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Ashley and Junie B. Jones: A Struggling Reader Makes a Connection to Literacy

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Ashley and Junie B. Jones

Learning to read is not necessarily about using the right program, but rather about making the right connection.

When I began visiting Joan's ninth-grade developmental reading class, our focus was starting a reading workshop. I had used a workshop approach as a teacher, so Joan sought my support when her district was considering the adoption of a scripted reading program for developmental reading classes. Joan knew that her students needed more than a program and wanted to provide evidence for the administrators of her school. I was there to help organize the classroom, assess the students, document what happened, and provide moral support. As I worked with Joan throughout the year, another story began to unfold. At the time, it seemed removed from the work we were doing in Joan's classroom. However, as Edwards (1999), a travel writer, pointed out, "finding a great story is often a matter of being receptive to opportunities and recognizing first-rate possibility when it comes your way" (p. 117). And so, I began to document this other "possibility."

The national reading goal in the United States specifies that 90% of students will be reading at or above grade level by the time they finish third grade (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 1998). This goal and other



initiatives have contributed to increased accountability measures, which, in many states, have resulted in mandatory testing. Reaching a specific passing rate earns many schools and school districts labels such as "exemplar," "exceeds expectations," or "recognized." Unfortunately, to help students pass these tests, classroom teachers often find themselves stuck following the path of a rigid curriculum.

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Focusing on these objectives is appropriate, but has led some school districts to purchase programs that ensure all children get the same information at the same time. While it is important to have objectives and to make sure that students understand the information they need to reach their potential and become productive citizens, students come to school from differing backgrounds and abilities. Programs that address state and local learning objectives in all subjects can fill the day, leaving little time for students to pursue authentic and engaging text. Moreover, by getting stuck in a singular curriculum path, some teachers may hinder the journey of individual students. A program that addresses curriculum but fails to meet the needs of students requires further evaluation (Meyer, 2002).

Therefore, it is vital for teachers to remember that each child's journey to literacy is an individual one. Joan and I both learned that from Ashley, a child with special needs, who came to literacy in her own way in the company of Barbara Park's fictional character, Junie B. Jones. We met Ashley through her mother, Kayla, who taught at the same school as Joan.

AN INDIVIDUAL PATH FROM THE BEGINNING

Believing that literacy must begin early, Ashley's parents read to her before she was born. The value of early reading for young children is well documented (Clay, 1985; Cooper, 2000; Holdaway, 1979; Meek, 1986; Routman, 1988; Trelease, 1995). Even before the birth of the child, mothers are encouraged to read to the babies and then continue to read aloud once their children are born. During the process of reading aloud, the child can assume various roles and responsibilities (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), parents and children develop close relationships, and children's literacy roots begin. Unfortunately, Ashley's mother developed toxemia during pregnancy, so Ashley's birth was induced two weeks early. This abrupt entrance into the world initiated a much different path of development. Ashley's parents, Kayla and Joe, expected to engage Ashley in a wide range of literacy events. Since they are both educators, they knew the importance of these early experiences. They wanted her to start school understanding concepts of print (Clay, 1985) the way their older daughter had. But the early delivery and side effects from her mother's toxemia caused Ashley to have medical problems. During the first three years of her life, she had several eye and bladder surgeries. Although Kayla and Joe continued to read to Ashley, most of their time focused on her physical needs.

Instead of entering kindergarten at five, filled with the knowledge created by early book experiences at home, Ashley started her public school education at the age of three and a half in a Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities (PPCD), qualifying on the basis of a speech deficit. Ashley had severe

articulation problems and was only able to pronounce vowel sounds. Diagnostic testing placed her in the bottom two percent of her age group in speech production and near the bottom in auditory comprehension. Further, she demonstrated problems in short-term memory and exhibited unusual behavior. As a result of the eye surgeries, she wore thick glasses to correct her vision problem. While attending PPCD all day for a year,

Instead of entering kindergarten at five, filled with the knowledge created by early book experiences at home, Ashley started her public school education at the age of three and a half in a Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities.

she received speech therapy three times a week and socialization skills with other children who had varying levels of handicapping conditions. At the end of the day when her mother picked her up from school, the teacher often described Ashley as "loud and inattentive." Despite the intensity of the program, Ashley made minimal progress in speech production and in auditory comprehension.

At four and a half, Ashley was tested again. The test results of her speech production were similar to the results of the previous year. Her most significant deficits were noted in fine and gross motor skills, auditory comprehension, and short-term memory. Again, she was placed in PPCD to receive speech therapy and play therapy. The classroom teacher focused her lessons on early literacy development—read-alouds, nursery rhymes, letter names and sounds.

