

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

[BONUS 1] Your Words

Voice 1: From the first episode, I just felt like “Oh my goodness, I am not crazy, it’s not just me.”

(Music)

This is a bonus episode of Sold a Story, a podcast from APM Reports. I’m Emily Hanford.

(Music continues)

Voice 2: I got up early this morning to go for a walk to listen to the last episode.

We’ve been hearing from a lot of you.

Voice 3: I just finished the podcast. I, like, literally drove an hour the wrong direction because I was so captivated.

We got emails. And voicemails.

Voice 4: Hi there!

Voice 5: Hi

Voice 6: Hello

Voice 7: Good afternoon

Voice 8: Hi Emily and team

Voice 9: Hi. I was totally one of those people from Episode 6 who thought—why isn’t this working?

Voice 10: You summarized my whole 29 years in public education.

Voice 11: I am that teacher. And I’m also that parent of a student who did not learn this.

Voice 10: I was trained as a Reading Recovery teacher. I trained other people in balanced literacy using that cueing system. I'm mad. I'm saddened for the kids that I've taught and believed in this so much, that I was led to believe this. You did a wonderful job telling our story.

We've heard praise. We've heard criticism. But a lot of what we've been hearing in response to the podcast are personal stories.

Voice 12: For the first few years as a teacher, I just

Voice 7: I was a good teacher but I wasn't a good literacy teacher

Voice 13: I got an email from my younger daughter's teacher

Voice 14: Just a few years ago, when my son was in first grade

Voice 6: The school she was in at the time in Virginia

Voice 15: When my daughter was in kindergarten is when the pandemic

Voice 13: She would try to sound out a word on the page, she would get the beginning part of the word

Voice 16: And one of my favorite reading specialists in our school district said to me, "The guilt that I feel"

Today – in the first of TWO bonus episodes – we're telling you about some of what we heard from listeners in response to Sold a Story.

(Music ends)

I read a lot of the emails we got. I listened to a lot of the messages. But I couldn't keep up with them all. So I got some help.

Eliza Billingham: I'm Eliza.

Meet Eliza Billingham.

Billingham: I'm a research assistant.

Eliza read or listened to every message we received.

Emily Hanford: So who did we hear from? What can you tell us about who called us and emailed us in response to Sold a Story?

Billingham: Oh, man. Who we didn't hear from might be a shorter list. We've got teachers, obviously, everyone from pre-teachers to retirement. Um. Parents, grandparents,

school psychologists, reading specialists, librarians, social workers, professors, lawyers, publishers and school board members, administrators. And even students.

We heard from a bunch of kids.

Jack Freeman: And when I listened to the podcast, I hear a lot of um, what I've struggled with throughout all the years in school.

This is Jack Freeman. He's 13. His mom wrote to us. And then I interviewed Jack and his younger brother.

Cooper Freeman: Hi, my name is Cooper. And I am 10. And I really loved the podcast.

The boys listened with their mom in the car.

Jack: So my mom started putting it on a lot during the car ride back and forth between tutoring.

(Music in)

Jack and Cooper are kids who are getting private tutoring because they weren't taught how to read in school.

Jack: I do remember a little bit of what you talked about in your podcast about them covering up the word and trying to use tools to guess that word.

Cooper: And I remember the sticky note. I remember "guess the word." There was a couch, there was a carpet. There was all this stuff and they'd be like, go find a spot to read.

But Cooper says he was lost.

Cooper: I couldn't read in kindergarten, first grade, second grade. I was running in darkness. I didn't know what to do.

It was during the COVID school shutdown that his parents began to recognize how much he and his brother were struggling. That's when their mom started homeschooling them. And taking them to tutoring.

Cooper: And I think I'm finally knowing how to read. I never thought I'd be doing this well. I thought I was just, you know, I thought I took the bad path, and I wasn't even going to find a path to go to the good path and learn how to read.

Hanford: So you mean as a little kid you actually thought, you had the thought maybe you won't ever learn to read?

Cooper: Yes. I was like, how am I going to learn how to read? How?

Brouck Anderson: I did not learn how to read until I was 11 years old.

We heard from adults, too—adults who were once struggling readers.

Anderson: My name is Brouck Anderson. When I finally did learn how to read, the first sort of reaction as it started to click for me was not one of happiness or pride or relief, it was just extreme anger. I was enraged that no one had thought to teach me how to sound out words before. I was just in my head thinking – what the [bleeped], like how did no one think to teach me this way? I’ve gone through my entire life thinking that I’m an idiot.

She also felt guilty. Guilty because she **WAS** finally taught how to read.

