In the early 1990s, Temple Ireland-Rosenberger got a temp job at a small company in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

(Music)

And her supervisor said to her:

**Temple Ireland-Rosenberger:** “Whatever you do, do not answer the phone ‘Heineken.’”

And the very first call I took, I said, “Good afternoon, Heineken.”

But she wasn’t working at Heineken. She was working at Heinemann.

Heinemann is an educational publishing company. Temple says it was a great place to work. Gabriel Price too.

**Gabriel Price:** It was really awesome.

He was a sales rep.

**Price:** It was like one of those – you know, like, you see in a sitcom or something like that, where the guy skateboards to work and is like skateboarding down the hallway, high-fiving some 65-year-old editor.

It wasn’t just a fun place. The work was meaningful.

**Lisa Luedeke:** It was a place where people were passionate about education. And passionate about helping teachers. We all were on a mission.

Lisa Luedeke was an editor.
Luedke: You know, I’d been a teacher. Every time I looked at a manuscript, I thought – how would I use that in my class?

(Music)

Heinemann came to the United States from Britain in the late 1970s. At the time, the American publishing market was dominated by big, traditional textbook companies. But Heinemann decided to focus on a new kind of book. Professional books for teachers. Kind of like self-help books. Full of tips and advice – for how to teach reading and writing in particular.

Dan Tobin: These books immediately took off.

This is Dan Tobin. He worked in educational publishing for decades.

Tobin: It became a very lucrative business.

(Music)

This is Episode 5 of Sold a Story, a podcast from American Public Media. I’m Emily Hanford.

In Episode 1, I told you that in this podcast we would be focusing on four authors and the company that publishes their work. Heinemann is that company.

For more than two decades, Heinemann focused mostly on those professional books for teachers. “Dedicated to teachers” became the company’s trademarked tagline.

But by the early 2000s, Heinemann was expanding. Beyond those professional books. Into the kinds of products put out by more traditional publishers.

But Heinemann maintained its early identity as different from other publishing companies. And this helped Heinemann get its products into schools. And helped the company make a lot of money. Despite evidence that shows some products they are selling don’t work very well.

(Music ends)

The first book that Heinemann published for the U.S. market was a collection of papers by Marie Clay, the woman from New Zealand who created the Reading Recovery program. Heinemann published Lucy Calkins’ first book, in 1983, and almost every book she’s written since. It
published books by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell. And other authors too. This is Christine Wells, who was an account manager.

**Christine Wells**: You know when they have those first day of school for the teachers. I had districts buy thousands of copies of a single book just to give to every teacher.

**Ireland-Rosenberger**: Heinemann had the stuff that was being circulated. You know they just, they had the goods.

That’s Temple Ireland-Rosenberger again. The one who accidentally answered the phone “Heineken.” She got a job in marketing. But she says Heinemann books didn’t need that much marketing.

**Ireland-Rosenberger**: I would call it social media before there was social media. Right? Like it was, the social media was in the school. It was, I’m gonna pass you my book, I’m gonna pass you this thing. And it was trade shows. It was going to – you know, like – oh, did you hear about this?

She remembers going to these trade shows.

**Ireland-Rosenberger**: I saw a teacher crying, saying, “This book changed my life.”

Teachers who were desperate for help on how to teach reading told me these books were godsend. Like Christine Cronin. She’s the teacher in Boston who tried to get on board with Bush’s Reading First program, but said the curriculum she was given felt old-fashioned. She remembers looking at the pictures in books by Fountas and Pinnell and Lucy Calkins and thinking – that’s what I want my classroom to be like.

**Christine Cronin**: They framed a picture of reading instruction that seemed beautiful. Like, softly lit rooms. Kids were gonna have cozy nooks where they were curling up with a good book. It got your heart, along with your mind.

Heinemann wasn’t just publishing books about how to teach. Heinemann was publishing books about the politics of teaching too. And in particular, the politics of teaching reading. In the early 2000s, as the battle was heating up over Bush’s Reading First program, Heinemann published books with titles like this:

(Music)

*Big Brother and the National Reading Curriculum: How Ideology Trumped Evidence*
The main message of these books was: leave schools alone. Teachers know what they’re doing. They don’t need politicians and scientists telling them what to do. And, the books were saying, this scientifically-based reading instruction stuff is mostly about publishing companies trying to profit off public education.

