What the Words Say
APM Reports Transcript

Part 1

Emily Hanford: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary. I'm Emily Hanford.

Two years ago, I visited a juvenile detention facility in Houston called the Burnett-Bayland Rehabilitation Center. It's a large brown building surrounded by metal fencing.

> **Security guard 1:** Welcome to BBRC.

I'm led through two large locked doors.

> **Jennifer Hunley**: We are a secured facility. We have both pre-adjudicated kids here, meaning before they go to court. And post adjudicated kids. Once they've gone to court, they come here to serve out their time and to get treatment.

I'm getting a tour from Jennifer Hunley, the assistant administrator. It's all boys here, as young as 10. They walk the halls in blue jumpsuits, their hands clasped behind their backs. We pass the units where they sleep on thin plastic mattresses and the isolation room where they're sent when their behavior is out of control.

> (Sound of keys opening door)

And then we get to a windowless cinderblock room with heavy locked doors on each side. There's a table -- and two green chairs. This is where the boys get to visit with their families once a week. It's also where some of them are learning to read.

Tutor: So you can do one word, one sentence at a time and then create the story and I can help you.

A tutor is sitting across the table from one of the kids locked up here at BBRC. I'm not allowed to ask why he's here or use his real name; I'll call him DeShawn. He's 17. All that noise you hear in the background is a kid banging on something in the hallway. Each lesson begins with some instruction. Things like how two letters can blend together to make one sound. Then the student does some writing. And some reading.

DeShawn: Making and keeping friends can be hard, can be hard work. We can do many things to help keep our friendships strong. We can cheer our friends on...

DeShawn says he's learning a lot of things in these lessons that he never knew.

DeShawn: OK, like, "ph." It's a "f" – I never knew that, like, "f" like a "f." Like when you put a "ph" together. Like physics. You know what I'm saying. Like that.

DeShawn is getting this tutoring as part of a study being conducted by researchers at the University of Houston. The researchers are investigating the relationship between reading problems and involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Lesley Hart: These are kids who are reading at or below the third-grade level.

This is Lesley Hart, one of the researchers working on the study.

Hart: There are an awful lot of kids who are coming in who simply can't read at all.

A lot of them have learning disabilities that were never identified, says Latashia Crenshaw. She worked for the juvenile probation department advocating on behalf of kids in the justice system who need special education services. She told me when she talked to their parents, they would say things like this.

Latashia Crenshaw: I knew that my son had a problem in first grade when I was coming up to the school every day, telling you something was wrong and no one listened, so you know, and for many parents we get tears, like "I was right, I knew, and my child is finally getting the help" and then we get the tears of the, "but they're in the justice system," when all this, possibly, could have been avoided.

She says when she'd review student records, she'd often see a pattern that starts in elementary school. When kids are having a hard time learning, they act up. Henry Gonzales, who was assistant executive director of the juvenile probation department when I visited, says behavior problems and reading problems go together all the time.

Henry Gonzales: I don't know how to read, and I don't want everyone to know about that but, I know how to make you laugh, therefore I'm going to be the class clown. I don't know how to do these things, but I can fight, therefore, I'm going to beat you up.

Not all struggling readers act out, of course. Some withdraw, stay quiet, hope no one will notice. The research on the links between reading problems and social and emotional problems is sobering. Struggling readers are more likely to say they are sad, angry, lonely and depressed. They're also less likely to graduate from high school... and more likely to end up in the criminal justice system.

(Door slam, walkie talkie sound)

After DeShawn's reading lesson, I got a chance to interview him.

Hanford: So, um, what do you remember about reading when you were first learning to read?

DeShawn: That it was hard. That's really it.

Hanford: Tell me like more about that. What was hard? What did it feel like?

DeShawn: Like when I was just reading, I just didn't know none of the words. Like, the only reason I knew how to read a little bit is because I hear people talk, you know, like I see the word, I can, you know what I'm saying.

Hanford: So you like memorize…

DeShawn: Memorized the words.

This is what a lot of struggling readers have told me. They memorize words - store them like pictures in their mind. But there are tens of thousands of words in the English language. You can't memorize them all. Research shows you need to understand the relationships between letters and sounds. That's why DeShawn is working on things like understanding that "ph" makes a "f" sound. DeShawn says he wants to be a better reader.

DeShawn: Can't be no flunkie. I don't want to be a bum, you know. I tryin' to take care of myself. I don't want to be out there on the streets.

DeShawn wants to go back to high school when he gets out to get his diploma. But the sad truth is most kids in the juvenile justice system never graduate from high school. One study found that 49 percent of juveniles who'd been in detention were in an adult prison by the time they were 25.

(Theme Music)

From APM Reports, this is "What the Words Say." For the past several years I've been reporting on what scientists have figured out about how skilled reading works, and the fact that a lot of teachers aren't being taught this scientific research in their preparation programs or on the job.

I've found that some of what teachers learn is actually at odds with the scientific research. Why is this happening? In large part it's because reading instruction is political and has been for a

long time. The basic debate comes down to a centuries-old chicken-or-the-egg argument about what it takes for kids to be able to understand what they read. One side said: start with letters and sounds. If kids know how to decode words, reading comprehension will follow. The other side said, no: if you focus too much on the letters and sounds, kids won't pay attention to the meaning of what they're reading. Focus on comprehension.

