

Sold a Story: Discussion Guide

This guide is intended to provide some possible points for discussion as educators, parents, community members and students listen to *Sold a Story* from American Public Media.

For each episode, there are questions for before, during and after listening, as well as suggested readings and activities to extend the conversation.

As you listen to each episode, think about:

- What moments and ideas in this episode stood out to you? Why?
- What challenged you? What surprised you? Why?
- What in this episode resonated with your own experience?
- What questions do you have?

Episode 1: The Problem		
Corinne Adams watches her son's lessons during Zoom school and discovers a dismaying truth: He can't read. Little Charlie isn't the only one. Sixty-five percent of fourth graders in the United States are not proficient readers. Kids need to learn specific skills to become good readers, and in many schools, those skills are not being taught.		
Episode Length	Link to Episode	Link to Transcript
32:47	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/10/20/sold-a-story-e1-the-problem	Printable Transcript
Additional Optional Materials	An excerpt of the lesson Charlie and his classmates watched during Zoom school: Readers Think about What Kind of Word Would Fit, from Units of Study for Teaching Reading Parents are Watching Like Never Before	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Problem”	
Before Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What thoughts come to mind as you read the episode description?• What percentage of students in your school district are not proficient readers?
While Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What causes the parents in this episode to question the instruction their children are getting in school?
After Listening	<i>From a teaching perspective:</i>

Corinne didn't tell the school about her concerns with Charlie's reading instruction:

"She drafted an email about all this to the principal of her son's school. But she didn't end up sending it because... she likes the school, she likes the teachers. She doesn't want to be the problem parent telling them they're doing something wrong."

- Have parents come to you with concerns about reading instruction? How have you responded to their concerns?
- Do you know if your students have received help with reading outside of school?

The strategies you hear children being taught in this episode are grounded in a theory of reading that will be explored throughout the podcast. In this episode we hear:

Teacher: "Let's do our triple check and see. Does it make sense? Does it sound right? How about the last part of our triple check? Does it look right? Let's uncover the word and see if it looks right?"

- Are these strategies familiar to you? Are you aware of the theory they are based on?

Corrine says:

"Public school should be like this sacred trust. I'm going to give you my child and you're gonna teach him how to read."

- As a teacher, there are many things you are expected to do. Where does teaching reading fit into your school's list of priorities?

From a parenting perspective:

Lee Gaul says if he hadn't been watching the instruction on Zoom, he and his wife probably would have thought that their daughter, Zoe, had a reading disability.

- Have you had concerns about your child's reading?
 - Did you think that their difficulties might be connected to the way they were taught? Why or why not?
 - Did you tell anyone at the school about your concerns? How did that go?

From a community perspective:

When Lee approached other parents at Zoe's school with his concerns about the reading instruction, many of them responded with disbelief. Lee says:

"It was almost like saying, 'I saw aliens. I saw the ship and you have to believe me.' Right? Like, people were like, 'Oh, yeah, OK.'"

- Why do you think people responded this way?

Near the end of the episode, Corinne says:

"I think a lot of people just expect that some kids will never read."

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you think this is true? Why? <p><i>From a student perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did Charlie and Zoe’s reading instruction sound familiar to you? How were you taught to read? <p>Zoe’s Dad got her a “decodable” book and she says reading it was “hard.” She also says that it was “the best thing ever.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you remember when you first learned how to read? How did it feel?
Wrap Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is “The Problem” detailed in this episode?
Extend	<p><i>Activity 1</i></p> <p>Kenni Alden describes her son’s reading:</p> <p>“He doesn’t look at all the letters in words. He doesn’t look at all the words in sentences. And reading is miserable for him. He omits words. He adds words. He’ll substitute a word that makes sense in the context, that has a few of the same letters as the actual word, and just cruise right on.... He got further and further behind as a reader and writer.”</p> <p>Read an excerpt from the materials that go with the lesson Charlie and his classmates watched during Zoom school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How are students being taught to read the words in that lesson? How might this result in a child reading the way that Kenni’s son does? <p><i>Activity 2</i></p> <p>Read this article by the CEO of the Baltimore City Public Schools, Dr. Sonja Santelises. She writes:</p> <p>“COVID-19 has blown the doors off our schools and the walls off our classrooms. It has Zoomed educators into homes and parents into classrooms, providing the transparency that parents have long deserved. Watching their children engage in remote learning, Zooming from one class to the next, parents note the differences across classrooms — differences we in education have long noted but have too often sought to minimize when trying to allay parents’ concerns. That worrisome thing parents couldn’t quite put their finger on — they can see it now... That simple, ‘trust us’ is not going to fly anymore.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How would you describe your trust in schools? Has anything changed? Why? <p><i>Activity 3</i></p> <p>Develop a survey to find out if, how, and why families in your school or district are providing additional reading instruction outside of school. Consider how you can use what you find to inform discussions about how reading is taught in classrooms.</p>

