

Teaching All Children to Read: The Challenge of Our Times

Pleasant Rowland's

[Transcript of Pleasant Rowland's Keynote Address given at IDA's Reading, Literacy & Learning Conference in Chicago, Illinois, on November 9, 2011.]

I suspect most of you know me as the creator of American Girl. If you are one of the millions of mothers, fathers, grandparents, godmothers, aunts, or uncles who supported American Girl over the years, I thank you deeply. Without you I would not be standing here today heading a non-profit foundation dedicated to teaching children to read and write. For it was the phenomenal success and sale of American Girl 10 years ago that made it possible for me to fund this foundation and return to my first love and passionate concern—teaching children to read.

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I deeply share your sense of mission and speak to you this evening as a teacher. Though my career has taken me down many different paths, at the end of it, I proudly claim "teacher" as my profession, as my calling.

For as far back as I can remember, a teacher is what I always wanted to be. Perhaps this was not unusual for a girl growing up in the 1950s. Back then there were not many careers to aspire to—you could be a nurse, a secretary, or a teacher. Perhaps I chose teacher because it was the only career of the three where you could be in charge, where you could be the boss. My two younger sisters would heartily confirm that I was good at being bossy!

But my desire to be a teacher was informed by something else I believe: I simply loved school. And I especially loved learning to read. I can close my eyes and still see the black and white illustrations in *Mac and Muff*, the primer I learned with. I can remember waiting with barely contained excitement for the moment each morning when our teacher would call us to the reading circle. I remember the accomplishment I felt as I unlocked each word, sound by sound, the joy of solving that puzzle and how proud I was to take such a grown-up step, to be "really reading." Because of my own happy experience, the teacher I dreamed of becoming was a first grade teacher who would open the wonderful world of words for boy and girls who would be as excited as I had been to learn to read.

And, in fact, a primary grade teacher is what I became, but teaching other children to read turned out to be a lot harder than learning to read myself. I discovered this about 48 hours after meeting my first class of second graders in a big, red-brick school building in Mattapan, Massachusetts. As a newly minted teacher, I, of course, assumed that the books I was given to teach my students to read would do just that—teach them to read. But they didn't. I had students who were struggling and I didn't know why. And the textbooks on the shelf didn't help. In fact, those were the very books they were struggling over!

So I set out to find what would work—reading the research I could get my hands on, talking with other teachers about programs they knew, gleaning from noted educators what I could. And day by day, through the school year, I would try those ideas, holding on to the ones that worked, discarding those that didn't.

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What seemed to work the best revolved around the central importance of phonics—the work of Jeanne Chall at Harvard, of Isabel Beck, Romalda Spalding, and Orton-Gillingham. I tried Sullivan's Programmed Reading and Lippincott's Basic Reading, textbook programs of the time, and from all of these I cobbled together a philosophy and a pedagogy based on systematic phonics instruction that worked. But phonics, while a reliable and proven foundation, was too often presented as drill and kill, grunt and groan. Learning should be fun, I felt. As many self-reliant teachers do, I created my own materials.

After five years of teaching first and second grade I was assigned to a kindergarten class. In the mid-sixties, no states mandated kindergarten, and if a school chose to have it, it was usually a half-day program devoted to developing socialization skills. Yet my little charges had been raised on Sesame Street, had had one or two years of pre-school and wanted more. I would have had a mutiny of 5-year-olds if I'd tried one more year of doll corner and block play. They came to school expecting to read. But back then, there was no formal academic curriculum to teach reading and writing to kindergartners. So I took all that I knew about teaching first graders and adapted it for my students.

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What resulted from those homegrown materials a few years later was a program called Beginning to Read, Write, and Listen published in 1971 by J. B. Lippincott. It was the first academic kindergarten curriculum ever published and has been in continual use for 40 years. Today it is published by McGraw-Hill.

Beginning also launched me on my second career as textbook author. Based on its success, Addison-Wesley, another school publisher, approached me about writing a basal reading and language arts program. And so, from 1973 to 1978 I wrote and oversaw the development of a program for the primary grades that became the Addison-Wesley Reading Program. By then, I knew that the Beginning program was producing solid results for teachers around the nation, and I based the Addison-Wesley program on the same fundamental concepts: explicit, systematic phonics instruction integrated with the language arts using multi-modal teaching techniques.

It was a rigorous, comprehensive, integrated curriculum that taught reading, writing, spelling, and grammar and made learning fun—a powerful combination of chocolate cake with vitamins—and children and teachers gobbled it up!

But this time, I created a cast of lively characters named the Superkids that became the beloved hallmark of the program. It was a rigorous, comprehensive, integrated curriculum that taught

reading, writing, spelling, and grammar and made learning fun—a powerful combination of chocolate cake with vitamins— and children and teachers gobbled it up!

The program received a warm reception in schools and I thought I would spend the rest of my career introducing the Superkids to teachers and administrators. The road ahead looked straight and clear. But that, of course, is when the unexpected usually happens!

The year was 1981, and most unexpectedly, along came a change of management at Addison-Wesley and a radical change in corporate direction. The chairman of the board decided to return Addison-Wesley to its original focus of math and science. No longer would the company be in the reading business. The program that I had spent 8 years developing was put on the shelf, never to be actively sold again. Needless to say, I was devastated.

What was coming that I could not see was the tsunami of the whole language reading movement—a powerful pedagogical shift that was to last for more than two decades.

