Previously on Sold a Story…

Kalli Alden: He doesn’t look at all the letters in words. He doesn’t look at all the words in sentences. And reading is miserable for him.

Corinne Adams: It was like, read the book to the child first. And then, eventually, the child will have practiced it enough that they’ll read it and it’ll be great, you know.

Lee Gaul: It didn’t seem like they were really teaching ‘em to read. It seemed like they were teaching ‘em to sound like they could read.

(Music ends)

Steve Baldwin: Ok, we’re gonna go ahead and get started here…

In 1996, there was a reckoning going on in California about how children were being taught to read.

Bruce Thompson: I’m going to try to hold back my anger towards you because you were at the helm when all this nonsense was going on.

Bill Honig: I, I, I can appreciate the position.

The state’s former superintendent of public instruction is sitting before a group of lawmakers at the state capitol. His name is Bill Honig. He’s on the hot seat because he was in charge in California in the 1980s when the state made big changes to reading instruction. And reading scores tanked.

Honig: 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.
California had gone all-in on the whole-language approach to teaching reading – and the idea that I told you about in the last episode. The idea that kids don’t need to be taught how to sound out written words because they can use other cues to figure out what the words say. Bill Honig tells the lawmakers he didn’t know there was anything wrong with that cueing idea. But since he left office, he’s been reading a lot of research. And talking to cognitive scientists. And he says — now he knows.

**Honig:** I had to change my mind. And I think, those of us, are just all, educators are going to have to be open enough to look at the facts. There’s some very strong research on these issues. You could say 20 years ago, yes, you could substitute context or, or meaning to decode a word and that would work. And, and they didn’t have the details of it. Now they know that’s not a good strategy to teach kids. It’s a second-rate strategy that will mean that they’re slow readers for the rest of their life.

**Honig:** Large numbers of youngsters are being hurt by the failure to adapt to this knowledge.

(Music)

But Bill Honig was optimistic back in 1996 that things were about to 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 know that they want the details of the skills. They want somebody to lay it out for them. They’re willing to play ball.

He was confident that if teachers could learn about the scientific research on reading, they’d be convinced just like he was. He was sure that science would change the way kids are taught to read. But he was wrong.

(Music)

This is Episode 3 of *Sold a Story*, a podcast from American Public Media. I’m Emily Hanford. When Bill Honig was sitting before those lawmakers in California in 1996, the science of how people learn to read was clear. There were studies. There were books. There was lots of research. But there were powerful people who already believed in that other idea. The cueing idea. They had an approach for teaching children to read that was based on that idea. And they were selling that idea to schools.
So, when the scientific research on reading came along, it had adversaries. People who believed in something else. People who were going to fight for what they believed in.

And they were going to win.

Even though the federal government, armed with billions of dollars in taxpayer money, tried to stop them.

That’s the story I’m going to tell you in this episode. The clash between people spearheading a huge government effort to change the way reading was being taught. And people who had a stake in defeating that effort.

Back in the 1990s, Susan Neuman was a professor of education.

Susan Neuman: We would go to conferences and it was like, it was like bizarre. There were teams.

She was on the team that was losing in the 90s. The team that was saying – you gotta teach children how to read the words. She remembers going to a conference in Texas.

Neuman: What I did is I gave a talk saying that children needed to be taught, early on, and they needed explicit instruction, and that early childhood methods were failing children by not providing that kind of explicit instruction.

There were a lot of people in the audience who didn’t like her talk.

Neuman: And they stormed the podium after and yelled at me and said how wrong and how awful I was, blah, blah, blah, all this awful stuff.

But there were at least two people in the audience that day who liked what she had to say. The governor of Texas, George W. Bush. And his wife Laura.

Neuman: And she asked me to sit next to her at lunch. And she wanted to know more of my ideas.

They hit it off. Literacy was a big deal in the Bush family.
Barbara Bush: I can tell you that almost everything I care about would be better if more people could read, write and comprehend.

This is George Bush’s mother, Barbara Bush, speaking at a public library when she was the first lady of the United States.

B. Bush: So, is it possible? I don’t know. But I hope it’s possible. And I hope everyone will make it their business to see it’s possible.

This was personal for Barbara Bush. When her son Neil was in elementary school, she went to his class for “Reading Day.” The children were passing a book around, each reading a section. And when the book came to Neil, he couldn’t read it.

