This podcast is designed to be heard. We strongly encourage you to listen to the audio if you are able.

Sold a Story: How teaching kids to read went so wrong

Transcript

Episode 10: The Details

Zoe Gaul: I just think it’s pretty cool to be in a podcast cause like, everybody hears it and like, then it's just like, oh my god, that's me, I did that. (laughs)

That’s Zoe Gaul. We introduced you to her in our first episode.

Emily Hanford: Did you listen to the podcast?

Zoe: Yeah, I did.

Hanford: What was it like to hear um, about other kids who were struggling to learn how to read?

Zoe: It was pretty cool. I mean, like, it's not cool that they’re struggling how to learn to read, but like, you know.

(theme music in)

Hanford: There are a lot of kids who struggle to learn how to read and I think that hearing you and hearing the other kids who were in the podcast was really, um, validating for those kids because they realized like they're not alone.

Zoe: Yeah.

(theme music swells)

I’m Emily Hanford and this is Sold a Story, a podcast from APM Reports.

In our previous episode, we heard what’s been going on with the people and organizations at the center of our investigation.
In this episode, we’re going to tell you about some of the other people who were in the podcast – kids, parents, teachers and scientists. What’s happened to them since Sold a Story came out? What do they think about what’s happened in response to the podcast?

(theme music out)

We’re going to start with Zoe Gaul. Zoe was in first grade when I went to New York City in the spring of 2021 to meet her and her dad. They lived on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. They still live in the neighborhood, in a new apartment. And Zoe still goes to the same public school, where she’s now in fourth grade.

Hanford: And how is fourth grade going so far?

Zoe: It’s going pretty amazing. Mm – two of my best friends are in my class this year. And then, um, I have a really cool teacher.

Hanford: Cool teacher. What makes her cool?

Zoe: Ah, I don’t know (laughs).

Hanford: She’s just cool.

And Zoe says reading is going well.

Hanford: Do you feel like you’re a, a good reader?

Zoe: Yeah, I do.

I ask her if she’d be up for reading out loud again.

Hanford: You willing to do that?

Zoe: Um-huh.

Hanford: You have a book?

Zoe: Yes, I do.

She’s got a brand-new book. One she’s never read before.

Zoe: OK, so chapter 1.
“Is that her? Stop pushing, I can't see. (ahroh!) Friends, quiet, you're going to ruin everything. A cab is coming! Quick, hide!” Fifteen-year-old Issa and twelve-year-old Oliver raced down, raced around, to the side of the brownstone. “Hurry, Hyacinth . . .”

Hyacinth? Pretty impressive.

**Lee Gaul:** She’s a, a really good reader.

This is Zoe’s dad, Lee Gaul.

**Gaul:** And I think it speaks to the fact that certain things that we did together when I was teaching her my phonics curriculum that I cobbled together, they really stuck and they really helped her connect the dots on how to read, um, despite the way they taught.

Zoe’s school will have to change the way it teaches reading. The school uses the Lucy Calkins’ reading curriculum. And as you heard in the last episode, all New York City public schools will have to stop using that curriculum. They’re supposed to be using something new by next school year. But when I did this interview with Lee last fall, he told me nothing had changed so far.

**Gaul:** It has not changed. The school knows about Sold a Story. The principal there let me know – she's like, “I know about the podcast.” Um, but we didn't talk about it, uh, at all. She just said she knew about it and essentially, they basically were like, we disagree.

I asked the principal for an interview, but she declined. Lee says it feels like the podcast is something no one is supposed to mention at school. He has talked to a few parents about it.

**Gaul:** But these are private moments. This is not somebody going and saying in front of the entire Parents Association and teachers bringing any of those things up that I know of, you know. It's one of those, like, um, “Hey, by the way, that was really great,” and a “Shh,” like, “Oh, somebody's coming.” You know? Like it almost feels like that.

When I first met Lee, he told me there were other parents at the school who were concerned about the reading instruction. Now, three years later, he says they’ve all left.

**Hanford:** Really?

**Gaul:** Yeah.
Hanford: And what are they doing instead? Do you know?

Gaul: They’re going to either private or Catholic school. Yeah, yeah, they’re all gone.

But of course, there’s always tutoring for the kids who stay.

Gaul: The other day when I was walking Zoe to school there was a guy on the corner with a banner stand and he was the “tutor doctor.” And like, you know, in our neighborhood, I’m sure he got tons of business because what people do when they think that their child is struggling is they just spend money on a tutor because they have the extra income to be able to do that.

