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 9: The Aftermath

At the beginning of the school year…

David Banks: So it's hard to believe that it's already September...

…the guy in charge of the largest school system in the country held a back-to-school press conference. He talked about a bunch of things facing the schools — a looming bus drivers' strike and the growing number of asylum-seekers entering the school system. And then he said this.

Banks: We have not taught the kids the basic fundamental structures of how to read.

David Banks is the chancellor of the New York City public schools.

Banks: We have gotten this wrong in New York and all across the nation. And many of us follow the same prescript of balanced literacy. And...

Balanced literacy is the approach to teaching reading we focused on in Sold a Story.

Banks: And like the Dance of the Lemmings, we all march right off the side of the mountain. And generations of kids have been hurt by that.

The chancellor says that all schools in New York City will have to get rid of balanced literacy. People across the country are asking their school districts to get rid of balanced literacy too.

(Theme music in)

Speaker 1: I urge the school committee to follow the neuroscience and vote not to accept the grant to Reading Recovery.

Speaker 2: My question is why are we still using leveled readers?
Speaker 3: I implore you to vote against the Heinemann materials purchase tonight.

Speaker 4: I urge the members of this board to do what is right for our children and to vote "no" on the Lucy Calkins curriculum.

I'm Emily Hanford. And this is Sold a Story, a podcast from APM Reports.

It's been more than a year since Sold a Story caused a bit of an earthquake in education. If this is the first episode you're hearing, you should probably press pause and listen to the podcast from the beginning. It'll make more sense that way.

And if you heard Sold a Story, but missed the additional episodes we released last spring about the reaction to the podcast, you might want to listen to those too. We focused on the outpouring of stories from listeners and what legislators have been doing in response.

In this episode, we're going to focus on the people who were at the center of our investigation. Lucy Calkins, Irene Fountas, and Gay Su Pinnell. We're also going to hear about the Reading Recovery Program and the publisher Heinemann. What's happened to them since the podcast came out?

(Theme music out)

None of them wanted to talk to us. But we were able to piece together what's happened through other sources. We're going to start with Lucy Calkins.

Lucy Calkins: One of the things I would say is no one person gets to own the word "science."

Lucy Calkins is the professor at the prestigious Teachers College at Columbia University...

Lacey Robinson: She was like a rock star walking into that building.

...who founded an influential teacher training institute and created a popular reading curriculum rooted in the flawed theory we told you about in the podcast.

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

Sold a Story Ep. 9 Transcript from American Public Media
Calkins once estimated that a quarter of elementary schools in the country used her curriculum, including lots of schools in New York. So when the chancellor said that schools in the city have to get rid of balanced literacy, he was telling them they have to get rid of Lucy Calkins reading curriculum. Sold a Story was a big blow to Calkins. After the podcast came out, she didn’t say much.

Calkins: I had been advised to be, to be quiet...

But she changed her mind.

Calkins: I made the decision to kind of come out from underneath the bushel basket.

This is Lucy Calkins on Zoom last year. It’s a meeting of a new study group she started for teachers and school leaders. The announcement on her website said the group was for people “who want guidance in responding to the national conversation around reading instruction.”

Calkins: What I finally came to believe is that if I’m quiet, I’m not really helping any of you to, to speak up and to, um, stand strong and to reach out to others.

She also launched a new website. It's called Rebalancing Literacy. It's branded as a site for educators who want to quote, "put aside the reading wars and focus on helping kids."

Calkins: People are asking, why this site?

There's a series of videos on the website.

Calkins: I tell kids, you're the author of your life. And I'm making these videos in part because I decided that I need to tell my own story.

The videos feature Lucy, alone in a room, talking into the camera.

Calkins: In the last year there have been a lot of podcasts, articles, editorials, programs that are scaring the public into thinking that somehow half the teachers in America have been hoodwinked into teaching reading in a way which deprives kids of the essentials that they need. They're actually suggesting that kindergarten and first grade teachers are not teaching kids their ABCs. That is absolutely inaccurate.

