

Literacy Justice for All: Johnny Can Read!

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The following is a story about Johnny that highlights larger issues impacting students across the country and beyond. It's a story that invites parents, educators, stakeholders and policymakers to listen carefully and to care deeply about systemic changes needed to support reading justice for all. Through a plethora of professional books and children's literature titles, the "Five Ws of Writing" (Who, Where, When, What, Why), and a short call to action, this story explores how equity and social justice intersect with reading education. So, let's dive in.

Keywords: Literacy, justice, reading

Introduction

Once upon a time in a land not too far away, lived a little boy named Johnny. Johnny's story is a tale as old as time and has been written about a lot since 1955. Some were introduced to Johnny in the famous book *Why Johnny Can't Read, And What You Can Do About It* (Flesch, 1955) or in its sequel *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools?* (Flesch, 1981). Perhaps others devoured the popular journal article "Johnny can't read: Does the fault lie with the book, the teacher, or Johnny?" (Idol, 1988) or jammed to Don Henley's 1980's song "Johnny Can't Read". Over the years, Johnny has been the focal point of discussions and debates about how best to teach reading and even contributed substantially to the "wars on reading" (Gabriel & Strauss, 2018; Thomas, 2020; Tierney & Pearson, 2021).

Context matters, and equity and justice demand contextualizing lived experience. So, before introducing the Johnny of this story, let's learn a little about his family. Johnny's parents have been married for 32 years and have seven children; biological and adopted. Their youngest four children were adopted from the foster care system. Five years after the first two adoptions in 2007, they found out about another child in the system, a half sibling to one and a full sibling to the other. This was unexpected but welcomed and they immediately engaged in the adoption process. Then, four years later, guess what? Another call, about Johnny—the *who* of this story—a half sibling to two of the previously three adopted children!

After years of navigating the foster care system and the complexities of courts and social services, Johnny's adoption was finalized at five years old. His family, already well-versed in teaching and education, was determined to give Johnny the stability and support he needed. His mother, a college professor with a PhD in Special Education and Literacy, had spent

over 30 years in education. She had worked with early intervention programs like Reading Recovery and had taught hundreds of students how to read. Johnny's father was a psychologist and retired military service member. The family settled in the Southeastern U.S. in a small town, surrounded by rural communities.

After his adoption in March of 2018, Johnny finished out the year in preschool before being enrolled in the local public elementary school. His Kindergarten year ended abruptly with the onset of COVID-19, and Johnny, like millions of other learners, faced several years of unconventional schooling. First grade was spent entirely at home via a computer screen and for 2nd grade, Johnny and his classmates arrived back at school fully masked, a practice with its own challenges to teaching reading to young learners (Wheeler & Hill, 2024). Third grade was almost "normal", but 4th grade (2023-2024) was riddled with weekly bus driver and teacher shortages. Additionally, there were pressures for all elementary school teachers to complete state mandated literacy training, resulting in forced significant changes to teaching reading (Thomas, 2020).

Despite the many challenges and transitions throughout his young life, Johnny survived and at 10 years old was promoted to 5th grade. His academic journey was not without adversity and struggle. At times, Johnny was distractable and disruptive. Full of energy and curiosity, his teachers frequently grew frustrated when Johnny wouldn't stay on task. However, and quite remarkably, Johnny enjoyed school. One day, when Johnny was in 3rd grade, his mother asked if he liked school and he replied "Oh, I love it. I love it so much I was thinking of writing the principal a letter to consider school on Saturdays, too!" Over the years, social workers, guardian ad litem, teachers, and family members described him as funny, athletic, full of curiosity, resilient, and a child who never met a stranger. But

state testing had another description of Johnny. According to them, Johnny *can't* read.

Where: Johnny's Story is Everywhere

Johnny's story is far from isolated. Before his arrival, Johnny's adopted family lived the nomadic life of a military family, first in Michigan, then California, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, California (again), Florida, and finally they settled in North Carolina. And, according to friends, family, and other educators around the country his story resonates there, too, where schools are forced to balance standardized testing with the realities of teaching reading to students from diverse backgrounds, cultures, interests and needs (Au & Raphael, 2000; Gorski, 2018; Koretz, 2019; Trelease, 2013). But the *where* of this story—of Johnny's story—took place in a public elementary school in the Southeastern U.S., impacted by teacher and transportation shortages, district and state testing mandates, and shifting reading practices.

