Solving the School Crisis in Popular Culture: Why Johnny Can’t Read Turns 60

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Type “Why Johnny can’t” into an Internet search engine and the results will complete the phrase with everything from “read” and “write,” to “code” and “stream,” to “ride a bike” and “preach.” The expression “Why Johnny can’t” is America’s go-to idiom for jeremiads about the deficiencies of young people—and, by extension, the shortcomings of adults who should be doing a better job of teaching their children. If various essays and books found through Internet and library search results are any indication, poor Johnny has a lot of deficiencies: he also can’t add, think, blink, sell, shave, encrypt, name his colors, or tell right from wrong. Johnny’s shortcomings, however, are nothing new. For sixty years now, Johnny has been falling down on the job.

The catchphrase comes from the title of Rudolf Flesch’s 1955 bestseller, Why Johnny Can’t Read and What You Can Do About It. Flesch’s book generated immense controversy in the 1950s for its claim that U.S. schools were teaching reading “all wrong.” Flesch, an advocate of phonics, argued that children were being taught to recognize and memorize whole words when instead they should be taught how to sound and spell these words out. In Flesch’s estimation, the “word guessing” approach taught in postwar schools was creating a generation of incompetent readers. Moreover, the literacy problem was being perpetuated by educational researchers who were fiercely anti-phonics. Flesch encouraged parents—his target audience—to take a side in the “deadly warfare between entrenched ‘experts’ and the advocates of common sense in reading” (10).

Interestingly enough, a book about America’s poor readers sold 60,000 copies in a little less than five months and became a top-ten bestseller for the year 1955 (Hackett 199). It enjoyed vast media coverage, being
reviewed and debated in the pages of newspapers across the country as well as in magazines like *Time, The Ladies Home Journal, The New Republic,* and *The Saturday Review of Literature.* The book was also fiercely attacked in the pages of professional journals. For instance, *NEA Journal,* the organ of the National Education Association, explained, “Why Mr. Flesch is Wrong” and questioned Flesch’s use of evidence in an article titled “Why Can’t Rudy Read?” *The Reading Teacher* devoted an entire issue to the “Battle of Phonics” that included the essay, “An Analysis of Propaganda Techniques Used in *Why Johnny Can’t Read.*”

Flesch’s critique of U.S. education captured the postwar public imagination, and the catchphrase itself quickly became a household term. Observed *National Parent Teacher Magazine* in October 1955, “All in all, it’s been quite a year for the subject of reading” (“What’s Happening in Education?” 30). From a historical perspective, what happened in 1955 also serves as an interesting case study of the ways in which popular culture can shape public debates about education. The hullaballoo that surrounded *Why Johnny Can’t Read* is indicative of a larger pattern of representation in popular culture. When mass-marketed books, periodicals, films, and television programs engage with educational issues, three things tend to happen. One, popular cultural texts often vastly oversimplify the complex challenges facing schools and teachers. Two, these cultural products tend to prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution to the problem. And three, popular representations of education typically traffic in fear or nostalgia—oftentimes both—in communicating their message to mass audiences.

My essay develops this argument by offering a cultural history of *Why Johnny Can’t Read.* Very little contemporary scholarship exists on *Why Johnny Can’t Read,* and this essay represents the fullest account of the book’s production, reception, and cultural significance to date.