On a fairly regular basis, her teacher verbalized great concern about Ashley's unusual behaviors not associated with speech problems.

These behaviors had been evident since infancy in varying degrees and included obsessive/compulsive tendencies and severe gaps in memory ability. Even after intensive measures were taken to develop her literacy, she still could not remember the colors or their names, numbers, letters, or simple words. Despite their regular classroom usage, the names of her four classmates and two teachers proved too difficult for her to remember on a consistent basis.

One morning on the way to school, there was a small breakthrough. Ashley and her mother witnessed a car accident. From that moment forward, Ashley knew if there was an emergency, you call "911" to bring help. From this experience, her parents and teachers concluded that Ashley needed to have a strong emotional attachment to information in order to move things from short-term to long-term memory. They all recognized that creating these types of attachments would not be an easy task.

Ashley began kindergarten still wearing prescription glasses and taking more tests for special education. However, her speech had improved to the point that she no longer qualified for PPCD. Thus, she was placed in a regular kindergarten classroom. Despite all of her early exposure to books and literacy skills in the PPCD and at home, she struggled with reading. Additionally, she was so hyperactive that she could not tolerate reading for more than a couple of minutes at a time. Reports from her teacher often indicated that, "Ashley

must sit still and learn to focus or she will not be ready for first grade."

JUNIE B. JONES CROSSES ASHLEY'S PATH

Despite everyone's efforts, Kayla indicated that Ashley had no interest in books other than to line them up around her room from end to end. Kayla often came to Joan's classroom to share her frustrations about Ashley's progress. Even though she had never met Ashley, Joan wished that there were something she could do.

Then, one evening at the high school open house, Ashley was walking past Joan's room when she decided to step inside. Once in the room, they talked about all of the print that Joan had on the walls. In an effort to engage 14- and 15-year-olds in reading, there were posters, a word wall, student work, and a classroom library filled with books of varying sizes, shapes, and levels. Ashley was intrigued because Joan's library consisted of more than books for adolescents. Since Joan has organized a program to teach teenage mothers about reading to their babies, she had a number of children's books. Although Joan knew that Ashley had been having problems in school, she wanted her to leave her classroom with a book. At one end of the shelves, there was a collection of Junie B. Jones stories by Barbara Park. From reading these books to her own daughter and with some of her ninth-grade struggling readers, Joan knew that they were funny and entertaining introductory chapter books. She told Ashley about some of the funny events in the books and let her choose one to take home. Ashley left Joan's room with *Junie B. Jones and Her Big Fat Mouth* (Park, 1993a). Knowing the difficulties that Ashley had been

having and the frustrations of her parents, Joan was glad to have had this encounter.

Ashley was a struggling reader—despite beginning school early, having an abundance of one-on-one assistance, and being a member of a family that provided countless exposures to books and other literacy events. Knowing all of this, Joan was not concerned about whether or not Ashley could read the book. Rather, she felt that Ashley was much like Junie B. Jones, an impulsive, busy kindergartener who was often rather loud. From her own understanding of the way children learn to read through natural processes (Smith, 2003), Joan hoped that reading a story about this character just might be the connection Ashley needed.

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Some would say the Junie B. Jones books are too ambitious for a struggling emergent reader like Ashley:

- In general, the reading level of chapter books exceeds that of someone with beginning literacy abilities.
- Researchers emphasize that readers who are having difficulty need to engage in texts that "roughly match their current level of ability" (Lyons, Pinnell, & DeFord, 1993, p. 199).
- Teachers are told to focus on the student's reading and problem-solving abilities when making book choices.
- In general, the audiences for the Junie B. Jones books are children in

kindergarten through second grade. Teachers often use these books during read-aloud. However, left on their own to read the books, children must be beyond emergent reading skills.

Given these "truths," is it possible for a book that is currently beyond the child's ability to become a catalyst for the reading process?

A CONNECTION IS MADE ON THE PATH

The morning after giving Ashley the book, Kayla came to Joan's classroom with a look of disbelief on her face. Kayla had read part of the Junie B. Jones book to Ashley at bedtime. For any other child, this would be an ordinary event; however, Kayla was thrilled to say that Ashley was captivated by the story. Having previously shown almost no interest in books, Ashley had insisted that her mother keep reading about Junie B. Jones, a little girl her age who had good intentions but always seemed to find herself in some kind of trouble. After several days of reading, they finished the book, so Joan sent home another book, and then another, because some nights they read an entire book.