This debate misunderstands what cognitive scientists have figured out about how reading comprehension works. This hour I'm going to tell you about what they've learned. Their research not only sheds light on what children need to learn to become good readers, it helps explain why some children are more at risk of becoming poor readers than others.

I'm also going to show you that when kids do struggle, some of them are more likely to get help. White kids from families with money can often get what they need. But those kids locked up in Houston? Almost all of them are Black or Hispanic and many of them were once the struggling readers in their local public schools who didn't get help. There are a lot of students like that in schools all over the country- including Nashville, Tennessee. That's where we're going next to meet a woman named Vesia Hawkins. She was shocked to discover just how far behind so many of the children in her city actually are.

Vesia Hawkins was a school system insider.

> **Vesia Hawkins:** I was the system. Like, I was a company girl.

She was the liaison between the director of the Nashville Public Schools and the elected school board. She went to all the board meetings, listened to every presentation about academic performance - for years. The test scores were never very good.

> **Hawkins**: But it was always couched in something, right? Like, it was always some kind of spin.

Test scores aren't good, but they're growing. Test scores aren't good, but we're doing something about it.

> **Hawkins**: And I never, I mean quite honestly, like I never just went to the website and looked at the data myself. Never. Until I left the district.

That's when it hit her. It was the Fall of 2017. She'd started writing about education. New test scores had just been released and she went online to take a look.

> **Hawkins**: And I sat at my desk at home and I mean I was just crying. Like, I could not believe we were doing this to our children. And I couldn't believe that I had missed it.

The test scores showed 86 percent of students from low income families were below grade level in reading. Black and Hispanic students? 82 percent of them were behind.

> **Hawkins**: We live in a city. A great city, right? A beautiful city. A growing city.

Cranes and construction crews were everywhere.

> **Hawkins**: We've got cranes galore. And underneath the cranes are kids who cannot read. Unbelievable to me. So, I decided to go on a little, I don't know...

> (Music)

> **Hawkins:** …research tour.

She started asking people out for coffee.

> **Hawkins**: And so I had about 50 coffees with people. With educators, administrators.

And she asked them - why are so many kids struggling with reading?

Hawkins: And every single person I talked to. Every single person I talked to, except one, blamed the parents for the reading crisis in our city.

They all said: parents don't read enough to their children. Only one person pointed to the schools. Everyone else said: it's the families, it's the home environment, it's poverty. But that didn't sit right with Vesia Hawkins. She grew up poor. No one read to her. And she learned to read.

Hawkins: And then I thought, maybe I'm asking the wrong people? What educator really is going to say, "It's our fault. You know, we don't have the right curriculum, we don't, you know, we didn't really learn how to teach reading in college?" Like, who's going to say that?

So, she started talking to parents. And she met Sonya Thomas. Sonya is a founding member of a group called Nashville PROPEL. PROPEL stands for "parents requiring our public education system to lead." It was started by parents whose local schools are on what is known as the "Priority Schools" list. Priority School sounded good to Sonya Thomas until she found out those are the schools with the lowest test scores in the entire state – the bottom five percent. Sonya says many parents don't realize how far behind their kids are.

Sonya Thomas: They don't know that their children are not reading at grade level and their children truly don't know how to read. They don't know until it costs them.

This is what happened with her youngest son, C.J. The story starts in first grade.

(Music)

Thomas: I knew something was going on with him, but I could not figure it out.

He just didn't seem to be getting it when it came to reading. The school said he was behind. But nothing to worry about. They were giving him extra help.

> **Thomas**: There was never a conversation of – "he's struggling with reading." It's "he needs some interventions, um so we're going to take him out of class, you know, read with him a little more." I'm like, OK, great, good, you know.

She asked what she should be doing at home and the answer was: read to him. She did, says she always had. But things didn't seem to be getting better. Second grade, third grade, fourth grade. Sonya was really worried. But the school said he was making progress.

> **Thomas**: He did OK. But I just knew that he wasn't doing as well as my other kids. So I started asking myself, does he have a learning disability?

She asked for C.J. to be tested but the school said no need, he was fine. She didn't know what to do. Tutoring? Private school? Those weren't things she could afford. She was desperate. And she knew something about how C.J. felt. She had a hard time learning to read. And she says no one helped her.

> **Thomas**: I don't remember, ah, being taught to read.

She just remembers being expected to know how to do it. As she got older, she says her problem wasn't that she couldn't read the words. It's that she didn't know what a lot of the words meant.

> **Thomas**: Because if I would read a sentence or read a passage, I'm like, OK, what did that mean?

She says she was rarely assigned to read anything in school except stuff in textbooks

> **Thomas**: No books, no novels, no, no any of that. Like, I did not read books until I actually got into high school in my English class and we read Fahrenheit.

"Fahrenheit 451," the 1950s dystopian novel by Ray Bradbury.

