

# Mary Johnson's Two Sentence Reading Test

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Age : \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Test Administrator \_\_\_\_\_

Instructions: Students are to read both sentences. Record their oral reading on the line below the sentences. Compare the two readings.

1. Mother will not like me to play games in my big red hat.

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Key words: *like, games, big, red, and hat.*

2. Mike fed some nuts and figs to his tame rat.

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Key words: *Mike, fed, figs, tame and rat.*

They rhyme with the key words in the first sentences.

Logic of the assessment: The first sentence is composed entirely of primer sight-words. The second is composed of simple, phonetically regular words, not usually taught as sight-words. Student who can read the first sentences but have problems with the second are holistic readers, reading by whole word configuration with a minimum of phonetic clues. They need immediate instruction in decoding English words with phonics.

## Notes by Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

May 31, 2006

Mary Johnson's *Two Sentence Reading Test* is a cleverly devised assessment for determining if students can read by analogy from memorized sight-words (phony-phonics). I began using the test on January 7, 2002. It is similar to the *Miller Word Identification Assessment* (MWIA) in that both tests compare students' abilities to read sight-words compared to their ability to read simple phonics words. Phonics-first trained students reading from the "sounds" will have no problem whatsoever with either group of words; sight-word-first trained students guessing from the "meaning" will have little problem with the sight-words but will experience great difficulty identifying simple phonics words. Mary Johnson wrote *Programmed Illiteracy in Our Schools* in 1971. In the spirit of the old *Reading Reform Foundation*, the MWIA and excellent free phonics-first programs may be downloaded from the Education page of the [www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net) website. Mrs. Johnson's picture and article below were added on 11/22/06. Corrected 11/30/06.

The following information concerning E. G. (Mary) Johnson's test is from Kathryn Diehl and G. K. Hodenfield's *Johnny STILL Can't Read But You Can Teach Him at Home*, Associated Press, 1976, pp. 25 – 28:

Mrs. E. G. Johnson of Winnipeg, Canada, proved that idea (the idea that students naturally learn to read by analogy using parts of memorized sight-words previously learned as wholes, D.P.) completely wrong with some New York City children a few years ago, and we'll get back to that in a moment.

We mentioned earlier in this article the test Mrs. E. G. Johnson gave to some children in New York City.

She merely asked the children to read two simple sentences. The first sentence was, "Mother will not like me to play games in my big red hat." These are words found in most primary school readers, and they are to be memorized by constant repetition. Their key words are: *like, games, big, tame, and hat*. The second sentence was, "Mike fed some nuts and figs to his tame rat." These are words *not* usually found in primary readers but they are simple three- and four-letter words. The key words are *Mike, fed, figs, tame and rat*, and they rhyme with the key words in the first sentence.

The publishers and authors of sight-word readers claim that children will apply the substitution technique when they happen across strange words. For instance, when they see the unfamiliar word "fed," they will decipher it by saying to themselves, "This word looks like "red," but it starts like "fun," so it must be "fed." (Need we remind you? – a phonics-trained child simply reads "fed" and goes on.)

Mrs. Johnson and some colleagues from the *Reading Reform Foundation* took a tape recorder to a playground in New York City's Central Park and asked 43 children who had been promoted to the second grade, and 34 children who had been promoted to the third grade to read the two sentences.

Only 16 of the 77 children were able to read both sentences without error. The second sentence, "Mike fed some nuts and figs to his tame rat," came out "Mide fed some nits and fudge to him take right, "and Milk fiz some nuts and fees to his time red." One second grader looked at the second sentence and "read" it as "Sally, father, Dick, Jane." The simple little word "fed," familiar to all children, came out, "feed," "Fred," "fort," "flag," "girls" and "give."

Go ahead, try it on your own children. If you have a child who has finished first grade, but who can't read "Mike fed some nuts and figs to his tame rat." you'll know he is in trouble and it's time to schedule some lessons so you can teach him to read at home.

Here is a picture of Mary Johnson and an article by her taken from the September 1982  
*The Reading Informer*, published by *The Reading Reform Foundation*.



## We all can and should get much more involved If we truly want a change.

Editor's (G. K. Hodenfield) note: Mary Johnson of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, was winner of the 1979 Watson Washburn Memorial Award for Excellence in Education. She has attended many RRF conferences, as a speaker and as a workshop presenter and is a pioneer and moving spirit of the RRF. She made the following informal remarks following a special introduction By President Bettina Rubicam at the first general session in Toronto, Saturday morning, July 10.

by Mary Johnson

Thank you, Bettina. It has been a beautiful, long lasting friendship with Bettina, all of 22 years now. All of the RRF conferences I have attended have been in the United States. This is the first one in Canada, and I'm really thrilled to have you here. I wish you a warm welcome and I hope you enjoy your visit.

We really have turned things around in Manitoba, and I can honestly say we do not have a reading problem there now. It is not just one thing. It is not just because we have a lot of phonetic books authorized. I would say basically it was public opinion that turned the situation around. The public was convinced year after year over a 15-year period. It took the same kind of exposure and pressure every single year to do this.

You can make a big splash one time, but when it fizzles out, things go on as they did before. What convinced the public and the media and the teachers was the use of very simple tests. Because I had no "qualifications," no one would listen to me. I argued about theory and textbooks, but no one would listen.

So I had groups of children — **not** especially selected — read two kinds of sentences. They would read a sentence from a school reader, which they could read fluently and easily without mistakes. Then they would read a similar sentence which was not any harder. (Editor's note: All Mary had done was to change a few consonants in some short, simple words. Children who learn to read with the sight word-first approach are supposed to utilize 'consonant substitution, aren't they? )

If you looked at the second sentence, it looked most innocuous. ‘**BUT**’, the second sentence would have words, which they had not memorized, and on the tape recording, this was devastating.

On the tape you could hear a child whip through the first sentence, and then on the second sentence he would say, “I haven’t had that word, I don’t know. It looks like. ...” and you would hear the groan and sighs and it was awful.

People told me later they heard this over the radio while they were driving their car down a busy street and almost had an accident because they were so utterly horrified. People were convinced, permanently convinced, once they heard the tape. That was all it took.

Last night Charlesetta Alston asked us all to try to do more than we've ever done before. I would endorse that 100%, and I would add, “If you have never tried this kind of homespun research, please try it. If it works, try it again next year, and the next year. It’s very easy to do.

You need to be professional about it and scrupulously careful. Keep very good records, conduct yourself in a professional manner. It may lead to bigger and better things.

I have been employed by the school division since 1970 — for the past 12 years I have worked for the very people who used to discredit me (at least they tried). Not the same people, exactly, but the same system. I have no “qualifications” now, either, but I’m accepted. I have come into the school system because of the ruckus I made for 15 years.

So I don’t think people need to worry too much about being put out of the school system if I can come into it through that door. So I would urge you people to give it a try. If you want to know more, I can fill you in. Thank you all very, very much for coming.

[Spelling Progress Bulletin December 1962 pp2,3,16]

**Mary Johnson's One-Woman War,  
by Stephen Franklin, Weekend Magazine Staff Writer.**

Why Can't Our Children Spell? she asked. The experts were indignant!