Lucy Calkins told the Washington Post in 2002 that the government wanted publishers to make programs that tell teachers what to do. And she said, “Of course it is big business.”

(Music ends)

But of course, Heinemann was a business too. It needed to make money, like all businesses do. And in the early 2000s, Heinemann’s parent company was looking for new areas of growth.

In a 2004 earnings call, the CEO noted there was growing demand – because of Bush’s education policies – for assessment systems to gauge student progress. And for intervention programs to help struggling readers.

Heinemann began creating products to meet that demand.

Unpacking LLI: Hello, I’m Angela Everitt, and I’m here to help you unpack your LLI system.

One of Heinemann’s new products was LLI – Leveled Literacy Intervention. This is a reading specialist in North Carolina unpacking a new LLI kit. She posted this video to YouTube.

Unpacking LLI: You wanna start with box number one. When you open up box one, you’ll pull it out of the carton, and you’ll see…

Leveled Literacy Intervention is a program for teachers to use with small groups of children who are struggling with reading. It's by Fountas and Pinnell. And it's based on the same flawed idea we've been talking about in this podcast. The idea that kids don't need to learn how to sound out words, because there are other ways to figure out what the words say.

(Music)
I ordered one of these LLI kits from Heinemann. It cost $3,947. And when it arrived at my house, I was shocked. I think I was expecting one box. But there were ten. Ten big, heavy boxes. My sons hauled the boxes to our basement. And it took me more than three hours to unpack them all. I spent most of that time peeling plastic wrap off sets of leveled books.

(Music ends)

You’ve been hearing about leveled books since the first episode. Remember when Corinne Adams was told that her son Charlie was “on level”? And then he couldn’t read the words in the book? His school was using leveled books. And they were using a Fountas and Pinnell product to determine his reading level.

It’s called the Benchmark Assessment System. It first came out in 2007.

Irene Fountas: First, the student reads a text orally.

This is Irene Fountas in a training video.

Fountas: After the student has finished the oral reading, calculate the accuracy rate.

(Music)

Fountas and Pinnell’s Benchmark Assessment System comes with a specially designed calculator to help a teacher find a child’s accuracy rate. The calculator has Fountas and Pinnell’s logo on it. The teacher punches in the number of words in the book, then punches in the number of errors the child made. A book is at a beginning reader’s independent reading level if the child got at least 95 percent of the words right, and can answer some comprehension questions.

We’re going to come back to this assessment system in the second part of the episode. To talk about the research on it. I’ll tell you now that there isn’t much research. But Fountas and Pinnell’s Benchmark Assessment System – and their Leveled Literacy Intervention program for helping kids who are behind – became blockbusters for Heinemann. In 2013, Heinemann’s general manager said that half of Heinemann’s sales were coming from those two products alone.

Another top seller for Heinemann was the Lucy Calkins curriculum. Calkins created a kit of materials called Units of Study to help teachers do her reading and writing workshop.

School districts were clamoring for these products by Calkins and Fountas and Pinnell.
Sara Parker: I would say, nine times out of ten our customers came to us.

This is Sara Parker who freelanced as a sales rep for Heinemann in northern California.

Parker: I never did hard sells. Never had to.

(Music ends)

And former employees we talked to said that when they did initiate the sales call, they think they got a different kind of reception than they would have if they’d been calling from one of the more traditional publishing companies.

Wells: I felt like every time called and I said I was from Heinemann people kind of were almost like relieved.

This is Christine Wells again, who was an account manager. You heard her earlier.

Wells: They just liked Heinemann. So, and they trusted Heinemann. They know that they cared about teachers. And they cared about schools and improving schools and helping teachers become more effective.

We wanted to find out how much school districts spent on Heinemann products. So my colleague Christopher Peak sent records requests to the largest school districts in every state.

Christopher Peak: And I asked them how much money they’d spent on Heinemann products in the last decade.

Emily Hanford: So you sent out 100 requests asking for these records. On the day that we’re recording this, you’d gotten records from 83 districts. What’d you learn?

Peak: Well, let me say first that there are a lot of school districts in the United States. About 13,000. So this is a small number of districts. But these 83 I heard from are some of the biggest. They represent a lot of students. All but five of the districts we got records from bought Heinemann products in the last decade. And they spent millions.