> **Thomas**: But I hated that book because that book was hard. I didn't have the vocabulary. I didn't have the understanding. It talked around a whole bunch of things. And I just did not understand. I could never make the connection. And so I struggled.

It wasn't just that words stumped her when she was reading. Words sometimes stumped her when people were talking too. She noticed it at work—in the healthcare industry.

> **Thomas**: I mean I worked in the corporate world and I could tell sometimes when they would have conversations, I didn't know what they were talking about. And I would find myself Googling words.

It was embarrassing. She did not want this to happen to her son. But the schools kept telling her not to worry. His grades were good. He was a well-behaved kid. And then, seventh grade. C.J. had moved to a new school. It was September. C.J.'s advisor called Sonya in for a meeting.

> **Thomas**: And, the advisor says that he's on task. He has turned in all his assignments. I'm like, "yeah, I know." She said, but when we tested him, he reads on a second-grade reading level. I lost it. It felt like I cried for 15 minutes. I sobbed.

Eventually she wiped the tears from her face, put her glasses back on, and looked up. The advisor told her the school would help C.J. Sonya wanted to believe it. But she'd been putting her faith in the school system for years and this is where it had gotten her: a son in seventh grade at a second-grade reading level.

> **Thomas**: And it was from that day on, I said, "Nobody else should walk away feeling like that."

> (Music)

Thomas: "No child, no mama, no daddy." Like, it's my life's work to make sure nobody else feels like that.

That was when she helped start the parent group, PROPEL.

Hawkins: I love what they do.

This is Vesia Hawkins again, the former school system insider. When she met the parents of PROPEL she realized she was finally talking to the people she needed to hear. All those educators she'd had coffee with? They'd blamed poverty for the city's reading crisis and made it sound so… unsolvable. But after listening to parents like Sonya Thomas it all seemed much more urgent, and clear.

Hawkins: We should be able to expect that a kid goes to school and learn to read, if nothing else.

In my years of reporting on reading, I haven't met a teacher or a school administrator who didn't want their students to be good readers. But I've met a lot of educators who didn't know what cognitive scientists have figured out about how reading comprehension works. For decades, those scientists have been studying what is going on in our minds as we look at words and make sense of text. And they've learned some fascinating things.

Wes Hoover: So, my name is Wes Hoover. I'm a cognitive psychologist by training. I am now retired after having worked in the field for almost 40 years.

When Wes Hoover was in college in the late 1960s, he got really interested in language development.

Hoover: Just how it worked, how is it possible that you are able to learn a language just by being exposed to it? Language just became a fascination.

His interest in how people learn to speak a language evolved into another question when he was in graduate school: how does a person learn to read a language? In the 1970s, that was a controversial question among academics. There were two big competing ideas.

> **Hoover**: One of the ideas was that when kids are reading, what they're trying to do is complete comprehension. And the way they do it is to try and get a flow going about what meaning is being communicated in reading, and when they come upon a word they don't recognize, to try and guess at what it is based on the context of what they've read so far.

The idea was that as long as kids are focused on the meaning of what they're reading, they'll figure out how to read the words. This view assumed that learning how to read is similar to learning how to talk; that it happens naturally, through immersion.

> **Hoover**: The other model is that, no, reading, while it is focused on comprehension, getting the word off the page actually is based on analyzing the pieces of the word, doing what's called alphabetic coding -- relating the letters to the phonology of the language.

The teaching approach associated with this belief was phonics – teaching kids how the sounds in words are represented by letters. The assumption was that kids need to be taught how to read, that it doesn't happen naturally. But no one really knew how reading works. How do we even do it?

> (Music)

When Wes Hoover went to graduate school in the 1970s, he studied under a professor who was trying to figure it out. This professor, Philip Gough, was trying to understand not just how we read - but what's going on when someone is having trouble reading.

Hoover: Phil was really trying to describe reading disability. What is it that defines whether someone can or can't read and what are the categories of people that can't read?

What Phil Gough knew was this: when kids start school, the vast majority of them are already quite good at speaking their native language. The average six-year-old, he wrote, "has a mastery of English [that] would be the envy of any college graduate learning English as a second language." But young children do not know how to read most of the words they know how to say.

Hoover: What happens when they come to school is their language comprehension is fairly high and what they have to do is learn word recognition. And so if they're taught word recognition then they can read to the level at which they can comprehend language.

The idea was that reading comprehension has two parts. One is your ability to understand meaning when someone is talking or when text is read out loud to you. That's language comprehension. The other is your ability to read printed words quickly and accurately. That's word recognition. If you can do both of those things, Phil Gough thought, you can comprehend what you read. But if you can only do one, or neither, you can't. In 1986, he and a colleague published a paper where they laid out this model of reading comprehension. They called it the Simple View of Reading. The Simple View does not say that reading is simple. It says that reading comprehension can be divided into two parts. Here's Wes Hoover again.

Hoover: If you know someone's language comprehension ability and their word recognition ability, you will know how well they read, you can predict perfectly their reading comprehension. That's the hypothesis.

The hypothesis was first tested and verified in a study that Wes Hoover published with Phil Gough in 1990. The basics of the model have been confirmed in more than a hundred and fifty studies since.