She was stunned. And like so many other mothers I’ve talked to who have had this experience, it changed her life. First, she went looking for help for her own child. Then the realization – it’s not just us. There are a lot of parents and children out here looking for help.

George W. Bush: Well thank you all very much…

When Neil’s older brother George ran for president, he made improving reading instruction one of his top priorities.

Bush: We will launch a new initiative called Reading First.

This is George W. Bush at a campaign stop in September of 2000. He tells the crowd that if he’s elected president, he’ll spend $5 billion on reading programs.

Bush: But we will only support effective programs. Effective reading strategies.

Four months later, George W. Bush was president of the United States.

In his first week in office – in the Roosevelt room of the White House – President Bush began laying the groundwork for his Reading First initiative.

Bush: It means we’re gonna have scientific-based knowledge be the cornerstone of our curriculum. And that’s why I appreciate Reid Lyon and others, experts…
In the Roosevelt room that day with the new president were some of the nation’s top reading scientists. One was Reid Lyon – you met him in the last episode. And Susan Neuman was there too, the education professor who had hit it off with Laura Bush at that conference in Texas.

**Neuman:** The whole idea that we would take scientific findings and put them in practice was like – I thought, this is nirvana.

Susan Neuman took a leave from her faculty job to join the Bush administration as an assistant secretary of education. And Reid Lyon became the president’s top advisor on reading.

**Reid Lyon:** You know, I wasn’t a Republican.

But he’d voted for Bush because he was so excited about the idea of schools following the science of reading. He didn’t think reading should be a partisan issue. It was though. Conservatives had been pushing for phonics instruction for a long time. And they were feeling vindicated by the scientific research. In fact, Republicans had endorsed phonics in their party platform in 2000.

(Appause sound)

**Karl Rove:** Pay attention to science, pay attention to research…

This is Karl Rove at a Republican leadership conference, in the summer of 2001, stumping for the president’s Reading First proposal.

**Rove:** And what we know from research is, phonics works. Not some fancy program of psychological babble…(applause)

Republican politicians focusing on phonics made Reid Lyon nervous.

Yes, phonics instruction was missing in many schools. And yes, scientific research had shown that phonics is critical. But Reid Lyon didn’t want schools to just add phonics instruction. He wanted schools to get rid of programs based on the cueing theory too.

**Emily Hanford:** Part of Reading First was to make sure that stuff was gone? It was trying to get rid of that stuff?

**Lyon:** Correct, yeah. Because now you have how many years of contrary evidence for the effectiveness of cueing systems. So why would Reading First pay for something that was philosophically or theoretically devoid of any solid evidence? Why would you do that? Why would you spend money on that?
He says the strategy was not to focus on what was wrong with how schools were teaching reading. The strategy was to try to get schools to use reading programs that were based on scientific research. But there were only two programs that fit that bill back in 2001, according to Reid Lyon. Only two. In September of that year, as part of his push to get support for Reading First, President Bush went to a school in Florida that was using one of those programs.

**Bush:** Good morning.

The president visited a class of second graders to watch a reading lesson.

**Teacher:** Open your book up to Lesson 60 on page 153…

The curriculum the teacher is using is called Direct Instruction. It was originally developed in the 1960s.

**Teacher:** Get ready!
**Kids:** Smile
**Teacher:** Yes, smile. Sound it out. Get ready.
**Kids:** S-mi-le
**Teacher:** What word?
**Kids:** Smile.
**Teacher:** Yes, Smile.

Direct Instruction is a very structured program. With a big focus on sounding out words. And none of the cueing strategies.

**Teacher:** What is that word?
**Kids:** Eats.
**Teacher:** Sound it out.
**Kids:** E-a-ts.
**Teacher:** What word?
**Kids:** Eats.
**Teacher:** Start from the beginning of that sentence. Go on.
(Kids read…)

The children are sitting in rows. Their teacher is at the front of the room. They’re reading a story called “The Pet Goat.” The teacher is tapping on the book as the kids read the words. The whole thing has a bit of an old-fashioned schoolmarm vibe to it.
Teacher: Nice and loud crisp voices, let’s go.
(Kids read…)

This kind of instruction was not fashionable in the early 2000s – especially in affluent suburbs where the thinking was – kids don’t need this kind of direct instruction.

But this was not an affluent suburb. This was a poor school, almost all Black and Hispanic students. And test scores were going up. This was the kind of reading program Bush wanted in more schools.