In the videos, she's defending herself, but she's also saying to her followers – look, I know you're grumpy about the science of reading. She uses that word – "grumpy." But she says – there's stuff here to pay attention to.

Sold a Story Ep. 9 Transcript from American Public Media
Calkins: At this point, there is a line of research that's come to be known as the science of reading.

She talks about what she's learned...

Calkins: We can be grateful for the reminder that teachers need professional development in the teaching of phonics.

And about changes she's made to her curriculum...

Calkins: Let me tell you how one particular unit has been revised. In Superpowers, the first decoding unit in kindergarten, a new imaginary character sends messages to the kids to rally them to use their reading powers to decode words. Mighty Reader gives the kids a special...

(music in)

In her revised curriculum, the cueing strategies are gone. And she's now selling books designed to help beginning readers practice sounding out written words. It's a big turnaround. A turnaround that had begun before Sold a Story. But a turnaround that's more urgent now -- because of the school districts dropping her curriculum.

Calkins: I find I'm in a position to answer a few questions, to share a few facts, and maybe to open a dialogue among people who care about kids and teachers and education.

What I hear Lucy Calkins saying in these videos is – I'm still relevant.

(music out)

She presents herself as someone who knows the science of reading now, and can help school districts get up to speed. But when she talks about the science of reading, she gets some important things wrong.

Calkins: The research has been developed mostly in clinics with a researcher working with a little group of two or three kids with a diagnosed reading problem engaged in, in the very beginning stages of reading.

This isn't true. The big body of research known as the "science of reading" includes hundreds of studies that have been done with entire classrooms of children. And not just beginning readers.

Sold a Story Ep. 9 Transcript from American Public Media
And not just kids with reading problems. I think it's important to understand this, because what I'm hearing in some of the pushback to our reporting, is that all of this fuss about the science of reading is overblown. That it's a narrow body of research. That it's not relevant to most kids. And that calls for wholesale changes to how kids are taught are not warranted. And that's what I hear Lucy Calkins saying on her new website. That she learned something from the science of reading. She fixed up her curriculum. And it's time to move on.

(music in)

Lucy Calkins launched her new website on the last day of August. The very next day, Sept. 1, there was an announcement from her employer, Teachers College Columbia. The college announced that Calkins would no longer be in charge of the Teacher Training Institute she founded there back in the 1980s. She's still a professor at Teachers College, but she's out as head of the institute where she built her brand.

**Cathlin Goulding:** It's just like watching one of those like statues being pulled down from the Cold War.

This is Cathlin Goulding. She went to Teachers College and is now an instructor there.

**Goulding:** I mean, she was such a domineering force in this school. Not even as a professor but mostly as a entrepreneur and business owner and consultant.

Teachers College announced the news in a written statement. The college said the decision was part of an effort to ensure that its programs are quote, "informed by the latest research and evidence." I wanted to ask Teachers College about this. Hadn't their programs always been informed by the latest research and evidence? But the college wouldn't make anyone available for an interview.

(music out)

**Speaker 6:** Yep, Thomas would really...

**Calkins:** Thank you, thank you, thank you for your student work...

(conversation continues underneath)

Just a month after the announcement from Teachers College, Lucy Calkins was launching that study group you heard at the beginning of the episode. The one for people who want "guidance

_Sold a Story_ Ep. 9 Transcript from American Public Media
in responding to the national conversation around reading instruction." As that meeting was wrapping up, Lucy Calkins noticed a familiar face on the Zoom screen.

Calkins: Is that Gay?

It's Gay Su Pinnell.

Calkins: Hi. (laughs) I'm so honored to have you here, Gay.

Gay Su Pinnell: Oh, I have to unmute. Okay.

Calkins: So lovely.

Pinnell: How are you doing? (laughs)

Calkins: I'm okay. I'm just doing great. (laughs)

Pinnell: Good.