Anderson: You know I grew up white, in an upper middle-class family in a wealthy New York City suburb and I got the help that I needed, and I was very aware that, you know, other kids like me were not going to get that help.

Other people talked about feeling this same kind of survivor’s guilt. One parent wrote on Twitter: “I cried when I realized how fortunate my son was that we could afford tutoring, and how tragic it was for all the children who would never have access to the same help.”

(Music in)

We heard from a lot parents.

Voice 13: I stayed up late last night to listen to your entire six-episode podcast. And man, it really struck a chord.

Voice 14: The stories are hard to listen to because they hit so close to home.

Voice 15: So much of your podcast resonated with me and what I’ve experienced with my third grader. I kept being told that everything would be fixed by third grade. Everything would be fine.

Parents knew there was a problem. But many of them couldn’t figure out what the problem was. Until they heard *Sold a Story*.

Jenn: Hi, I just had to tell you that I think your podcast has changed my life.

This is Jenn, a mom in New Jersey.

Jenn: I was working late one night a few weeks ago and your podcast came on. And I started screaming, “Honey, you have to listen to this right now!” My husband was downstairs grading papers. He’s a teacher. And he teaches high school. And our son is eight years old. And we have struggled so hard with our son. He’s a delightful and very smart boy but, um, my husband and I are both voracious readers. We could not

understand what we were doing wrong and why our son was having such a hard time reading. And hating to read.

She says they blamed themselves. They blamed their kid. But they never thought much about how he was being taught in school. Until she heard the podcast.

Jenn: And I pulled out all of his schoolwork from kindergarten and first grade. And sure enough. There were the books. There were the letters. So I called the principal...

And the principal said to her – yes, we teach those strategies and those programs. She sent him the podcast. Every episode, every week. She doesn't know if he listened. But she sent the podcast to teachers at her son's school, too. And she says some of them wrote back and said – we listened and we're talking about this now.

Jenn: So my hope is that they're slowly moving away from it and I'm so thankful for this podcast.

Another mom told us that it was a teacher at her son's school who told HER to listen to the podcast.

Liz: Last week my school's parent teacher conferences were happening, and I scheduled a parent-teacher conference with his 4th grade teacher like I always do every year with his regular teacher. But this year I also scheduled a conference with his reading specialist.

This is Liz. She says her son has been working with the same reading specialist since kindergarten. So she'd met with her before.

Liz: But this time it was a really weird and strange and different vibe to the conference with his reading specialist. She was almost getting emotional. She started out the 15-minute conference, teleconference over Zoom, apologizing and saying that she hasn't helped Cole at all. She was talking really fast and seemed really emotional. But she said, Sold a Story. Please. You've got to listen to Sold a Story.

So she listened.

Liz: I'm so sorry. Wow. Um, this is my son. You know. This is my child. I'm so upset. But mostly I just want to change it right away. And so does his reading specialist. And I'm so grateful to her and I'm so grateful to this podcast because I think you just changed my son's life and I'm going to share this podcast with everyone I meet. Ah, sorry, gosh, I had no idea I was going to get so emotional. But, um, yeah, wow, this is a big deal.

(Music)

We also heard from a lot of teachers.

Alex: Hi Emily. My name's Alex.

Alex was a Reading Recovery teacher. Reading Recovery is the program that was started by Marie Clay, the woman from New Zealand you heard about in the podcast.

Alex: As difficult it is to hear that a belief system that I adhered to was erroneous, it made me think a lot about the frustrations I experienced as a Reading Recovery teacher and also as a reading specialist using Reading Recovery and then Fountas and Pinnell with the students I taught to read, or believed that I taught to read.

Alex wanted us to know *why* Reading Recovery was so appealing to him.

Alex: I knew nothing about teaching reading which is why I got my master's degree in literacy and then just jumped at the chance to be trained as a Reading Recovery teacher. And it certainly did change the way I taught in the classroom in terms of my attention and my ability to do *something* to help kids read, which mostly involved putting a book that they could read in front of them.

(Music out)

Alex: Teaching is a lonely profession in many respects. And the intensity of the Reading Recovery training in particular—where you're being observed by your colleagues and observing your colleagues, with regularity, throughout the time that you're a Reading Recovery teacher—involves a lot of risk, a lot of intimacy, and you build tremendous trust in your colleagues. And you're guided by a teacher leader, and it's a wonderfully constructed model for professional education, professional development, but it's also worked very well to create an insulated community.

That kind of community is not going to be open to changes in perception, unless they come from on high. And in that case, it was Marie Clay, who we all worshipped.

He says he did have some nagging questions though. Some doubts.