Bush: Whew! These are great readers.
Teacher: Yes they are.
Bush: Very impressive. Thank you all so very much for showing me your reading skills

Bush is smiling as he chats with the second graders.

Bush: Reading more than they watch TV?
Teacher: Oh yes.

But look closely at his face and you can see that something is bothering him. Moments earlier, his chief of staff had walked over and whispered in his ear — to tell him that a second plane had hit the World Trade Center. When the reading lesson is over, Bush goes to the school library where he addresses the nation, surrounded by schoolchildren.

Bush: Ladies and gentlemen, this is a difficult moment for America. I, um, unfortunately will be going back to Washington after my remarks…

Back in Washington, pretty much everything was focused on terrorism. But there was one domestic policy issue that remained a top priority. The president’s education plan, which included his Reading First proposal. George Bush was not going to give up on that. And there was a huge amount of support on Capitol Hill. Republicans and Democrats were lining up behind it.

But there was opposition. Outside the Beltway. And some of that opposition was coming from people who had a stake in the cueing theory. Including the woman from New Zealand who had developed that theory – Marie Clay. She came to the United States a lot to work with people here who were using her Reading Recovery program. And on one of those trips, she went to DC. To meet with a guy on Capitol Hill named Bob Sweet.
**Lyon:** Bob Sweet was the staff member on the Education and Workforce Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives.

This is Reid Lyon. He remembers getting a phone call from Bob Sweet.

**Lyon:** He, uh, called and said that he had just met with Marie Clay and some of her colleagues.

Clay and her colleagues wanted their Reading Recovery program to be eligible for the billions of dollars in new federal money that was going to be part of the president’s Reading First initiative. And Bob Sweet was the Congressional staffer in charge of writing the legislation. What I’m going to tell you about Bob Sweet’s meeting with Marie Clay is based on an email he wrote before he died a few years ago. And Reid Lyon’s memory of that phone call he got from Bob Sweet after the meeting. Here’s what happened, according to those accounts.

(Music)

Marie Clay and her colleagues came to the Rayburn House Office Building on Capitol Hill. They met in a small conference room with Bob Sweet. Marie Clay asked him if her program would be eligible for federal funding under Reading First. He told her, “no.” But he said to her that she had an opportunity to modify her program and to include the proper training for teachers in decoding skills. He wrote in the email: “I told her that she could help to turn the tide towards reading science.”

At that point, he wrote: “Dame Clay looked at me with steely eyes and said: ‘We will not change a thing in our program. But we will modify our description of Reading Recovery to comply with the law.’”

(Music ends)

Marie Clay wasn’t the only person with a program to protect. Other people were promoting programs based on the cueing theory too. And now there was this big piece of federal legislation – with support from Republicans and Democrats. And this legislation was saying the cueing theory was not backed by evidence. It’s not science.

(Music)

And that was a threat to people whose beliefs, reputations and livelihoods rested on that theory.
The president’s Reading First proposal passed in December of 2001 as part of the No Child Left Behind Act. With huge bipartisan support.

**Hillary Clinton:** The ayes are 87, the nays are 10…

There were only ten votes against it in the Senate.

But it wasn’t going to be easy to convince schools to adopt programs based on the science of reading. Because a lot of them liked what they were already doing.

And what a lot of them were already doing was an approach based on Marie Clay’s Reading Recovery program. An approach that was made popular by the two women I’m going to introduce you to next, after a break.

**BREAK**

(Music)

When I started doing all this reporting on how kids learn to read and why there’s this wrong idea entrenched in schools, these two names kept coming up. Fountas and Pinnell. Parents would mention Fountas and Pinnell. Researchers would mention them. Teachers would too. They were telling me – if you want to understand why cueing is still so big in American schools, you’ve got to look at two women whose names are Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell.

(Music)

I’ve tried several times over the past few years to get an interview with them. But they’ve said no every time. So I’ve had to learn about them through reading their books. Talking to other people. And looking for recordings of them – speeches, interviews, things like that. When the reporter who’s working on this story with me was searching through some archives and found a videotape from 2001 with their names on it, we knew we needed to watch it. But who has a VCR these days?

**Christopher Peak:** I ended up finding one on Facebook Marketplace that was at the very far edges of Brooklyn.

This is my colleague Christopher Peak. He’s talking to me from his apartment in Brooklyn. On a Saturday morning last fall, he set out to go get this VCR.