Gay Su Pinnell was the professor at Ohio State who helped bring the Reading Recovery Program to America. She's also the person who came to Teachers College to help Lucy Calkins when Calkins was writing her first book about teaching kids to read.

Pinnell: We're all in a dilemma.

Calkins: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. You know, I think we're in the, the aftermath, after a, a war, we hope it's the aftermath. Trying to...

Pinnell: I hope so. It could be...

Calkins: Try to reveal

Pinnell: Yeah, uh, the beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning.

This is the first time I've heard Gay Su Pinnell talking about what's been going on in the wake of our reporting. She has been keeping quiet and staying out of the spotlight. But on the Zoom call with Lucy Calkins, she vents some frustration.

Pinnell: People don't really know what they're talking about when they say – cueing is bad. They don't know what it is. I understand what it is. But it's, it's not the devil that...

Sold a Story Ep. 9 Transcript from American Public Media
Calkins: No

Pinnell: they think.

Pinnell and her co-author Irene Fountas aren't backing down on cueing the way Calkins has. And they're not embracing the science of reading the way Calkins has either. In a webinar Irene Fountas did last Fall....

Irene Fountas: Okay, everyone, people are starting to come in...

...she characterized changes that are happening in response to the science of reading as something potentially harmful.

Fountas: In this current conversation about literacy - which I'm hoping will be productive, not destructive for schools – uh, sometimes I've seen teachers in schools think that there's a right way to do something, one right way, and it's because it says it in the lesson or in the script. And in schools that are over scripting teaching, what we may have are teachers who think they're supposed to do something, instead of they have good rationales for what they say and what they do.

There's a lot to unpack in what she just said.

(music in)

She's expressing concern about new curriculum many schools are adopting. I share her concern. We talked about this in episode eight. And I agree with Irene Fountas that teachers should have good rationales for what they are doing. But, as you heard in Sold a Story, she participated in providing teachers with a faulty rationale for how to teach reading.

That's what many teachers are coming to understand as they learn about the science of reading. And that's one reason schools are turning away from experts they once relied on.

We wanted to know about the universities that Fountas and Pinnell are affiliated with. Are they making changes the way Teachers College is?

Gay Su Pinnell retired from Ohio State back in 2007. She's still an emeritus professor there -- but Ohio State wouldn't make anyone available to talk with us for this episode. We did get an interview with someone at Lesley University. That's the Teacher's College in Massachusetts where Irene Fountas is a professor and where she runs a center for Reading Recovery.

Sold a Story Ep. 9 Transcript from American Public Media
Stephanie Spadorcia: We're very proud of our history and affiliation with reading recovery.

This is Stephanie Spadorcia. She's the vice provost of education at Lesley University.

Spadorcia: I actually remember when Marie Clay came to our campus many, many, many years ago, and we got to hear about this unbelievable program.

Marie Clay was the woman from New Zealand who created the Reading Recovery Program. Spadorcia says Lesley University continues to teach Clay's ideas.

Spadorcia: So, we teach the students about the three cueing system because that is one methodology. That's one theory. That's one way. And our teachers do have to be prepared for that because there's lots of schools that use that strategy.

Spadorcia says she listened to Sold a Story. She didn't criticize our reporting directly. But she said the media has gotten things wrong. And she says while the university isn't making changes because of the reporting, there is one way they've had to respond.

Spadorcia: If anything, we've had to teach our candidates how to navigate this political time of what, you know, when a parent says to them, well do you teach the science of reading?

(music in)

Spadorcia: So how does a teacher say, let me tell you what I know about the science of reading and what my curriculum does. So if anything, we've had a teach our, teach our candidates to be more politically savvy in those arenas.

So we've got two universities. Teachers College Columbia is backing away from the work of its star professor. Lesley University is not.

And we've got the professors themselves. Lucy Calkins is speaking up and trying to embrace the science of reading. Fountas and Pinnell are sticking with their core principles and staying out of the spotlight.