Episode 2: The Idea

Sixty years ago, Marie Clay developed a way to teach reading she said would help kids who were falling behind. They'd catch up and never need help again. Today, her program remains popular and her theory about how people read is at the root of a lot of reading instruction in schools. But Marie Clay was wrong.

Episode Length	Link to Episode	Link to Transcript
51:41	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/10/20/sold-a-story-e2-the-idea Clean Version for listeners who prefer a version without curse words	Printable Transcript
Additional Optional Materials	The three-cueing system in reading: Will it ever go away? Brain Builders Videos: The Science of Reading for Kids	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Idea”

Before Listening	Read the episode description. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you know about Marie Clay? What was she promising?
While Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think the episode begins and ends with Dan Corcoran’s story?
After Listening	<p><i>From a teaching perspective:</i></p> <p>Clay said this about the books used in a Reading Recovery lesson:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“The easy text gives the child a chance to practice all the reading strategies that they’ve learnt so far. To put some of the complicated behaviors together which I sometimes call ‘orchestrating’ the reading behavior. To do fluent reading right from the very beginning.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clay wanted students to sound like fluent readers from the beginning. What did you learn in this episode about how people become skilled readers? <p><i>From a parenting perspective:</i></p> <p>Clay did not expect the scientific breakthroughs that have since revealed how skilled reading develops. She said:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“We don’t know what’s going on behind the eyes in these particular areas. And they’re also saying, as far as I can see, it’s unlikely we will ever know. So that will remain magic and all we can do in these situations is to arrange good situations for children to respond to and then just guide their responding. They have to do the learning.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you believe about how children learn to read before you started listening to

	<p>this podcast?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have your ideas changed? How? Why? <p><i>From a community perspective:</i></p> <p>Clay said (in 1967):</p> <p>“We have a school system which allows the good readers to get better and the poor readers to drop further and further behind.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has that changed? Why or why not? <p><i>From a student perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you learn in this episode about how people learn to read? <p>Here are videos you can watch to learn more. We especially recommend Episode 4: The Origin of My Reading Brain.</p>
<p>Wrap Up</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This entire podcast explores one idea about reading. The idea is described in this episode. What is the idea?
<p>Extend</p>	<p><i>Activity 1</i></p> <p>Compare the research methods Marie Clay used to the methods Bruce McCandliss used.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you think their methods influenced their different understandings of how reading works? <p><i>Activity 2</i></p> <p>In the article, The three-cueing system in reading: Will it ever go away?, Kerry Hempenstall writes:</p> <p>“One might think that after the publication of numerous authoritative reports on skilled reading and how to promote it (such as that of the National Reading Panel, 2000), this tired hypothesis would have been long ago assigned to the history folder. However, a cursory search for the 3 cueing term produces many examples of it being endorsed by school districts, education departments, teacher training institutions, and school documents.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think the cueing system has had such staying-power? <p><i>Activity 3</i></p> <p>Listen to your child read and notice how they approach unfamiliar words.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have concerns? <p>Talk with other parents in your school to see what they have noticed about their children’s reading.</p>

Episode 3: The Battle

President George W. Bush made improving reading instruction a priority. He got Congress to provide money to schools that used reading programs supported by scientific research. But backers of Marie Clay’s cueing idea saw Bush’s Reading First initiative as a threat.