Hoover: It's the big idea of reading. That is, reading is complex. Word recognition is complex. Language comprehension is complex. But the big idea of reading is that if you can master those two skills, those two complex skills, then you can master reading comprehension.

When a person can't understand what they read, according to the Simple View, they have either a word recognition problem or a language comprehension problem - or both. Lots of struggling readers have both. That was obvious when I was at the juvenile detention facility in Houston. One of the kids I met there was a 15-year-old I'll call Mateo. I sat in on his second reading lesson. Here he is trying to sound out the word "toast."

Mateo: t-

Tutor 2: mm-huh

Mateo: oa-s-t

Tutor 2: Yes, that's it!

Mateo: Toast

Tutor 2: Yes, good.

Mateo is one of the kids who can barely read at all.

Mateo: G-l-oa-t – gloat

Tutor 2: Yes – say it one more time.

Mateo: Groat…

Tutor 2: Oh, that's an "l."

The word is "gloat." Sounding it out is a first step. But does Mateo know what the word "gloat" means? His tutor asks him.

Mateo: Like glow?

Tutor 2: Give me something else.

Mateo: Umm, like, something shiny?

Tutor 2: OK…

Mateo doesn't know what "gloat" means. His tutor tries to define it, struggles a bit, then turns to Jennifer Hunley, the assistant administrator, who's in the corner keeping an eye on us.

Jennifer Hunley: Like, to, to brag. Like if someone just got their case (unintelligible) and they're going "ooh, I get to go home' and no else does. Yeah, kind of like that.

Tutor 2: Right, in an ugly way.

Hunley: Not being very nice.

Tutor 2: Yeah, OK, and then…

The word "gloat" comes up again when Mateo is trying to read a story called "Taking a Ride."

Mateo: I …?

Tutor 2: Do.

Mateo: Do not like to…

Tutor 2: Uh huh - remember this one?

Mateo: Gl- oa – t

Tutor 2: Yeah. Gloat, remember?

Mateo: Gloat, the…

I'm not sure Mateo remembers the meaning of that word. I'm not sure he has any idea what he's reading. Listening to him struggle through the text, I'm having a hard time keeping track of what the story's about. At the age of 15, Mateo is a beginning reader. His mental energy is still focused on figuring out how to sound out the words.

Tutor 2: Shhh…

Mateo: Stor??

Tutor 2: Uh-uh

There are a few moments when he successfully pronounces something and realizes it's a word he knows.

Mateo: Woman!

Tutor 2: Yes.

But many of the words – like '"gloat" -- and "sneer" and "trait" -- it was clear from earlier in the lesson that Mateo didn't know the meaning of those words. You could have read this story out loud to him and he wouldn't have understood it all. Mateo has a reading comprehension problem

because he has a hard time with both word recognition and language comprehension. He's not going to be a good reader until he gets better at both. But if Mateo had learned how to successfully sound out words earlier in his life, he'd likely know the meaning of a lot more words now.

Hoover: Because there's a very powerful thing in reading called "Matthew" effects.

This is Wes Hoover again.

Hoover: It's this idea that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

It's a Biblical reference. Here's how it works.

(Music)

Let's say you enter school and you get off to a good start when it comes to the word recognition part of the Simple View of Reading.

Hoover: Then what happens is that you tend to read more. You tend to read more difficult texts. You tend to engage in conversations about those texts. And all of those things, then, reciprocally build your language comprehension and your word recognition. Once you start to be able to read, and you read more, the reading you do further develops the language comprehension and word recognition skills you have. That's the rich get richer.

But the opposite can happen. You don't get off to a good start with word recognition – either because it's something that's really hard for you. For example, you have dyslexia, which is characterized by difficulty with discerning the sounds in words. Or – you don't get off to a good start with word recognition because no one teaches it to you. Or – both. It's hard for you and you're not taught how to do it.

Hoover: Those kids who can't read very well will start not reading very much at all, they'll try and read less complex texts, they'll get frustrated and stop reading altogether. And that will have the effect of not moving either their word recognition or language comprehension skills forward.

When kids don't get the instruction they need, they can easily grow into adulthood without knowing basic things about how written language works. Like Mateo and DeShawn. I don't know what happened to them. The study they're part of is still going on; struggling readers in the juvenile detention system in Houston continue to get tutoring. But not at the facility I visited in 2018. That shut down last year -- as part of an effort to lock up fewer kids.

(Music)

You're listening to "What the Words Say" from APM Reports. I'm Emily Hanford. Studies show that almost all children can become readers - they have the cognitive capacity to do it. But a lot of them aren't becoming readers. The National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that roughly half of Black and Hispanic children and nearly a quarter of white kids do not have basic reading comprehension skills by fourth grade. A lot of those children's parents have been told - don't worry, your child will catch up. But most of them won't catch up.

Coming up, we'll hear about why so many kids like Mateo and Deshawn are not getting the instruction they need.

Julie Washington: I go into poor schools; nobody has dyslexia in a poor school. In the face of a population where eight and a half out of ten are struggling with reading, who has a reading disability? The answer is, we have no idea.