In what follows, I’ll first construct a context for understanding the book’s popularity and influence in the 1950s. Then I’ll talk about the author and his background. Next, I’ll offer a close reading of the book’s content, with an eye toward showing how *Why Johnny Can’t Read* resonated with larger cultural issues and anxieties in the 1950s. Finally, I will discuss the book’s critical reception and the ways in which it shaped the public debate about schooling in the postwar era. 1955 may have been “quite a year for the subject of reading,” but the breathless phonics debates served to silence and marginalize a host of other social, cultural, and educational issues that contributed to—and still contribute to—the nation’s school crisis.
I should state from the outset that I will not be wading into the phonics vs. whole word reading debate in this essay. I am more interested in historicizing Why Johnny Can’t Read as a pop culture phenomenon and analyzing its cultural work. Educational historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban write that “conversation about schools is one way that Americans make sense of their lives” (42). I would suggest that popular culture is one of the places where this conversation about education occurs, for better or ill. Popular culture circulates “powerful and suggestive images and ideas about teachers, learning, and other aspects of schooling,” and these images and ideas can greatly influence “common assumptions about the point and purpose of schooling” (Farber 3, 13). Whether it be a motion picture about a heroic teacher, or a Newsweek cover story about an education reformer, or a bestselling book about how students learn best, popular culture can establish the parameters for debate about schooling, delimiting what is possible and permissible when it comes to discussing American education. Popular culture constitutes a form of public knowledge about education and as such it “provides the principles through which options are made available, problems defined, and solutions considered as acceptable and effective” (Popkewitz, Franklin, and Pereyra 29). In the mid-1950s, Why Johnny Can’t Read shaped common assumptions about the school crisis and proposed a solution that was perceived as “acceptable,” even though the definition of the problem lacked context and nuance.

**School Crisis U.S.A.**

By the time Why Johnny Can’t Read was published in 1955, Americans had already been hearing about the “crisis in education” for nearly a decade. Up until that point, however, the crisis had nothing to do with phonics. After years of economic depression and war, when other issues had been on the forefront of the national agenda, the United States began the postwar era suddenly alarmed by the state of its schools. “Almost without warning,” writes educational historian Herbert Kliebard, the postwar era “became a period of criticism of American education unequaled in modern times” (222). In 1946, for instance, New Republic published a list of troubling statistics concerning swelling student enrollment, growing teacher shortages, and declining budgetary spending, and called the situation a “crisis in education” (“These Are the Facts” 434). In like manner, Collier’s stated pointedly that “Our Schools Are a Scandal,” and offered a roll call of what it described as “the statistics of ignorance” (Crichton 32).

The New York Times published a widely discussed series on the “Crisis in Education” in 1947 that further shaped public perceptions of the problem. Based on a revealing six-month survey of public schools, the expose
announced that the nation’s educational outlook was “not a pretty one.” It reported that many of America’s young people were being taught by incompetent teachers in dilapidated classrooms, and cautioned that such conditions threatened the democratic way of life. According to the *New York Times*, seventy thousand teaching positions remained unfilled. One out of seven teachers served on an emergency or substandard certificate. Six thousand schools would have to close because of lack of teachers, and seventy-five thousand children would have no schooling whatsoever that year (Fine 4).


Government and private organizations echoed the growing concerns of the mass media. In 1947, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce announced that “education faces an acute crisis.” The Chamber called for “immediate outlays of money” by states and communities to pay for better equipment and more teachers (qtd. in “The Crisis in Education” 5). The subject of the nation’s school crisis found its way into President Truman’s 1949 State of the Union address, when he stated that it was “shocking that millions of our children are not receiving a good education” (Merrill 59). In the late forties, the Advertising Council launched a “Better Schools” campaign designed to focus public attention on teacher and classroom shortages. The Ad Council canvassed 1,610 magazines a month with one-page ads, mailed campaign material to 4,000 newspapers, and distributed thousands of window posters and car cards (“Business on the School Crisis” 92). Messages about the nation’s education woes appeared in radio ads, bread wrappers, automobile license plates, and matchbooks (Zilversmit 112).

In 1948, the historian Jacques Barzun remarked that “education has become news.” Writing in the pages of the *Ladies Home Journal*, Barzun observed that an “aroused American public” was now demanding an explanation for the “poor-grade education” delivered in U.S. classrooms. “Almost daily in the great metropolitan newspapers,” wrote Barzun, “you may read of some new critique, charge or countercharge affecting our schools” (142-143). Such charges were reiterated in a number of widely discussed books that were critical of U.S. schools. These included Mortimer Smith’s 1949 missive *And Madly Teach: A Layman Looks at Public Education*, as well as Arthur Bestor’s *Educational Wastelands* and Albert Lynd’s *Quackery in the Public Schools*, both published in 1953. Indeed, educational
criticism became a veritable cottage industry for book publishers in the postwar era, arguably generating a ready-made audience for *Why Johnny Can't Read* when it appeared in 1955.