Alex: That I started to see but I couldn't really acknowledge. And so I really appreciate your reporting because it—in a very gentle way, in a very kind way—you've let me accept what I suspected. And I think back about the children I taught to read. And many of it was just, they taught themselves and I got to watch it.

Of course, there are current and former teachers who did not feel the way Alex did about the podcast. A group of 58 educators wrote a letter criticizing *Sold a Story*. The group included Lucy Calkins and other people who have published with Heinemann. The letter condemned the podcast for, quote, “attacking the integrity of a group of educators who have led pioneering research and helped advance our field.” Another woman wrote: “Please stop blaming teachers. Teachers are employees who must do as they are told.”

But many teachers wrote to say they believed what they were told.

Michelle Schardt: I've learned a lot about the science of reading since you started writing about the topic.

Michelle Schardt has been a teacher for 29 years.

Schardt: I have some ideas about why we thought the way we did and want to share them. Um, I didn't focus on decoding during my early years as a classroom teacher because I wanted to teach kids to read deeply, to make connections and synthesize information using deep critical thinking. And we as a group wrote off phonics as a superficial skill that didn't need much attention. Most of the teachers I knew came to reading easily, seemingly automatically. So it made sense to us that our students would as well.

She says teaching kids HOW to read the words felt kind of like not believing in them, not believing in their ability to learn on their own.

Schardt: And that felt inequitable. We believed the Marie Clay studies and the Fountas and Pinnell methods, and especially Lucy Calkins' structures around Readers and Writers Workshop, because it went with how we were all thinking. Also, we didn't know how to teach phonics. So there you have it, we were sold the story.

Other teachers called to say they never believed in Clay and Fountas and Pinnell and Calkins or the ideas they were promoting.

LeQuisha Underwood: Your podcast shined a light on something I've been trying to tell people for the last 11 years of my teaching career.

This is LeQuisha Underwood.

Underwood: I was a striving reader as a child. I am now a reading teacher because I did not want what happened to me to happen to millions of other children. I was afraid to turn over my own children's ability to learn reading to schools because I know what they've been told. And I know that it doesn't work.

She says she's had to make hard decisions because she had doubts about programs she was expected to teach.

Underwood: As early as last year, I saw a school purchase the LLI leveled reader program and I cringed so much so that I actually took a leave after trying to be forced to use the program that I know doesn't work. Anyhow, thank you so much for the work you've put into this. And I'm going to keep doing what I can to help people learn to read.

Kindergarten teacher: Hi, I'm a first-year kindergarten teacher.

We heard from new teachers trying to buck the system, too.

Kindergarten teacher: I just finished listening to the podcast.

This teacher didn't say her name.

(Music in)

Kindergarten teacher: I teach in a district that uses Lucy across the board and does not support very much phonics instruction. And so I try to do things myself to fill in the gaps. And I don't teach the cueing system, but I have to keep it secret. And after listening to the podcast, I just feel stuck. It's like, I like my district. I like it for quite a few different reasons. And I just don't even know if I'd be able to find a district that did teach reading that was aligned with science. The other option I have—and the district has made this quite clear—is to keep your mouth shut, keep your head down. Because if you say something, or if you try to take a stand, there will be trouble. And I don't know where to go from here. So I wonder if you have any other teachers who are in a similar position or teachers who have been in that position and figured out—what happens next? Do you stay and try to fight, or do you leave to a district that's more aligned with what you know to be true?

(Music fades out)

We'll be back after a break.

**** BREAK ****

(Music in)

Happy Hour: Hey, everybody!

After people heard Sold a Story, they wanted to talk about it.

Happy Hour: Thank you so much for coming.

This is a Zoom happy hour to talk about Sold a Story.

Happy Hour: If you would not mind, just putting your name, maybe where you're from. Always feel free to tell us what you're drinking.

We heard about a bunch of Sold a Story discussion groups like this one. This series of Friday night happy hours was started by a teacher in Connecticut.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: My name is Virginia Quinn-Mooney. I've been teaching first grade for a little over a minute.

She's been teaching first grade for nineteen years. She says she knew something wasn't right with reading instruction.

Quinn-Mooney: Like, I did teach phonics and I, I've always known that, you know, Post-It notes over letters is really not effective.

But she doubted herself. Because everyone around her seemed to be all in on balanced literacy and Lucy Calkins and Fountas and Pinnell.

Quinn-Mooney: All of education was embracing this. All of the people that were my literacy leaders were sitting me down and telling me this is the way.

She says after she heard *Sold a Story*, she couldn't sleep.

Quinn-Mooney: I couldn't sleep because I was like, what can I do?

So she started the happy hours.

Happy Hour: Welcome everybody. Thank you so much for being here and moving the conversation forward.

