



## Glean Education's Research to Practice Podcast Episode #12 - Maryanne Wolf (UCLA)

Maryanne Wolf: I believe that my life's work is to help literacy be considered a basic human right around the world and especially in our world, and our backyards.

Jessica Hamman: Hi, and welcome to Glean Education's Research to Practice podcast, where we talk to education experts from around the world about their latest work and bring their fascinating findings out from the journal pages and into your classroom.

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Jessica Hamman: I'm Jessica Hamman, founder of Glean Education. And today I'm so excited to be speaking with Maryanne Wolf. She's a scholar and teacher and advocate for children and literacy around the world. She's currently director of the newly created center for dyslexia, diverse learners and social justice at the UCLA graduate school of education and information studies. Today, we're chatting with her about her extensive work specifically in the area of dyslexia and reading and the intersection between literacy and social justice. Wolf, it is a great pleasure to welcome you here today. Thank you for taking the time.

Maryanne Wolf: Absolutely. Jessica.

Jessica Hamman: Can you just take us back to the beginning of how you got started in teaching in the first place and what sparked your interest in the area of literacy?

Maryanne Wolf: The reality is that like so many people in the world of literacy and reading, I was first an English major. And I have several degrees in literature thinking that I would do ultimately a dissertation on the poet, Rilke. If you look behind me, you'll see all these different books. So you've got George Eliot, you've got *The Monastery* and *The Microscope*. Wendell Berry, *Reading for Life*. William James, *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds*. That gives you a clue to my mind, but



in between my master's degree and that program, I did a , it's like a peace Corps mission that was supposed to be on a native American reservation. At the last minute it fell through and they sent me to Hawaii.

Maryanne Wolf: I mean, I'm laughing, but the reality was, this was desperate poverty, mostly Filipino workers who, some of whom were able to bring their families to the plantation and some weren't. And what I learned in a year was that literacy was the foundation for the potential of a child. And if I could not make them literate, I was really condemning them to the life of poverty of their parents. And I had not known any of this. This was an awakening like few others. It also alerted me, Jessica, in a very unusual way. I was the English major who didn't have a clue about how to teach reading.

Maryanne Wolf: I just thought like many a new untutored teacher that all you have to do is love books and you'll convey it. So my second rude awakening was that there is so much to know about reading and I didn't know it. And I was in a funny way, like some of the teachers who believed, if you just introduce a love of book that the kids will [inaudible 00:04:45] it, the alphabet principle and read. But the reality that I saw firsthand was that our children, especially about 40% of them really, really must have the lower rungs of the ladder in the teaching of reading.

Maryanne Wolf: So I ended up applying to schools across the country and had no idea where to go because I was an English major. And luckily, Harvard reading lab took a... I have no idea to this moment why



they accepted me. They shouldn't have, but they did. And from then I became absolutely obsessed with understanding how the brain learned to read. And at the time it was not a popular way of thinking. In fact, people really felt that I was misdirected to be so interested. But very quickly, I think the world changed. Imaging gave us so much more information, and then it became what we have now, of course.

Maryanne Wolf: Everybody thinks you can know everything from imaging, which is as wrong as it was by thinking you could learn nothing from it. So in between, I believe Jessica, that my life's work is to help literacy be considered a basic human right around the world and especially in our world and our backyards. And that's when I discovered if you will, at Harvard, the study of dyslexia. And dyslexia is both a reality and a metaphor for me. And I don't think about it the way some people do.

Maryanne Wolf: For me, dyslexia is this amazing different organization of the brain. The brains of human beings to survive as a species, we have to have differences. And so way before literacy was invented, that's only 6000 years ago, we had brains of dyslexic. And so if you think about the generals or the leaders and the artists and the architects and the builders, they all had that kind of brain. But then when we invented literacy, we also invented dyslexia. Even see Egyptian hieroglyphs. They knew it then that if you get hit over the head with an Axe, you lose hieroglyphs. So they knew it even then that it was related to the brain.