Another reason education became news in the postwar era was the growing public and legal debate over school segregation. Questions of equal educational opportunity came to the fore of mainstream discourse in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* in May 1954. The unanimous U.S. Supreme Court decision stated that the “opportunity of an education” was a right “which must be made available to all on equal terms.” At the time of the *Brown* decision, seventeen states maintained segregated school systems. According to the Supreme Court, segregation deprived children of equal educational opportunities and “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (*Brown v. Board of Education*). The court ruling made news in the United States and abroad. Voice of America radio broadcast the *Brown* decision in thirty-four languages, “beaming word to the world [that] in the United States, schoolchildren could no longer be segregated by race […]. No Americans were more equal than any other Americans” (Kluger 708). Newspapers across the nation editorialized about *Brown* and readers saw numerous political cartoons interpreting the decision. And for those Americans who opposed desegregation, the latest version of a “school crisis” was the specter of integration. As Richard Kluger points out in his history of *Brown*, “The depth of the American public’s concern with education was what made the desegregation of schools an explosive issue” (717).

It is important to note the substance of the national conversation about education before *Why Johnny Can't Read* dominated the headlines in the mid-fifties. In the ten years after V-J day, the public dialogue focused on overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, dilapidated facilities, budget shortfalls, and school segregation. In other words, for a full decade after World War II, it was clear that the education crisis was being defined in the public sphere as a crisis of resources and, increasingly, equal access. When popular attention turned to *Why Johnny Can't Read*, however, this particular framing of the problem was displaced and seemingly forgotten. In 1955, the main problem with U.S. schools appeared to be that Johnny could not—allegedly—read.

**The Anti-Expert Expert**

The person who redefined the education crisis for the American public in 1955 was not himself a schoolteacher. Before he published *Why Johnny Can't Read*, Rudolf Flesch was best known as an expert on readability
and “plain” style. Born in Vienna in 1911, Flesch obtained a doctorate of law from the University of Vienna in 1933 and practiced law before fleeing Austria for the United States in 1938 after the Nazi occupation. When he arrived in New York, Flesch worked odd jobs until he received a refugee scholarship to attend Columbia University, where he majored in Library Services. He went on to earn an M.A. in adult education and a Ph.D. in educational research from Teachers College. Flesch’s research focused on readability formulas—trying to determine how different types of writing correlated with school grade education. After completing his Ph.D., Flesch parlayed his expertise into editing and consulting jobs with CBS television, the Associated Press, Prudential insurance, several publishing houses, and the U.S. government (namely the Office of Price Administration), providing counsel on the readability of news copy, TV programs, insurance contracts, and government documents.

Flesch was already a public figure before Why Johnny Can’t Read became a bestseller. In 1946, his dissertation, The Art of Plain Talk, sold an enviable 30,000 copies in its first edition. Business Week published a profile of Flesch in 1947 that referred to him as the “Apostle of ‘Plain Talk,’” and subsequently “the popularity of Flesch’s scientific approach to technical and business writing rapidly spread to many corners of the nation” (Longo 169). He was celebrated for taking a hatchet to the “Federalese” and “gobbledygook” that dominated the language of bureaucrats (“Rudolf Flesch” 216). Flesch’s other publications before Why Johnny Can’t Read included The Art of Readable Writing (1949), How To Write Better (1951), The Art of Clear Thinking (1951), and How to Make Sense (1954). He also taught graduate courses at New York University.