The tide is turning in Mary Johnson's six-year war against the experts; a war which has transformed her from an unknown suburban housewife into one of the most controversial women in Manitoba.

Mrs. Johnson is a reading-reform crusader, an unpaid amateur crusader who has single-mindedly plugged away at her contention that children are not being taught to read or spell effectively in Manitoba's primary schools. She has been opposed, ignored and ridiculed and has lost one battle after another. Now, after 10,000 hours of voluntary research and propaganda, of world-wide surveys and home-made tests she is at last gaining increasingly strong support for her assertion that the "look-and-say" method of teaching children to read is guilty of contributing to juvenile illiteracy. At their last convention, 400 Manitoba school trustees unanimously resolved that the present system of "look- say" sight reading leaves much to be desired and recommended a reemphasis on sounded reading (phonics). Former Premier Douglas Campbell championed her cause at the last session of the Manitoba Legislature and called for establishment of a non-partisan legislative committee to examine the problem during the recess.

A government amendment turned the problem over to the Education Advisory Board of the Department of Education for study.

In May this year the Winnipeg School Board, whose inspectors had persistently opposed Mary Johnson's assertions, announced they would launch an experiment in sight-reading vs. phonics in three schools this fall. A later announcement said the phonetic system would be tried in at least 12 other schools on a less formal basis.

When she began her crusade quite by accident six years ago, Mary Johnson was simply a Winnipeg lawyer's wife, with three children, who gave music lessons at her home in the suburban city of St. James. She was - and still is - a shy, soft-spoken woman. An English war bride, she met and married Winnipegger Ernest Johnson over-seas in 1943 when she was with the Woman's Auxiliary Air Force, and he an officer in the R.C.A.F. As the daughter of a church organist and choirmaster and a music teacher herself, she was very interested in sound and had a penchant for painstakingly devising dial charts like the Johnson's Harmony Guide and Johnson Chord Selector as musical ready-reckoners.

Apart from this, she was just "a mere parent." And this she remained as far as most educators were concerned long after the spring day in 1957 when an 11-year-old pupil of hers, an intelligent girl arrived for her lesson, sat down at the piano, and proudly announced she was going to play a new piece entitled Minuet. "Called what, dear?" asked

Mrs. Johnson looking over her shoulder, for the music was plainly entitled Mimic. No amount of effort, however, could get the fifth-grader to sound out the word "Mimic". She knew what a mimic was, it transpired, but was incapable of reading the word.

Mrs. Johnson was both, disturbed and curious. After six months tuition the girl could sight-read music, but she could not read the title of it after 4½ years in school. "Unfortunately, she had never been taught how to sound out a strange word which she couldn't recognize by its shape" Mary explains.

She decided to check to children on her block to find out if they had trouble reading aloud. She was appalled to discover that not only were they guessing wildly at the pronunciation of words they did not recognize but her own son Grant, then age nine and in Grade 4, was as bad as the rest. And this despite good school reports in reading.

The Royal Commission on Education was due to sit that November of 1957 in Manitoba. With her husband's help, Mary Johnson determined to submit a brief urging the introduction of articulated phonics at the start of a child's school career.

First she needed evidence. She sat down at the dining-room table which has been her office ever since, and composed her own spelling test. It was a list of 25 simple one-syllable words - words like joy, nod, bog, wax and lent - most of which the children had not learned to sight-read in the Dick and Jane readers (the Curriculum Foundations Series which has been the authorized text for Manitoba schools since 1946).

She then persuaded nine school principals to give the test to 600 students in Grades 3 and 4. Only 10 of the 600 children spelled all 25 words correctly, and the average incidence of errors was 30%. By contrast a group of Grade 1 children taking the same test at a school in Argo, Ill., where the phonic system is used, averaged only 7% of errors. The results from Greater Winnipeg schools revealed not only misspelled words but the most bizarre of guesses. Students managed to misspell the word "jot" 95 different ways from "joket" to "cohawe" and from "kote" to "jinned."

It was two years before the Royal Commission on Education published its final report, but when it did it supported Mrs. Johnson's plea. The report noted that the author of the Curriculum Foundation Series "insists that consonants should never be sounded in isolation. (He) asks pupils to deduce the sound of a consonant from his ability to pronounce several sight words in his vocabulary. Thus, (he) reasons, if a child knows 'now', 'not' and 'never', he will deduce the beginning sound of the word 'name'. "The advocates of the phonic method would say, rather, "Teach the child the sound of the letter 'n'."

The Commission recommends "that after an initial stock of sight words has been taught, the teacher should teach the sounds of the letters, even the consonants, and thus give the child, almost from the outset, two methods of attacking new words."

The Royal Commission made a further point which Mary Johnson had raised: "If beginners in reading are taught letters in isolation, the Commission believes that parents will find it possible to help their children to learn to read at home, if they have need of help. Since parents generally do not understand the sight method of teaching reading, they seem unable to help youngsters who are experiencing reading difficulties."

They added that this change could be made without abandoning the Dick and Jane readers but that the use of the recommended phonetic attack would have to be taught at the Teachers' Training College. Mrs. Johnson did not wait for the Royal Commission report. With a team of 11 Winnipeg mothers with a total of 34 children, she first canvassed the English-speaking world through a letter sent to 200 newspapers in the Commonwealth, the United Kingdom & the United States. The 301 replies from parents, teachers and organizations convinced them the problem was widespread. Mary sat down and worked out a second and more elaborate test, this time a comparative phonic sight-word one. It consisted of 13 words from "look-say" readers and 13 unfamiliar words, which rhymed with them. The test was given to 1,934 schoolchildren from Albuquerque N.M., to Edmonton, and from Nottingham, England, to Toronto, a total of 62 classes in three nations.

The results were interesting, Mrs. Johnson discovered. They not only indicated a similar state of affairs elsewhere in the world, but showed that English and U.S. school children taught by the sight method were by and large even worse spellers than the Canadians. 96 out of every 100 children had been able to spell "sun", but the word "spun" stumped as many as 96% of the children in one Omaha, Nebraska school; 72% in Leeds, England, and 67% in one Winnipeg classroom. Also, quite a number of the attempts to spell "spun" were not just near-misses, but meaningless collections of letters like "cping", "xouyeis", "duodp", "foeal" and "sishsha".

The 12 mothers issued a detailed 16-page report a month before the Royal Commission report appeared and sent copies to every school trustee, every legislator and many educators in the area.

Educators did not take kindly to Johnson's intrusion into the methods of teaching reading. Nor did all the parents. Wrote one woman in a letter to the editor of the suburban St. James Leader signed Mrs. X- "It seems ridiculous to me that a non-professional should be allowed to have her self-styled reading tests even considered, let alone digested by those intelligent men who make up our school board. I would rather take my child to a good veterinary surgeon to have his tonsils removed than to have his reading difficulties diagnosed by Mrs. Johnson's tests.

Counters Mary Johnson: "I am not trying to tell the educators what to do. If only they themselves would take a good look at the present series of readers and investigate them objectively, I should be satisfied," As it is, she explains, the publishers of the authorized texts not only supply the readers and the voluminous guidebooks for teachers, but also sponsor the lectures, reading experts and consultants who give regular seminars to student teachers. The publishers also supply the tests the children take. "All the tests do is camouflage the weaknesses of the system," she claims.