There are other big players in the mix here. The publishing company, Heinemann. And the Reading Recovery Program.

Sold a Story Ep. 9 Transcript from American Public Media
We're going to find out what's happening with them after the break.

(music out)

(theme music in)

Remember this from episode two of Sold a Story?

Bill Clinton: I'm a big fan of the Reading Recovery Program.

Back in the 90s, President Bill Clinton used his bully pulpit to promote Marie Clay's Reading Recovery Program.

Clinton: And if you look at the research, it has about the best long term results of any strategy.

At its height in the early 2000s, the Reading Recovery Program was in more than 3000 school districts in all 50 states. But things have changed. And it seems to have a lot to do with our reporting.

(music in)

Our reporting on the Reading Recovery Program began years before the Sold a Story podcast. Back in 2019, I wrote a story that named Reading Recovery and Marie Clay's ideas as part of the problem with the way many schools were teaching reading. That story got a lot of attention.

What I didn't know is that in the aftermath of that reporting, the organization that promotes Reading Recovery in the United States was beginning to experience financial strain. And things have gotten worse since Sold a Story came out at the end of 2022.

(music out)

I'm going to bring in my colleague, Christopher Peak. He's been trying to figure out what's been going on inside Reading Recovery.

Emily Hanford: Hi, Chris.
Christopher Peak: Hey, Emily.

Hanford: So you've been trying to figure out what is up at the organization known as the Reading Recovery Council of North America.
Peak: I was hoping to talk to someone about what's been going on inside Reading Recovery. I emailed back and forth with the executive director, but they haven't liked the reporting. And he ended up declining to talk to me. But I did hear from an unlikely source who gave us a look at what's been going on behind the scenes at Reading Recovery.

(Door opens)

Peak: Hey

Michael Lemaster: Hi Chris, come on...

Peak: Nice to meet, ya!

Lemaster: Nice to meet you!

(conversation continues underneath)

Peak: In December, I hopped on a plane and I went to Columbus, Ohio to meet with a guy named Michael Lemaster.

Peak: Oh, man, I love this carpet!

Peak: He was the chief financial officer for the Reading Recovery council for more than two decades.

Hanford: So why was this guy talking to you?

Peak: Michael was laid off last year. There have been a bunch of layoffs at Reading Recovery recently. They had 12 employees just a couple years ago, they're down to five now. And he wanted to share some information about what was happening inside.

Hanford: So you're in Ohio – that's where the Reading Recovery Council is based, and you go to this guy's house.

Peak: And he has a handful of papers laid out on his dining room table.

Peak: What you, what we have laid out here.

Sold a Story Ep. 9 Transcript from American Public Media
**Lemaster:** We had a group within our leadership that was interested in the finances of Reading Recovery short...

**Peak:** And he wanted to talk about the challenging financial situation the organization is now facing

**Lemaster:** Budget versus...

**Hanford:** This organization is the group that champions Reading Recovery that helps to get the program into schools. Uh, they do things like host conferences and try to win political support for Reading Recovery.

**Peak:** And it's a nonprofit. We're not talking about some big corporation that's trying to maximize profits for investors and shareholders. They're not making lots of money off Reading Recovery.

**Hanford:** And so what did you learn from Michael Lemaster, about what's going on with the finances at the Reading Recovery Council?

**Peak:** So Michael's main concern was that for the last few years, the organization has been overspending, and that's draining their reserves.

(music in)

They were posting deficits every year, hundreds of thousands of dollars, which is a sizable chunk of their annual operating budget. Their conference attendance was down, their membership dues were down. All the indicators were red. And Michael told me he thought Reading Recovery's leadership was not paying enough attention to what was happening.

**Lemaster:** There was almost an attitude like everything's just gonna be okay, we're gonna get money from some outside source. Uh, there was kind of a joke going around, we had to wait for someone to die to get a big bump in revenue, we get it from their estate. And I kind of felt like we were almost relying on things like that to bail us out.