Support for APM Reports comes from the Spencer Foundation, Lumina Foundation, and the Hollyhock Foundation. More in a minute. This is APM. American Public Media.

Part 2

Emily Hanford: Welcome back. I'm Emily Hanford and this is "What the Words Say" from APM Reports.

> **Michael Hunter:** Good morning.
> **Teachers**: Good morning.
> **Hunter:** Thank you for being our guinea pigs today in our simulation…

We're in an elementary school classroom in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. There are about 20 teachers seated at tables. A consultant named Michael Hunter is taking them through an exercise to demonstrate some of the things scientists have figured out about how reading works.

> **Hunter**: I need four brave volunteers.

A few hands go up. Michael sends them into the hallway. Before I tell you what happens next, I want to go back to the two big ideas about how people read that academics were arguing about back in the 1970s.

> (Music)

One idea was that readers use the meaning of what they're reading to predict what the words will be. Learning to read is not about sounding words out. It's about using context to guess what the words are. According to this theory, readers don't necessarily have to read every word accurately to comprehend what they're reading.

The other theory was that learning to read is a process of looking carefully at words, sounding them out, and matching those pronunciations with words you know in spoken language. If you can't accurately identify the words, your comprehension will suffer. That's the idea that decades of scientific research has confirmed. And that's what Michael Hunter wants to demonstrate with the teachers in Harrisburg.

Hunter: So let's bring in our first reader…

A first grade teacher named Katie comes in from the hall. Michael projects a passage onto a screen at the front of the room and asks her to read it out loud.

Katie: A tragnex is a simple jiid used for finding pliyvns. Most will fit in your bryzpn...

Thirty percent of the words in this passage are nonsense words. Katie does her best to sound them out, but she has no idea what they mean. When she's done, Michael asks her some questions.

Hunter: First question is – what tool is the topic of the passage?

Katie: Tragnexes.

Hunter: OK – ah, why is the face of a clock mentioned?

Katie: I have absolutely no clue.

(Laughter)

Katie just demonstrated what reading comprehension is like when you're faced with a bunch of words you don't know. The next volunteer comes in from the hall to read the same passage, but this time fewer of the words are nonsense – just 20 percent. This is Jalissa.

Jalissa: A tragnex is a simple tool used for finding pliyvns. Most will fit in your palm. The face is similar to that of a bronty....

There are two kinds of nonsense words in this passage to demonstrate an important point about decoding. Some of the words are hard for Jalissa to sound out. "Pliyvns," for example. P-l-i-y-v-n-s. She hesitates and stumbles on that one because English words aren't spelled that way. She's

not sure how to decode it AND she doesn't know what it means. A word like "tragnex" -- that's pretty easy for her to decode. But decoding doesn't help much because Jalissa doesn't know what the word means. The point is: you can sound like a decent reader if you have good decoding skills. But it doesn't necessarily mean you understand what you're reading. How was Jalissa's comprehension when she didn't know 20 percent of the words?

Jalissa: Tragic.

Katie: It was better than mine!

Hunter: Yeah, OK.

So, when do the benefits of context kick in? At what point can you figure out what the words say from the meaning of what you're reading? The next reader comes in from the hall.

Hunter: So read aloud to us, do your best reading.

Now just ten percent of the words are nonsense.

Reader: A tragnex is a simple tool used for finding directions…

This reader figures out what the passage is about.

Hunter: How do you feel about your comprehension? Did you totally understand the passage?

Reader: I did not until I got about halfway and then realized what it was talking about and then I started to comprehend it.

Hunter: OK.

She knew enough of the words to get a gist of what was going on and then it clicked – it's about a compass! But – she already knows what a compass is and how it works. She was able to fill in the gaps left by the handful of words she didn't know by relying on her background knowledge. This happens all the time in reading. Even when you can easily read all the words, your comprehension can be aided – or impeded – depending on what you already know about the topic.

> **Hoover**: Easy example is if, ah, I don't know if you know cricket.

This is reading researcher Wes Hoover again. And -- I don't know anything about cricket except that it's a bat and ball game -- not played much in the United States.

> **Hoover:** If you read a sports column about cricket you most likely would have great difficulty understanding it as opposed to a column written about baseball.

This assumes I know something about baseball. And I do. Probably more than a typical kid growing up in New Zealand, for example, where there's a lot of cricket but not much baseball.

> **Hoover:** So, kids in New Zealand can quickly understand accounts of cricket matches but they have great difficulty understanding accounts of baseball matches and the problem is they don't have the background knowledge to interpret what's going on.

Your ability to comprehend what you read is linked to your knowledge. This is one reason there's an association between a child's reading comprehension and their family's income; more income often means more opportunity for experiences that build knowledge of the world. The teacher who figured out "tragnex" meant compass already knew something about compasses. If you don't know anything about compasses, one way to learn about them is through reading. But your chances of learning something about compasses through reading will be impeded if you can't read the words. That's why teaching kids how to read words is so important.

> **Lisa Flute**: I have a master's degree in reading and I didn't learn this.