Gwinnett County Schools in Georgia, they spent $14 million. Baltimore County in Maryland, $11 million. Chicago, $11 million. Palm Beach County Schools, down in Florida, $9 million. The New York City schools spent $21 million on Heinemann products.
So, big picture here – from the 83 school districts that we have records for, we calculated that Heinemann received at least $215 million over the last 10 years.

**Hanford:** And that $215 million represents only a fraction of the company’s sales. Do we know how much Heinemann makes in total every year?

**Peak:** Heinemann’s parent company hasn’t disclosed that recently. The last time they made public what Heinemann was earning was in 2013. Back then, sales were $159 million dollars a year.

I wanted to figure out what Heinemann was making more recently, so I looked at corporate filings.

And I was able to come up with an estimate of the total the company earned in the decade before the pandemic hit. What those records show is that Heinemann made at least $1.6 billion dollars in sales in that ten-year period. And it could have been hundreds of millions of dollars more.

(Music)

**Hanford:** So that’s how much the company has been taking in. At least $1.6 billion over a decade. What about the authors we’ve been looking at?

**Peak:** We don’t know how much Gay Su Pinnell, Irene Fountas and Lucy Calkins have made from the sales of these products. But we do know they’re best-sellers for Heinemann. And we do know they are wealthy people.

**Hanford:** And what do we know about their wealth?

**Peak:** We know that Gay Su Pinnell set up an educational foundation around 2007. Tax returns showed her foundation gave away at least $9.8 million. A lot of that money went to Ohio State to support Reading Recovery and her teaching methods.

**Hanford:** Someone at Ohio State who I talked to told me Pinnell drove a Maserati.

**Peak:** That’s true. I found those records. She did buy a Maserati.

**Hanford:** All right, so what about her co-author Irene Fountas?
**Peak:** Fountas owns a lot real estate. She paid $3.1 million in 2006 for the house she lives in. And records show she appears to own or co-own at least seven other properties.

**Hanford:** And what about Lucy Calkins?

**Peak:** So in the last episode, you mentioned Calkins has an LLC. This is where most of the districts send their money when they hire her or her team to do training. And I got court documents that show the value of that LLC. Last year, it was worth nearly $23 million.

(Music ends)

Lucy Calkins and Gay Su Pinnell and Irene Fountas and their publisher Heinemann have made a lot of money. But what’s the evidence behind what they’re selling? Do their products work?

**Lucy Calkins:** It works because it’s based on reading research. Not on market research, but on reading research…

This is Lucy Calkins in a promotional video produced by Heinemann in 2010, the year her curriculum first came out.

**Calkins:** …that provides kids with the conditions that we now know all readers need. Above all, the reading workshop provides kids with time to read and read. Read. Read. Read.

(Music)

She says what she's selling is based on research. But there were no studies of her published curriculum when this video was made. Not a single one.

Studies are expensive and difficult to do. Especially the kinds of studies that can actually show you if a program works. You have to identify two large groups of similar kids. Have one group do the program, one group not, and compare the results. Most programs don’t get studied like this.

But Heinemann did pay for two of these kinds of studies to be done on Fountas and Pinnell’s Leveled Literacy Intervention program. Heinemann paid nearly $2 million for these studies. The studies were done by researchers at the University of Memphis.
The studies showed that kindergarteners, and first and second graders who were in the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention program got better at reading leveled books. But the studies also showed that the program had no “discernible effects” on their ability to sound out words. Another way to say that: kids moved up reading levels, but they didn’t get better at reading.

(Music ends)

I tried to get an interview with the lead researcher to ask her about this. But she wouldn’t talk to me. Other researchers I discussed these studies with say the studies were well designed. But they say the studies don’t show that the Leveled Literacy Intervention program works when it comes to teaching kids the foundational skills that are necessary for becoming a good reader.

And yet, Fountas and Pinnell and Heinemann point to these studies as evidence that their Leveled Literacy Intervention program does work. They have links to these studies on their website. They’re not trying to bury the results. I emailed Heinemann last month with questions about these studies. But the company declined to answer my questions.

