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

### **Transcript**

#### **Episode 4: The Superstar**

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**Lacey Robinson:** So, we were in Dayton, Ohio.

(Music)

**Robinson:** My parents had just gotten a divorce. I was in first grade.

This is Lacey Robinson. She started first grade in 1978 in a suburb of Dayton called Englewood. Her mother had moved there after her divorce seeking better schools for her children.

**Robinson:** We actually integrated the neighborhood. When we get to school it was my sister, myself and maybe one other African American male.

And first grade was awful for Lacey. Not just because she was one of the only Black children in the school. She wasn't learning how to read.

**Robinson:** I remember my mother being extremely worried. 'Cause my mother was like, "Wait a minute, she doesn't know her letters? She doesn't know her sounds?" And she finally gets frustrated enough. She goes up to the school, because she gets the end of the year report card and sees that they're passing me on to second grade. And my mother's like, "How in the world is this child going on to second grade and she can't read?" And they were like, "Oh, but she's so nice. And she's so quiet." And she's like, "Yeah, but she can't read." And they were like, "Well, Miss Robinson, you know, what do you want to do?" And she's like, "I want to hold her back." They're like, "Oh, no, no, no, you can't do that." She's like, "Why? Why can't I hold her back?" And so she forced them to make me do first grade over again.

She got a different teacher the next year. Her name was Miss Montgomery.

**Robinson:** And she smelt like oatmeal cookies. And she had short brown hair, and she seemed really tall. And I walk in her class, and she gives me the warmest squeeze.

And Miss Montgomery taught Lacey how to read.

**Robinson:** She taught me how to decode words.

It was old-school phonics instruction. Sounding out words. And it worked. And that summer – after Lacey finished first grade for the second time – she helped teach her grandmother how to read.

**Robinson:** I would sit next to her and she would say, you know, we would sit there and I'd be like, "No grandma, that's a B. It says /b/." Like, and I was so excited to be able to teach her.

(Music ends)

Her grandmother had grown up in rural Georgia, in the Jim Crow South. Had to drop out of school when she was about nine years old. She worked and she raised a family without being able to read. And then, when she was in her early 60s, she became a Jehovah's Witness, and wanted to be able to read the Bible. The people in her religious community taught her how to read. And little Lacey helped too.

**Robinson:** And I'm telling you, she got that reading down. All of a sudden now she became a part of a community where she was going to meetings, and they were reading, and she was tr...And I just watched her come alive.

(Music)

**Robinson:** I've had other relatives and close family friends that – as I got older, my mom would say to me, "Well, you know, she can't read." "Well, why can't she read?" "Well, she grew up in the south. There were 11 of them. They were sharecroppers. They couldn't afford to go to school."

That's when Lacey Robinson knew that she wanted to be a teacher. She was going to teach children how to read. And in particular, she was going to teach Black children how to read.

(Music)

I'm Emily Hanford and this is Episode 4 of *Sold a Story*, a podcast from American Public Media.

Lacey Robinson knew what it took to learn how to read. She knew what it took to teach someone how to do it. And she knew how important it was. But even Lacey was wooed by people who had other ideas. Ideas about how to teach reading that went against what she knew. That's the story I'm gonna tell you in this episode. I'm gonna tell you why even Lacey Robinson believed. And I'm gonna introduce you to the person she believed in. One of the most influential people in American elementary education today.

(Music ends)

Lacey Robinson started teaching first grade in 1996, in Marietta, Georgia, at a poor elementary school where more than half the students were Black.

**Robinson:** And there was no reading program.

She says there was no curriculum to teach kids how to read. And no training for teachers.

**Robinson:** I got so angry that I spent that next summer creating my own reading program.

When she returned to school in the fall, she went to the lead teacher and showed her what she'd come up with.

**Robinson:** We gotta teach reading. Here's my program. I laid out this program. I was like, "We gotta start with phonics, we got to, we got to teach them the code, we got to give them books. And da, da, da, da." And like silence. And then the principal got called in. And then I basically got told to stay in my place.