Lisa Flute is a reading specialist in Harrisburg who participated in the demonstration we just heard. It's part of a yearlong professional development series on what scientists have discovered about how reading works – and how to apply that to teaching. Lisa Flute says she didn't learn about the science of reading in her preparation to be a teacher. She learned that idea from the 1970s.

> **Flute**: The goal is meaning, meaning, meaning.

What she didn't understand is how kids get to meaning. She didn't spend much time teaching kids how to decode words because she didn't think it was necessary -- they had other ways to get the meaning. She now realizes what a mistake that was. Some of her students needed much more help.

> **Flute:** And there are kids that I'm picturing in my mind right now that I want to say I'm sorry to.
>
> (Music)

I've talked to a lot of teachers who express regret about what they didn't know. For many of them, the Simple View of Reading is a big "aha" moment. They didn't fully appreciate the importance of word recognition. And they didn't quite get how the language comprehension part works either. Language comprehension is critical. Research shows that once children have mastered the basics of decoding, their ability to understand what they read is largely determined by their oral language skills, their knowledge and their vocabulary. And a large body of research shows that children from low-income families come into school knowing the meaning of far fewer words - on average - than higher-income kids. This can put them at a disadvantage at the outset because making sense of what you're reading is about matching what you see in print with what you already know in spoken language. This also means that if the language you speak at home is different from the language you use in school, learning to read is likely to take more time and may be more challenging. This is true for English language learners. Kids who speak

Spanish or Korean or Arabic at home. It can also be true for children who are native English speakers. Julie Washington studies language and reading development in African American children. She's specifically interested in the role of African American English.

(Music)

Julie Washington: African American English is a dialect of English.

Every language has dialects. They're variations of a parent language -- different ways of pronouncing words and different vocabulary and grammar too.

Washington: So an example of African American English is, "One day, me and my mom was at home." That is completely acceptable in African American English.

There was a moment when Julie Washington realized that children who come into school speaking African American English might have a harder time learning how to read.

Washington: This was way back in the beginning of my career, worked with a 4-year - old and we were reading, "Are You My Mother," by P.D. Eastman.

Audio book: Today, we're going to read a story about a little bird looking for his mother.

Washington: And so the baby bird jumps out of the nest, goes to different animals, objects and says – "are you my mother?"

Audio book: "Are you my mother?" he said to the hen. "No," said the hen.

Washington: And so it's this, "Are you my mother? I am not a…" that goes through this story. So when this little girl -- African American, dialect speaker -- goes to retell the story to me, she says "Is you my mama? I ain't none a yo' mama!" I laughed, it was hilarious, and it was fun! But then I went back to my office and I thought about what she

> had to do in order to listen to this story that was told in a language form that she doesn't actually use. She re-coded it into her own dialect and then she told me the story. That takes a lot of working memory. It takes a pretty good vocabulary.

That little girl had to do a lot of work because there was a difference between the language she knew and the language of the book.

> **Washington**: The kid who comes to school whose language system mirrors the book doesn't have that work to do. The kid who looks at the book- it's exactly the same system he uses- can go straight for decoding and not have to do all of those other steps in between.

Julie Washington says schools need to understand that children who are heavy dialect users may need more time, and more help, to be successful with reading. She says almost all low-income African American children use African American English at home.

> **Washington**: Middle income kids are more likely to either not use it at all or to be able to code switch because they've had more access outside of the community, they go to schools where there are more kids who are using mainstream English. They are more likely to be able to code switch in and out.

> (Music)

Think of family income as a kind of buffer when it comes to the risk of being a struggling reader. The more resources your family has, the more opportunities you're likely to have for early life experiences that tilt things in your favor when it comes to learning how to read. But it's not just how affluent your family is, it's how affluent your school is, too. High-poverty schools are less effective - on average - when it comes to promoting reading achievement. And according to the US Department of Education, nearly half of all Black students in this country go to high-poverty schools. Nearly half of all Hispanic kids too. White kids? Only eight percent of them go to schools where most students are from low-income families.

And here's the thing: If you're a struggling reader and you go to a school where most of the students are from low-income families, your problems with reading may go unnoticed. Because a lot of the other kids are probably having a hard time learning to read too. Here's Julie Washington again.

> **Washington:** I go into poor schools -- nobody has dyslexia in a poor school. In the face of a population where eight and a half out of ten are struggling with reading, who has a reading disability? The answer is, we have no idea.

She says part of the problem is the way federal law defines learning disabilities. The law says a child cannot qualify for a learning disability if that child's learning problems are primarily the result of economic disadvantage.

> **Washington**: So what that policy is saying - we've decided as a country that if you are having trouble reading and you're poor, you're having trouble with reading because you're poor. Because our policy does not allow you to be both learning disabled and poor.

The goal was to prevent low-income kids of color from being overidentified for special education. But the policy has had unintended consequences.

> **Paul Morgan**: We hear from teachers that they have been told not to refer any more children of color. That they're already at their threshold.