**Peak:** We’re getting very close to the edge of the island. Takes a good hour to get
there. Lots of walking involved.

He finally gets to the right address. A guy meets him outside. Christopher pays him $15 in cash. Takes this big old VCR back to his apartment in a duffel bag. And fires it up.

Peak: I put the video in and there on the screen are these two authors we’ve been looking for, Fountas and Pinnell.

(Video starts)
Gay Su Pinnell: I’m Gay Su Pinnell. And this is my co-author Irene Fountas.
Irene Fountas: Learning to read is a continuous process…

Peak: And what it showed was that, this method we’ve heard about, cueing, it was all there onscreen.

Teacher: Check the picture  
Kid: Look at the…Mom…

Peak: They were not teaching kids to use phonics to sound things out. They were teaching them to use all the other sources of information to figure out what words were.

Teacher: You said “truck” here. Does that make sense?
Teacher: What do you think that might be?

Peak: And you see these poor kids struggling over very simple words. And the teachers, instead of saying, “sound it out,” they’re telling them to use basically anything else.

Teacher: Wonderful! Let’s close our books for a minute.

As I mentioned, this video is from 2001. So, the same year the Bush administration was pushing its Reading First proposal, Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell were pushing these strategies – as part of an approach called Guided Reading. Guided Reading is a version of Marie Clay’s Reading Recovery program. But it’s not just for struggling first graders. Guided Reading is for all kids, at all grade levels.

Teacher: Let’s read that together.
Kids: I like helping. I will help you…
In Guided Reading, kids are given the same kinds of little books I told you about in the last episode. Books with words the children haven’t been taught how to read. But there are pictures to help them guess. And Fountas says teachers can do what she calls “word work.”

**Fountas:** Use an easel, small chalkboard, white dry-erase board or magnet letters to involve children in working with words and parts of words.

But Fountas says “word work” should only last one or two minutes. And she says it’s not necessary.

**Fountas:** Word work is an optional part of the lesson. It’ll be very important for some readers. You will want to include it for children who need to solve words more quickly as they read text.

(Music)

The idea here is that most kids can learn to read without “word work.” It’s only some kids who need it. And they only need a little bit. Because, the theory goes, using the letters is just one way to figure out a word. This comes straight from Marie Clay. Before Fountas and Pinnell started promoting this Guided Reading approach, they were promoting Clay’s Reading Recovery program. In fact, Gay Su Pinnell was one of the professors at Ohio State who had brought Reading Recovery to America in 1984. Fountas was a professor too – at Lesley College in Massachusetts. And by the time George W. Bush signed his Reading First initiative into law, these two women were a brand in American education. They had written a book in 1996 about their Guided Reading approach. And that book became a bestseller for their publisher.

**Lisa Luedeke:** It was a huge hit. Just crazy hit.

Lisa Luedeke was one of the editors at the publishing company.

**Luedeke:** And from that point on, we started publishing a series of books by Fountas and Pinnell.

(Music ends)

Some of the books Fountas and Pinnell wrote were about phonics. They weren’t saying *no* to phonics. But they were saying you can teach a child to read without it. And the fact that they weren’t insisting on phonics was part of the appeal of their Guided Reading approach for many teachers.
Marsha Durbano: I have to say I fell in love with it. I instantly fell in love with it.

Marsha Durbano was taught the whole-language approach in college. She graduated thinking she wasn’t supposed to teach phonics. But she didn’t really know what to teach. Until she went to a weeklong summer institute where she learned about Guided Reading from Fountas and Pinnell.

Durbano: It seemed to fit the philosophy of how I thought kids should learn. And the approach was so—it seemed so practical and user friendly.

Hanford: And were you learning something new? Was this your understanding?

Durbano: Yes.

Hanford: And what was so new about it?

Durbano: A new approach to teaching kids to read that did not involve phonics.

(Music)

Marsha Durbano started teaching Guided Reading with her first graders in 1998. She says by the early 2000s, Guided Reading seemed to be everywhere.

Durbano: This was everything. This was how, to my knowledge, everyone was teaching, teaching reading.

Sarah Gannon: I felt like I was part of this exciting movement.

