

Let's Stop Talking About The '30 Million Word Gap'

June 07, 2018

Did you know that kids growing up in poverty hear 30 million fewer words by age 3? Chances are, if you're the type of person who reads [a newspaper](#) or listens to NPR, you've [heard](#) that statistic [before](#).

Since 1992, this finding has, with unusual power, shaped the way educators, parents and policymakers think about educating poor children.

But did you know that the number comes from just one study, begun almost 40 years ago, with just 42 families? That some people argue it contained a built-in racial bias? Or that others, including the authors of a new study that calls itself a “failed replication,” say it's just wrong?

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, with her longtime collaborator Roberta Michnick Golinkoff and other researchers, wrote a scholarly critique of the Sperry study for the [Brookings Institution](#).

“I am worried,” Hirsh-Pasek tells NPR, that downplaying the word gap will have “dangerous” consequences. “Whenever you send out a message that ‘Hey, this doesn’t matter,’ the policymakers are listening and say, ‘Hey, that’s great, we can divert the money.’ “