**Peak:** And it's happened before. They did get a bailout from none other than Gay Su Pinnell.

**Hanford:** That's the professor at Ohio State who helped bring Reading Recovery to America, and then went on to make millions of dollars writing books and curriculum rooted in Marie Clay's ideas.

*Sold a Story* Ep. 9 Transcript from American Public Media
**Peak:** Yep. In 2020, the year after your first story on Reading Recovery, Gay Su Pinnell gave the organization more than a million dollars.

**Lemaster:** That was huge. Gay Su Pinnell is the Reading Recovery Council of North America. Without her this would have probably ended already.

(music out)

**Peak:** And according to Michael Lemaster, the organization decided to spend a lot of that money – close to half a million dollars – to hire a PR firm. Michael told me a big focus of the PR firms work was to push back on reporting about them – our reporting in particular.

**Hanford:** So when Sold a Story came out at the end of 2022, did people at the Reading Recovery Council listen to it? Were people talking about it at the office?

**Peak:** Michael said people were definitely talking about it. They were listening to the podcast, they were buzzing about it. And they were figuring out what they should do.

**Lemaster:** The Communications Director would send out something and say – Okay, what's our strategy to refute? And it was a little chaotic for a while.

**Peak:** Chaotic in what way?

**Lemaster:** Chaotic in there was a lot of people that wanted to drive how the discussion would go and the response.

**Peak:** Reading Recovery is on defense right now. We got data that show a lot of school districts are getting rid of it. The number of districts using the program is down 40%, just since 2019.

**Hanford:** And some states are effectively banning Reading Recovery with these new laws that are designed to get rid of the cueing idea that we focused on in Sold a Story.

**Peak:** That's even happening in Ohio – Reading Recovery's home state. Ohio passed one of those cueing bans. And that's a big threat to Reading Recovery. It's a big enough threat that the Reading Recovery Council filed a lawsuit against the state and the governor to try to stop it. And one of the things that's really fascinating is that Gay Su Pinnell was actually a big campaign contributor to the governor, Republican Mike DeWine. She gave him more than $25,000 when he first ran for governor.

**Hanford:** And now the organization that she founded and has bankrolled is taking him to court.

*Sold a Story* Ep. 9 Transcript from American Public Media
Peak: After they filed that lawsuit, reporters caught up with the governor.

(voices)

He was asked about it after an event.

AP Reporter: Governor, do you have any comment on the lawsuit that was filed over this...

Peak: I got this clip from an Associated Press reporter.

Mike DeWine: Yeah, I think it's really a shame. I...

Peak: The governor just rips into Reading Recovery.

DeWine: Now we have a lawsuit being filed by people who just...

Peak: He says the lawsuit isn't about what's good for kids. He thinks it's about adults trying to protect their business.

DeWine: I think Ohioans ought to be pretty angry uh, about that type of a lawsuit.

Hanford: So that's what's been going on with the organization that supports Reading Recovery.

(music in)

What about Heinemann? The company that published Marie Clay's books and books by Gay Su Pinnell and Irene Fountas and Lucy Calkins. What's going on at Heinemann these days?

Peak: All this new legislation and regulation about the science of reading – the same kind of stuff Reading Recovery is fighting back against in Ohio – it's affecting Heinemann too.

The company has taken a big hit financially. And we know that because they told us. We got a letter from an attorney representing them. And it said our reporting has caused "enormous financial damage to Heinemann."

And we can see that in some data I got. We got access to a database that tracks spending from government agencies, and it includes schools. And we can see in that database just how much
money districts are spending on Heinemann products. And it’s really changed since our podcast came out.

(music out)

**Hanford:** Alright, so what’d you find?

**Peak:** Uh, here. This will be easier if I just share my screen. Can you see that?

**Hanford:** Ah, yep, I can see it. Okay.

**Peak:** So, this is GovSpend. They've been tracking basically every purchase order that comes out of a public agency that they're able to get their hands on since 2015. And it has everything from your state highway patrol all the way down to your local trash pickup. And...