When: Johnny's Story is Past and Present

This story takes place now but has been going on for decades and it resonates with other stories in Johnny's family. His parents recalled an experience when their eldest was in 1st grade and was restricted by the school from checking out a picture book about cheetahs from the school library. Why? Because the text was leveled a 3.2 and did not fall within a reading range of 1.3-1.7 (the target range based on their child's grade-level). Really? Whoever thought that denying young children the opportunity of self-selecting interesting books was an effective practice, even if some titles exceeded text difficulty determined by a program? Some of the guidelines and approaches to teaching reading enforced by the school were contrary to how Johnny's family tried to instill a love for reading. They believed that children should be able to select books based on their interests and be given time to read every day (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Fox, 2008; Gallagher, 2009; Miller, 2009; Ripp, 2018; Tracey & Morrow, 2023; Trelease, 2013). To this end, their home library included books and magazines from different genres and difficulty levels to spark the individual interests and motivations of their children.

And, from an early age, all seven children in Johnny's family—to include Johnny—were read to regularly from popular picture books like *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?* (Carle, 1997) and *Love You Forever* (Munsch & McGraw, 1997) to classics like *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952), *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1978) and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1999), to popular graphic novel series like *Dog Man* (Pilkey & Girabaldi, 2016) and *Bad Guys* (Blabey, 2019). When Johnny's parents read to their children, stories came alive, and imaginations were sparked of wonder and possibility (Miller, 2009; Ripp, 2018; Tracey & Morrow, 2023). Sadly, the joy of reading is often overshadowed in school settings by

the pressures of rigid reading programs and standardized test performance (Koretz, 2019).

What: Johnny's Story is About Justice

At the heart of this story is the struggle for literacy justice. Johnny *can* read—but he doesn't test well, and this is worrisome. Most people hold fast to the hope that all members of a society will be able to read, a critical factor in becoming a productive member of society (Au & Raphael, 2000), but research on literacy and equity consistently shows that standardized assessments are often biased and fail to reflect the diversity of learning experiences represented in a classroom (Gabriel & Strauss, 2018; Gorski, 2018; Koretz, 2019; Savitz & Kane, 2023). Standardized test results also impact the livelihood of teachers. In Johnny's district some teachers were informed by their administrators that their students' reading test scores were too low. So, they were given a choice: teach a grade with fewer standardized tests, like kindergarten, or find a new job. Whether Johnny (and others) can read, according to state testing, has become a high-stakes issue—as it can directly impacted teachers' careers (Fuchsman, et al., 2020).

In the book *Wemberly Worried*, Henkes (2009) tells the story of a young mouse named Wemberly who worries about everything, especially on the first day of school. She worries about what others will wear, whether the teacher will be nice, or if the room will smell. She worries about so many things it becomes overwhelming:

What if no one else has spots?
 What if no one else wears stripes?
 What if no one else brings a doll?
 What if the teacher is mean?
 What if the room smells bad?
 What if they make fun of my name?
 What if I can't find the bathroom?
 What if I hate the snack?
 What if I have to cry? (p. 18-19)

Sadly, teachers share similar worries. They, too, are overwhelmed by questions like: Why can't my students read better? Score higher? Is their reading fast enough? Fluent enough? Did I teach reading the right way? What if they don't pass the test? What about retention? Will they end up in jail? Did we read enough? Write enough? Did we go to the library enough? What could I have done differently? Am I bad teacher?

Unfortunately, parents, guardians, and caregivers also wrestle with impossible questions: Did I provide enough fruits and vegetables? What about brain health? Gut biome development? Did they eat too many foods with red dye #40? What about private school? What about too much screen time? Not enough outdoor time? Less video games and more Mozart? More board games? Too many sugary drinks? Too much junk food? Should we test for attention and impulsiveness? What about medication? What about environmental toxins? Climate change? Is

it nature, nurture, or both? What if it's more nurture and it's me? Am I good enough? What if I cry? These are some of the silent struggles that often go unspoken yet weigh heavily on the hearts of everyone involved in a child's learning journey.