To round out her own experiments, she charted the Johnson Oral Reading test, a series of 15 sentences using words not found in the Dick and Jane readers, plus a control group of three sentences using sight words familiar to her subjects. Armed with the test, a portable tape recorder and a supply of candy suckers, Mrs. Johnson headed for four widely separated playgrounds accompanied by her daughters, Anna, then 13, and 6-year-old Susan. She found plenty of volunteers to take the tests but not many who failed to stumble over the reading of the sentences. Later she played the tapes on television panel shows and at Parent-Teacher Association meetings, as dramatic rebuttal of suggestions that children now read better than they ever did.

For all her industry and effort, she seemed to be getting nowhere. The bookshelves in the Johnson home by now were filled with technical books, texts, surveys and reports on the vital subject of reading. She was spending five or six hours a day on this self-appointed labor of persuasion. More often than not when she was baking a chocolate layer cake in the kitchen or cooking supper for her family, at the same time she was busy on her conveniently long-chorded telephone giving what help she could to mothers worried about their own children's reading difficulties.

"I got lots of sympathy and agreement," she says, but support, which suggests doing something actively, was forthcoming from only a small number of people. There were times when I would decide to drop the whole thing. Then my family would look at me and say: 'Mother, you just can't!'"

"I couldn't have stopped even if I had wanted to. If I had I would have been throwing away all that had been done. I knew it would take dynamite to have any effect on this problem, because it is a big problem and an old one. I knew that parents would have to keep on hooting and hollering to get it done. And they have. It is really quite remarkable, because I don't think an uprising of parents like this has ever happened before. Our activities here are very meek and mild really compared with what is happening in the United States. But for once we are able to help the Americans instead of them helping us, which is good."

As a leader of the "phonics underground" and now a member of the national advisory council of the Reading Reform Foundation in New York, Mary Johnson has been running a clearing house and information center from her dining-room table in the past two years. Few developments on the subject anywhere in the English-speaking world have escaped her eye. She has eight bulging scrapbooks of clippings and reports. "Each month," she says, "I write a confidential letter to 11 girls who are leaders of parent groups across the U.S.A. One is in Phoenix, Ariz., another in Menominee, Mich., a third in Salt Lake City, Utah, a fourth in North Carolina, and so on."

In their long war against the established "look-sayers" Mrs. Johnson and her supporters found two particularly hard obstacles to overcome. The first was educators' assertions that present methods do already incorporate a blend of sight-reading and phonics, a claim advanced by, among others, Manitoba's Minister of Education, Hon. Stewart E. McLean.

The claim is true. What is equally true is that the two sides are talking about different forms of phonics, the degree to which sight-reading should be supplemented by phonics and the timing of its introduction. The Curriculum Foundation Series guidebook prescribes that teachers use abstract phonics in which the sounds are sensed. The reading reformers want the introduction of articulated phonics in which the sounds are sounded out. They claim abstract phonics are hard for any but the brightest children, and lead to wild guessing.

Mary Johnson's other big obstacle was that, in the main, educational authorities in Manitoba refrained from coming out and answering her; for to answer her would have been to recognize her. And to recognize her would have been to admit that parents might know what they were talking about.

An interview with Manitoba's Deputy Minister of Education, H Scott Bateman, and his director of curricula, G. M. Davies, reveals that the department has not been unmindful of trends in the teaching of reading. "We don't think the Curriculum Foundation Series is perfect," Bateman explained. "And we do have experiments already under way with other readers in selected classrooms. But we would much sooner defer a decision for at least another year until we've had a chance to fully test the new readers. For quite apart from any other considerations, extremely high costs are involved in switching to new readers for all Grade 1 to 6 classrooms in the province.

"There are six different texts under experiment now. Two are quite new series and there are other and newer series coming on the market. There is also an upsurge of interest to turn out new series which would be Canadian rather than American."

Successive editions of the teachers' guidebook to the Curriculum Foundation Series have themselves recognized the trend and there has, the two officials agreed, been a trend in them to an earlier introduction of phonic elements on a permissive basis. Manitoba teachers still use the 1948 edition. "But to shift to the 1952 edition would be to introduce a book that is already 10 years old,"

Bateman explained. "Some of these classroom tests take three years to complete. One has already been under test for two full years. We have to turn to the practicing teachers for their reports on the readers unless we want to be a bunch of ivory tower jackasses. And so it takes time to reach a sound decision."

Mary Johnson's six years of "pecking away at one single problem" may have had more effect than she yet realizes. (end of quotes),

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## Comments by Helen Bowyer

The S.P.B. has its own special reasons for congratulating the Weekend Magazine of the Winnipeg Tribune on its eulogy of Mrs. Mary Johnson. She was an early contributor to our fledgling publication and has since been an arresting source of information on the state of reading both in our northern neighbor and in other countries of the English-speaking world.

Moreover, anyone actively crusading against *look-and-say* is to that extent, a colleague of ours.

Like us, the *back-to-phonics* advocate realizes that English is an alphabetic language, not an ideographic one. He recognizes that its print is made up of sequences of letters and letter combinations, each one of which is *intended* to visualize one of the forty basic sounds, of which our spoken tongue is composed. Thus the printed word *dog* is a sequence of the letters d, o, g, and quite correctly visualizes the sequence of basic speech sounds we utter in the second member of the sentence, "The dog is an immemorial friend of man." If this correspondence of symbol and sound held for: *one, child, his, mother, know, gnat, phlegm*, and thousands of other such everyday words, "*back-to-phonics*" would be all that is needed to solve our reading problem, and the Bulletins campaign for spelling reform would be as superfluous as gilding a ten dollar gold piece.

But it is precisely because this symbol-sound correspondence doesn't hold often enough, that *look-and-say* drove phonics from our schools. Instead of the merely forty symbols (letters and letter combinations) required to give each basic sound the single, consistent, and wholly predictable visualization which truly efficient spelling demands, there are some seventy such phonograms, not one of which can be depended on "*to do its job, its whole job, and nothing but its job*" by itself. For instance, j permits g to oust it from *gem*, and dge to take its place in such words as *pledge, ridge, budge*, which obviously should transmute themselves as *plej, rij, buj*. Ea serves with equal aplomb in *mead, bread, heard*, and ou in *four, tour, sour*. T thinks nothing of letting d pinch-hit for it in the past tense of whole categories of verbs - vide: *dropped, talked, puffed* - and s takes over for z in thousands of words and their inflections - girls, rose, Nan's, raises, noises, teaches, and use (which is it, use or uze?).

It all works out that we have 251 common spellings (and more than 200 less common ones) for our 40 basic speech sounds and not one of them does the back-to-phonics movement propose to drop!

The American school had been struggling with this monstrous superfluity for almost three centuries when new compulsory attendance laws triggered what its leadership hoped would be a way out of it. Until then, the kid who couldn't learn to read could usually drop out of school at the age of 12, but now the school had to keep him till 16. Away, then, with all this futile sounding out of who, do, you, through, grew, blue, evil, devil, weevil, bevel, they said, let's teach the word as one piece and be done with it.