(music in)

Lee’s glad that balanced literacy is on its way out of New York City public schools. And that Lucy Calkins is out as head of her teaching training institute. I asked him what he thought when he first heard that news.

Gaul: I have a lot of schadenfreude. You know, this, this real satisfaction. Um, but it’s too little too late. I mean, damage has been done for so long. People are going to struggle their whole lives with, with not being able to read very well.

(music out)

For parents who believe their children did not get what they needed, watching balanced literacy fall has felt like a victory. Missy Purcell remembers when she heard last year that her school district would be dropping the Reading Recovery program.

Missy Purcell: It just felt so, I may have gone out to have cocktails, if I’m being real honest.

Missy’s son Matthew was in Reading Recovery. You heard about Matthew in Episode 5. He struggled for years and didn’t get the instruction he needed in public school.

Hanford: So by the end of Sold a Story he was in sixth grade at a private school that specialized in helping kids with dyslexia.

Purcell: Um-huh.
**Hanford:** And you said that after just one year in that school he was almost up to grade level in reading and writing.

**Purcell:** Um-huh.

**Hanford:** So how is Matthew doing now?

**Purcell:** Ah, you just asking that question, I’m like already tearing up. So, here we go…

(music in)

**Purcell:** He is doing so great. First of all, I was told he would never be a fluent reader. He’s a fluent reader.

She says he’s happy. He’s got a lot of friends. He’s playing baseball. And he’s a confident student now.

**Purcell:** He has just, he’s just blossomed. And I could not be more proud. And I want that for every kid. I don't want my kid to be a unicorn.

(music out)

**Sarah Gannon:** I do believe every kid can read. Every kid. It’s doable.

This is Sarah Gannon, another parent from Sold a Story who ended up moving her child to a private school.

**Gannon:** She said to me the other day. “I just feel like people get me.” And now, all of a sudden, you can see, she doesn’t think she’s dumb anymore.

Sarah Gannon was the reading specialist in Episode 3 who put her faith in Fountas and Pinnell.

**Gannon:** I trusted that they’re experts. I trusted that this is the way you teach reading.

But when her own daughter couldn’t read and Sarah wasn’t able to help her, she found the science of reading. And eventually she quit her job because her district wasn’t willing to change. She says some of her former colleagues – people she considered friends – are not interested in changing the way they teach kids to read. And they don't want to talk about it with her anymore.
Gannon: And at the end of the day, you know, we've moved apart. And, and I think that's just unfortunately how it has to be.

Sarah says Sold a Story has been hard for many teachers to hear.

Gannon: No one likes to be criticized, especially when it’s as personal as teaching. Teaching is a very personal career because it involves children and it involves their lives. And if you feel like you are not doing something right and you potentially harm them, I think it’s really hard because no one goes into teaching that I know of to harm people. It’s because you are a helper by nature. And most teachers I work with want to do it right.

Sarah has a new job now, helping school districts that are changing the way they teach reading. She wants teachers and district leaders to learn how to be critical consumers of curriculum. To ask – what is the research behind this? And to be able to evaluate that research. She says that’s what was missing before.

Gannon: I think those of us who came from that movement of balanced literacy where it was almost like blindly accepting what we do, I hope – I know for myself – have become a little bit more thoughtful and critical and not just taking someone’s word for it.

This is what I was hoping our reporting would do. I was hoping it would get more people curious about the scientific research on reading. That people – especially teachers – would listen and want to know more. And I wanted people to understand that this is not just about whether schools teach phonics. It’s about whether they teach that other idea – the idea that beginning readers don’t have to sound out written words because there are other strategies they can use instead. I wanted to show people why that idea is a problem and how it became so influential in early reading instruction.

Christine Cronin: That was new information for people.

This is Christine Cronin. You met her in Episode 3. She was the teacher in Boston who ultimately resisted that big effort by George W. Bush 20 years ago to get the science of reading
into schools. She resisted because she felt like she was being told what to do – and she didn’t understand why. And she says people need to know why.

**Cronin:** Especially in education, where people are often looking for the next shiny object, people become initiative weary. And when you told the whole story, there was a lot of information that people didn't have access to without having heard you report on it that made it beyond just – “Oh, this is just the next new thing” to – “Wow, this, there was a flaw here all along that we weren't privy to at the time. And now we have that information and now we can approach this shift, not just as – “Oh, gosh, it's a new, new thing,” but – “Oh, I really, I should learn more about this.” I think that that's the difference that I think that it made.