Episode Length	Link to Episode	Link to Transcript
41:09	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/10/27/sold-a-story-e3-the-battle	Printable Transcript
Additional Optional Materials	<p>How legislation on reading instruction is changing across the country</p> <p>“Premortem” activity (from page 6 of Lessons Learned? Reading Wars, Reading First, and a Way Forward)</p>	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Battle”

Before Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you know about Reading First and what it was trying to accomplish?
While Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who knew what about the problems with cueing? When did they know?
After Listening	<p><i>From a teaching perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What obstacles did Reading First face? • Has your perspective on Reading First changed after hearing this episode? In what ways? <p><i>From a parenting perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you like your child to be taught to read? <p>Picture what you want and write down some words that come to mind. As you continue listening to <i>Sold a Story</i>, notice if your thinking changes. (We will revisit these words in discussion about the next episode.)</p> <p><i>From a community perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What should be the role of government in how schools teach reading? • How can the story of Reading First be used to inform future initiatives? <p><i>From a student perspective:</i></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you think about the idea that only some kids need “word work?” • Were you in guided reading groups? What do you remember about guided reading?
Wrap Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why was there a battle over cueing?
Extend	<p><i>Activity 1</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does your state approach reading instruction? <p>You might consider starting your research with this article: How legislation on reading instruction is changing across the country</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has there been any new legislation in your state regarding reading instruction? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What do the laws say? ○ Do you think these laws will help improve instruction? Why or why not? <p><i>Activity 2</i></p> <p>Consider the “premortem” activity (which comes from page 6 of Lessons Learned? Reading Wars, Reading First, and a Way Forward)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How could a premortem help refine or improve a reading initiative proposed in your school, district, or state? <p>Organize a premortem for the stakeholders who are planning a reading initiative at your school or district.</p> <p>Prior to completing a premortem for an actual initiative, it may be helpful to familiarize participants with the process by doing a practice round. Margaret Goldberg wrote these scripts to facilitate a role play and you may find them helpful, if you want to do the same.</p>

Episode 4: The Superstar

Teachers sing songs about Teachers College Columbia professor Lucy Calkins. She’s one of the most influential people in American elementary education today. Her admirers call her books bibles. Why didn't she know that scientific research contradicted reading strategies she promoted?

Episode Length	Link to Episode	Link to Transcript
33:18	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/11/03/sold-a-story-e4-the-superstar	Printable Transcript
Additional Optional Materials	Using Research and Reason in Education	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Superstar”

Before Listening	<p>Episode 3 ended with people talking about a superstar.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“She was like a rock star walking into that building. And it was like theater.”</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">"If Beyoncé came and gave a private concert in my district, it would not have been a bigger deal for many of my teachers."</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">"It felt like you were watching something magical."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Did you know who they were describing? What do you know about Lucy Calkins?
While Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do you learn about Lacey Robinson? Are you surprised that she was drawn to Lucy Calkins’ approach to teaching reading?
After Listening	<p><i>From a teaching perspective:</i></p> <p>In this episode, we hear teachers talk about how motivated they were to learn how to teach children to read and write.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Lisa Karim: "Everybody was whisper quiet and there was Lucy, down at the front, with a student, teaching a writing lesson. And it felt like you were watching something magical."</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Hanford:" Lisa Karim wanted to make the same kind of magic for her students. That’s why she was there."</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Karim: "It was – here’s a person who knows how children learn to read and write. And I want to be able to teach children to read and write."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How much did you know about how kids learn to read when you started teaching?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What motivates you to learn more as a teacher? <p><i>From a parenting perspective:</i></p> <p>Emily says this:</p> <p>“Lucy Calkins had an idea about how children learn. And I think that idea was influenced by privilege. Her idea was kind of romantic. That learning is fun and beautiful. That it’s a natural process. Kind of magical. And that a teacher’s job is to unlock a child’s potential. To observe and nurture. To help children fall in love with reading and writing.</p> <p>I think I used to believe this too. That learning to read was a natural process. That if you read enough to your kids, they’d learn. And I think my belief was influenced by privilege. I grew up in a family not unlike Lucy Calkins’ family. Upper middle class, white, well-educated – both of my parents went to Teachers College Columbia in the 1960s. I even had some monogrammed bath towels.</p> <p>And as I mentioned in an earlier episode, I think learning to read was pretty easy for me. And it was pretty easy for my kids. Nothing challenged my view that learning to read is a natural process. Until I began doing this reporting a few years ago.”</p> <p>Look at what you wrote during the discussion of Episode 3.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How has your background and life experience influenced the kind of reading instruction you want for your child? <p>Lacey says:</p> <p>“Everybody don’t have to love to read and write. But everybody has a right to learn to read and write.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● When you heard her say this, what did you think? <p><i>From a community perspective:</i></p> <p>Lacey says:</p> <p>“I thought I was playing Robinhood.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What did she mean by that? <p><i>From a student perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Does your school do the reading and writing workshop? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What do you like about it? What don’t you like?
Wrap Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What was Calkins’ idea about how kids learn to read? Where did it come from and how did she help spread that idea?
Extend	<p><i>Activity 1</i></p> <p>In this 2003 article, Using Research and Reason in Education, Paula and Keith Stanovich wrote:</p> <p>“Education is so susceptible to fads and unproven practices because of its tacit endorsement of a personalistic view of knowledge acquisition—one that is antithetical to the scientific value of</p>