We wanted to talk to the people in school districts who were making the decisions to buy Heinemann products. Had they read the studies on Fountas and Pinnell’s Leveled Literacy Intervention program? Did they know that there were no studies of the Lucy Calkins’ curriculum when they bought it? We tried to get interviews with superintendents, chief academic officers, principals, school board members. Many of them ignored our emails. Some refused to talk to us. Others would only talk off the record. But we did get some interviews. One person who agreed to an interview was the former superintendent in Palo Alto, California. The guy who was in charge when the schools there started using the Lucy Calkins Units of Study for Teaching Reading. His name is Max McGee. I asked him if he knew whether Calkins and her team had any studies that showed their curriculum worked.

Max McGee: I can’t tell you if they did or didn’t. And I can’t tell you necessarily how it was aligned to state standards. But I can tell you it was engaging. I mean, just, you know, going into the classes. Seeing the kids with their own little personal libraries. Reading what the teachers had posted on the walls. Listening to the reading, their table reading discussions.

And the program came from an institution he trusted.

McGee: I have great regard for the Teachers College of, uh, Columbia University. I went to University of Chicago and we had read plenty of research that came out of Teachers
College so the association with that I think is – by association – that this is not something that has not been vetted and researched.

(Music)

Teachers I talked to in Palo Alto thought the same thing.

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

**Krista Velasquez:** No. We just assumed there was.

This is Krista Velasquez, the teacher in Palo Alto you met in the last episode.

**Velasquez:** We assumed if someone was writing a curriculum and our school district was buying it, um, I assumed that it was backed by research.

(Music)

We’re going to take a break. When we come back, we're gonna look at Fountas and Pinnell’s popular system for figuring out a child’s reading level – and what research says about how accurate those levels really are.

(Music ends)

**BREAK**

(Music)

Missy Purcell could have been a spokesperson for Lucy Calkins.

**Missy Purcell:** At some point in my life, I read or purchased every book that Lucy Calkins ever wrote. I used to call them my bibles.

Not just books by Lucy Calkins. She says books by Fountas and Pinnell were her bibles too.

(Music)

Missy started teaching in the Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia in 1999. She had learned the “balanced literacy” approach when she was in college. Balanced literacy is another name for what Calkins and Fountas and Pinnell and others have been selling. There’s not a
precise definition of balanced literacy. But what I’ve learned in my reporting is that in schools that say they do balanced literacy, you’re very likely to find Lucy Calkins and Fountas and Pinnell. And you’re almost certain to find those leveled books I’ve been telling you about.

(Music ends)

The basic idea with leveled books is that if kids are moving up levels, they’re learning how to read. Missy believed in this idea. She even taught other teachers how to do balanced literacy with those leveled books.

**Purcell:** I’m literally training teachers. Teachers are coming to my classroom. In fact, my second-grade teacher was a group that came from another county up in North Georgia and she walked into my room and I was like, “Oh my gosh, Miss Galloway.”

Missy taught elementary school for eight years. And then she left to raise her three sons. They went off to their local public school, same school district where she’d been a teacher. And when it came to her kids and reading, everything was fine at first. Her two older boys learned pretty easily. And then, her third son.

**Purcell:** Matthew just wasn’t picking up on things as quickly. He was really struggling with letters and just anything that had to do with print.

Matthew’s school was using Fountas and Pinnell’s Benchmark Assessment System to gauge student progress. There are 26 levels in the Fountas and Pinnell system, one for each letter of the alphabet. Level A books are the easiest. Level Z are the most difficult.

**Purcell:** That’s how you feel like your kid is making progress, right? They give you the letters and you’re like, “Oh, they’re making progress.”

Matthew’s school wanted kids to be reading level D books by the end of kindergarten. But Matthew had only made it to a level B. Missy was worried. That summer, she gathered a bunch of books on his level and had him read every day.

But in first grade, he was still behind. So Matthew was put in the Reading Recovery program.

And by the end of the year, the school said he had caught up. He was at a level J, which was right where the school wanted first graders to be.

(Music)
But Missy was skeptical.

Purcell: We weren’t seeing any progress at home.

What she could see was that Matthew was memorizing the books he was bringing home from school. But he was lost with a book that he’d never seen before.

Purcell: He didn’t know what the words were.

By the time Matthew was in the middle of second grade, the Fountas and Pinnell system was indicating that he had slipped below grade level again. He was back to a Level E. Five levels lower than he’d been the year before. And Missy was thinking – what is up with these letters? It was starting to seem like some kind of alphabet soup. And she just wanted to know – why can’t my child read?