Sarah Gannon taught Guided Reading too. She first learned about it when she was in college at the University of Michigan. She was assigned Fountas and Pinnell’s Guided Reading book in a class. She never asked about the research behind Guided Reading. She never thought to ask. Because Fountas and Pinnell were professors. Her professors had assigned their work. Why would she question it?

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

Gannon: Like, how could they be, how could they be wrong?

(Music ends)

Fountas and Pinnell didn’t think they were wrong. As far as I can tell. Like I said, I haven’t been able to talk to them. I don’t know what they were thinking back in the early 2000s. They had to have heard about the scientific research on reading. There were big government reports about that research. It was in the news. But I think they just didn’t agree with it. Because they had Marie Clay’s research. They thought Clay was right. And reading scientists were wrong.
We found a recording where Gay Su Pinnell talked about this.

(Applause sound)

**Pinnell:** So we cannot count on science and must accept its findings tentatively.

Let me set the scene here a bit. This is the 2005 conference of the Reading Recovery Council of North America. Gay Su Pinnell is speaking to a room full of people who support the Reading Recovery program and have been trained in Marie Clay’s idea about how kids learn to read. But at this point in 2005, a whole bunch of school districts in the United States are getting federal grants to adopt programs based on a different idea. And Pinnell is telling her audience – don’t be so sure about that idea. Don’t be so sure about that science.

**Pinnell:** Remember that science can yield some universally accepted findings that looking back a century, seem actually bizarre.

The argument Pinnell is making in this speech is that Marie Clay is the person who figured out how children learn to read. And reading scientists haven’t caught up with Clay’s ideas yet.

**Pinnell:** We should remember that nothing changes instantly.

She compares Marie Clay to Isaac Newton.

**Pinnell:** Newton discovered gravity…but there was no great heralding of his new thinking. In fact, the theory was widely disputed. It took 60 years for the new ideas to enter acceptability in science. And we’ve only had 40 so far….

(Music)

Pinnell says she keeps a first edition of one of Clay’s books locked in a safe in her house. When I heard this, I remembered a former Reading Recovery teacher in Texas I interviewed who told me that some of Marie Clay’s original writings were in a university library there. And this teacher was taken to see them like they were the Holy Grail.

Marie Clay was more than a professor who had a theory about reading. She was an icon who inspired a movement. A movement to help children. Pinnell tells the audience that when she did her own studies on Clay’s Reading Recovery program in Ohio in the 1980s, and those studies showed that most kids in Reading Recovery could get up to the average reading level of their class…
**Pinnell:** It was a little bit like Arthur pulling the sword, Excalibur, out of the stone. Now I’ve got it. What am I going to do with it?

She says she *had* to get Marie Clay’s ideas into more schools. She felt she had no choice.

**Pinnell:** If we know these children have a chance, then the responsibility is inescapable. We are obligated to do it. In spite of the political wars. We all know we live in a rich country. This country can actually afford, if it chooses, to teach all of its children who possibly can to learn to read.

(Music ends)

At this same Reading Recovery conference in 2005, there was another session.

**Lucy Gettman:** How many of you have engaged in some direct advocacy activity? You’ve written a letter, sent an email, um, visited them in their district office…

This was the lobbyist for the Reading Recovery Council of North America. She’s telling people how they can get in touch with their elected representatives to make the case for Reading Recovery. She says — send your congressman a birthday card. Invite them to your school.

**Gettman:** OK!

She’s giving out prizes to the people who’ve done the most.

**Gettman:** Ladies, who wants a calendar? Who wants a magnet? You get to choose.

When the discussion turns to the government’s Reading First initiative, the mood in the room darkens a bit. Audience members report that Marie Clay’s Reading Recovery program is being cut in some school districts. Their way of teaching reading is under attack. And they know it.

**Audience member:** What is happening in Reading First schools is permeating…
**Gettman:** Yes.
**Audience member:** …what the states are doing
**Gettman:** Yes.
**Audience member:** …for all schools…
**Gettman:** For everything. Yeah. Mmhm.
**Audience member:** Why?
The people in this room didn’t understand why their program was under attack. The federal government was saying – we want schools to use reading programs that are based on scientific research. And they thought their program was based on scientific research. A woman in the audience raises her hand. She’s from a school district in Colorado.

**Woman:** …and it’s just north of Denver. I actually live in Denver, but it’s in a suburb...

It’s hard to hear her so I’m gonna tell you what she says. She says the Colorado department of education just sent out an email. The email said programs that use the cueing system were not considered valid and reliable and would not be allowed on the state’s list of approved reading programs.