This is Paul Morgan, a professor at Penn State. His research shows that if you look at children having the hardest time with reading – kids who score in the bottom ten percent – you find that white children are much more likely to be receiving special education services than children of color. He says there are likely a number of things going on. Part of it is expectations. The white child struggling must have a disability whereas the Black child struggling is just – struggling? Like so many other kids in her school. And then there's the fact that getting special education

services for a child with a reading disability can be difficult no matter what kind of school the child goes to.

> **Morgan**: Too often I think parents have to fight. And when the school says no, there's not much of a recourse for the parent to engage in short of legal action, which is very costly.

It's a system that favors people with money. Some parents spend thousands of dollars trying to get their kids into special ed. But a child who is having a hard time learning to read doesn't necessarily have a learning disability. Paul Morgan points to the experience of his own two kids.

> **Morgan**: Our oldest is a voracious reader and took to it readily. He seemed to benefit from what our local school did in terms of teaching reading.

This wasn't the case with his younger son.

> **Morgan**: He really was starting to experience difficulties fairly early, by kindergarten, first grade.

The school's advice to Paul and his wife?

> **Morgan**: Read storybooks to him, surround him with books.

But they'd been reading to him since he was a baby. They had tons of books in their home. Language comprehension wasn't the issue. Paul's son needed to be taught how to read words. So, he and his wife started doing that.

> **Morgan**: We were in a position to reorganize our work schedules. And we, just every morning before he went to his classroom, set aside ten, fifteen minutes of regular practice. And then he was OK, things made sense to him, he was decoding and starting to read quickly and fluently and that, that was what he needed.

They caught the problem and were able to fix it pretty easily. That’s not going to be the case with every child. Some kids will need lots of instruction. But intervening early is critical.

> **Morgan**: If you can’t read well in the early grades, your peers notice, your teacher notices, you notice. And it really starts to have negative consequences on your social emotional development and your behavior.

Most children who are struggling with reading at the end of first grade don’t catch up...

> (Music)

… because the kids who got off to a good start in reading are catapulting ahead. Those good readers are soon able to read everything they know how to say. And now - because they can read lots of words - they’re gaining knowledge and teaching themselves the meaning of new words, through reading. That’s the rich get richer. When kids struggle, they tend to read less and miss out on tons of little opportunities to learn through reading. All those missed opportunities add up. One study estimated that a fifth-grader who is a good reader - at the 90th percentile compared to her peers - encounters almost two million words in text every year just in stuff she reads outside of school. The average child who reads at the 10th percentile encounters just eight thousand words outside of school. Think about that, and then think about a kid who gets to seventh grade reading on a second-grade level. That’s what Sonya Thomas was told about her son. What happened with C.J.?

> **C.J.:** Hello

> **Hanford**: Hello. So, I’m Emily

> **C.J.:** And I’m C.J.

I never got a chance to meet C.J. in person. The coronavirus abruptly canceled travel while I was reporting this story. So I met him on Zoom with his mom. I asked him what he remembers about being taught to read? Not much, he says, except that it was hard.

Hanford: What was hard? What was it about it that was hard, do you know?

C.J.: Saying the words out loud and reading out loud.

Hanford: Reading out loud? Could you sound them out and say the words and then you didn't know what they meant? Or did you have a hard time just sounding them out?

C.J.: Both.

Hanford: Both. Do you remember anyone teaching you how to sound out words?

C.J.: No.

Hanford: No. But maybe they did and you don't remember.

C.J.: Yeah.

Sonya had warned me that C.J. isn't much of a talker so I wasn't surprised by his one-word answers.

Sonya Thomas: He's being 13, don't want to do it.

Hanford: I gotcha.

My big question about C.J.'s reading is this: does he have a disability that the school system missed? Or is the problem that C.J. was never taught how to read? Or both? His mom wants to know the answers to those questions, too.

(Music)

So Sonya requested all of C.J.'s school records. And APM Reports hired a professor named Zack Barnes to review those records.

Zack Barnes: I'm assistant professor of special education at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee.

Before that, Zack was a special education teacher in the Nashville schools. So he's familiar with the forms and assessments in C.J.'s file. Sonya and I met with Zack virtually and he went through what he found in C.J.'s records, starting in kindergarten.

Barnes: From the data that we're seeing, C.J. was starting off behind.

The records are sort of frustrating though. They don't say what he was behind in. Just that he was "below benchmark." When C.J. started first grade, he took a reading test that placed him at the 24th percentile nationally. That means more than three quarters of first graders in the country were doing better than he was. There's a form in the file that says C.J. had no problem understanding and using vocabulary but that he spoke slowly. Sonya noticed this, too.

Thomas: I do remember me having some concerns about his speech and um, him being really shy, like not talking a lot.

There's no indication that C.J. was evaluated for a speech issue or a reading problem. But there is a handwritten note Sonya wrote when C.J. was in first grade asking the school to test him for a learning disability. At the end of first grade, C.J. took the same assessment he took at the beginning of the school year, the one that showed he read at the 24th percentile. This time, he scored at the 12th percentile. That means nearly 90 percent of kids his age were doing better than he was.

Sonya tears up when Zack points this out.

> **Thomas**: Sorry, but this tears me all to pieces.