Flesch’s biography is significant in light of the impact he had on postwar discourse about education. Flesch was never an elementary or high school teacher, yet he gained fame as an expert on education. At the same time, ironically, his book railed against educational experts. In fact, Why Johnny Can’t Read was addressed to parents, asking them to take charge of their children’s education at home because teachers and educational specialists could not be trusted. Throughout Why Johnny Can’t Read, Flesch portrayed himself as a common sense layman, though he himself was a noted adult reading specialist with a doctorate. Moreover, it is important to reiterate that Flesch waded into the public school debate from a business background; he made his career as a private consultant hired by corporations like CBS and Prudential. In sum, the figure that shaped the national debate on K-12 public education in 1955 came from the private sector and had never himself taught children.
Reading *Why Johnny Can't Read*

*Why Johnny Can’t Read* is carefully crafted—made readable, in a sense—through appeals to the broader cultural assumptions and anxieties of 1950s readers. Popular culture texts can be said to resonate when they “[vibrate] in sympathy with a similar frequency” in the broader culture (Phillips 6). A text achieves resonance when it connects to “cultural drifts and directions in such peculiarly poignant ways as to be recognized as somehow ‘true’” (Phillips 5). When this “sympathetic” resonance occurs, a popular text becomes not merely mimetic but also productive: it does not just reflect its existing context, but as a result of its resonance and perceived “truth,” the popular text can work “as an agent in constructing a culture’s sense of reality” (Howard 15). Such was the case with Flesch’s postwar bestseller about the school crisis. As a cultural product that circulated widely in 1950s America, *Why Johnny Can’t Read* “participate[d] in historical processes and in the political management of reality” (Howard 15).

*Why Johnny Can’t Read* resonates sympathetically with cultural currents that were already traversing postwar public discourse. The book makes overtures to the cold war, domestic ideology, and mythic American values of self-reliance and the “pioneer” spirit. Flesch uses both nostalgia and fear to powerful effect as he propagates the notion that teachers and educational experts are not to be trusted with the future of the nation. Ultimately, the book provides readers with not just a critique of education but a pointed commentary on cultural change in the postwar era.

Flesch begins his book with a swift jab at experts and ends it with a direct appeal to the layperson striving to achieve the postwar American dream: “Just as war is ‘too serious a matter to be left to the generals,’ so, I think, the teaching of reading is too important to be left to the educators” (ix). According to Flesch, the “American dream” is “beginning to vanish in a country where the public schools are falling down on the job” (132). As Flesch sees it, too many parents today “know that something terrible has happened to their most precious dreams and aspirations, that something, somewhere, is very, very wrong” (133). What is wrong is the fact that parents have surrendered too much trust to experts and to the public education system. Flesch wants parents to take an active role in their child’s education—to reclaim their mantle as primary teacher—and his book includes a practical step-by-step guide on how to teach children phonics at home.

Flesch assures readers that his brand of private tutoring at home is speedy, efficient, and, most importantly, in line with America’s cultural heritage. For Flesch, teaching children phonics at home “is wholly in the American
tradition. It’s what the pioneers did, when there were no schools for hundreds of miles around” (110-111). Readers are reminded that “Lincoln in his log cabin must have learned that way; so did his successor, Andrew Johnson, the illiterate tailor’s apprentice who taught himself to read when he was ten” (130).

Without question, Flesch’s argument about phonics is couched in the American tradition of self-reliance and the cultural mythology of the American dream. If the experts at school are failing you, it just makes sense to do it yourself. After all, Lincoln and Johnson didn’t need experts. In fact, *Why Johnny Can’t Read* conjures an image of a world in which experts are simply not needed: “You paint your living room, you lay tiles in your kitchen, you do dozens of things that used to be left to professional experts. Why not take on instruction in reading?” (111).

Appealing to a postwar readership that was increasingly concerned about suburban conformity and “lonely crowds,” Flesch invites readers to imagine themselves as independent “pioneers,” as self-trusting laypeople building their own American dream.