Jessica Hamman: Your origin story is really interesting and resonates with mine actually in a lot of ways, because my very first stint in teach was through a volunteer core called the Jesuit volunteer core, in my case for one year, working in Alaska, not Hawaii.

Maryanne Wolf: Oh.

Jessica Hamman: But I actually taught literacy to adults. So what's interesting is that you saw kind of the beginning and felt that onus upon you and the pressure and the responsibility. And I was able too, to see what happens when those students are not given the proper path to literacy as adults. I came to the realization that it's a social justice issue and that it is our duty as teachers to support them in that.

Maryanne Wolf: Jessica, these are [crosstalk 00:08:14].

Jessica Hamman: Yes. Yes, in a lot ways.

Maryanne Wolf: Jessica, I had no idea you and I had similar analogous backgrounds.

Jessica Hamman: What's so amazing is that all these components, diverse learners and literacy instruction and social justice seem to come together. That



brings me to your new venture, if you will, at UCLA. And I'd love to hear more about what you're doing there and how you've brought in an element of social justice that will be guided under this department.

Maryanne Wolf: So I have spent, as you know, from my scientist self, I have spent a lot of time on basic theory. And then I became very aware, thanks to Maureen Lovett and Robin Morris in particular that it's one thing to do all this work theoretical. It's another to apply it. And I had begun to get into this area because it was a social justice issue. It wasn't a sidebar. It became my full life to understand what it was like.

Maryanne Wolf: But I wasn't applying the knowledge. And so with Robin Morris and Maureen Lovett, and thanks to national Institute for child health and human development, we did a series, more than a decade of work on the intervention that applied it. And that gave me a different reality that we can't just have our knowledge exist in academic life or even just in the classrooms that we serve. And so when I was asked whether I'd be interested in creating this center, I said it had to be a center in which social justice was the application of the knowledge about dyslexia, the reading brain and diverse learners.

Maryanne Wolf: And one of the things that I love about dyslexia is that... Actually was in one of the conferences, in which one of the preeminent visual researchers from Stanford, Brian Wandell, was listening to a bunch of us in a very small working group, talk about dyslexia. And



he said, "Wait a minute, are you saying that whatever you learned about dyslexia will help all readers?" I said, "Yes, that's it."

Jessica Hamman: Ding.

Maryanne Wolf: That's the simplest way of putting it. And I had it put it that way. And he just summarized two days of a working conference. And it's just the way it is. Once you know about the reading brain and once you know about the dyslexia organization, and you know that the heterogeneity inside dyslexia is like a more concentrated version of heterogeneity in so many of our struggling readers, but for different reasons so that the environment can also cause a behavior that looks like dyslexia, that isn't dyslexia.

Maryanne Wolf: And there are measures that we could show why that's so different, including brain imaging. But it can look the same, but we can learn what do we do in dyslexia that can help readers who have difficulties in this skill, this skill, this skill area. So for me, dyslexia research is all about building a knowledge base that is helpful not only to the struggling readers of the United States in North America and Latin America, but it is a template of knowledge that can be used for non-literate children everywhere, and can help us devise, it's another piece of the work, devise apps and digital activities that can help children who exist in places where there are no schools and no teachers.

Maryanne Wolf: I would usually say that before now, when we're in the midst of two pandemics, one that we can't control the virus and the other that we have caused a systemic racism and poverty and all the issues



involved. We can learn from this knowledge base about how best to use digital technology to help. And, and that's a very important and, what is wrong with digital technology in terms of how it can be misused and actually short circuit the reading grade. So all of this comes together with the two concepts. Literacy is a basic human right. What we know about dyslexia can help literacy at a deep enough level for critical analysis to occur.

Jessica Hamman: And one of the key components of bridging that research to practice gap is training and then accessibility of materials.

Maryanne Wolf: Absolutely.

Jessica Hamman: You are connected with the Haskins laboratories resource bank.

Maryanne Wolf: Yes.

Jessica Hamman: Would you explain a little bit about what that is and how that connects to this?