By now, Matthew was getting Leveled Literacy Intervention, the program for struggling readers by Fountas and Pinnell. And he’d been put into special education too. The school had determined that Matthew has a reading disability. Dyslexia. And under federal law, kids with reading disabilities who are behind in school are entitled to get special support and monitoring. Missy had been doing a lot of reading on her own about dyslexia. She was glad that Matthew had been put in special education. She thought – finally, I’m gonna get some answers about what’s going on and how to help him. She remembers going to a meeting at the school.

Purcell: We expected when we got to this meeting that we were gonna be given a lot of information on what he had mastered. Like specific decoding skills that we knew he was weak in. And all I get is a Fountas and Pinnell letter.

That was it. She says that was all the information the school had for her. And she was furious. She didn’t trust that leveled reading system anymore. And she was thinking – maybe the school doesn’t know how to help Matthew.

(Music)

This reading level idea has been around for a long time. Back to at least the 1940s. Long before Fountas and Pinnell.

Matt Burns: It makes intuitive sense.

This is Matt Burns. He’s a professor at the University of Missouri who studies reading assessments. He says there is nothing inherently wrong with the idea of trying to find a child’s
reading level and putting kids who have similar learning needs into small groups together. In fact, that’s a good idea. The problem, he says, is with the books themselves. And how they are leveled. And whether a leveled reading system can really assess a child’s reading ability.

Let me start with the books.

(Music)

One of the trickiest things about leveled reading has always been – how do you determine what level a book is? This is where Fountas and Pinnell come in. Back in the 1990s, they came up with a system for leveling books. Their leveling system takes into account things like themes and content and illustrations. But not how difficult it is to sound out the words.

The books at the lowest levels in Fountas and Pinnell’s system are written to encourage children to use the pictures and the context to get the words. Not sound out them out. In their Level A books, for example, there are words like “climb” and “dance.” Those are not easy words to decode. Beginning readers can guess those words by looking at the pictures. But many of them can’t actually read those words.

And then there’s those letter levels. Missy’s son Matthew had made it to a level J in the Fountas and Pinnell system and then he went back to a Level E.

(Music ends)

What’s up with that?

Burns: Well, unfortunately, that’s predictable.

This is Matt Burns again, the professor at the University of Missouri.

Burns: I give the kid the test one day, it’s a G. The next day it’s an I. The next day it’s an E. The next day it’s an F.

He says there’s not enough of a difference between a level E book and a level G book for that to be a reliable way to determine a child’s reading ability.

And a child’s ability to read a particular book has a lot to do with their background knowledge. Take for example a struggling reader who loves baseball. Maybe her dad reads her a lot of books about baseball. So she’s seen certain words a lot – words like “ball” and “bat,” and maybe even “field” and “diamond.” Give her a level C book about baseball. She recognizes most of the
words. And she understands what the story is about, no problem. But give her a Level C book about something else, like farming, and she’s lost.

That’s why leveled books are not a good way, on their own, to determine a child’s reading ability.

And Matt Burns says there’s a problem with the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System in particular. The problem is that it’s being used to try to identify the children who are struggling with reading and need extra help. Because Fountas and Pinnell say that their system can be used this way. Matt noticed that claim when he was flipping through the manual for their Benchmark Assessment System.

**Burns:** It says that this measure, the Benchmark Assessment System, can be used for universal screening. So that means it can be used to identify kids who are struggling to learn how to read or experiencing difficulties with reading.

He was surprised. Because he knew of no research that shows leveled reading systems can be used in this way. And he didn’t see any research in Fountas and Pinnell’s manual to back up their statement. So he and some colleagues decided to see if it was true.

**Burns:** And we did a study with almost a thousand kids in Minnesota.

They gave the kids three different tests. The Benchmark Assessment System, and two other tests that studies had already shown do reliably identify kids who are struggling with reading.

The researchers wanted to know – did the Benchmark Assessment System accurately measure children’s reading ability? And more importantly – did it identify the kids who were struggling and needed extra help?

**Burns:** K, so we found that the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System had about 54% diagnostic accuracy. It identified children as good readers and struggling readers about as accurately as if you were to flip a coin.