Why desperation should have taken this turn is something for the psychologist of our phonemic future to diagnose. For not only did our education archives have on record a number of highly successful experiments here and in England in the “teeching ov reeding and rieting bie meenz ov wun-too-wun alphabets”, but the mere crossing of a bridge at El Paso or Brownsville landed one on the northern edge of some 3,500,000 square miles of Spanish-speaking territory where all education from first grade through medicine, law, engineering was carried on through a notation which closely approximated that ideal. There is no use pleading that a comparable regularizing of our spelling couldn't have been brought about because the public wouldn't stand for it. When have our schools ever sought the acquiescence of the public? When has the reform which would transfigure the lives of millions of their children ever been presented to them as other than a thing to ridicule or to be brushed off as wholly impracticable?

Well, now the time of a second great discard may be approaching - the discard of this 30 year reign of look-and-say. Is it really thinkable that the best we can do is to return to “phonics” applied to the same old 251shifting spellings of our 40 basic speech sounds? And this in the face of the big English project now half way through its second year, in which 2500 moppets from 4 to 6 years old are careering through phonemic primers, readers and story books with an ease, speed and enjoyment which one headmaster describes as “fantastic” and a headmistress as “simply out of this world!”

There is just one condition under which “back-to-phonics” is worth the gallant struggle our friend is waging for it. And that is when the print to which this method is applied shall be itself one-to-one-phonemic, that every new word the child meets from the first primer on, shall smile up at him with “Just sound me out. If you know my symbols, you can't go wrong.”

(Miss Bowyer is a retired teacher, with experience in teaching “South of the Border.”)

[Spelling Progress Bulletin Fall 1971 pp5,6]

## **Toward Mastery of Spelling, by Mary Johnson**

Pity the poor speller! His problems are much more serious than the obvious one of not making a good impression. Far worse is his inability to communicate precisely on paper due to the fact that his misspelled words sometimes convey a meaning he did not intend. His writing also tends to be trite and immature because he avoids using words which he hasn't previously studied. Psychologically, the poor speller is anxious, insecure, frustrated and tense because he knows that in spite of his strenuous efforts his writing will nevertheless be riddled with errors invisible to his undiscerning eye.

The poor speller's communication gap, his frustration and lack of self-confidence, can be traced to the unsystematic way he has been introduced to written English. His ear has not been trained to distinguish the speech sounds and their proper order in spoken words, and he has not learned how to build words on paper. Because he has never been sure of the relationship between spoken and written sounds, his eye has not learned to spot the irregularities and peculiarities in new words when he is reading. This lack of visual acuity means that he is often unable to recall the spelling of words he has read or written many times before.

It is this inadequate foundation, which has produced poor spellers on an unprecedented scale. The problem today is not merely that of a few inept spellers who confuse "ie" with "ei" in words like "receive" - now we have such chronic and widespread misspelling that obtaining evidence of wholesale illiteracy is frighteningly easy. As one example, these 15 words conform to common spelling patterns and contain the most basic English speech sounds:

bombard, scuffle, chide, groin, hex, Jove, rakish, refute, yowled, quell, twang, zither, whiff, stork, plucky [1]

In tests on over 2,000 American and Canadian junior and senior high school students, 1/3 of these simple words were misspelled - usually in a grotesque and unreadable manner.

In one Winnipeg survey, the word *groin* was misspelled by 108 out of 245 junior high students, with these 43 variations, none of which would have been written by a student who had a working knowledge of English phonics: [2]

growing, croine, grone, growing, greown, groane, gron, gronen, grind, growin, grome, roine, goen, groned, coran, grind, grond, croin, groeing, gorwing, gerone, groien, gowun, grong, guawen, growng, groinde, grorn, gwoing, gorn, grine, groining, groune, grouien, grown, gorion, grane, groen, grioned, grion, groan, groun, groing.

Pinpointing the exact cause of the trouble is easiest at the primary level - where the effect of basic instruction (or lack of it) in spelling and reading is most obvious. Children who have been taught the separate letter sounds and how to use them to build words can spell both sections of this test equally well, averaging five errors in spelling the 26 words.

**new words:** jot, wax, hub, zip, cob, gap, vet, skid, fret, spun, dump, yelp, quilt.

**known words:** not, wag, cub, skip, Bob, tap, pet, did, frog, sun, jump, help, quits. [3]

Primary pupils who have *not* been taught functional word building misspell, on an average, 10 out of 13 new words and 5 out of 13 known words. The contrast between the spelling of known and new words is dramatically revealing. One-third grade class in Denver, Colo., for example, made only two errors in spelling *not-know*, *nat*. When *jot* was dictated, 17 out of the class of 29 made these mistakes: jhot, jar, jote, juout, jit, junt, jaest, juht, jut, jont, jatele, gurt, juct, jouit, jaut, junt.

Teaching spelling effectively is simple - but not easy. The difficulty lies in the need for systematic, daily training: first, of the ear, teaching it to hear the difference between similar speech sounds and to identify them in words; next, ear and hand must learn to work together in associating spoken speech sounds with written letter symbols; and lastly, ear, hand and eye have to co-operate in studying the speech and spelling patterns of our language.

The effect of daily training, like that of daily nutrition, is cumulative and of enormous importance - but it does not show up in the first few days. Sometimes it takes weeks or months for this training to prove its worth. And unless a teacher is thoroughly educated herself in the sequencing of the necessary skills, and unless she has been convinced of the vital importance of this training, she does not persevere long enough or schedule it often enough to get results.

There is a long-standing and urgent need for teacher training in this field by practical, experienced and successful primary teachers-instructors who can spell out for the novice the many little steps toward mastery of our wayward English spelling.

Spelling is important and it is worth teaching, not merely so that the student will make a good impression, but so that he can communicate his innermost thoughts and ideas with accuracy, ease and style.

(1) Johnson Test No. 2.

(2). Johnson, Mary, *Programmed Illiteracy in our Schools*, Clarity Books, Box 92, Sta. C, Winnipeg, Man. Canada, 1970.

(3). Johnson Test No. 3.

[Spelling Progress Bulletin Fall 1965 pp12-14]

### **Oral Reading Survey, New York City, by Mary Johnson.**

On August 3rd and 4th, 1965, members of the Reading Reform Foundation under the guidance of Mary Johnson of Winnipeg, Canada, tape-recorded the oral reading of primary school children in New York City parks. A total of 139 children volunteered to read, and the performance of *all* children in the survey who had been passed to grades II and III in New York City Public Schools has been tabulated in the accompanying table.

Volunteers were asked to read Johnson Test # 9, which consists of the following two sentences

1. Mother will not **like** me to play **games** in my **big red hat**.
2. **Mike fed** some nuts and **figs** to his **tame rat**.

The words in Sentence 1 are in most primary school readers and therefore test for recognition of familiar words. Key words are: *like, games, big, red, hat*. The words in Sentence 2 are not usually found in primary readers and therefore test children's ability to attack new words. The words: *Mike, fed, figs, tame, rat* rhyme with the key words in Sentence 1.