This was the 90s. Phonics was not something you were supposed to be teaching.

**Robinson:** And then interestingly enough, that same year, the principal hired a woman from New York who was an expert in reading and writer's workshop.

The woman was a literacy coach whose job was to help teachers at the school implement something called the reading and writing workshop. Lacey had never heard of the reading and writing workshop. And she was kind of suspicious because it didn't include phonics instruction. But...

**Robinson:** By the end of the year I was curious.

(Music)

The reading and writing workshop was not a curriculum. It was more like a framework. A set of routines. It has since become a published curriculum. Here's how it works. The teacher starts with something called a "minilesson." An example of a minilesson for kindergarten is "What is an Avid Reader?"

The teacher shows the class photographs of avid readers and asks the children to discuss what they notice.

Then the children are sent off to find comfortable spots so they can practice avid reading. These are kindergarteners. Most of them don't know how to read yet. But they're supposed to spend 35 to 45 minutes reading independently, and with partners, and in small groups. The teacher circulates and observes and confers with the children. At some point, the teacher gets the attention of the whole class for what's called a mid-workshop teaching point. She might share something she's noticed. The example in the teacher guide is to say something like this: "Everywhere I look, *you* are reading avidly. I don't need those photographs of strangers to see avid reading. No way! It's right here in front of me!"

The kids then go back to their books. Eventually, the teacher brings the children back together so they can share what they learned about avid reading.

Like I said, Lacey Robinson was suspicious at first. But this is what her school was telling her to do. And the workshop approach grew on her.

(Music ends)

**Robinson:** You didn't have to spend your entire summer or weekends trying to cobble together a reading program. And it came with a lot of professional development and coaching.

She was finally getting some training. And the best thing about the workshop approach is that it came with a lot of books.

**Robinson:** It brought volumes of books in my classroom.

To do the reading workshop, a teacher needs a big classroom library. Kids will browse the library on a Monday, pick a bunch of books on their reading level, and then read those books all week. Maybe even bring them home in a baggie. Lacey loved that. She was in a poor, Black

school in Georgia. Same state where her grandmother had grown up. And Lacey's students were getting books. Tons of books.

(Music)

But Lacey was kind of frustrated with her job. She was working with the children she wanted to teach. But it was a struggling school. And she still didn't feel like she was getting all the resources and training she needed. She had a friend, another first-grade teacher at the school, who was from New York. And this friend started telling Lacey about schools in affluent communities outside New York City.

**Robinson:** She began to talk to me about, uh, schools in the suburbs. And one of her goals was to get there, was to get there. The pay was better. You know, she knew she was gonna be professionally developed better.

Lacey decided she wanted to get to the suburbs too. Not because she was gonna spend her career there. Her plan was to go to wealthy schools in the suburbs, learn everything she could about how the kids were taught, and come back to schools like the one where she started in Marietta. She wanted to give poor Black children what rich white children were getting.

(Music ends)

Her friend had an idea about how to get a job in the suburbs. She said, go to graduate school first. At Columbia University. The prestigious Teachers College there.

**Robinson:** I was like, all right, I'll apply. I had no idea the status. I had no idea any of that.

She also had no idea how expensive it was. She got in and realized pretty quickly that she needed a job. And one of her professors offered her one. Working as an administrative assistant at a teacher training institute the professor had founded. The professor's name is Lucy Calkins. Her institute is called the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project.

**Robinson:** So, uh, I started working there. Making copies, answering phones, helping prepare for meetings.

Lacey didn't know it at first, but Lucy Calkins is the person who created the reading and writing workshop approach she'd been using in Marietta. Lacey also didn't know that she was working for Lucy Calkins at a pivotal moment for Calkins and her organization. Calkins' institute had been founded in the early 1980s to focus on writing instruction. The expansion into reading

instruction was relatively new. And when Lacey started working for her, in the late 1990s, Lucy Calkins was working on a book about how to teach reading. Problem was, Lucy Calkins didn't know that much about how little kids learn to read. It was not her area of expertise. So she invited the Ohio State professor you met in the last episode – Gay Su Pinnell – to come to Columbia. And Lacey Robinson was there.