She says nearly four hundred people signed up for the first Happy Hour—people from all over the world.

Quinn-Mooney: We had South Wales, we had Ghana. There were some great accents.

Lots of teachers came. So did principals, superintendents, school board members, college students, parents.

Happy Hour: So much of this for me is, it's incumbent on me to pay back those families that I needed to have done better for.

This is Virginia at one of the happy hours.

Happy Hour: We have to just be done with balanced literacy. Like, it just has to go away. And we have to just start directly teaching our kids how to read.

Teacher: Virginia, I feel the same way.

This is one of the other teachers who came to the Happy Hour.

Teacher: I feel like I have to give back to the community because I was so ingrained, and I was a balanced literacy teacher and supported it so much. And I've been on that same journey for about probably four years now. And I am so passionate about it. And I spend more time reading and taking classes and, it's just, I devote all my free time to this.

(Music)

This is what I think I was hoping for when I started reporting on this topic more than six years ago. I was hoping that the reporting would get people interested in the scientific research on reading. That it would be an invitation to learn more. And it has been. I think a lot of people know a lot more about how kids learn to read because of the reporting.

But I have focused mostly on one aspect of what it takes to be a good reader. I've focused on what it takes to be able to read words quickly and accurately. Because that's critical. You can't be a good reader without being good at reading the words.

But that's not enough. There is a lot more to reading. And this has been one of the criticisms of my reporting. That it's focused too much on word reading. And not enough on comprehension—on what it takes to *understand* what you read. And I heard from people who expressed that criticism in response to *Sold a Story*.

Claude Goldenberg: I'm Claude Goldenberg.

Claude Goldenberg was a professor of education at Stanford. He retired a few years ago.

Goldenberg: But I'm still involved in working through reading issues, reading policy, reading problems, reading research.

He wrote me an email after hearing the first two episodes of the podcast.

Hanford: One of the things that you said in that email to me in October is, "there's a huge danger we're digging another hole for ourselves by appearing, maybe unintentionally, to extol foundational skills as silver bullets." So can you say more about that? Like, what's the danger? What are you actually noticing out there?

Goldenberg: Well, I get the impression and sometimes more than just an impression—there's like this, this sort of dismissing like, yeah, okay, right. We know there's more, but you gotta get those foundational skills down.

He's concerned that schools aren't paying enough attention to the vocabulary development and knowledge building that's necessary for kids to become good readers.

Goldenberg: I think one of the things I said in my email was even if you were to in each episode, just make a brief aside, you know, 30 seconds. "Look, ladies and gentlemen, we know there's more to reading than foundational skills. We also know that that's been a glaring gap in reading education. But no one should walk away from this podcast thinking that if we just got foundational skills right, everything would be okay."

He's right.

(Music in)

Things will not be OK if all schools get better at teaching kids how to decode words. And here's the thing: making sure kids get the knowledge and vocabulary they need to comprehend

what they read may actually be the bigger challenge. It takes years and years of schooling. And it's where family income and educational background tend to make a big difference. Because kids don't just learn vocabulary and knowledge at school. They learn a lot at home. And through the experiences they have every day—the people they meet, the places they go, the information they're exposed to.

Goldenberg: The challenge of bringing literacy on a massive scale to an entire population is a tall order.

Claude Goldenberg doesn't want anyone to be under the impression that just teaching kids how to decode words will lead to better reading comprehension.

Goldenberg: We need to have a teaching force that understands these things with as much kind of nuance and complexity as possible.

He's concerned that people are rushing to adopt simple solutions to a complex problem.

(Music out)

And changes ARE coming. Fast. State legislators across the country are passing laws.

Laura Adams: We need to improve reading in Wisconsin. We are all in agreement on that.

Glenn Cordelli: Exhibit 1 is the result of a five-year investigation by an education reporter into reading instruction.

Mike DeWine: I'm calling for a renewed focus on literacy. And on the way we teach reading in the state of Ohio.

I'm going to tell you about some of the laws that are being passed in response to the podcast—and why I'm kind of worried about some of those laws—in a second bonus episode of Sold a Story coming next week.

This episode was produced by me, with Eliza Billingham and Christopher Peak. Our editor was Chris Julin. He also did mixing, sound design and made some of the music. Final mastering of this episode was by Alex Simpson. The Sold a Story theme music is by Jim Brunberg and Ben Landsverk of Wonderly.

Our digital editor is Andy Kruse. The acting deputy managing editor of APM Reports is Tom Scheck. And our Executive Editor is Jane Helmke.

You can still write to us if you want to respond to the podcast. We're especially interested in your tips and story ideas. What questions do you have? What else do you want us to report on?

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