**Gettman:** Oh, dear.

**Woman:** So obviously I have huge concerns. I also have huge concerns…

We tried to track down this email and couldn’t find it. What’s interesting about this exchange is that right now, in 2022, the Colorado department of education is trying to get rid of the cueing system in its schools. Something it apparently already tried to do 17 years ago. And it didn’t work.

(Music)

Because something else happened instead – in schools all over the country. Schools added some phonics instruction. But they didn’t take away the cueing system. They didn’t get rid of programs based on that idea. Exactly what Reid Lyon was worried about.

And something else happened too – the government’s Reading First initiative fell apart. And people who had a stake in the cueing theory had something to do with it.

**Neuman:** Reading Recovery wrote us some really nasty notes. That we were saying bad things about them.

This is Susan Neuman again, the education professor who became an assistant secretary of education. She says members of Congress would call her office and say, “You should consider Reading Recovery. Why isn’t it being funded?” Reid Lyon remembers Reading Recovery teachers who would confront him at conferences.

**Lyon:** I’d have five teachers two inches from my face just tearing me up and down.
Usually the arguments were, “You don’t know anything. You have no idea how good this is. Just come to my classroom.” Those kinds of things.
In August of 2005, the Reading Recovery Council of North America filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Inspector General. The complaint said that the Department of Education was supporting a “misinformation campaign” against Reading Recovery. Two other vendors who believed their programs were out of favor under the government’s Reading First initiative filed similar complaints. The Inspector General did an investigation.

NBC: Tonight, a Bush administration audit is finding fault with one of the Bush administration’s favorite programs.

The Office of Inspector General released its findings in September of 2006.

NBC: The program known as Reading First is mismanaged, the auditors say, and full of conflicts of interest.

The audit found that some consultants who reviewed Reading First grant proposals had professional ties to commercial reading programs.

The headline became – Bush’s cronies are pushing phonics to make money. The government’s Reading First initiative could not survive the ensuing controversy. By the end of 2007, Democrats in Congress had cut the budget for Reading First by more than 60 percent. Within a couple of years, the funding had been cut completely.

Christine Cronin: It sort of, I would say, trickled away.

This is Christine Cronin. She was a teacher in Boston during the Reading First era. She says at the beginning, she was all in.

Cronin: I obviously wanted to be cutting-edge. You know, wanted to be really doing what was research-based and what was right.

She remembers going to a weeklong training as part of Reading First where she learned about the importance of phonics instruction. And then she was handed a curriculum and she was told – teach this.
Cronin: I wasn’t told the why behind any parts of that curriculum. It went to a quick space of – just do the thing.

She didn’t come away with an understanding of how children learn to read. She didn’t really learn about the science of reading. Other teachers told me they did. They say the training they got during Reading First opened their eyes. Changed their lives even. Some of them still use the materials they were given. But for Christine Cronin and many other teachers, Reading First represented a change they didn’t like. They were told to follow a curriculum. With structured lessons like the one you heard when Bush visited the second-grade classroom in Florida. To Christine Cronin, it felt traditional and old-fashioned.

Cronin: It felt like going back to that classroom where everyone is sitting in rows and everyone being in lock step. And that felt really bad.

And Christine Cronin and a lot of other teachers liked what they’d been doing before Reading First. And what a lot of them had been doing before was Fountas and Pinnell’s Guided Reading. With the cueing strategies. Christine Cronin doesn’t remember being told there was anything wrong with those during her Reading First training. So she kept doing Fountas and Pinnell’s Guided Reading approach. She thought it was fine as long as she was doing some phonics too.

Cronin: We thought that this was what the research was telling us what the right thing to do.

(Music)

Christine Cronin thought she was following the scientific research on reading.

Other teachers didn’t know there was scientific research. That’s because Reading First was a grant program that focused on low-income schools. Only about ten percent of elementary schools ended up getting funding. Lots of teachers kept on doing what they were doing because no one told them to do anything different. I talked to people who were teaching back then who said they had no idea what Reading First was. Never even heard of it.

Others knew that there was this Bush administration thing called Reading First. And they were not interested. This is Carrie Chee.