**Robinson:** I remember saying to my friend, "I think the mother of reading is here."  
(laughs)

Pinnell came to Columbia many times over the course of a year to teach Lucy Calkins and her colleagues what she knew about how children learn to read.

**Robinson:** I remember feeling like Gay Su Pinnell talked about reading the way a ear doctor talks about the system of the ear canal and the throat. It was with such precision.

Marie Clay came to Columbia too. Lucy Calkins embraced her cueing theory and adopted the word reading strategies into her workshop approach.

(Music)

For Lacey Robinson, it was pretty heady stuff. She'd ended up at a prestigious institute at an Ivy League school that was developing an approach to teaching reading. She was learning from people who were clearly at the top of their field. Famous people. None more famous, it seemed, than her boss.

**Robinson:** I got invited one day to go out with Lucy and the team to some schools in the Bronx and to witness her professionally developing a group of teachers. And it was like theater. I mean the people — she was like a...rock star walking into that building. And I just remember sitting there, like, in awe.

This was more than twenty years ago. Lucy Calkins is even more famous today. Her approach to teaching reading and writing is used in schools all over the world. It's estimated that as many as one in four elementary schools in the United States uses her curriculum. And more than 170,000 teachers have come to the weeklong teacher training institutes she offers in New York.

(Music ends)

These institutes often begin with opening ceremonies in a church.

**Teacher:** This is where we're gonna see Lucy!

This is a teacher recording herself as she walks into the church. It's Riverside Church in Manhattan.

**Teacher:** Oh boy, oh boy. This is so beautiful. Oh my gosh!

**Lisa Karim:** It was like being at a rock concert, right?

This is Lisa Karim. Another teacher who came to one of the Calkins institutes in New York.

**Karim:** One of the sessions was going into this big college auditorium. Everybody was whisper quiet and there was Lucy, down at the front, with a student. Teaching a writing lesson. And it felt like you were watching something magical.

Lisa Karim wanted to make the same kind of magic for her students. That's why she was there.

**Karim:** It was – here's a person who knows how children learn to read and write. And I want to be able to teach children to read and write.

Lucy Calkins tapped into a need among the nation's teachers.

(Music)

A need to know more about how to teach reading and writing. Her institute in New York is like a mecca.

**Carrie Chee:** It was like, this sense of the Ivy League, and you always want to go there.

That's Carrie Chee. The teacher you met in the last episode who didn't like George Bush. She loved Lucy Calkins. She never got to go to one of the Calkins' institutes in New York. Neither did Krista Velasquez. She's a teacher in Palo Alto, California.

**Krista Velasquez:** We would all apply and certain people would get picked to go and then certain people wouldn't get picked to go.

A school district can't afford to send everyone. The institutes cost up to \$850 per person plus expenses. Krista says everyone was envious of the teachers who got to go.

**Velasquez:** There is this desire – you're gonna go with your best friends. You guys go together. You stay in a hotel together. The people who went, you know, they kind of got

wined and dined. And they would go to shows when they were out there. They got a free trip to New York.

But a school district doesn't have to send their teachers to New York to learn from Lucy and her team. They can come to you. For a few days of training or for ongoing coaching and support.

(Music ends)

The Palo Alto schools contracted with Calkins for years to have her trainers in their schools. Records show the district paid an LLC that belongs to Calkins more than a million dollars between 2013 and 2021. That's how Krista Velasquez learned to do the Calkins reading and writing workshop.

**Velasquez:** The Lucy trainers are phenomenal. And when you're sitting with them in a room and they're teaching you, you feel like you can do anything. They become a sunlight in a room. And when you're in these trainings with them, you see that there's a possibility to become that sun.

Lucy Calkins has visited Palo Alto too.

**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.

This is Todd Collins, a school board member in Palo Alto, remembering a Calkins visit to the district a few years ago.

**Collins:** And I've been stunned. I mean I, I've sat in meeting with educational leaders in my district and have them talk about the curriculum as "Lucy." Lucy says this. Lucy does this. She personifies this curriculum.