At first Kayla was just glad that Ashley was listening. Soon, besides listening, Ashley's interest in the stories and motivation to keep reading started to have other effects on her learning. She began making critical observations. She was realizing how words and stories came from the letters on the page. Although Kayla was not aware that Ashley was paying *that* much attention, Ashley began asking questions like: "Did it really say that?" "Oh, let me look at that." [meaning the words in the book] "Where does it say that?"

Each time Ashley asked a question about the text, Kayla made sure to point to it. In the past, Ashley had

multiple exposures to many books, but they left little impression of the story, and Ashley had *never* sought out specific words on the page. However, these books were providing formats and experiences similar to the ones that emergent readers need with predictable books, concept books, and beginning-to-read books (Glazer, 2000).

Kayla started to observe her daughter's reactions more closely. Soon Kayla saw another change in Ashley's learning. She had begun to memorize recurring lines or patterns from the book. For example, at the beginning of each of the books, Junie B. Jones introduces herself in the following manner.

My name is Junie B. Jones. The B stands for Beatrice. Except I don't like Beatrice. I just like B and that's all. (Park, 1993a, p. 1)

Other lines in the book use slightly different words for similar purposes. They were often Junie B. Jones's way

of telling about something that was not good or that was unusual for her.

*And so guess what?
I just like Janitor.
And that's all. (Park, 1993a, p. 11)*

*And guess what?
That night at dinner I didn't even
growl about sitting on the telephone
book. 'Cause everything was going my
way, that's why! (Park, 1995, p. 31)*

*And guess what else?
I wish I could hide her in the
hamper. (Park, 1994, p. 10)*

*And so guess what?
No dessert, that's what! (Park,
1993b, p. 7)*

Just like these sections in the books, the "guess what" was becoming part of Ashley's vocabulary. When Ashley related the events of school, she would tell it in much the same way as Junie B. Jones. Ashley was making important personal connections to the actions, problems, and experiences of the character, which were helping her latch on to the meaning of the story

and build her own understandings (Rosenblatt, 1978). Needless to say, Kayla was overjoyed that Ashley was remembering the day's events. This was something totally new.

While she rarely remembered the events of any other books read to her, Ashley often provided extended retellings of these Junie B. Jones stories. Kayla initially thought it was happening by accident, but, as the retellings occurred more often, she began to believe that Ashley was really remembering. Ashley's retellings were significant since short-term memory and auditory comprehension had been identified as areas of need. Although the retellings were not necessarily in the correct order or verbatim, for Ashley to remember details was a major breakthrough in her learning.

Kayla read *Junie B. Jones Is Captain Field Day* (Park, 2001), Ashley's favorite, every day after school and every night at bedtime for months. Gradually, Ashley began to read the

Research on Children's Book Choices

- Moss, B., & Hendershot, J. (2002). Exploring Sixth Graders' Selection of Nonfiction Trade Books. *The Reading Teacher*, 56(1), 6–17. A university educator and a sixth-grade teacher explored the impact of including nonfiction trade books in students' book choices. This two-year study identifies the complex factors involved in students' decision making around nonfiction literature and demonstrates that a critical motivator is having choice in reading.
- Pierce, K. M. (1999). "I am a Level 3 reader": Children's Perceptions of Themselves as Readers. *The New Advocate*, 12, 359–375. Pierce used a variety of engagements to explore her students' ideas about reading levels, perceptions about grouping books, and genre as a way to categorize books. Her data revealed the importance of knowing much more about students as readers beyond their level, and the benefits of her students knowing one another's reading interests.
- Worthy, J., & Sailors, M. (2001). "That book isn't on my level": Moving beyond Text Difficulty in Personalizing Reading Choices. *The New Advocate*, 14, 229–239. This study investigated a reading incentive program that involved students in reading books matched to their achievement level, taking computerized comprehension tests, and earning points for correct answers. The results revealed most of the students spoke about books in terms of their difficulty level and the number of points they would earn by reading them, rather than about the content of the book or what they found interesting. Reading tastes, motives, and needs were personal to each reader, and neither reading materials nor readers fit into neat, predetermined schemes.

—Karen Smith and Faryl Kander

first few chapters on her own. She even "read" it aloud to Kayla with voice inflections. Besides this reading, she had memorized enough of the book so she could concentrate long enough to decode words that she already knew. As her reading skills improved, she began trying other Junie B. Jones books on her own. This opened a whole new world for her as she realized that she could discover new things and learn new ideas and stories from different books. As her reading improved and her grammar and speech matured, she began substituting the correct grammar and word pronunciations for Junie's less mature ones without even thinking about it.

other sound but the fan in the other room.