the public verifiability of knowledge claims.

Many educators believe that knowledge resides within particular individuals—with particularly elite insights—who then must be called upon to dispense this knowledge to others. Indeed, some educators reject public, depersonalized knowledge in social science because they believe it dehumanizes people.

Science, however, with its conception of publicly verifiable knowledge, actually democratizes knowledge. It frees practitioners and researchers from slavish dependence on authority.”

- Do you agree that education is susceptible to “fads and unproven practices”? Why or why not?

Activity 2

Go onto your school district’s website and see if you can determine how your child’s school teaches reading.

- Can you identify the curriculum used, who provides teacher training, and the reading strategies children are taught?

Emily and Margaret have both written articles for parents you might want to read:

[Is my child’s school getting reading right? What to ask. What to look for](#) by Margaret Goldberg

[What to do if your child's school isn't teaching reading right?](#) by Emily Hanford

Episode 5: The Company

Teachers call books published by Heinemann their "bibles." The company's products are in schools all over the country. Some of the products used to teach reading are rooted in a debunked idea about how children learn to read. But they've made the company and some of its authors millions.

Episode Length	Link to Episode	Link to Transcript
47:22	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/11/10/sold-a-story-e5-the-company	Printable Transcript
Additional Optional Materials	Video of Calkins introducing the Units of Study program	

Questions and Topics for Discussing "The Company"

Before Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What thoughts come to mind as you read the episode description?
While Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are a lot of numbers, dates and dollar amounts in this episode. Consider making note of them while you listen.
After Listening	<p><i>From a teaching perspective:</i></p> <p>In this episode, you heard:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Hanford: "Heinemann books didn't need that much marketing."</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">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. "</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do ideas spread in education today? • How are those ideas being vetted (or not)? <p>Learning that Gay Su Pinnell bought a Maserati caused a stir among some listeners of <i>Sold a Story</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did it seem unfair to include that detail? Why or why not? • Were you surprised to hear about the money that has been made by Heinemann and its authors? • What other dollar amounts, dates and numbers caught your attention and why? <p><i>From a parenting perspective:</i></p>

	<p>Matt Burns says that reading levels are unreliable:</p> <p>“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.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does your child’s school use a leveled reading system? • What information do you get about your child’s reading ability? <p><i>From a community perspective:</i></p> <p>In this episode, you heard about the lack of evidence to support the Fountas and Pinnell leveling system and you also heard about a big study that raised questions about the effectiveness of Reading Recovery.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you want schools to do with this information? <p>Missy Purcell says she wants Calkins, Fountas & Pinnell and Heinemann to be “held accountable.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you agree? If so, what would that mean? <p><i>From a student perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What surprised you most in this episode? • Does your school use leveled books? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Do you think your level reflects your reading ability? Why or why not?
<p>Wrap Up</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are some reasons why reading research hasn’t had much impact on how schools teach reading?
<p>Extend</p>	<p><i>Activity 1</i></p> <p>Watch this video of Lucy Calkins describing the <i>Units of Study</i> program and write down the claims she made about her program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What process does your school district go through to vet programs? <p><i>Activity 2</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If your school uses leveled books, what will you do with them now that you’ve heard this episode? <p>If you are looking for ideas, you might want to read some lessons that Margaret wrote.</p>