She’s now in charge of professional development for the Boston Public Schools, where she’s working with a team to oversee a big change in reading instruction. The school system started doing this before Sold a Story. But she thinks some teachers who were resistant are more interested now. Because they heard the podcast. Or maybe they’re just hearing people talking about the science of reading.

**Cronin:** Those conversations are happening through social media. They’re happening in sort of all levels of people’s experiences as educators and so they definitely are coming into learning experiences curious and open, I think, in a deeper way if they maybe had not been before.

And she says the scientific research is more accessible to teachers than it was 20 years ago during Bush’s Reading First program. There are now lots of books and articles and videos and podcasts that explain the research.

**Cronin:** It’s not this sort of mysterious thing that I felt like you could only get the knowledge from a few, you know, people who held it.

And it’s not just that the information is more widely available now. It’s that teachers are sharing this information with each other.
Cronin: And it’s just, it changes everything as far as how people feel connected to the work. And we didn’t feel that way during the Reading First era. We felt like something was being done to us as opposed to being collaborators as part of a movement.

Reid Lyon: I do think it’s different this time.

This is Reid Lyon, the neuroscientist you met in Sold a Story who helped develop Reading First.

Lyon: What’s changed is this tremendous hunger for information.

(music in)

Lyon: It’s the first time I’ve ever experienced people asking me, “Where can I find more information so I can really do this well?”

It’s kind of blowing his mind.

Lyon: People who heretofore would have said, “F--- off,” you know, “I know what I’m doing,” now say, “I can’t believe that I thought that.”

He’s feeling hopeful that things are going to change for the better. But he also has concerns. Because he says the science of reading has become a movement.

Lyon: What I’m fearful of, cause I’ve seen it so many times, is movements sometimes gloss over detail. And here’s, the details are so critical.

(music out)

When we come back, we’re going to talk about some of the details.

Episode 10 Seg B

(music in and out)

In Episode 3 of Sold a Story you heard the former superintendent of public instruction in California testifying before state lawmakers.
**Bill Honig:** Um, I agree with the chair’s comments, there is no issue facing education that’s more crucial right now than how and whether we teach our youngsters to read – all of them. So there’s ...

Bill Honig told lawmakers he’d made mistakes when he was superintendent because he didn’t know enough about how children learn to read. But he said he’d learned from cognitive scientists. And he was optimistic that reading instruction would change.

**Honig:** I think we can turn this around very, very quickly. The field is ready. The teachers are ready. They know that there’s a problem. They’re willing to play ball.

This was in 1996. And – as you know – things didn’t turn out the way Bill Honig hoped.

(music in)

That’s why we made this podcast. We wanted to know why scientific research from decades ago still wasn’t making its way into many schools.

What we discovered is that there was an idea that was in the way. An idea about how kids learn to read that was in conflict with what the research said. This idea was everywhere. It was embedded in books and curriculum materials and assessment systems and intervention programs that were being sold by many people and many publishing companies – and most successfully, by the people and the company we’ve been focusing on in this podcast.

The idea is that kids don’t need to be taught how to sound out written words because they can use other strategies to figure out what the words say.

(music out)

This entire podcast has been about that one idea. And how that idea justified an approach to teaching reading that didn’t include much phonics.

That approach – often referred to as balanced literacy – is now being scrutinized by a lot of people.

**Mark Seidenberg:** The science of reading movement and the laws, in particular, have had the effect of dislodging – not completely – but certainly pushing that approach off the pedestal and opening the door to doing different things.
This is Mark Seidenberg, one of the cognitive scientists you heard in Sold a Story. And like Reid Lyon – who you heard before the break – Mark is thrilled and kind of amazed that there’s such an interest right now in the science of reading.

Seidenberg: So we have all this antipathy to science in so many parts of the country and with regard to many issues, and in reading you have all these people who are saying – we want to know more, we want to know more. And that’s great.

But like Reid, Mark is worried about the details. The details of how schools are translating the science of reading into practice. So, we’re going to talk about some of the details. Because the details matter here.

(music in)

I’m going to start with Mark and then bring in Reid. And I’m going to offer some of my own thoughts too.

Mark Seidenberg’s concerns are mostly about how the science itself is being understood – or misunderstood – by teachers and curriculum developers. As you heard in Episode 8, the science of reading isn’t a program you buy or a thing you do. It’s a body of research. And this research has important implications for how schools teach reading. But Mark says only a few big ideas from the research literature seem to be getting through. And he thinks that’s a problem.

