborious readers even if they get really good instruction, right?

So there's this continuum of reading ability.

But it's a continuum.

It's not like people with dyslexia have sort of one kind of brain and everyone else has a different kind of brain.

People all a lot more similar.

Our brains with reading and all that are a lot more similar than they are different.

And instruction really makes a difference.

And we have lots of studies that show us this, that instruction really can make a difference.

So I think a lot of the struggling readers out there and even some of them who are being identified with dyslexia really have more of an instructional issue than they have a reading disability.

And it becomes very difficult to suss out the difference between the two because ultimately dyslexia is decided by like, what's your assessment and what's your cutoff?

What are you deciding is dyslexia under this score on this, these tests is dyslexia and this isn't.

And there's no way to kind of do that.

But instruction is definitely part of it.

But that is to say that instruction, this is why it's still very important in schools to understand that kids do have different needs in terms of the amount of instruction that they need for sure.

They don't need wildly different kinds of instruction necessarily.

But I don't think we're going to fix this problem and get to the goal that many people put out there, which is, well, we could have 95% of people reading pretty well.

I don't know if we could have them all reading proficiently on the NAPE test.

The NAPE test is actually a fairly difficult test.

But I think we can have a lot more people reading a lot better, but it's not just going to be fixing core classroom instruction. It's going to be making sure that kids get good individualized help if they need it.

That is going to be part of the solution to this problem.

In a way, I mean, it just seems so tragic because I can imagine so many students being told or their parents being told that they have a learning disability that they might not actually have that would internalize this and this could affect their lives all the way into adulthood thinking that there's something wrong with them when there's really not.

It was just bad teaching.

Absolutely.

And kids don't necessarily need the label of dyslexia.

In fact, I've talked to a lot of people for whom the label of dyslexia ends up being helpful because then they're like, oh, here's a reason for this and they can sort of own it that way.

I think their bigger problem are kids out there, maybe they get the label dyslexia, but many of them don't, who just struggle with reading and just think they're stupid and they're not. You know, they just think, well, it's me, it's my problem, there's nothing wrong with me and they are ashamed of it and embarrassed and they keep it a secret.

And this is one of the things that has moved me the most in this many years of reporting is how many people I've met, older children, teenagers, adults who talk about the shame of their reading struggles and the fact that they've kept it a secret for their whole life and the fact that they actually live with a kind of anxiety about sort of being like outed for their reading problems like every day, like someone's going to ask them to read something.

And, you know, I tell a lot of people if you want to find the struggling readers in a school, go to the nurses office because those are the kids who have like a tummy ache when it's time to read aloud in class or go to the assistant principal's office where the kids who are in trouble because another thing when it's time to read is you can just get in trouble and get kicked out of class.

And those are two strategies that lots of kids are using to avoid reading.

And this happens really early.

There's a piece of tape in the last episode of Soul of the Story where a mom talks about how when a kid is struggling with reading, the kid knows first, the parent knows second, then maybe the teacher chimes in and then the hunt is on for help. And I just kept saying, well, keep trying. And then when they couldn't,

I just thought they didn't want to try.
And what I'm haunted by is when it wasn't working, I blamed it on children.
That kid is sort of knowing it when they're like five and six and seven.
And in some cases, they're keeping it a secret from their mom.
You know, they're keeping it a secret.
They don't want anyone to know because they think it's something wrong with them.
And it might be a disability that they have that they can get help with.
And it may just be that this whole reading thing is just super confusing
because no one teaching them how to do it.
So your story is about teaching children reading.
This is maybe the most important thing that is taught in schools,
but it also shows just how broken things are in American education right now.
And you've been reporting on the education system for years.
So where else is this sort of thing happening?
I mean, it can't just be reading, right?
Should we be looking at the math curriculum, science history?
Yes. I hear a lot of people write to me about math
because I think math suffers from some of the same problems.
And it goes down to just this core idea of do we explicitly teach kids
the things we want them to know,
or do we want them to sort of discover and figure it out for themselves?
And again, there's definitely a place for discovery that is important.
But when it comes to these really crucial foundational skills
upon which so much learning gets built in school,
I think that cognitive science research is really clear
that sort of direct instruction really plays a role and really matters.
So yes, I think that we do actually need to look at this in other areas.
I think that the education system is broken for a lot of reasons.
I really think we don't value teachers the way that we should.
I mean, I think a lot of this goes back to just a poor teacher training system,
and there's a lot of evidence out there that we just don't train teachers well
or train them long enough or train them in the right way
to really meet the challenges of the job.
It really is a challenging job, and I'm like so appreciative of teachers.
I think one of the biggest takeaways for me from all this reporting
is just how many teachers want to get this right.
They really do, and in many cases when they figure out this stuff about reading,
it's kind of on them.
It's on them to read about it on the weekends.
It's on them to pay for training on their own.
It's on them to seek out the resources,
and I don't think it should be on them this way.
I think they need more assistance from their systems
and from all of us as taxpayers.

I think another good thing about this is that parents are getting really involved in this and are educating themselves and going to their schools and asking questions and asking good questions.

I think some teachers and administrators are feeling like, everyone's coming to me and saying this podcast, and I have to do something about this right away.

I think that can kind of be problematic, but the big part of the data those people is, well, what's your plan? What are you doing?

What's your school system doing?

What's your answer to the parent who comes and says, how are you teaching my kid to read?

Are you doing well?

Do you have an answer to that?

Make sure you have an answer, and if you don't have an answer, get one and work towards it.

I also think this isn't going to be a quick fix.

I think one of the reasons education is so quote-unquote broken is because we expect a lot of our schools and we expect schools to fix problems right away.

Then we just create more problems.

I think we need to understand that this problem has been a long time in the making, and the solution is probably going to be a long time in the making too, and there's urgency about it because there are little kids who are six years old right now who aren't being taught to read and they need something better right now, but at the same time, I think too much urgency and we might do the quick thing rather than the best thing, and I think we should be doing the best thing, and it's not always obvious what that is.

Well, Emily Hanford, thank you so much for coming on the show.

You're welcome. I was happy to be here. Thank you.

Thanks so much to Katie Herzog for guest hosting this episode and to Emily Hanford for reporting this important series.

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Thank you so much and see you next week.