**Song:** Just a young mind, trying to learn through, Lucy Calkins, the writing guru...

Songs have been written about Lucy Calkins. Like this song a teacher posted to Twitter.

**Song:** Now in New York, we want to follow her....

And this song about the reading strategies Lucy Calkins recommended.

**Song (call and response):** Good readers build good habits.

**Song (response):** Good readers build good habits.

Teachers are being taught this song at one of Calkins' institutes. We found the video on Facebook.

**Song:** Good habits for solving hard words.

**Song (call):** Check the picture.

**Song (response):** Check the picture...

Those strategies – check the picture, look at the first letter – Lucy Calkins recently acknowledged she was wrong about those strategies.

(Music)

She says there are important things about how children learn to read that she didn't know. She told *The New York Times* earlier this year that my reporting helped change her mind. But the research showing those strategies were a bad idea has been around for decades. Why didn't she know about it? That's what I've been trying to figure out. And I want to tell you a little about her background because I think it may reveal some things about why she got reading wrong and why she didn't realize it for so long.

More on that, after a break.

**\*\* BREAK \*\***

(Music)

In January of 2019, before she acknowledged she was wrong about the cueing strategies, Lucy Calkins appeared on a podcast produced by her publisher. And talked about her childhood.

**Lucy Calkins:** I think I grew up, ah, in a family that conveyed in every way that our role here in, on earth is to make a difference.

Lucy Calkins is from a big, well-to-do family. Her parents were both doctors. They had nine kids.

**Calkins:** My eight brothers and sisters are mostly all doctors or lawyers. Everybody went to Harvard or Yale or – you know, it's a very high-achieving family.

She was kind of the Black Sheep of her family. Those are her words. She didn't go to Harvard or Yale. She went to a different elite school – Williams, a small college in western Massachusetts. Where she majored in religion.

**Calkins:** And I did imagine myself becoming a pastor. And I, I wanted that because I wanted to be part of a community of people who dealt with things that matter. I wanted to be with people around issues that are life and death and that ma–, that make a difference.

But she wasn't actually much of a believer.

**Calkins:** You're not sure how cooked up some of this is.

That was a problem when it came to being a pastor. So she decided to try something else. Another career where she thought she could make a difference. Teaching.

(Music)

After college, she went to her childhood minister for advice. He had recently completed a doctorate in education. And he told her to check out the primary schools in Britain. This was the 1970s and these British Primary Schools were at the forefront of the progressive education movement. There were no desks in these schools. No strict schedules. Children learned through experience and exploration. Not formal lessons. It was very appealing to a young Lucy Calkins.

**Calkins:** So I flew to Heathrow airport and, ah, stuck out my thumb. Um, and I hitchhiked to Oxfordshire.

She went to the office of the man in charge of the local schools and convinced him to give her an unpaid apprenticeship. She lived in a nursery school – says she actually slept on a mat in a classroom surrounded by little red chairs. Got up and out each morning before the children arrived. And rode her motorcycle to the Bicester Primary School. She spent a year in England.

**Calkins:** In the British Primary Schools at the time, there were these retreats for teachers. And so, on weekends, I would be part of these study retreats. And they were held in castles. And you arrive Friday night, and there's sherry in front of the crackling fire, and then on Saturday, you do things like, um, like observe a mushroom and make little, delicate drawings studying the mushroom close up with the magnifying glass and the fungi, and, you know, or you would do creative movement, Laban movement.

Lucy Calkins says this is where she first got the idea for her “workshop” approach.

(Music ends)

She focused first on writing instruction because she was a writer. Her goal was to turn the elementary school classroom into something like an adult writer's workshop. A place where children are inspired to write and to think of themselves as authors who have something to say.

**Calkins:** What do you like about writing?

**Student:** Putting my own feelings into stories and knowing what I'm writing about.

**Calkins:** Mmhm. Mmhm.

**Student:** And it's fun. And...

This is Lucy Calkins interviewing a child at a school in rural New Hampshire as part of a research project on student writing in the late 1970s.