(Music)

And in fact, the results were even more alarming. Because the Benchmark Assessment System – according to Burns’ study – was particularly bad at identifying the kids who were struggling. The study showed that in a school where 100 children needed reading intervention, the Benchmark Assessment System would identify only 31 of those kids. Sixty-nine children who needed help would fly under the radar.
Burns: Flipping a coin would actually be better.

In other words, a school has a better chance of finding the children who need help if they just flip a coin. Rather than spending thousands of dollars on Benchmark Assessment kits. And spending the time that it takes to do the assessment. It takes about 20 to 30 minutes for a teacher to do a Benchmark Assessment on one child. That’s 20 to 30 minutes for each student in a class. Matt Burns says there are a number of other good assessments that can tell a teacher if a student is struggling. And the assessments take only a few minutes. And they don’t cost anything. They are free.

Matt Burns and his colleagues published their research in a series of papers in peer reviewed academic journals in 2015.

Burns: We’d really hoped that would cause schools to stop and pause and take a look and think, is this really an effective approach?

And then he realized how naïve that was. He went to a conference. And walked into the exhibition hall where vendors display their products.

Burns: And I look across this huge room at this large reading conference and you see this huge banner that says “Fountas and Pinnell.” And you walk over, and they’ve got these wonderful displays and these incredible anecdotes of all these kids being helped and these teachers saying, “This is great.”

What he realized is that a researcher with peer-reviewed papers is no match for an influential publishing company with a marketing budget.

(Music ends)

Matt Burns says he doesn’t know of a school in the United States that does not use some kind of leveled reading assessment system. And he says in his experience, the most popular one – by far – is Fountas and Pinnell’s Benchmark Assessment. Surveys show that about a quarter of elementary schools use it.

But the Matt Burns study that I just told you about is the only independent, peer-reviewed research that he’s aware of on Fountas and Pinnell’s Benchmark Assessment System. That’s it. One study.
Fountas and Pinnell have their own study to support their Benchmark Assessment System. It’s on their website. But the only way that they evaluated whether their system accurately identified a beginning reader’s level was to compare their system to the leveling system that Marie Clay used for Reading Recovery. What they found is that their system was consistent with Marie Clay’s system. Which isn’t really a surprise. Fountas and Pinnell built their leveling system based on Clay’s cueing theory.

I don’t know why Fountas and Pinnell didn’t compare their system to something else. As you know, I haven’t been able to talk to them.

What I think, based on the reporting I’ve done, is that they believed that if their system was as good as Marie Clay’s, their system was as good as it could be.

**Sandra Iversen:** Marie was the goddess. You know. And I followed her, faithfully. I loved her. Yeah.

This is Sandra Iversen, the Reading Recovery teacher from New Zealand you met in Episode 2.

She’s not a Marie Clay follower anymore. And it’s because Sandra ended up doing her own research on Reading Recovery. Research that compared Reading Recovery to something else.

(Music)

It was the early 1990s. Sandra had come to the United States to train Reading Recovery teachers in Rhode Island. She was still a big believer in Clay and her program.

**Iversen:** ’Cause I was convinced that Reading Recovery in the pure form was perfect. Absolutely convinced.

But Sandra was working on a master’s degree at the time. And her thesis advisor thought that maybe Reading Recovery could be more effective. There were already a number of studies on Reading Recovery by Gay Su Pinnell and others. Those studies showed that kids who got Reading Recovery did better than kids who didn’t get Reading Recovery. But what if Reading Recovery included explicit instruction in how to sound out written words? Would kids do even better? That’s what Sandra Iversen’s thesis advisor wanted her to test.

**Iversen:** I didn’t for one minute think it would make the slightest bit of difference, you know.
But she did the study. One group of kids got Reading Recovery in its original form. And another group got Reading Recovery but with an added element: explicit instruction in how to sound out words.

(Music ends)

And the students who got the explicit instruction needed far fewer lessons to be successful.

**Iversen:** And that to me was significant because it meant that you could recover more children than you would have otherwise.

Sandra says when the study was published, many Reading Recovery supporters were not happy with her.

**Iversen:** And ever since then it’s been like a big black mark, a big black cross against my name. Because you’re not supposed to do things like that. You’re not supposed to fiddle with the program. Marie always said – you know, you can’t sway from the program because once you do it’ll, you know, it’ll just decay sort of thing, more and more and more.