Carrie Chee: Forget it, I wasn’t going to do any of that. And, you know, I wasn’t necessarily rejecting the curriculum as much as I was rejecting Bush.
Carrie Chee was a teacher in a school district outside Seattle. She was also a liberal Democrat. So were a lot of her colleagues. And they weren’t going to be for the science of reading if the science of reading was coming from George W. Bush.

Carrie Chee: You know the sense of war with reading wars is very true. That you just absolutely reject other pieces of evidence coming at you because you can’t believe their source.

(Music)

When Bill Honig was sitting before those angry lawmakers in California in 1996, he was optimistic that science was gonna change the way kids were taught to read. Reid Lyon and Susan Neuman were optimistic too. They all imagined a future where teachers knew and understood the scientific research on reading. And the cueing system and those word-reading strategies were gone. That was their utopia.

But that vision of the future was a dystopia to other people, including Marie Clay and her supporters.

In the 2005 speech that Gay Su Pinnell made at the Reading Recovery conference, she asked her audience to imagine that dystopian future.

Gay Su Pinnell: I’m going to pretend I’m an educational researcher, uh, invited by the president – she called me, and asked. (laughter)

In the scenario Pinnell is laying out, it’s the year 2024. The Bush administration education reforms have prevailed. Teachers are being handed textbooks that tell them exactly how to teach reading. And publishers are making hundreds of millions of dollars.

Gay Su Pinnell: And what about Reading Recovery in this grim scenario? A few teachers nearing retirement will occasionally mention their early training in Reading Recovery, saying that’s where they learned so much. But they don’t get to use their knowledge in, except in invisible ways. And those folks are few because programs like Reading Recovery didn’t fit into the general competitive design. And they didn’t make money. Occasionally someone writing a scholarly treatise will mention Reading Recovery in the historical perspectives section. Clay is certainly remembered as a researcher and pioneer. But mostly, by researchers. A few islands of light incorporate her principles, but Reading Recovery has largely disappeared.

(Music)
There’s a special guest sitting on the stage as Gay Su Pinnell makes this speech. She’s wearing big glasses and a green jacket. She’s a small woman with gray hair who celebrated her 79th birthday weeks earlier. Gay Su Pinnell surprises her with a plaque.

**Marie Clay:** I’m so taken by surprise, I am at a loss for words, if you can believe it.

It’s Marie Clay. The plaque she’s holding is from The Ohio State University College of Education. The college has just established the Marie Clay Endowed Chair in Reading Recovery and Early Literacy.

**Clay:** I’m not terribly fond of putting up plaques around my office. But this is one I will definitely be showing everyone. Thank you. (applause)

(Music)

I never met Marie Clay. But I’ve read lots about her and talked to people who knew her. By all accounts, she was a humble woman. Steely and dedicated to her cause, but not that interested in accolades. And not that interested in money. She set things up in association with universities and as nonprofits. According to people we talked to, Marie Clay did not want her Reading Recovery program aligned with commercial interests. And she was not a fan of big publishing companies or traditional curriculum.

Marie Clay died just a little over two years after she accepted the plaque at that conference.

And the future didn’t turn out the way Gay Su Pinnell had feared.

Marie Clay has not been forgotten. She hasn’t been pushed aside by publishers trying to make money. In fact, the opposite has happened. Marie Clay’s ideas are everywhere. And it’s Pinnell – and her coauthor Irene Fountas – who are now publishing those ideas – and making a lot of money. Along with another woman I’m gonna tell you about in the next episode. A woman who is so well known among teachers that you don’t even have to say her last name.

**Lacey Robinson:** She was like a rock star walking into that building. And it was like theater.

**Todd Collins:** If Beyoncé came and gave a private concert in my district, it would not have been a bigger deal for many of my teachers.

**Lisa Karim:** It felt like you were watching something magical.
(Music ends)

That’s next time on Sold a Story.

(Music)

Sold a Story is a podcast from American Public Media. It’s reported and produced by me, Emily Hanford, with Christopher Peak. Catherine Winter is our editor. Dave Mann and Andy Kruse are the digital editors. Mixing and sound design are by Chris Julin and Emily Haavik. Our reporting and production team included Angela Caputo, Chole Marie Rivera and Will Callan. Our fact-checker is Betsy Towner Levine.

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We have three more episodes coming in this podcast. Find them all on our website, SoldaStory.org. You can also find links to our previous articles and documentaries about reading at that website. It’s SoldaStory.org.

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