Why Johnny's Story Matters: Johnny is My Child

This story matters so much, because Johnny is my child. A few months ago, a literacy professor gifted me a copy of *Unspeakable Acts Unnatural Practices: Flaws and Fallacies in "Scientific" Reading Instruction* (Smith, 2003). Although familiar with Frank Smith's work, I did not recall this specific title, so I brought it on a flight and devoured it from cover to cover until chapter eight, when I about fell off my seat (which is hard to do in the economy section). Pay close attention to the opening:

Like many people, I know a child who is having trouble in school. I'll call him John. There's nothing wrong with John, as far as I can tell, though his school authorities are subjecting him to all kinds of diagnostic tests. The results of these tests, and the conclusions drawn from them, will go into his school record. A label is also being attached to John that could affect his future as well as his perception of himself. The label says that John can't keep up. That's the polite version. Other versions identify him as a slow learner, a disabled learner, a probable malingerer, insufficiently motivated, and attentionally disordered. John gets upset by all the derogatory things said about him, by his continual frustration in class, and by the cajoling or disciplinary pressure his beleaguered parents put on him at home when his friends are out playing. Because he gets upset in this way, John is also categorized as being emotionally and behaviorally dysfunctional. (p. 59)

The chapter continues for nine more pages, and every sentence seemed to speak directly to "Johnny"—my Johnny. I read it out loud to my husband, to colleagues, to friends, and to Johnny's Oma, who immigrated to this country at the age of 20 (who was almost denied acceptance to college due to the divide between reading ability and a test score). My mind swirled, and so did theirs. How did Smith (2003) know about "Johnny" a decade before my Johnny was even born? Well, he knew, of course, because this tale is as old as time.

On some level, I had always known these truths but seeing them in print about a child called "John" struck a deep chord within. Everything I had learned about teaching reading became blurry—every lesson from undergraduate and graduate courses in reading, Reading Recovery training, dissertation research, experiences raising, adopting, and fostering children, and countless hours attending professional development and literacy conferences. The list of experiences that shaped my

understanding was numerous, yet here was a book, written two decades ago, that prompted intense reflection.

Call to Action: Literacy and Justice for All

Johnny's story is not just an individual story; it reflects broader issues of equity and justice in reading education (Aydarova, 2023; Freire, 1970). There are numerous progress and performance factors beyond students' control state-mandated testing, teacher shortages, poverty, trauma, adoption, shifting identities, and an overemphasis on a single reading curriculum (Gorski, 2018; Muhammad & Love, 2020; Savitz & Kane, 2023). These challenges raise critical questions about how we can better support all students like Johnny. State testing suggests Johnny can't read, but the reality is more complex—so, what can we do? This article concludes with a call to action—a call to notice and to ponder. While the complexities of justice in reading education cannot be fully explored in this brief space, there are clear ideas for reflection that emerge from Johnny's story, which have the potential to drive meaningful change in reading education.

Reading is not simple; it is way more complicated than what can be learned from test scores that attempt to measure decoding and "correct" answering of questions in inauthentic and high-pressure settings. Reading is also more than phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. Instead, reading is a dynamic and highly organic cognitive process, governed by the brain.

In a recent podcast episode "Why we don't understand the human brain" (Tomba, 2022) neuroscientists highlighted the mystery of the brain, the most complex of all highly organized matter. They reminded listeners that every synapse has approximately 100,000 molecular switches and that the number of synapses is equal to all the stars in 5,000 Milky Way galaxies! Reading, simple? I think not! Because our brains are part of life and because our lives are complicated, they claimed the impossibility of identifying, measuring, and understanding processes that involve thinking, remembering, behaving, and engaging with the world. Almost twenty years earlier, Smith (2003) agreed:

No neuroscientist has been able to find any of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet in the brain, nor the connections they are supposed to have with particular sounds, though we are assured that such structure exist. . . The parts of the brain involved in handling letters could very well be the same parts that are involved in identifying birds or cooking omelets. (p. 8)