Episode 6: The Reckoning

Lucy Calkins says she has learned from the science of reading. She's revised her materials. Fountas and Pinnell have not revised theirs. Their publisher, Heinemann, is still selling some products to teach reading that contain debunked practices. Parents, teachers and lawmakers want answers. In our final episode, we try to get some answers.

Episode Length	Link to Episode	Link to Transcript
41:40	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/11/17/sold-a-story-e6-the-reckoning	Printable transcript
Additional Materials	<p>Calkins’ statement: "No One Gets to Own the Term "The Science of Reading""</p> <p>Some of the responses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cognitive scientist, Mark Seidenberg - professor who specializes in multilingual learners, Claude Goldenberg - teacher, Margaret’s response - group of parents in Wisconsin <p>Comparing Reading Research to Program Design: An Examination of Teachers College Units of Study</p>	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Reckoning”	
Before Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What questions do you have for Calkins, Fountas & Pinnell, and Heinemann?
While Listening	<p>Many questions are asked in this episode — by parents, teachers, and Emily. Write down the questions you hear and whether or not they are answered.</p>
After Listening	<p><i>From a teaching perspective:</i></p> <p>In her statement No One Gets to Own the Term "The Science of Reading", Calkins rebuked people who questioned her approach.</p> <p>But she later says to Emily:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“I think it’s really been learning from you and other science of reading researchers – the importance of orthographic mapping and being convinced as we worked with teachers and in classrooms, you know, being convinced that that was something that we could benefit from changing on that account.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What did you think about the science of reading when you first heard about it? ● What do you think about it now? What’s changed and why? <p>Emily describes a moment at the Reading Recovery Conference in 2018 when she realized something:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“The people in this room have bought into a definition of reading that isn’t really reading. They’ve bought the idea that reading is making meaning from a story using whatever strategies you can think of. You can look at the pictures, you can look at parts of the words, you can think about what would make sense.</p>

	<p>They've bought into the cueing idea. The idea that a child can read a book without being able to read the words."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Did you believe in the cueing idea? Has your thinking changed? <p><i>From a parenting perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you know how students are taught to read in your school district? ● Has there been any discussion about reading? What are people talking about? <p><i>From a community perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What has been the response in your community to <i>Sold a Story</i>? ● Are you planning to take any action? What will you do? <p><i>From a student perspective:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have you been talking to people about the podcast? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Who have you been talking to and what have you been talking about?
Wrap Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Were your questions answered?
Extend	<p><i>Activity 1</i></p> <p>Read the statement from Calkins, No One Gets to Own the Term "The Science of Reading" and some of the responses, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cognitive scientist, Mark Seidenberg - professor who specializes in multilingual learners, Claude Goldenberg - teacher, Margaret's response - group of parents in Wisconsin <p>As you read each response, highlight key words and phrases that illuminate concerns the authors have about Calkins and her approach.</p> <p><i>Activity 2</i></p> <p><i>Sold a Story</i> focuses on how children are being taught to read words. This is just one element of reading instruction.</p> <p>Review Comparing Reading Research to Program Design: An Examination of Teachers College Units of Study and discuss additional components of reading instruction that warrant attention.</p> <p><i>Activity 3</i></p> <p>Parents: Write down what you want from your child's reading instruction after listening to <i>Sold a Story</i>. Now compare that to what you wrote in the discussion of Episode 3.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Has anything changed? Why?

Concluding questions

Now that you've listened to *Sold a Story*

Below are the episode titles:

- The Problem
- The Idea
- The Battle
- The Superstar
- The Company
- The Reckoning

- Using the titles, how would you summarize the argument the podcast made?
- What was the purpose of *Sold a Story*?
- What are you going to keep thinking about?