It is frequently claimed by authors and publishers of look-say basal reading programs that children taught by these texts will be able to apply the "substitution technique" when reading new words at the Grade I level. This means that if they know the familiar word *red*, they will be able to decipher *fed* by thinking, "This word looks like *red* but starts like *fun*, so it must be *fed*". This theory is not successful in practice, as the test results in the table demonstrate. Without formal teaching in phonics, it is expecting too much of many children to make such deductions on their own.

#### INCIDENCE OF ERROR

	Familiar Words, Sentence 1	Unfamiliar Words, Sentence 2.
Passed to Grade II Pupils # 1 to 43	32%	84%
Passed to Grade III Pupils # 44 to 77	22%	40%

Mary Johnson is the author of a number of articles on testing the ability of pupils to use their knowledge of phonics and the effectiveness of teacher's teaching.

## JOHNSON ORAL READING TEST # 9

Mispronunciations and refusals made by Grade II and III unselected volunteers in Central Park, New York City, on August 3 and 4, 1965. Blank spaces represent words pronounced correctly.

--- indicates the child was unable to attempt a pronunciation. PS - Public School.

CHILDREN PASSED TO GRADE II														
Child			Errors		Familiar Words					Unfamiliar Words				
No.	Age	PS	F	U	LIKE	GAMES	BIG	RED	HAT	MIKE	TAME	FIGS	FED	RAT
1-8	6/8		0	0										
9	7	PS163	0	1										
10	7	PS169	0	1							tammy			
11	7	PS169	0	1										
12	6	PS163	0	2						make	tam			
13	6	PS90	0	2								figus	feed	
14	6	PS104	0	3						make	time		feed	
15	6	PS86	0	3						milk	tail			
16	6	PS90	0	3						make				right
17	6	PS104	0	3						milk				
18	6	PS90	0	3						---			feed	hat
19	7	PS179	0	4						make	time			
20	6	PS28	0	4						milk	time		Fred	
21	6	PS236	0	4						like		fish		
22	6	PS64	0	4							ram	fregs		rot
23	7	PS104	0	4						make	time			
24	8	PS70	0	4						make	time			
25	6	PS120	0	4						make	take	fudge		right
26	6	PS28	0	5						---	---	fish		
27	7	PS104	0	5						---	tow			rie
28	6	PS101	0	5						make	---	feegs	feed	
29	7	PS156	0	5						milk	time		fez	red
30	7	PS163	1	5						---	---			
31	7	PS179	1	4	little	---				---	---			
32	7	PS110	5	4	let	---	boy	dog	---	my	come			rit
33	7	PS253	2	5	---	---				make	---	f--	feed	
34	7	PS70	4	5	make	---	---		hant	---	tummy	funny	fort	rate
35	6	PS179	3	5	---	---				make	---	fish		
36	7	PS31	4	5	let	---	---			make	---			
37	6	PS279	5	5	---	---	---	---	tet	make	can	from		
38	7	PS156	5	5	---	---	---	---		---	---			
39	7	PS90	5	5	---	---	---	---		---	---			
40	7	PS163	5	5	---	---	---	---		---	---			
41	7	PS70	5	5	---	---	---	---		---	---			
42	7	PS70	5	5	---	---	---	---		---	---			
43	7	PS156	5	5	Sally father Jane Dick					mother brother sister				

CHILDREN PASSED TO GRADE III														
Child			Errors		Familiar Words					Unfamiliar Words				
No.	Age	PS	F	U	LIKE	GAMES	BIG	RED	HAT	MIKE	TAME	FIGS	FED	RAT
55-53	7/8		0	0										
54	7	PS171	1	0		---								
55	8	PS70	0	2										
56	7	PS179	0	3						make		---		
57	8	PS708	0	3						---	took	---		
58	8	PS156	0	3						make		----	---	
59	8	PS248	0	3						make		flag	feel	
60	8	PS165	0	3						make		---	---	
61	7	PS156	0	4							---	---	fill	
62	7	PS163	0	4						milk	time	flags		
63	7	PS163	0	4						make	---	---	---	
64	11	PS163	1	2				bed		milk		geevs		
65	8	PS120	1	0	let									
66	8	PS877	1	5	take					---	---	---	---	---
67	7	PS163	2	5	let					may	---	---	---	---
68	8	PS51	3	3	---	---				milk	tum	---	---	---
69	8	PS51	3	5	----	girls		run		---	---	-girls	---	run
70	9	PS156	3	5	---	---				---	---	---	---	---
71	8	PS156	3	5	---	---	---		---	---	---	---	---	---
72	6	PS155	3	5	---	---				---	---	---	---	---
73	8	PS70	3	5		come		ride	have	make	laugh	flag	come	right
74	8	PS123	1	5		---				---	---	---	---	---
75	7	PS156	4	5	---	---	---			milk	time	---	for	---
76	8	PS156	4	5	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
77	11	PS72	5	5	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

## Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

January 28, 2014

I first published Mrs. Johnson's *Two-Sentence Test* back in 2006. Because of some changes to my website, it was accidentally deleted. I am republishing it today because of request from visitors to my website.

I have finally (August 10, 2014) gotten around to finish Mary Johnson's Charts. The *Miller Word Identification Assessment* is based on the same theoretical concept of comparing the students' ability to read memorized sight-words with their ability to read analogous phonics words.

Be sure and read the penetrating essays by Helen Lowe.

1. "How They Read"
2. "The Whole-Word and Word-Guessing Fallacy"
3. "Solomon and Salami"

I have published several essays by Raymond Laurita that explain the psychology behind whole-word guessing. The following will serve as a good introduction to Mr. Laurita's enlightening perspective on reading.

1. "A Critical Examination of the Psychology of the Whole Word Method,"
2. "A Basic Sight Vocabulary: A Help or A Hindrance," and
3. "Frustration and Reading Problems."

Mrs. Johnson promoted the Economy publishing company's *Phonetic Keys to Reading*. That program was a very strong phonics-first program. Tragically it is no longer available. I am not personally acquainted with any current commercial basal phonics program that I can recommend.

There are numerous excellent supplementary phonics programs available. Among them I would like to mention my republication of Florence Akin's 1913 all time phonic masterpiece, *Word Mastery*. Information on the program is available from Amazon or Barnes & Nobles.

While having basal readers (decodable texts) are nice, they are not absolutely necessary. A student who masters a complete supplementary phonics program, like *Word Mastery*, will have no problem reading trade books on their comprehension level.

Miss Geraldine Rodgers challenging book *The Hidden Story* explains in-depth the causes of whole-word guessing.

Be sure and read Samuel L. Blumenfeld's "Can Dyslexia be Artificially Induced in School? Yes, Says Researcher Edward Miller." Mr. Miller was the author of the *Miller Word Identification Assessment*, which is available on my websites.

Donald L. Potter, Odessa, TX  
[www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net)  
[www.blendphonics.org](http://www.blendphonics.org)

Last updated 8/10/2014.