The cognitive and psycholinguistic complexities of how we learn to read were ignited during undergraduate learning, particularly through Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1982) and the widely endorsed definition of reading as a process involving the interaction between reader, text, and context (Michi-

gan Board of Education, 2002). Reader characteristics such as strength, ability, disability, language, motivation, culture, identity, personal experiences, and more shape reading outcomes. Text factors to consider include font size, genre, interest, pictures, difficulty, and whether the text is self- or teacher-selected, digital or print. And context factors encompass the setting in which reading occurs, including lighting, noise, room layout, access to books, and even the presence of a classroom pet, technology, or peer and teacher interactions. The dynamic and simultaneous interactions between the three domains of reader, text, and context are extraordinarily complex, and they vary with each individual reader. This definition of reading has been widely praised and accepted (Boyd, 1986; Kaufman, 1994; Patterson, 2016) and has served as a cornerstone in my professional work as well as in efforts to understand and support my own children's reading development.

Reading is not simple. Therefore, anyone involved in the literate lives of others must think beyond a simplistic view of reading by intentionally engaging with current brain research, revisiting Rosenblatt's (1982) transactional theory, exploring Tracey and Morrow's book on reading "lenses" (2024), or Duke and Cartwright's "Active View of Reading" (2020). Other considerations are the four-tiered equity framework focused on culturally and historically responsive literacy practices (Muhammad & Love, 2020) and literacy approaches that develop not only intellectual ability, but also the social and emotional lives of learners (Johnston & Champeau, 2024; Johnston et al., 2020). These interconnected factors—cognitive, cultural, and contextual—all serve to deepen our understanding of what it means to read and to be a reader.

In the U.S., more than two-thirds of states have enacted mandates requiring the implementation of Science of Reading (SoR) legislation and related policies. For a detailed overview of each state's legislation, the "Science of Reading Legislation and Implementation State Scan" on the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) website provides a comprehensive breakdown. This trend is striking—and warrants careful reflection. While states are aiming to equip educators with what they believe to be the most effective approach to improving the literate lives of students, we must heed a caution expressed by Freire (1970) long ago, who argued that educational or political action programs will fail if the experiences of the people they serve are not recognized or respected. But because human experiences are wide and varied, "how literacy is taught has everything to do with race, class, culture and identity, and any reporting or reform that ignores this is missing or misrepresenting reality" (Gabriel & Strauss, 2018, para. 28). Will these reading mandates lead to success, or will they fall short?

Reading resides in the brain, and it is far from simple, and the idea that one approach meets the diverse needs of everyone's experiences is fundamentally flawed. What needs to happen, then, seems clear: Ponder programs carefully. How much do students read each day? Are the texts interesting,

meaningful, and accessible? How do factors like language, structure, genre, readability, and organization impact student engagement? Were the texts selected by the teacher or the students? Do students "see" themselves in the texts they are reading? How often are they given opportunities to listen, write, and discuss what they read? What is the instructional climate in the classroom? What sociocultural factors influence students' texts and contexts? Ultimately, is the issue with the book, the teacher, or the student (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Idol, 1988, Johnston & Champeau, 2024; Johnston et al., 2020; Muhammad & Love, 2020)?

At the heart of literacy equity and justice lies the accessibility, enjoyment, and connection to books to develop background knowledge, foster meaningful connections, introduce rich vocabulary, reflect diverse experiences, and to create identity. Every student must read and be read to—this is foundational, essential, and equitable. Additionally, we must acknowledge the complexity of the brain and its role in the reading process, evaluate definitions and programs that are reshaping literacy education across the country, and engage with the remarkable work of those that offer both insights and cautions on the future of literacy (Allington & Gabriel, 2013; Aydarova, 2023; Freire, 1970, Gallagher, 2009; Hoffman et al, 2020; Muhammad & Love, 2020; Muhammad & Mosley, 2003; Tierney & Pearson, 2024; Thomas, 2020).

Johnny's story highlights the importance of quality literature and thoughtful pedagogy amidst recent state mandates on reading instruction. My Johnny *can* read, and my Johnny is also very fortunate: he is resilient and loves school, even though school doesn't always love him. There is hope—and justice—not just for Johnny, but for all. And as for 5th grade? Well, that's another story!

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