Maryanne Wolf: There are so many great reading scholars around the world who are very dedicated to helping parents and educators when we can't have one-to-one teaching. So what we did was all of us got together





under the umbrella of Haskins laboratory at Yale. And that's Ken Pew is the director. Ken had a wonderful technology expert who helped the group of reading scholars and neurosciences and educators. And that includes Aim Institute, windward school, the Reading League, Southport, Atlanta speech school, Meadow farms.

Maryanne Wolf: I'm sure I'm leaving some out. All these people were helping say, all of us said, we need an organizer of all the skills from infancy. That includes your two year old, from zero to five. That's our early childhood, the early developing reader, and then the developing reader, slightly older. And then the advanced expert reader or the adolescent. Peggy McCardal and Maureen Lovett and I had a wonderful time using [inaudible 00:14:53] rope to say, "Okay, these are the precursors that we really want everybody to know about. And what are the activities and skills in zero to five that are free, online, evidence based if possible, and if not evidence based curated by a group at Haskins or ourselves?"

Maryanne Wolf: So all of those skills between zero and five have corresponding activities. The early reader has even more skills that are involved, everything from phoneme awareness to different apprehension skills. And then activities and books available. Everything free, online, organized. And that goes all the way to adolescents. Now there are holes in it. We've got our first launch is only a week and a half old. So you can imagine we're going to continue to update and add.

Jessica Hamman: So exciting.



Maryanne Wolf: Very, very amazing generosity is going on in our world, Jessica.

Jessica Hamman: Well, and I think a wonderful offshoot of this curated resource bank that you have is you end up teaching teachers and parents what they need to know about reading by way of presenting this in a sequence, but also in terms of the breadth and the depth of what they need to know in order to teach reading.

Maryanne Wolf: And you've hit the nail on the head because parents, they see this, this, that, but it's all over the place. And they have no means for judging what is quality and what has evidence behind it. So they've been bombarded. And though that was in the beginning that nobody knew what to do, but there are now we have different groups. Barbara Wilson has a resource library. Reading League has a resource library. We're all connecting. Canadian children's Literacy Foundation, I was with them this morning. We're all sharing resources.

Jessica Hamman: Fantastic.

Maryanne Wolf: And we're linking to each other. But what we wanted to do was have a centralized hub. Now, one of the things that I will cue you in Jessica. I don't know if you've seen the little video that it begins with.



Jessica Hamman: Yes, I did.

Maryanne Wolf: I did something subversive. So I was given five minutes. Peggy McCardal says, "Maryanne, you can't do anything for five minutes." "Peggy, I'm going to prove it." Well, she was right. It was six and a half minutes. But what I did was with the last minute I wanted parents to realize this is a way of introducing you just as you said, Jessica, to the beauty and complexity of the reading process.

Maryanne Wolf: So even though these are activities for your child, it's something that all of you can understand as a way of realizing the beauty and complexity of the reading brain. There's one other thing. I've been working with the Atlanta speech school on a town hall concept, which will be aired with one of the most, just a wonderful pediatrician from Boston who's really talking about trauma and safety issues that are connected to literacy. She and I are really trying to pull together all these different factors that parents and educators are struggling with.

Jessica Hamman: And this is another area where social justice meets literacy and those well curated and vetted materials are so important for teachers. So they become more informed in instructors themselves.

Maryanne Wolf: That's right.



Jessica Hamman: Well, Wolf, you have spent, I'm sure all day on Zoom calls and I appreciate.

Maryanne Wolf: You have too.

Jessica Hamman: I have too. It's true. But I truly appreciate your time and wisdom, and we are lucky to have you at the front lines doing the work you're doing. So thank you.

Maryanne Wolf: Thank you. And very best to you. And God's speed and good health to everyone.

Jessica Hamman: To learn more about Maryanne Wolf, visit her website at [maryannewolf.com](http://maryannewolf.com). To find links and articles to the resources mentioned in this podcast, go to [gleaneducation.com/podcast](http://gleaneducation.com/podcast) and access them in the show notes.

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