**Hanford:** Wow. So you can go in here and you can just type in some terms like the term “Heinemann” and come up with which schools are buying what Heinemann products?

**Peak:** Exactly. So I put in right here, you can see this says Heinemann and its LLCs name, and this is tracking purchases since 2015. It's more than a billion dollars’ worth of sales. And we know that school districts spent most of that money on Heinemann's reading products. Heinemann built its brand largely around Clay, Fountas and Pinnell, and Calkins – and their way of teaching reading. That's been the bulk of their business for decades.

**Hanford:** Okay, so what I'm looking at here is a graph that shows sales have really cratered.

**Peak:** It's a big change. What we can see here is the company was consistently breaking its own sales records every year, just going higher and higher – until 2019. That big mountain there, in May 2019, that's their peak.

And if you look at last year, 2023—it's now more like a little hill. So from what we can see in the data collected so far, sales last year were down to less than a fourth of what they were in 2019.

(music in)

And we're seeing this play on school board meetings all across the country. It's not just New York City that's changing its curriculum. Superintendents are replacing Heinemann programs in lots of places. In Portland, San Francisco, Fargo, Louisville, Philadelphia. Change is happening statewide through new laws in places like Ohio, Indiana, Connecticut—just so many other states. So, it's no wonder we're seeing a drop in sales.
Hanford: So what’s Heinemann doing to try to turn things around? How are they responding?

(Music out)

Peak: They’ve tried to discredit our reporting. They put a statement disputing our findings, but at the same time, they’re also making changes. Lucy Calkins has her new curriculum. As we heard earlier, it no longer has those cueing based strategies in it. And Fountas and Pinnell revising their curriculum as well. They said they're going to add more phonics practice and new instructional routines. And it seems like the company Heinemann's at this inflection point. This is something their President's talked about.

Podcast Host: Matthew, thanks for joining me today. Great to have

Hanford: If you listen to this podcast episode that the president of Heinemann, Matthew Mugo Fields, was on...

Matthew Mugo Fields: Hey, Steven, great to be with you.

(Fields continues underneath)

Peak: He said that Heinemann has been strengthening it programs and that the company is trying to reposition itself for almost a new era.

Fields: You know, I think, at this moment in time, we need all hands-on deck, uh, in our field. We need everyone to be at the table, and we need to be helping each other. That's why I think it's important that we not get distracted by divisiveness. You know, there's resurgence and things like reading wars, all that kind of stuff. No, we need everyone at the table focused on helping us address what is undoubtedly a big challenge that we face.

Hanford: So it sounds like the president of Heinemann is saying something similar to what we heard Lucy Calkins saying in the first part of this episode...

(Music in)

...which is basically – we're relevant. We have a role to play here as this whole science of reading movements sweeps the nation. We're still here. Don't count us out.

Peak: And what we can tell at the moment is these two institutions -- one, this nonprofit that's been around for decades supporting the spread of Reading Recovery, and the other, this company

Sold a Story Ep. 9 Transcript from American Public Media
that has brought in a lot of money from the products we focused on in Sold a Story. They're both facing major challenges. They've lost a big share of their business because school districts all across the country are rethinking their approach to teaching reading.

(music out)

Hanford: In the next episode, we're going to talk about the new direction schools are taking and concerns that some scientists have about how the science of reading is becoming a movement.

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

(theme music in)

This episode of Sold a Story was produced by me with reporter Christopher Peak. Our editors are Curtis Gilbert and Chris Julin. Mixing and sound design by Emily Haavik and Chris Julin. Our theme music is by Wonderly. Final mastering of this episode by Josh Sauvageau. We had reporting help on this episode from Anika Besst, Kate Martin and Emily Haavik and fact checking by Betsy Towner Levine.

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(theme music out)