Seidenberg: There are big parts of the literature people haven’t gotten to for various reasons and I would say the main one is the stuff we know about learning.

(music out)

“The stuff we know about learning ...”

Let me back up a bit to explain what he’s talking about. First of all, he sees many successes when it comes to how the science of reading is changing instruction in many schools. There’s a lot of good news here.

Seidenberg: It has definitely focused attention on the need to teach kids basic reading skills like about print and about how print relates to language and how language relates to
the world. And it did definitely increase awareness of a true fact which is that kids need instruction in these areas and that that’s an important thing to do.

This is a big deal.

Lots of kids were struggling because they were being left to figure out too many things on their own.

**Teacher:** 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.

This is that lesson you heard in Episode 1 where children were being taught to use the meaning of the story to guess a written word.

**Teacher:** Do you think that covered word could be the word “miss?” Because now that they’re gone maybe their parents will miss them?

One of the big lessons from the scientific research is that schools need to explicitly teach beginning readers how to sound out written words. Because kids who don’t get off to a good start with decoding often end up with reading problems they may never get over.

**Below-basic reader:** Jod dogs who ...

Remember this fourth grader trying to read in Episode 1?

**Below-basic reader:** a bell-ton ... percent to ...

The balanced literacy approach – with its emphasis on teaching kids other strategies for identifying words – failed to provide many kids with the decoding instruction they needed. But Mark is concerned that in their enthusiasm to teach things they weren’t before, some schools may be going overboard.

**Seidenberg:** I think people had the idea that – look, we've been leaving too many kids behind, we've been doing a poor job. We know what the parts of reading are, and we will teach them, g--d-- it.

And what he’s seeing now – when he visits schools, when he talks to teachers, when he reads what they’re saying online – is that some schools may be teaching kids more than they need to know.
Seidenberg: I’ve seen first-grade classrooms where “phonological awareness” is the big term that’s on the wall or teaching kids what diphthongs are.

The point is – children need to be taught how to read.

They need to know how to identify the sounds in words – but they don’t need to know that’s phonological awareness.

And they need to know that the letters “oi” make the sound /oy/ in coin. But they don’t need to know that’s a diphthong.

Seidenberg: I think there’s a failure to distinguish what a teacher might need to know about how language works and how reading works and what a kid needs to learn.

He’s concerned that teachers now think they have to teach kids everything there is to know about how English spelling works – every spelling pattern, every exception, every rule.

Seidenberg: And so you have the emergence of a view that really emphasizes explicitly teaching everything that goes into becoming a reader.

There’s not enough time in the school day to teach kids everything they need to know about how written language works. And more importantly – it’s not necessary.

(music in)

Seidenberg: There’s another kind of learning.

This other kind of learning has a name.

Seidenberg: Implicit learning or statistical learning.

This kind of learning occurs without explicit instruction. Mark Seidenberg’s research has shown that the brain has a remarkable ability to learn from the statistical regularities in language, such as the frequency of certain spelling patterns in words. Explicit instruction is critical at first – most kids don’t just start picking this up. But research shows that a lot of what a good reader eventually knows about words – and how they’re spelled and what they mean – is stuff they learned implicitly, through reading. Mark says the goal of reading instruction should not be to teach kids everything they need to know. It should be to teach them enough so that this implicit or statistical learning can kick in.
Seidenberg: You know, there’s this idea of cracking the code where the lightbulb goes on and the kid kind of goes – oh, that’s how it works.

(music out)

Remember Kah’Marii?

Kah’Marii: s-m-i… smi – ing

You heard Kah’Marii having a lightbulb moment in Episode 2.


Kah’Marii got a lot of phonics instruction – not on things like what a diphthong is, but on how to sound out written words. He needed extra help. But eventually, he was able to decode words with spelling patterns he hadn’t been taught. That’s implicit learning.

That kind of learning depends on lots and lots of practice. And Mark Seidenberg is worried that schools may now be spending too much time on instruction and not giving kids enough time to read.

(music in)

Remember the cozy nooks? I mentioned them in Episode 6. I said that people – with good intentions – wanted to get kids curled up with books as fast as they could. They wanted to get kids to the good part, which is reading. So, they taught beginning readers shortcuts like, “look at the picture,” “think of a word that makes sense,” in the hopes that, eventually, kids would figure out how to read. That approach failed to recognize how difficult it is for many children to learn how to decode words.