# A Reading Test and Its Resultant Questions

By Mary Johnson

At the July 13, 1968

Seventh Annual: Reading Reform Foundation Conference

Mr. Robert C. Price (Moderator):

We are delighted to give you a most welcome addition to our program, from Canada – one who has met with great success in taking the very claims of the whole-word advocates, devising a simple test and showing conclusively that they simply do not work. The creator of a new group, the Reading Methods Research Association of Canada, speaking to the subject: “A Reading Test and Its Resultant Questions,” Mrs. Mary Johnson of Winnipeg.

Mrs. Johnson:

Mr. Price, ladies and gentlemen, friends of phonics: My past travels have taken me to English, America, and, of course, Canada. Everywhere I go, I use a two-part test. The first sentence is words that we usually memorize in Grade 1. It is “DID YOU SEE THE RED CAR STOP HERE?” Now most children can read this, no matter how they were taught. So we sail through the first sentence. The second sentence is “LEE HID A JAR OF GUM DROPS IN THE SHED.” Now this is a rather neat test, because the words are matched. You’ll notice “did” in the first sentences which they have memorized and “hid” in the second sentence which is not often memorized. You have “see” and “Lee” – “read” and “shed” – “stop” and “drops.” And what happens is the poor children whom we have taught by look-say sail through the first sentence, and then do as one little girl in Winnipeg – stop dead. She had two years of school and she turned to me and said, “Is this still in English,” Miss?” This is another language because these words have not been memorized; and if they do not have the phonetic skill to unlock these words, they cannot read them. No matter where I go, the Grade 1 consistence is remarkable. They make on an average, six time as many mistakes in reading new words as they do in reading sight words – and I mean a word which differs by only the initial or final letter. People cannot understand why they can have six time a much trouble. But to these children, it’s a second language – the language they have not memorized. They can read the word “did,” but when they get to the word “hid” they say “hide,” “his,” “had,” “him,” or anything that pops into their minds that looks like it. This week, in a middle-income white neighborhood, we tape-recorded this reading: “Let him a jack over gem did in the school.”

Now this child is looking at the shapes of the word, he is trying to guess by the rest of the sentence – and he’s a country mile away from it. Another child at the same playground who had had two years in school said, “Listen – a jar of guesses doors in the sail.” Again you can see they are guessing by configuration, and the first consonant in many ways, wrong; it’s very pathetic to listen to these children.

In our so-called “better” neighborhoods, by the end of Grade 2, the error is only 5% in reading new words. Somebody has taught these children during their second year. In the second year, the parents wake up and realize that all the fuss and furor is justified – their children can’t read. They get busy in the home and in the school and often teach these children to read. In less privileged neighborhoods, they do not get so much help. Their rates of error will be up to 30 and 40% so that these children are at great disadvantage.

In England where I visited last summer, I did a lot of testing. The outstanding difference, in my opinion, between England and Canada, was that the attitude of people toward children was different. In England they regard any child under seven as a baby. And when I talked about these terrible results, they would say, “Well, how old are these children?” And I would say six or seven years of age – “Well, they’re just babies.” You don’t expect much from them!” We don’t have this point in view in Canada, and I don’t hear it here, either. They are very permissive, very disorganized, in many English schools that I visited. And it certainly shows in the children’s reading. They were more illiterate than the children I hear in North America – very definitely more illiterate. They don’t have the pressures that you have here with your reading reform movement – people actively working on reform. Everywhere I went, I asked, “Have you ever heard of a reading problem – or do you have a reading problem here?” And they said, “Oh, no, nothing like that in English! It’s just across the Atlantic!” Well, they certainly do – and it is much worse that it is here (if that gives you any comfort)! In America, my impression is that this problem is not quite as great as it is in Canada. Out of 32 youngsters who had finished Grade 1 whom I have heard here in California, five could read both sentences. Now this may sound terrible that only five out of these 32 could read both sentences after one year in school. Yet in Metropolitan Winnipeg, I tested about 150 such youngsters (they had completed Grade 1); and only seven could read both sentences.

In Canada, we recently had a huge experiment in reading involving 4,000 children at one point, which compared a phonetic program with Dick and Jane. The end result statistically was 160 to 13 on the side of the phonetic program. One hundred and sixty times the phonetic classes proved significantly superior. The conclusion drawn from this by the Superintendent’s Department was that there was no difference in the two methods! I don’t need to tell you how we feel about this; but then, I understand you have a bit of this chicanery in America too!

As a result of all this frustration, we have formed a Reading Methods Research Association in Manitoba. Our prime purpose is to encourage the testing of reading programs prior to their publication – and especially prior to their adoption.

Reading programs can scramble up a child’s mind and deform him just as much as thalidomide has done to many children’s bodies. These programs should be thoroughly researched before they go onto market – not afterwards! We are also going to supply information on research and cooperation with people in the reading field, and supply information on reading methods in different programs. We are in the process of setting up an International Advisory Council consisting of educators who have conducted research and who can tell us what is sound and what is unsound research. We are hoping to make membership international – and any one of you who would like to join us and support the work which we hope to do in cooperation with the Reading Reform Foundation may write me as follows, and I will be happy to send you an application. (Here Mrs. Johnson gives her address.) We need you very much; and so do help us and we’ll do everything we can to help you.

Mr. Potter added this Talk by Mrs. Johnson on August 4, 2018.



ANALYSIS OF ERRORS  
Johnson Test No. 3

<u>ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS LABORATORY SCHOOL</u>	<u>INCIDENCE OF ERROR</u>	
	Experimental Group PKR	Control Group CFS
<u>May, 1961, Grade I</u>		
Part I, Unknown Words	17%	78%
Part II, Known Words	8%	33%
 <u>Components of unknown words:</u> The % of error was calculated on the number of times a letter was <u>not included</u> in the spelling of unknown test words:		
Short vowels: a, e, i, o, u	7%	54%
Initial consonants: j, w, h, b, c, g, s, f, d, y, t	7%	14%
Final consonants: t, p, d, n, s	6%	11%
 <u>Known words:</u>		
3-letter words: not, pet, did, sun	8%	12%
4-letter words: jump, help	8%	75%
 <u>May, 1962, Grade II (second administration of test)</u>		
Part I, Unknown Words	14.5%	40%
Part II, Known Words	5%	8%
 <u>1959 WORLD-WIDE SURVEY (CONDUCTED BY WINNIPEG READING STUDY GROUP)</u>		
	Sounded Phonics Methods	Incidental Phonics Methods
Part I, Unknown Words	17.5%	48%
Part II, Known Words	7.5%	26%

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION SEE:

RESEARCH AND SERVICE BULLETIN NO.12, May, 1962, published by the Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, for A Progress Report on a Longitudinal Study of Two Methods of Teaching Reading by Dr. Roy P. Doyle, Research Director of the Arizona State University Laboratory School

SPELLING PROGRESS BULLETIN, Volume II, No.3, October, 1962, published at 5848 Alcove Ave., North Hollywood, California, for Spelling Skill as a By-Product of Instruction in Reading by Dr. Doyle;  
also Volume III, No.1, March, 1963, for A Test of Adequacy by Mary Johnson

## Hurray for Mary Johnson – A Great Educator (and a Canadian)

By Bruce Detrick Price

Canada Free Press - February 3, 2011

Here's how I happened to meet Mary Johnston, the very model of what an educator and intellectual should be.