**Calkins:** Do you like rewriting? Or do you find it a, a chore?

**Student:** Well, depends on what kind of a mood I'm in that day. See, my writing sort of depends on the way I feel that day and that kind of a thing. Because, if I don't really...

Lucy Calkins was to writing instruction what the whole language movement was to reading instruction. The basic idea was that if kids are motivated to learn, they will. Create the right environment, give students lots of freedom to make their own choices, and they'll develop the skills they need. Calkins was not particularly interested in teaching children the mechanics of writing. She thought focusing too much on grammar and spelling was part of the problem with writing instruction.

By the early 1980s, Lucy Calkins had joined the faculty at Teachers College Columbia. She had started her teacher training institute. And according to an article back then in *The New York Times*, she was already "transforming" instruction "in many schools."

**Calkins:** You come from Cincinnati, Ohio and from Atlanta, from Springfield, Massachusetts, from Hartford...

This is Lucy Calkins giving a talk at an education conference in 1985.

**Calkins:** And the revolution in the field of writing has come because we've realized that teachers need to be coaches. They need to be master craftspeople working with an apprentice. They need to be researchers in their classroom. They need to pull their chair alongside of kids and watch how this person goes about writing.

(Music)

A few months after she gave this talk, Lucy Calkins published a book called *The Art of Teaching Writing*. In the book, she says that children “learn to write by writing” and by “living with a sense of ‘I am one who writes.’”

“This self-perception,” she says in the book, “will give children the eyes to see, and they will notice the conventions of written language everywhere. They will learn about punctuation, spelling...and the many rhythms of written language from billboards and...labels and books. They will ask about the monogram letters on their bath towels.”

(Music ends)

I’ve thought about that sentence a lot – “They will ask about the monogram letters on their bath towels.” It’s one detail in a 550-page book. But I think it’s a revealing detail.

Lucy Calkins had an idea about how children learn. And I think that idea was influenced by privilege. Her idea was kind of romantic. That learning is fun and beautiful. That it’s a natural process. Kind of magical. And that a teacher’s job is to unlock a child’s potential. To observe and nurture. To help children fall in love with reading and writing.

(Music)

I think I used to believe this too. That learning to read was a natural process. That if you read enough to your kids, they’d learn. And I think my belief was influenced by privilege. I grew up in a family not unlike Lucy Calkins’ family. Upper middle class, white, well-educated – both of my parents went to Teachers College Columbia in the 1960s. I even had some monogrammed bath towels.

And as I mentioned in an earlier episode, I think learning to read was pretty easy for me. And it was pretty easy for my kids. Nothing challenged my view that learning to read is a natural process. Until I began doing this reporting a few years ago. That’s when I started hearing the same story again and again from parents all over the country. My kid can’t read. And the school isn’t teaching her how to do it. A lot of these kids were in schools in affluent suburban districts. Districts with great reputations. The kind of district Lacey Robinson wanted to get to. And she did.

(Music ends)

But she discovered that things weren’t quite what they seemed.

Lacey got a teaching job – after she graduated from Columbia – at an elementary school in New Rochelle, a suburb north of Manhattan. And it was just like what her friend in Marietta had described.

**Robinson:** The classrooms were smaller. The supplies were endless. The teachers seemed to be more professionally developed.

And the school district was all-in on the Lucy Calkins' approach.

**Robinson:** The students were immersed in complete readers and writers workshop. Not only did you have the leveled libraries. You got the pretty baskets and the stickers and the labels and you had a para that came in and helped you organize it and the posters were laminated, and it was like, it was like Teachers R Us. It was my version of Teachers R Us. (laughs)

(Music)

Lacey thinks one reason she got the job in New Rochelle is that she was an expert on Calkins' approach. Back when she was in grad school, working for Lucy Calkins, Lacey had worked her way up to being one of the trainers that helps schools implement the reading and writing workshop. That approach seemed to be working beautifully in New Rochelle. She says almost all her students were good readers. They could decode the words. But she soon realized something. And it was kind of a secret. Something no one seemed to be talking about.