But Mark Seidenberg wants everyone to be cognizant of the fact that time in a cozy nook curled up with a book is essential. You become a good reader by spending a lot of time reading. But there’s that critical first step – learning how to decode – that can’t be skipped or given short shrift.

(music out)

And here’s the thing: figuring out the amount of instruction that each child needs and making sure each child gets that instruction – that’s a complex task. And Reid Lyon is concerned that
with all the new laws and policies and public awareness about the science of reading, schools and teachers are under pressure to do things quickly. And they might not have what they need to do things well.

**Lyon:** Whenever you're trying to put anything in place, you’ve got to have time to do it. You’ve got to have teachers who feel like they're being taken care of. You know, the nuts and bolts of helping people work together and feel supported, as hokey as that sounds, is so critical.

He learned this the hard way, through his experience 20 years ago with Reading First. He thought if educators learned about the research, instruction would change.

**Lyon:** I thought just saying the words would get it done.

What he learned is that information is not enough. He says the key thing to think about is – how do complex systems change? What’s the best way to do that? And one of the lessons from Reading First is that top-down policies are not necessarily effective when the goal is complex systems change. That’s why Reid has concerns about laws that are telling schools they have to do things, and they have to do them fast.

**Lyon:** Where my fear is it takes us away from the details I’m talking about and the love for learning the details back to a combative stance where you’re blowing out a lot of epinephrine and norepinephrine and cortisol.

That’s the neuroscientist talking. He’s referring to chemicals in our brain that get released when we’re stressed. He wants to avoid this, to avoid the kind of fight that eventually took down Reading First. And he is optimistic. Because, as he said earlier, he does think something is different this time.

(music in)

**Lyon:** There’s a thoughtfulness about reading in the country today. There is an actual mature conversation.

But there are intense debates going on right now on social media and among teachers and researchers about the details of how to teach kids to read. And how to do it at scale. Because
that’s the task here. Getting thousands of school districts to make the right kinds of changes so that millions of kids can become better readers. It’s a tall order.

I’m worried that things will fall apart under pressure. The pressure of new laws and policies in particular. It’s tricky. Policy has an important role to play here. Schools and teachers often need the resources that can come with policy – things like money for new training and materials. And policy has a key role to play when it comes to accountability – sometimes pressure is necessary to change the status quo.

But what’s happening now is that schools and districts are buying new curriculum and materials. Sometimes because they have to. They’re spending a lot of money, committing to new products. And there are a lot of questions to ask about these new products. What’s the evidence they will lead to better results?

(music out)

This is one of the things Mark Seidenberg is really worried about. He’s worried that schools will commit to doing things in a certain way because they have bought a particular product that tells them to do it that way.

Seidenberg: If people decide that all we need to do is stick to the program here and everyone will read, I think that would be a really big mistake.

And something that’s troubling him is a kind of dogmatism that he’s noticing in conversations these days around the science of reading. People expressing strong beliefs. Joining teams. And becoming committed to new programs and new authorities.

Seidenberg: One thing I see is, there is this sort of authoritarian strain where people want to have someone they can rely on for guidance. It’s like we need to have an authority who we can rely on to tell us what to do. And one of the problems with people like Lucy Calkins were – well, she took on that role. And she was a flawed resource.

Here’s what I think.

(music in)
I think – as a nation – we need to approach what’s happening now as a work in progress. Keep learning new things. And be prepared to course-correct if necessary.

But this is hard to do in education. Because it’s such a big system with so many parts and so many people – and so much money involved and so much at stake.

What I can see is that the Sold a Story podcast and our earlier reporting has helped to raise awareness about the body of research known as the science of reading. It’s spurred a lot of action and reaction. And now it’s kind of messy out there.

And that means we’re not done with this story. There’s a lot more to report on. And we’re going to do that.

We want to know what’s working in schools as they are changing how they teach reading. And what’s not working – and why?

(music change)

If you have a story you want to share, you can send us an email at soldastory@apmreports.org. We’ll put that email address in the show notes.

You can also find links to an article and a talk by Mark Seidenberg about his concerns with translating the science of reading into practice. And a recent piece by Reid Lyon on what he believes are the most important findings from the reading research with tons of citations if you want to read more.

To get new episodes of Sold a Story when they come out, stay subscribed to this podcast feed. You can also sign up to get email alerts. Go to our website, Soldastory.org, and scroll down to where it says, “email notifications.”

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