Ashley's reading progress has become even more apparent as she completes second grade. Her reading skills have improved, and Ashley is reading slightly above grade level. More important, it is her personal reading behaviors that are noteworthy. Every night before going to bed, she reads a Junie B. Jones book. Each day, she takes a Junie B. Jones book to school in her backpack so she can read while she waits for the morning bell or for Kayla to pick her up after school. She reads as she walks to the car and on the ride home. Junie B. Jones and Ashley are constant companions.

reading ability and her attributes in other academic areas. Recently, Kayla started to use *Top-Secret, Personal Beeswax: A Journal by Junie B. (and Me!)* (Park, 2003) to work on Ashley's writing and spelling. In the past, Ashley hated writing, but now she enjoys following the journal entry examples from this book. Kayla is hopeful that this will have as big an impact on Ashley's life as a writer and speller as the books had on her reading.

So can a book that is at a higher reading level than the ability of the student become a catalyst for learning to read?

A BUMP IN THE ROAD CLEARS THE PATH

While Ashley was finishing first grade, she had a grand mal seizure. She was diagnosed with epilepsy, and her parents learned that a small portion of her brain was, and had been for years, in a constant state of seizure. The doctors were amazed that she had been able to learn anything because of the effect of the seizures on her brain. They prescribed medication, and Ashley's motor skills improved almost immediately. Her hyperactivity subsided, which allowed her time to focus. For the first time ever, she was able to sit through dinner without getting up, walk from room to room without running, and focus on reading for longer periods of time without being prompted. To Kayla's amazement, Ashley's homework time could come and go with no

So can a book that is at a higher reading level than the ability of the student become a catalyst for learning to read? When Ashley met Junie B. Jones, a character in a chapter book, her interest in Junie's next adventure opened her path to literacy. As she became more motivated and engaged in reading about this fictional character, her reading improved. Research indicates interest as a motivating factor in learning to read, so despite the level of difficulty of the text, Ashley's struggle with learning to read had been bridged (Asher, 1980; Palmer, Codling, and Gambrell, 1994; Worthing, Moorman, & Turner, 1999).

Her mother firmly believes that meeting Junie B. Jones was the catalyst for creating the pathways in Ashley's brain that led her to reading. She feels that there is no other way to explain the difference between her

PATHS FOR ALL STUDENTS

Ashley was given intensive early intervention for literacy development. She received multiple opportunities to experience appropriate levels of text coupled with a supportive learning environment at home and at school. However, she never engaged in the process until her chance meeting with Junie B. Jones, a girl about her age who had outrageous adventures and some language difficulties similar to her own. Once the initial connection was made, she formed the strong emotional connection to the material she required to achieve retention. According to Meek (1986), "The only motivation for reading that really works is the pleasure of the text or feelings of increasing success, and these depend on the reader's own activity" (p. 198). Clearly, once Ashley was exposed to Junie B. Jones, she became an active participant in her reading process.

As I documented Ashley's path to literacy, I realized that her path provides a lesson for us as teachers. While all students need to form a strong foundation for literacy, reading development occurs differently for everyone (Weaver, 2002). Each person's zone of proximal development varies (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers have an important role to play in the learning process because they must understand

how children learn to read and, despite their differences, how to successfully teach each child to read (Smith, 1996). Thus, the focus of all learning must be on individuals rather than a prescribed text or curriculum. This makes learning more authentic and teaching more complex (Meyer, 2002).

Ashley was introduced to a Junie B. Jones book because a teacher made a decision that this book might be one that would gain the child's interest. The teacher was not concerned about programs or book level; she focused on the child. During my stay in Joan's classroom, I noted that she used this same fundamental principle with her ninth-grade students. Her classroom provided a stimulating and supportive environment for literacy development. Armed with a large classroom library and knowledge of her students' needs and interests, she was able to make informed decisions about the books that her students read and about the ways that they "found" these books. Even when the school district bought a scripted program and mandated its use, Joan "juggled" the program and continued the reading workshop format in her classroom.

Teachers need to take informed actions. When programs are mandated, teachers can use their knowledge of materials, child development, strategies, pacing, lesson design, and the reading process to "shape" the program around students' needs and interests. If mandated programs do not allow room for trade books, then room can be found during other content lessons. If scripted programs do not require teachers to think, then teachers can use their brains to read and discuss literature with children. If programs have rigid time restraints, then teach-

ers can whet students' appetites for books through book talks so they will choose to read on their own. If a child is having difficulty learning how to read, then teachers must look deeply at that child to find other strategies to support that child's growth as a reader. When teachers take informed actions, children have the potential to reach beyond national goals and standards in order to lead literate lives.

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