An upcoming book ("Planned Illiteracy in Australia?") prompted me to search that intriguing phrase "planned illiteracy." I found an obscure book titled *Programmed Illiteracy in our Schools* (published 1970) and ordered it.

Suddenly I was back in 1956, in far-off (for me) Winnipeg, and here was a young, shy housewife, mother of three and a piano teacher, about to enter history.

Mary Johnson had a student, 11 years old, who had learned to play the piano; presumably the girl had at least average intelligence. One day she showed up boasting that she had learned a new piece of music titled "Minuet." Mary Johnson, stunned, pointed at the word at the top of the page and asked, "What does this say?" The big type read: Mimic.

"Joan had been able to read the piece of music after only six months' piano lessons, and yet she could not read the simple title after four and a half years of public schooling! Her mother told me that Joan is 'doing well' in grade 5 at school and that she read several library books each week."

So began the wonderful and heroic saga wherein Mrs. Mary Johnson discovered how bad things truly were, took on the Education Establishment, and probably saved millions of children from illiteracy. First, she made certain her own children could read; learned all the theories; and then she began to present analyses and proposals to the provincial authorities. The people in charge of Canadian education massively counterattacked.

Now she was up against the education professors; the publishing companies who made so many millions of dollars on Dick and Jane books; and that lobbying group called the International Reading Association (IRA). You can imagine the sneer these phonies used in dismissing a housewife in 1957. And yet she just kept fighting. She should be a feminist icon.

The book records a 12-year battle to protect literacy in our schools. Of all the many excellent books about the Reading Wars, this might be the best. Only 170 pages long, it manages to be both intensely personal and high-scholarly. It shows you the kids, parents and schools struggling with look-say; the politicians ducking; the Education Establishment scheming for dollars and control.

And how did they intend to "program" illiteracy? Typically, when people try to explain the Reading Wars, they start off talking about the silliness of memorizing thousands of words as SHAPES or configurations. But Mary Johnson reminded me that there is an aspect more primal that needs to be focused on, and it's all laid out in one short paragraph on page 77: "The publishers taught our teachers to regard Dick and Jane as a scientific, all-inclusive, delicately balanced teaching tool, not to be tinkered with by amateurs. It was frequently stressed that English was 'not a phonetic language' and that children did not need to be told the separate letter sounds. 'Surely we don't have anyone here who is old-fashioned enough to tell children the sounds of the letters!' teased one consultant [from a publishing company]."

The plot, simply stated, was to make the alphabet disappear. Think about the audacity of this scheme. Letters are everywhere around us; but the geniuses of look-say wanted to create a landscape where the ABC's would not be visible except as graphic elements inside word-shapes. To the degree these so-called experts can pull off this nonsense, kids become illiterate and dyslexic. The plot continues today. Public schools are at this moment forcing millions of five- and six-year old children to memorize Dolch Words. (The remedy is that parents teach their three and four-year-olds the alphabet and sounds. I call this "Preemptive Reading." Nothing is more important.)

The most vivid memory I have of Mary Johnson's cleverness is when she went to city parks and recruited kids to read for her. She tape-recorded their reading and then had the recordings played on local radio stations. And parents everywhere were stunned (and also relieved) to find that their child was not the only illiterate in town that schools were creating massive numbers of kids who also stumbled, hesitated and guessed wildly.

Mary Johnson is famous for devising the simplest reading test of all. Children are asked to read these two sentences: "Mother will not like me to play games in my big red hat" and "Mike fed some nuts and figs to his tame rat."

Sight-word readers have no trouble with the first sentence; but they usually can't read the second sentence without mistakes because these words haven't been memorized; and the kids are unable to figure them out, despite the massive propaganda saying they can. Second-graders produce variations like this: "Mide fed some nits and fudge to him take right"

As much as I admire Rudolf Flesch and others, I have to say that Mary Johnson was perhaps more alone and needed greater courage and ingenuity for her fight against the huge army of quacks, hacks and flacks in control of public education. She was a Mama Grizzly before we heard the term.

My own conclusion about public education in the last 75 years is that it is a swamp of sophistries and lies, not to mention depravity. This book reinforces my conclusion.

*Programmed Illiteracy in our Schools*, which I reviewed on Amazon, is a book I would recommend to anyone; but it is now rare and expensive. So, in no particular order, here's a further sampling of quotes from the book:

"In their search for an explanation of reading failure, it seemed that the experts focus their attention on the shortcomings of children, rather than on the method by which they were being taught. For example, in 'Your Child Learns to Read', Dr. Sterl Artley [a Dick and Jane author] used the personal problems of nine children to explain why 'some reading problems do occur.' The unfortunate youngsters described by Dr. Artley were, among other things, sub-normal, above normal, half blind, irresponsible, depressed, hostile, lazy, immature and slightly deaf. The solution to the problem, according to the experts, was to give individual tuition in the same methods which had failed to get results in the classroom." [This gimmick was later enshrined in Reading Recovery.]

"These theories sounded plausible, but I was not convinced. Most of the children who had read aloud for me made so many mistakes and were so baffled by new words that I did not see how they could understand what they were trying to read. Reading, in fact, had proved to be such a laborious and frustrating task for many of the older children that they did not want to read at all."

“The first person I talked to was a local teacher who had taken special courses in reading. I expected her to be interested in the test results I had accumulated, but she just seemed to be irritated by them. ‘I don’t know why you’re doing this,’ she said. ‘Some children are not ready for phonics and it is impossible to teach them.’”

Another educator told her: “‘Most people in Britain today who write about the teaching of reading,’ he wrote in a letter, ‘say the aspect to be taught first is a sight vocabulary of perhaps 50-100 words, and then the phonetic elements are extracted, systematized and practiced as need arises. This indeed is what a good teacher does, and the results are not in doubt.’” [This gimmick is now enshrined in Balanced Literacy.]

“The one factor which seemed to be common to all the trouble spots was the taboo, in teachers colleges, against the straightforward teaching of phonics. Even in far-off New Zealand a teacher college instructor insisted that separate letter sounds were ‘nonsense learning.’ We are quite against the return to direct phonics in the introductory stages of learning to read,’ she wrote. This educator supported her position by quoting the viewpoints of three American reading experts—all of whom were authors of basal sight method series, including Dick and Jane! All three of these authors were also on faculties of education at leading American institutions—and therefore in an influential position to further the interests of their publishers.”

Another revealing anecdote: “‘Quite frankly, Mrs. Johnson,’ the Chief Inspector told me in his office, ‘I’m not in the least interested in this controversy. I haven’t even read your brief to the Royal Commission. All I know about it is what I read in the newspapers and I don’t pay any attention to that. They always get things mixed up.’”

“The specialists showed great enthusiasm for analyzing, and diagnosing and treating the reading problem—but not for solving it. ‘Where would we remedial teachers be,’ I overheard one gentleman say, ‘if it weren’t for all these poor readers?’”

“The editors of the Winnipeg Tribune had told me in 1957, ‘You make the news, and we’ll print it’—and they certainly kept their promise.” [Which is a dramatic contrast with the American newspapers I know about, where the Reading Wars are not explained.]