The image of phonics pioneers training children at home also connected with postwar discourse about family and domesticity. In postwar popular culture, the nuclear family and the home were depicted as a source of security and a signifier of the American dream. As Elaine Tyler May writes, “in the early years of the cold war, amid a world of uncertainties brought about by World War II and its aftermath, the home seemed to offer a secure private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world” (3). American culture in the fifties encouraged and celebrated family togetherness: “the family ideal […] promised material benefits and personal stability in a confusing social world” (Spigel 34). Relatedly, childrearing trends in the postwar era, influenced by the likes of Dr. Spock, moved toward more child-centered approaches. Flesch’s book appeared at a time when “public attention to childrearing mounted, as did anxiety that faulty childrearing could produce enduring problems” (Mintz 279). In *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, phonics training at home is imagined as a better and safer way of educating children who were being subjected to more dangerous forces outside the domestic sphere—namely at school. Flesch’s invocation of a long phonics tradition, going back to the pioneers, bolstered the image of phonics as a source of stability in a rapidly changing world.

Flesch also makes subtle and not-so-subtle nods to the cold war context of the 1950s. He suggests that failure to teach reading through phonics could have dire consequences, for “there is a connection between phonics and democracy—a fundamental connection” (130). Without really explaining how or why this is so, Flesch avows
that “the word method is gradually destroying democracy in this country” (132). Further, “equal opportunity for all is one of the inalienable rights, and the word method interferes with that right” (130). What Flesch seems to be suggesting is this: If schools are supposed to provide all students with a quality education and a chance to succeed, then the current method of teaching reading is somehow putting students at a disadvantage. The word method, in other words, was undemocratic, while phonics would preserve democracy.

Flesch also repeatedly reminds cold war readers that the word method is popular in China. U.S. schools make children “learn to read English as if it were Chinese” (5). American teachers use the “Chinese system” and the “Chinese word-learning method,” and students are learning to read in the “Chinese fashion” (6, 7, 8, 57). Such repeated references to China could not have been lost on 1955 readers aware of the “fall of China” in 1949 and the installation of communist rebel Mao Zedong as the new leader of the People’s Republic of China. Flesch’s statement that schools were teaching reading in the “Chinese fashion” suggested, without saying so, that American children were learning to read the same way the communists did.

In an era when many politicians and social commentators had established a “strong link between school instruction and fighting the cold war,” Flesch cleverly added phonics to the nation’s arsenal (Holt 48). Years earlier, the New York Times “crisis in education” series had stated flatly that education was the “first line of defense against attacks from within or without” (Fine 63). Mid-decade readers of Why Johnny Can’t Read were already primed to view schools as the “first line of defense” in the cold war. The stakes for Johnny were high indeed: the very survival of democracy and the American way of life seemed to depend on the teaching of phonics.

My point here is that Why Johnny Can’t Read was ostensibly a treatise on phonics, but its popularity was due in part to its ability to resonate sympathetically with its historical moment. Just as dominant American culture in the 1950s converged on the nuclear family and celebrated the good life as lived in the domestic sphere, so does Flesch. If American culture in the 1950s fretted about conformity, then Flesch counters this by invoking a longer tradition of pioneer self-reliance. Whereas American culture in the 1950s was anxious about cold war geopolitics, Flesch draws on these anxieties in championing his solution as the very embodiment of democracy. Viewed in this way, Why Johnny Can’t Read becomes a primer on cultural change, offering advice to readers on not just how to educate their children, but how to navigate the postwar world.
What *Johnny* Left Out

Notably, Flesch’s book does not address the education crisis as it had been defined in popular discourse during the previous ten years. *Why Johnny Can’t Read* does not reference teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, poor facilities, budgetary issues, or equal educational opportunity. Phonics is presented as the one-size-fits-all solution, regardless of racial, socioeconomic, and regional differences in the student population. As Flesch sees it, the real school ground threat to democracy and equal opportunity is the whole word approach—not, say, segregation, or poverty, or rundown buildings.

