



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

THE READING ALIBI -

A MAJOR SCHOOL PROBLEM *

Carolyn G. Ennis,
Supervisor of Public
Instruction,
Johnston County Board
of Education U.S.A.

Note : This skit was designed to emphasize the negative attitudes of teachers and parents toward students who are poor readers. Reading and discussion of the skit may help teachers become aware of alternative solutions that will eliminate the negative attitudes and will accentuate positive practices for reading improvement of students.

As a follow-up, teachers are divided into groups to discuss one of the problems presented and to report to the total group suggestions for eliminating the problem discussed.

CHARACTERS -

Narrator Principal Johnny Counselor
Teachers of Grades 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9.

Narrator: "Johnny can't read" is echoed throughout the home and school domain. Reasons, complaints, excuses, by students, parents and teachers are proclaimed. Each one passes the proverbial buck. In reading development Johnny gets stuck.

*This first great blow
to his ego -
determines his course,
the route he will go.
His mental health, his self-esteem -
on reading achievement primarily depends.*

.....

* Reprinted with permission of Carolyn G. Ennis and the International Reading Association from January 1975 *Journal of Reading*, Vol.18, No. 4.

First Grade Teacher: Johnny can't read. He lacks the proper background of language experience necessary for reading readiness. He should have received those experiences at home.

Johnny: I can speak, hear, but I can't seem to see well. I want to read.

Second Grade Teacher: Johnny can't read. He doesn't know the basic sight words. He should have learned those in the first grade.

Johnny: I can see the words. I want to know what they say and mean. I want to know what the pictures are about. Sometimes I make up pretty stories about those pictures and pretend that I can read.

Third Grade Teacher: Johnny can't read. The vocabulary in the basal reading textbook is too hard for him. He doesn't have the ability to attack words properly.

Johnny: I feel sad. I can't read and I am already eight years old. Everyone gives me books: my mother, my teacher, the librarian, my older sister, my older brother, my Sunday School teacher, my grandparents. When is someone going to help me learn to read?

Fourth Grade Teacher: Johnny can't read. He might have a severe emotional problem. I notice that he bites his fingernails. Maybe he could function better in the special education program for exceptionally slow learners. There he could progress at his own rate.

Johnny: I can't read. I am a slow learner. I am stupid or retarded, maybe both. Most of the kids in my class can read. They get called on often if they can read well. They get to do a lot of things too, such as being in plays and taking notes to the principal's office. They are very dependable because they can read. The teacher can trust them because they can read. They are important because they can read. I want to be important. I want to read.

Fifth Grade Teacher: Johnny can't read. He should have been retained in the lower grades. I can't go back and teach all the skills that he should have already learned. I have thirty-two other children to teach and some of them can't read. He lacks comprehension skills, reading rate, work attack, study skills - everything.

Johnny: I feel bad. I can't read. I hate school. The teacher smiles at the kids who can read well. She never smiles at me. I don't think she likes me. I never get called to read aloud. No one wants to hear me read because I make too many mistakes. At home my parents tell me to practise reading but they never listen to me read aloud. They don't have time. No one has time for a dummy.

Sixth Grade Teacher: Johnny can't read. If a child has reached the sixth grade and has not learned to read, there is absolutely nothing anyone can do to help him learn to read. There is no need to waste time on Johnny. He will never be able to read.

Johnny: I can't read. I can't learn because I can't read. I wish so very much that I could read. The minister says ask God to help you and He will help you to overcome all problems. I am going to ask God to help me learn to read. Everyone says I'll become a better reader if I read more but I can't read, so how can I read more? I look at a lot of books but I don't read them because I can't read them.

Seventh Grade Teacher: Johnny can't read. How will he ever be able to get maths, science, social studies, if he can't read? What in the world can I do to help him?

Johnny: I can't read. The school is my prison. The teacher says that I'm not college material anyway; therefore I must learn to work with my hands because I can't read? But how can I work with my hands if I can't read? I can't even put my model cars together unless my sister reads the directions

for me. I want to read although I can't go to college.

Eighth Grade Teacher: Johnny can't read. The school can't afford to buy special materials for him to work with, and I don't have time to make anything for him. Maybe if I get some workbooks with nothing but pictures that will help. At least he can enjoy looking at and colouring the pictures. This will keep him busy so that he won't get into any mischief.

Johnny: I can't read, but every teacher gave me a textbook anyway. This year I have eight textbooks. Even though my teachers agree that I can't read, each one gave me a book. As they said, "I can't read the first one of those books."

Ninth Grade Teacher and Others in High School: Johnny, you cannot read. How in the world did you ever get to high school? I want to help you but I don't know what to do. I'm not a reading teacher. My advice to you is take the courses that do not require any reading. Be sure that you are always very polite. Above all, keep quiet. Don't give any trouble, and you will make it.

Johnny: I wonder what courses are available that don't require any reading. Maybe now I will be successful since I won't have to read. Mom was very hurt when I told her that I couldn't go to college. She said that she had looked forward to my going to college since the day I was born. I have learned a lot of things from observation, doing things, listening, but I just can't read that printed page well enough. But if I can be successful without knowing how to read well, that'll make Mom happy, I hope.

Principal: Johnny, since you can't read well, I've assigned you to all the lower level courses. I don't want you to become frustrated. You are a nice, quiet, young man. Sometimes students who are slow are inclined to mischief but I am glad to know that you are so well behaved. If your teachers don't seem to understand you, just be patient with them. They may not understand you but they are all here to help you. Remember that.

Johnny: My brains must be smaller than the other kids who can read well. What's wrong with me anyway? If I keep my mouth shut, maybe someone will like me just the same if I behave myself. Billy is a bully but everyone likes him because he can read well. He even called the teacher a bad name but he still makes A's because he can read. Gosh! I wish that I could read well. Then I could become a real person.

Counselor: Johnny, I recommend a vocational school for you. You will learn to make a good living. That's the most honorable career a nonreader, or a poor reader like you - well, I mean a person who does not read so well, can pursue. You will be happy and successful, too, working with your hands..

Johnny: I got my high school diploma. Everyone congratulated me. Twelve years of schooling - oh, I forgot about kindergarten, Head Start, Followthrough. Almost fifteen years of training and I still can't read well. I must be awfully dumb. What's this? An ad: "Learn to read in six weeks to six months. Satisfaction guaranteed or your money refunded." I'm going to enroll. Do you suppose they can teach me to read well within six months? Well, it won't hurt to try it. I can't work very well with my hands if my mind isn't working too. And even a dumb kid like me, a poor reader like me, knows that reading feeds information to the brain and the brain tells the hands what to do. I'm going to learn to read well. I have always wanted to read, and this ad says that *someone is willing to take time to teach me to read.* If they have the time to teach me, I can and will learn to read well. I didn't forget God's promise, did you?

Narrator: Conclusion: A simple solution to a perplexing mental health problem and a major school problem = faith, positive reinforcement, time, and a child who was taught to read in grades K-12.

.....