We found a document from the 1980s in an archive at Ohio State that said one of the responsibilities of someone like Sandra who trained Reading Recovery teachers was to quote “maintain model purity.” Sandra had violated that.

(Music)

She says once she was cast out, she started questioning other things about Reading Recovery. Like Marie Clay’s claim that kids who were successful in Reading Recovery would never need reading help again.

**Marie Clay:** This is like an immunization.

This is Marie Clay. You heard this in Episode 2.

**Clay:** It’s, uh, something you bring in early. Or another way I look at it is I call it, uh, it’s like an insurance policy.

But what Sandra Iversen began to notice is that kids could be successful in Reading Recovery without really learning how to read. They could look like they were reading those leveled books by using the strategies they’d been taught. But as the books got harder – as the words got longer,
as the pictures went away – some of those kids fell apart because they didn’t know how to actually read the words.

**Iversen:** Those students who are coming out of Reading Recovery, many of them just do not make progress in the classroom. They either stand still or they move back.

(Music ends)

That was her observation. Other former Reading Recovery teachers I interviewed told me the same thing. That many kids who were successful in Reading Recovery in first grade were not doing that well a few years later. There were some studies that indicated this too. Reading Recovery supporters disputed these studies. They pointed to their own studies. And it was kind of a battle of the studies.

And then, there was a really big study of Reading Recovery. Thousands of kids. The initial results of this study were published a few years ago.

**Podcast:** Hello, and welcome to this week’s research minutes, presented by the CPRE Knowledge hub…

The researchers who did the study discussed the results on a podcast about education research back in 2018.

**Researcher:** We found significant positive effects of Reading Recovery on student’s reading achievement.

Kids in Reading Recovery were doing better than the other kids at the end of first grade, right after they’d finished the Reading Recovery program.

(Music)

The study was good news for Reading Recovery. The Reading Recovery Council of North America posted the study on its website. Celebrated the results. This was one of the largest studies ever of an education intervention program. It was part of a big scale-up of Reading Recovery. And it was paid for with a grant that Ohio State got from the federal government in 2010. Amazing, I know, given that the federal government had just spent billions of dollars on the Reading First program. And one of the goals of Reading First was to get rid of the cueing system.
But there was a new administration in Washington by 2010. And a huge recession. And this federal grant to expand Reading Recovery was part of the economic stimulus package. It was $45 million from the federal government. And another $10 million from private matching funds. The private funders were not disclosed. But through a public records request we were able to learn that one of those private funders was Gay Su Pinnell. Her education foundation provided nearly a million dollars for the Reading Recovery expansion and the study.

And like I said, the study was good news for Reading Recovery. At first.

(Music)

But the study didn’t end with first grade.

The researchers got another federal grant to collect more data. To see how the kids who were successful in Reading Recovery in first grade were doing a few years later. And earlier this year, they released the results.

**Henry May:** When we look at the results…

This is Henry May, the lead researcher. He’s a professor at the University of Delaware.

**May:** ...the kids who received Reading Recovery actually had test scores that were below the third and fourth grade test scores of kids that did not receive Reading Recovery.

To be clear here, this study was not comparing kids who got Reading Recovery to all the kids in a school. It was just comparing the kids who got Reading Recovery to a group of kids who were also struggling with reading in first grade and did not get Reading Recovery. And the kids who got Reading Recovery were doing worse, on average, by third and fourth grade. Was Henry May surprised?

**May:** Yeah, very much so. When you see kids in Reading Recovery, you see that they’re learning to read these books. And it looks to be pretty miraculous.

(Music)

**May:** So, to see a negative result and have it show up as statistically significant. That the kids that received Reading Recovery are actually earning test scores on the state tests in third and fourth grade that are below where they would have been expected to score had they not gotten Reading Recovery. That’s, that’s very surprising.
The study could not answer the question – why? That’s one of the frustrating things about studies like this. They can tell you if an intervention worked or not, but not why it succeeded or failed. It’s possible that Reading Recovery worked great in first grade. Maybe the students in the program weren’t just memorizing words and using the pictures. Maybe they were really learning how to read. And that wasn’t enough for most of them. Struggling readers tend to need a lot of instruction and support. We know that from lots of research. So maybe the fault was not with Reading Recovery but with a lack of follow-up after Reading Recovery.