Flesch makes it especially clear that he sees pedagogy as both the problem and the solution when he describes his visits to three schools in the Chicago area. In Chapter IX, titled “Eyewitness Report,” Flesch recounts how he observed classes in the Argo-Summit-Bedford Park district, located fifteen miles outside of Chicago. He describes the district as “working class” with a “sizable colored population.” He adds that one of the schools in the district “is all colored” (100). Of the all-black Argo school, Flesch writes that “many” of those students “came from homes without reading matter; some of the parents were probably illiterate” (105). In contrast to the working-class white children of another school he had visited, Flesch tells readers that “obviously the children’s average I.Q. was lower than that of the children of Bedford Park” (105).

Even though Flesch’s description of the school district makes plain reference to socioeconomics and residential segregation, while also invoking racial stereotypes about black families, Flesch focuses on phonics as the cure-all. He celebrates the fact that in all three elementary schools he visited, teachers taught with phonics. As a result, those students “read fluently, with natural intonation, and with much understanding and enjoyment” (107). Presumably, students in Chicago were afforded equal educational opportunity—and democracy was therefore preserved—because of their phonics training. Flesch fails to address why it might be that one of the schools he visited was “all colored,” and the chapter essentially takes it for granted that this homogeneity is neither unusual nor a problem.

Context is again important here. Chicago in the postwar era was home to de facto segregation that had resulted from years of residential segregation, and many of the city’s African American schools suffered from overcrowding and a shortage of facilities. “We have segregated schools outright,” said the president of the Chicago branch of the NAACP in 1945. “They are as much segregated as the schools in Savannah, Georgia, or
Vicksburg, Mississippi” (qtd. in Homel 27). In the early fifties, the superintendent of Chicago schools championed “neighborhood schooling,” whereby students were only permitted to attend their local schools. “With housing and neighborhoods racially segregated,” writes historian John F. Lyons, “this policy virtually guaranteed racially segregated schooling” (137). The Chicago Board of Education maintained segregation by constantly adjusting school boundaries and issuing transfers to white students in schools that had growing black student populations. Meanwhile, new schools—as well as rented additions and mobile classrooms—were situated in already overcrowded black neighborhoods. As a result, in 1950s Chicago, “Some white schools had underused classroom space while black schools worked on double-shift where half the students started their day early in the morning and the rest later in the day” (Lyons 137). In addition, segregated black schools “were actually getting less in school funds per child than those in more prosperous white areas” and the “total expenditure for teaching was demonstrably less” (Herrick 311).

In Chicago, there was a clear racial divide when it came to equal educational opportunity and distribution of resources. None of these factors, however, is mentioned by Flesch in a book that so boldly proclaims that the American dream is “beginning to vanish” because “public schools are falling down on the job” (132).

The Battle of Phonics

As David Tyack and Larry Cuban point out in *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform,* “What was not on the agenda of reform was often as important as what was debated” (59). It is no exaggeration to say that *Why Johnny Can't Read* captured the public imagination in 1955 and set the terms of debate at mid-decade. Flesch’s book “struck a nerve” and “set off a national debate about literacy” (Ravitch 353, 354). Even though the book was controversial—many disagreed with Flesch’s claims—it nonetheless defined the parameters for acceptable discussion about the nature of the problem and the possible range of solutions. For over a year, the 222-page, $3 book published by Harper remained *the news* about American schools. “Unlike any other educational book in our time,” wrote the editors of *The Saturday Review* in July 1955, “[*Why Johnny Can't Read*] has popped up week after week on best-seller lists, has been syndicated in newspapers throughout the country, and has been the cause of a host of articles now appearing in national magazines” (“Teaching Johnny To Read” 20).
One reviewer dubbed *Why Johnny Can't Read* “one of the most talked about books in America” (Christ 77). *Time* magazine reported that “Not since its music critic called Liberace a ‘butcher’ musician […] did the San Francisco Examiner get as many irate letters on a single subject” as the paper did on Flesch’s book (“Why Johnny Can’t/Can Read” 28). In May 1955, education writer Fred Hechinger observed, “At almost any dinner party these days some parent is likely to worry aloud about a child who has serious difficulty with his reading” (42). Similarly describing what must have been an excruciating trend in postwar social gatherings, another writer noted, “Flesch has been passionately condemned and extolled […] at dinner parties, and at teas” (Bienvenu and Martyn 499). In December 1955, *The Reading Teacher* announced, “The battle of phonics is still on” (66). Almost a year after *Why Johnny Can't Read* first appeared, the *Saturday Review* affirmed, “The contest between Johnny and Reading seems destined to go on forever” (Jennings 7). As late as July 1956, the *Ladies Home Journal* was still asking, “Why Make it Harder for Johnny to Read?” (Thompson 11).