**Robinson:** Those white, affluent students who weren't learning how to decode in school, they were learning how to decode at home with tutors. I know because I became one of 'em.

She became a private tutor. To make extra money. To pay off her student loans. And as a tutor, she did a lot of direct and explicit instruction. The kind of instruction that had helped her when she was a little girl. The kind of instruction that had helped her grandmother.

She eventually left New Rochelle and went to another suburban school district. Montgomery County, Maryland. Just outside of Washington, DC. It's the school district where my children went to school. And she says she saw the same thing she'd seen in New Rochelle. Private wealth taking care of the problem when schools weren't teaching children how to read.

(Music ends)

Lacey Robinson wanted it to be true that there was something in rich, white schools that she could take and give to poor Black children. She'd been hoping for that. Betting on it.

**Robinson:** I thought I was playing Robinhood.

But what she ultimately discovered is that a lot of rich white kids weren't getting what they needed in school either. She realized that she was looking for something that wasn't really there.

**Robinson:** When I think about it now and I talk to friends – especially a lot of my friends of color, who move into middle class neighborhoods, who have worked tirelessly to shift the trajectory of their family for their kids. And they send them to the neighborhood schools under the assumption – same as I'm sure my mother had, why she moved us to a all white neighborhood – that if I'm in this area, that my kid will learn. Only to find out...

(Music)

**Robinson:** ...I gotta hire a tutor.

Lacey Robinson says she feels regret and shame about the years she spent spreading the Lucy Calkins reading and writing workshop. She says she should have recognized the problem sooner. There were clues she wishes she'd paid more attention to, back when she was training teachers in New York City.

**Robinson:** I started supporting the school system in Harlem. And I would go in – reading and writers guru – let me show you how to set it up. And I was supporting them. And the teachers would be – "Come here, Miss Robinson. Now I understand this readers and writers workshop is beautiful. We get our leveled library books and everything. But when will he learn how to decode these words?"

And Lacey remembers saying, "Don't worry. He'll learn." And the teachers said:

**Robinson:** Uh-huh. And 'cause this is the other thing. A lot of those teachers' children were in that school. "My son needs to learn how to decode these words. Where is that in this operating system?"

She remembers taking note of that. Thinking – yeah, there's some stuff missing here. But the reading and writing workshop was still the ideal in her mind. She was thinking the goal was to get to a place where kids in Harlem didn't need anything else. It took her getting to the suburbs and seeing that kids there needed help with decoding words, too, for her to finally grasp the scope of the problem.

Still, she thinks there are elements of the Calkins' workshop approach that are important, and shouldn't be discarded. Like, getting lots of books in kids' hands. Inspiring them to want to read and write. But she says what got lost in the romance with the workshop approach is what it takes for a child to learn *how* to read and write. And that a child is not going to love reading and writing if she can't do it.

**Robinson:** Listen, I devour words. I love literature and books. But everybody don't have to love to read and write. But everybody has a right to learn to read and write. So that whole, "I want them to love." I don't want them to love. I want them to know how to do it. Love comes later.

(Music)

I wanted to talk to Lucy Calkins about all this – about why she sold an approach to teaching reading that was contradicted by research, and what she's doing now that she's acknowledged she was wrong. I emailed her, and she got back to me right away. She said she was anxious about the idea of doing an interview. But she ultimately agreed. I'm gonna tell you about that interview and let you hear what she had to say. But first, in our next episode, I wanna talk to you about money. Because the people I've been telling you about – Marie Clay, Gay Su Pinnell, Irene Fountas, and Lucy Calkins – are all top authors for the same publishing company. And that company has made a lot of money selling their ideas.

**Luedke:** It was a place where people were passionate about education.

**Tobin:** It became a very lucrative business.

**Hanford:** Do you remember ever asking – is there like research or evidence behind this program?

**Velasquez:** No, we just assumed there was.

**Purcell:** I want them to be held accountable. They've promoted flawed theories that are not grounded in science. And they have profited off of it.

(Music ends)

(Music)

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