If there are any universities in Canada worth the name, Mary Johnson must have received a lot of honorary degrees. It was a great honor to meet her.

[For more analysis of the reading crisis, see “42: Reading Resources” on Improve-Education.org.]

Accessed by Donald L. Potter on August 10, 2014.

<http://www.canadafreepress.com/index.php/article/hurray-for-mary-johnson-a-great-educator-and-a-canadian>

## Elizabeth Brown's Quotes from

### Mary Johnson's *Programmed Illiteracy in our Schools*

**pp. 44 – 51:** [and some of the appendixes show her early tests that she used and results. They do not, unfortunately, include her 2-sentence test.]

**p. 60:** Parents need to be very patient with the “educated guesser.” He isn’t being difficult or stupid—he is just reading the way he has been taught—by the shape of the word, by the first or last letters, but the “consonants which stick up.” The retraining sessions are hard on all concerned and are seldom completely successful. The final product, like a retreated tire or a made-over dress, may not be ideal but it is a big improvement.

**p. 71:** Even in far-off New Zealand a teachers’ college instructor insisted that separate letter-sounds were “nonsense learning.” “We are quite against the return to direct phonics in the introductory stages of learning to read,” she wrote. This educator supported her position by quoting the viewpoints of three American reading experts—all of whom were authors of basal sight word method series, including Dick and Jane!

All three of these authors were also on faculties of education at leading American universities—and therefore in an influential position to further the interests of their publishers. Dr. William Gray, for example, author of the Dick and Jane series, was head of the Reading Department at the University of Chicago, where many of our Winnipeg teachers had attended courses.

No wonder it was so hard to change the system in Manitoba! The influence of Dick and Jane and similar programs—and their authors and publishers—was indeed worldwide, and so were the consequences.

**pp. 81 – 82:** The letter invited me to join the I.R.A. [International Reading Association], and I did. Gradually, over the next few years, I pieced together the picture of a commercial-professional alliance which was extraordinarily successful at controlling the choice of method in initial reading instruction—not only in Manitoba, but all over the world.

At the top level of the organization many of the leaders were authors of Dick and Jane type reading programs and reference books. of the sic presidents who help office during the years we pressed for articulated phonics [synthetic phonics] in Manitoba, five were, or became, authors of well know basal series.

(table listing 1956, Gray, Dick and Jane, 57, Harris, Macmillan Reading, 58, Spache, Good Reading for Poor readers, 59, Artley, Dick and Jane, Austin, Sheldon Basic Reading, 61, Sheldon, Sheldon Reading. Table includes full titles of programs, full names of Presidents, and publisher of books.)

These leaders of the reading establishment travelled widely to advise and lecture on the teaching of reading and to recommend the books they had written. Over the years most of them visited Winnipeg, including Dr. Gray and Artley, co-authors of Dick and Jane. With the assistance of three representatives of Gage and Company, [one of publishers of Dick and Jane] Dr. Artley held a cocktail party for Winnipeg school trustees, educators and newsmen in 1958. Later that same day, in a public address to the I.R.A., he spoke highly of his books: “The best brains of the country have gone into this reading program,” he said, “as well as a lot of time and money.”

Since its inception in 1956 (one year after the publication of *Why Johnny Can't Read*) the I.R.A. had expanded rapidly. By the time I joined in 1957 it boasted 96 local Councils, most of them in the United States, with a membership of 8,900.

**p. 83:** The resolve of Manitoba teachers to have faith in Dick and Jane was fortified at local I.R.A. meetings, where experts from the Child Guidance and the Department of Education tended to dominate. "After all," a grade I teacher explained to me, "those are the people with degrees, and they make twice as much money as I do. It just doesn't pay to argue with them." The specialists showed great enthusiasm for analyzing, diagnosing and treating the reading problem—but not for solving it. "Where would we remedial teachers be," I overheard one gentleman say, "if it weren't for all these poor readers?"

**pp. 124 – 126:** People often say to me, "If phonics is really superior, and if so many people want it, then why don't the publishers just change the method in their books from sight to phonics? Why would it matter to them—they would make just as much money, wouldn't they?"

If this were so, then I believe articulated phonics would have been reinstated long ago. Unfortunately, it can be taught simply and inexpensively with a piece of chalk and the blackboard, and therefore is not intrinsically profitable in a commercial sense. Children who learn to separate letter sounds and how to sound out words from the beginning of Grade I become independent readers in six months. They are able to read whatever interests them at their level of comprehension and therefore do not provide a captive market for the controlled vocabulary readers and workbooks of any one publishing company.

It was in the interests of the textbook publishers which controlled the teaching of reading, the (former) Manitoba Director of Curricula told me in 1957. This statement shocked me, but I did not fully understand it until I used simple arithmetic to estimate the annual cost of teaching reading in the primary grades of our province. In 1965 I multiplied the cost of the Dick and Jane hardcover readers by the approximate Manitoba primary enrolment (Grades I, II and II,) and then divided by ten to allow a life expectancy of ten years for these books. (In the past some of our teachers have used the Dick and Jane readers for over fifteen years.)

I also multiplied the annual cost of the basal series workbooks by the primary grades enrolment and found that the annual expenditure on workbooks was more than four times greater than that on hard cover readers. (The workbooks have to be replaced each year because the children write in them.)

She shows her math with exact figures of hard cover books and workbooks, then multiplies it out for \$22,420 annually for hardcover books (\$224K averaged over 10 years) and \$99,800 annually for workbooks (3 grades worth, replaced yearly.)

*It is the consumable workbooks which form the backbone of the basal series trade, and which represent at least 80 per cent of the annual cost of teaching reading under this system in the primary grades.*

Under a sight method basal series, children need at least three workbooks at each grade level to help them reinforce memorization of words contained in the hardcover readers. On the other hand, if a phonic method is used, children do not need this constant reinforcement. The *Open Court* (1967) phonics basal series, for example, includes only one workbook—to be used at the beginning of first grade.

The workbooks to a sight method basal series soon become superfluous whenever phonics is taught by a direct method. This is why articulated phonics is a serious threat to any publishing company which has invested heavily in the production of a basal series. The size of this investment *is much greater than most people would imagine*. Dr. Jeanne Chall, writing in *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* quotes an estimate given to her in 1966 by the editorial head of the elementary school division of one of the largest publishing houses. This executive said that a full reading system for kindergarten through Grade VI, including books, tapes, films, and tests, probably represents an investment of 25 million dollars.

In addition to the basal series workbooks, a wide variety of other instructional material depends for its sale on the widespread use of the primarily visual approach to the teaching of reading. And it is the very ineffectiveness of this visual approach which creates the demand for follow-up, remedial textbooks, skill-teaching kits and “educational hardware.” Publishers of basal series are well aware of the business opportunities in the failure market. Their *Tactics in Reading* kit, advertised Scott Foresman in 1961, was designed to reach “practically to rock-bottom” in helping Grade IX students to master basic reading skills.

Unfortunately for the children, there is more commercial profit in illiteracy than in independent reading.

Received from Mrs. Brown on April 27, 2017. I read Mary Johnson’s book many years ago.

Minor revisions were made on July 21, 2019.