Flesch’s book was at once dismissed as “dogmatic and unfounded criticism” and praised as “the most important contribution to the betterment of public-school teaching methods in the past two decades” (Rettie 22; “Teaching Johnny To Read” 21). Flesch himself was labeled a “master of histrionics” as well as a “master in the art of controversy” who was catering to the “anxious parent” market (“Teaching Johnny to Read” 21; Rettie 21). Wrote one critic, “Anger can cause a man to set himself up as an authority in a field toward which his emotions have propelled him” (Rogers 70). Some reviewers skewered Flesch’s “sweeping generalizations” and his “oversimplification of a problem that is anything but simple” (Christ 80; Hechinger 43). At the same time, parents who were “troubled about [their] child’s reading” were told that they “had better get hold of the Flesch book and see what’s been going on” (*San Francisco Chronicle* 19).

The media essentially followed Flesch’s lead and couched the year-long public debate about literacy in terms established by *Why Johnny Can't Read*. During the battle of phonics, the school crisis was reframed as a controversy over reading pedagogy. Pre-1955 popular discourse about teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, outdated facilities, and unequal opportunity did not find its way into stories about why Johnny could or could not read, even though the mass media had been showcasing those very problems (and selling copy with those ledes) for ten years.
Conclusion

What lesson can we learn from the cultural history of *Why Johnny Can’t Read*?

The story of Rudolf Flesch’s bestseller reminds us how popular culture can work to propagate the myth that “childhood is the same for all children, a status transcending class, ethnicity, and gender” (Mintz 2). The generic “Johnny” of Flesch’s book represents a monolithic American child, an every-child who is losing out on a quality education for one reason and one reason only: schools are employing the wrong pedagogy. Phonics is presented as the cure-all for the American Johnny, regardless of class, ethnicity, and gender. If only schools would tweak their reading instruction methods, then democracy and the American dream would be intact for all young people.

Of course, fantasies of a one-size-fits-all-children solution continue to pervade popular culture and popular discourse about U.S. schooling. Whether the solution is a heroic Hollywood teacher, or an iPad for all students, or a new and improved standardized test, or a common curriculum, the tendency in our public debates about education is to imagine and prescribe a remedy that will magically lift up all students regardless of their background. In many ways we still see the United States as Flesch saw Chicago in the 1950s: yes, there is regional, racial, and socioeconomic diversity reflected in our public schools, but with the one right pedagogy (or curriculum, or assessment, or qualified teacher), all students will learn, because that’s how meritocracy is supposed to work. So we continue to focus on the latest pop culture panacea, while contemporary issues such as resegregation, unequal distribution of resources, the denigration of teacher status and bargaining rights, racially discriminatory disciplinary practices, and the privatization of public education are marginalized or silenced.

Notes

1. While there was some academic discussion of *Why Johnny Can’t Read* at the time of its publication, educational and cultural historians have not subsequently examined its historical significance. This is surprising considering both the book’s cultural impact in the 1950s and its more lasting influence on the lingua franca of education. For brief mentions of the book’s popularity and controversial nature, see Ravitch (353-356) and Holt (61). Many works that focus explicitly on the history of education in the 1950s, such as Cremin (1961), Kliebard (1995), and Hartman (2008), make no reference to the book.

2. On the longer history of residential segregation in Chicago, see Lewinnek (2014) and Wiese (2004).
Works Cited


“These Are the Facts About the Crisis in Education.” The New Republic (7 October 1946): 434-5.