But interestingly, what the study found is that kids who had been in the Reading Recovery program in first grade got more reading intervention in second, third and fourth grades. More than the other struggling readers. And the intervention that they were most likely to get, according to the study, was the Leveled Literacy Intervention program by Fountas and Pinnell.

(Music ends)

Here’s what’s happening to many children in this country. They go to a “balanced literacy” school that uses Fountas and Pinnell and Lucy Calkins. They’re taught the cueing strategies. Their reading ability is measured using leveled books. If they’re struggling – and someone notices – they might get Reading Recovery in first grade, where they get cueing and leveled books. And if they’re still struggling after that, many of them get Leveled Literacy Intervention. More cueing. More leveled books.

Struggling readers keep getting more of the same.

(Music)

That’s what happened to Matthew. Missy’s son. In Gwinnett County, Georgia. She and her husband ended up hiring a private tutor to help Matthew. She remembers calling the tutor.

**Purcell:** And she was like, “You finally arrived at the place where most of us arrive.”

She had given up on the idea that the school was going to teach her son how to read. And she’d decided she was going to have to take care of the problem herself. It’s what Corinne Adams did with her son Charlie. It’s what Lee Gaul did in New York City with his daughter Zoe. It’s what Kenni Alden in California wishes she had done with her son.

Missy says the private tutoring helped Matthew. But she felt like the balanced literacy instruction he was getting at school was undercutting what he was learning from his tutor. His tutor was teaching him how to decode words. At school he was being taught the cueing system. So last
year she and her husband pulled him out of public school, and they put him in a private school for kids with dyslexia.

Matthew’s in sixth grade now. And Missy says he’s doing really well. After just one year at the private school, she says he was almost up to grade level in reading and writing.

(Music ends)

For Missy, what’s especially painful about all this is that she had been a teacher. She advocated for Lucy Calkins and Fountas and Pinnell in her school district. She taught other teachers how to do balanced literacy with the cueing and the leveled books.

**Purcell:** I think that’s what fuels my passion to change it. Knowing that I spent so many years trying to help other people understand reading and writing workshop and Fountas and Pinnell and Guided Reading, and I led them down that path, and maybe in some way I can fix it a little bit by hopefully influencing a new generation of teachers to know how to do things better, and things that are grounded in science.

Missy has found a group of parents and teachers in her school district who have the same concerns she has. They’ve met with the superintendent and other Gwinnett County school officials. They’re pushing for change. And the school system seems to be listening. This year, the district is piloting two new curriculums. But they’re still using Clay’s Reading Recovery program and the Leveled Literacy Intervention program from Fountas and Pinnell. An official from the Gwinnett County Schools told us the district has no current plans to drop either of those programs.

(Music)

I asked Missy how she feels now about Lucy Calkins, and Fountas and Pinnell, and Heinemann. She’s angry.

**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.

**Purcell:** In my early days of teaching, if someone had handed me, you know, research that showed me what the science of reading was, instead of a Guided Reading book by Fountas and Pinnell, I would have been a different teacher.

**Purcell:** Had I known I was doing the wrong thing, I would have fixed it. In a heartbeat.
In our next and final episode, I talk to the former general manager of Heinemann. I’ll tell you how Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell are reacting to criticism of their work. And what Lucy Calkins is saying about changes that she’s making to her Units of Study for Teaching Reading.

**Calkins:** We fixed up a few of the places where the science of reading has been, you know, pointing out, we, we like, messed up.

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, and Christopher Peak. Our editor is Catherine Winter. Digital editors are Andy Kruse and Dave Mann. We had mixing and sound design from Emily Haavik and Chris Julin. And original music by Chris Julin. Reporting and production help from Will Callan, Chole Marie Rivera and Angela Caputo. Fact checking by Betsy Towner Levine. Our theme music is by Jim Brunberg and Ben Landsverk of Wonderly. The final master of this episode was by Alex Simpson. Special thanks to Chris Worthington, Lauren Humpert, and Kristine Hutchens.

We have a website. It’s SoldaStory.org. You can find a map that shows how much various school districts across the country have spent on Heinemann products. You can also find other articles and documentaries I’ve done on reading collected there. The website is SoldaStory.org.

If you want to help get the word out about *Sold a Story*, leave a review wherever you get your podcasts. It really helps people find us.

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