We spend nearly two hours going over C.J.'s entire school file, grade by grade. There are nearly 200 pages of records and Zack notices a pattern. Some years C.J. got pulled out of the classroom for extra help with reading. His test scores went up. Then the help stopped.
I asked Zack later if this is unusual. He said no. And not just in Nashville. In lots of schools. He likened it to a lifeguard saving someone and then allowing them to drown a few minutes later. Things might have been different for C.J. if he'd been in special education. He would have had an individualized education program and rights to services protected by federal law. But to get into special ed, you need to be identified with a disability. Zack says to determine if C.J. has a disability, he'd need a full evaluation from a school psychologist. C.J. never got one of those. Zack says he should have.

> **Barnes:** He's this kind of student that we really need to dig deep on to figure out, how can we help C.J.?

Zack offers to help Sonya get C.J. an evaluation. Sonya is grateful. But angry. Her son just finished eighth grade. She asked for him to be tested for a learning disability in first grade. She wonders - how many other kids needed help and didn't get it?

> **Thomas**: There is this heavy feeling that I have of- uh! So many people that's not going to get it. And worse off than him. And I don't know what to do. Except to keep telling parents to question everything and everybody, so they don't have to go all of these years like I did, to try to get down to the bottom of it.

I contacted the Nashville Public Schools to see if someone could answer questions about what happened with C.J. A spokesperson declined to comment.

> (Music)

There are kids like C.J. all over the country. Learning to read does not come easily to them. Schools tell their parents- read to him. He'll be OK. But he's not. Some kids get help. Their parents pay for it. Or they teach their child themselves. Or the child gets into special education where he's more likely to get the kind of instruction he needs. But if your child is not learning to read in school and you don't have the money or time to deal with it yourself – what do you do? The equity implications of this are stunning. A child from a low or even a moderate-income family who is having a hard time learning to read may never get what he needs to become a good reader.

(Music)

There are several ways to view what's going on with reading in this country.

One is to see it as a special education problem. We have lots of kids with learning disabilities who aren't getting the help they need. We do -- but that isn't the whole story. A third of fourth graders in this country can't read on a basic level. They can't *all* need special education. Remember Paul Morgan's son? He got the help he needed and he was fine. He's doing well academically. About to start high school. The same age as C.J.

Another popular explanation is poverty. Kids can't read because they're hungry, they're stressed, they weren't read to enough at home. Poverty plays a role. No question. There's lots of research on this. But children from low-income families can learn to read well, and when they do, it can change their lives. Vesia Hawkins grew up poor. She learned to read. And now she has a master's degree.

A third explanation is the tests themselves. They're not measuring reading ability accurately. The levels are set too high. Reasonable people can disagree on how proficiency levels are set on standardized tests. And no test will be able to measure everyone's reading ability accurately. For example, if you're a kid who doesn't know anything about cricket and there's a passage about cricket on your fourth grade reading test, you may not do so well. Maybe you would have

done better if the passage was about… baseball. But arguing about the tests misses the big picture. Many kids are struggling, and there are parents like Sonya Thomas crying out for help all over this country.

(Music)

What I've learned from my years of reporting on this topic is that a big part of the problem is many kids aren't being taught how to read. Old assumptions about how reading works are pervasive in schools. The idea that readers don't need to sound out words, they can use context instead. The idea that kids who are behind will catch up. The idea that learning to read is like learning to talk. That it happens through exposure. It doesn't. Cognitive scientists have known this for a long time. Phil Gough - the guy who came up with the Simple View of Reading - published a paper in 1980 called "Learning to Read: An Unnatural Act." He wrote this: "the statistically average child, normally endowed and normally taught, learns to read only with considerable difficulty. He does not learn to read naturally." The bottom line is that learning to read is not easy for many kids. Reading difficulty is natural. And a lot of kids are not being taught what they need to know. Vesia Hawkins wants to see a movement of parents demanding better reading instruction.

Hawkins: I mean, like I just envision like just thousands of parents descending upon central office or the courthouse, you know and just force people to look at the kids, to look at the families that's not being served. I mean, ya'll are taking our tax dollars. But we're not getting the return on that investment.

Sonya Thomas wants to see a movement too.

Thomas: Why isn't everyone in this country angry like me? Why are they not losing sleep? It's unacceptable for children to not have a chance right off the bat. And I'm not going to let anybody sleep. We are not going to let anybody sleep until we have changed and changed for the better for all children.

Sonya is now executive director of PROPEL, the parent group she helped found. It's her full-time job. And she's determined to make sure that all the C.J.'s and Mateo's and DeShawn's out there get what they need to learn how to read.

(Music)

You've been listening to "What the Words Say" from APM Reports. It was produced by me, Emily Hanford, and edited by Catherine Winter. Research and production help from Sabby Robinson and John Hernandez. Our associate producer is Alex Baumhardt. Web editors are Dave Mann and Andy Kruse. The final mix was by Chris Julin and Craig Thorson. Fact-checking by Betsy Towner Levine. The APM Reports team includes Sasha Aslanian and Lauren Humpbert. Our Editor-in-Chief is Chris Worthington. Special thanks to Stephen Smith and Shelly Langford.

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