Today, I look back at one of the most difficult personal disappointments of my life, and realize that this setback was actually the program's salvation. What was coming that I could not see was the tsunami of the whole language reading movement— a powerful pedagogical shift that was to last for more than two decades. Its devastation remains today for millions of people who failed to become competent readers. Had Addison- Wesley continued to publish the Superkids program, it could never have withstood the market pressure to accommodate whole language, and my phonics-based curriculum would have been compromised. Ironically, by putting the program on the shelf, Addison-Wesley saved it.

Because the Superkids program had gotten a toehold in the market in the first four years that it was available, Addison- Wesley continued to fulfill it and satisfied schools continued to buy it. In spite of the fact that it was never actively marketed again, the Superkids program grew by word of mouth.

So while it chugged along in the shadows on its own steam, I set out to rebuild my career, leaving educational publishing behind. But I didn't leave teaching behind; I just found a new way to do it. During the next fifteen years I founded and built the company called American Girl, and dedicated my third career to teaching American history to young girls through books, dolls, and related playthings. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine American Girl would become the huge success it did, redefining the world of books and play for young girls, an audience that had been underserved until then.

Ten years into the building of the company, I got an unexpected phone call from the president of Addison-Wesley offering to sell me the Superkids program. Assured that there was a solid core of users who relied on it, I purchased the program and because I had the infrastructure within American Girl to fulfill and ship orders, I became the supplier of Superkids simply to keep it alive. But my attention was consumed by the rapid growth of American Girl and I was as passive a steward of it as Addison-Wesley had been. In 1998, I sold American Girl and in 2000, I retired. I have had no affiliation with the company from that time forward.

One morning, soon after leaving American Girl, I was indulging one of my retirement fantasies—simply to get up and have time to read the paper. On that particular day, the New York Times had a major article reporting on the findings of the National Reading Panel.

For many years, I had known that phonics worked but I didn't know why or how. Now I did.

The Panel, comprising distinguished reading educators and researchers, was charged with studying the copious research on literacy instruction and determining the most successful strategies for teaching children to read. Its report, directed specifically to primary grade educators, verified that children must learn how to read by the end of second grade. And it firmly stated the importance of systematic, explicit phonics as the foundation for reading instruction, integrated with the language arts—teaching children to write and spell as they learned to read.

And there it was, decades after I had written *Beginning and the Superkids*, affirmation that the system I believed in and held fast to, that I had incorporated into the programs I wrote, was being recommended as the right way to teach reading. After years of whole language holding sway in American schools during which my steadfast belief in phonics had been dismissed and even ridiculed, my philosophy had been validated.

Just two weeks later, I opened the morning paper to find an article reporting on the research of Drs. Sally and Bennett Shaywitz, neuroscientists at Yale. Their research using brain imaging techniques to compare what happened in the brains of children who were good readers versus those who struggled showed the importance of systematic phonics instruction as children built the neural pathways that connect the visual recognition of letters to their sounds. For many years, I had known that phonics worked but I didn't know why or how. Now I did. Here at last was the explanation.

No longer would my conscience allow me to be a passive steward—I had to act.

The confluence of the National Reading Panel's report and the Shaywitz and Shaywitz research was the jolt I could not ignore. I had a program that worked. I simply could not let the *Superkids* program drift off into oblivion.

And, I could no longer drift off into retirement, when, day after day, the papers were reporting that two thirds of America's fourth graders couldn't read proficiently and that all the effort and funds spent on remediation in the intermediate grades weren't working because the statistics got no better in eighth grade.

No longer would my conscience allow me to be a passive steward—I had to act. And so I formed the Rowland Reading Foundation and began my fourth career. It seemed that the tender hand of Providence had been guiding me all along, and all the twists and turns of the past, and all I had learned in my previous careers as teacher, author, and business woman, had prepared me for this moment.

And what a moment it is. A moment when American education is in crisis. A moment when a non-profit foundation with the clear and targeted mission of improving reading instruction in the primary grades is desperately needed.

The Rowland Reading Foundation believes that the ability to read is at the heart of all achievement. Without it, a child cannot succeed in school, cannot fulfill his God-given potential, cannot rise from poverty, cannot become a contributing citizen, cannot realize the American dream. There is no more critical mission for our nation. Our very democracy depends on an informed, literate populace, yet a quarter of our students drop out of high school and America is 18th in the world in rankings of international literacy.

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As you know, the costs of reading failure are profound and lifelong. One in five adults is functionally illiterate. This group accounts for 75% of the unemployed, 85% of juveniles in the court system, and 60% of prison inmates. But, more troubling, this crisis is not just limited to kids in "the low reading group," or minority students or the urban poor. Fully two thirds of our students cannot read proficiently at 4th or 8th grade in spite of billions spent each year for intervention and remediation. Perhaps 15% of those children have dyslexia but that leaves 50% who are "instructional casualties" who simply have not been taught how to read.

Reading failure is happening across the economic and ethnic spectrum, including middle class kids. When 65% of college professors say their students are poorly prepared for college, when one third of first-year college students have to take at least one remedial course and those taking remedial reading have only a 17% chance of completing a bachelor's degree, we have an epidemic. We are on the edge of a deep national disaster that will take decades or more to fix—if ever.

As Americans look for solutions that can be adopted and scaled, non-profit foundations have taken notice and thrown their hats in the ring—or should I say their purses? They are funding schools that are successful and broad educational initiatives that appear to hold promise, hopeful that they can make a difference. But the deeper they waded into the murky pool of American education, the more they realize how turbulent the waters are.

Confronted with state and district politics, recalcitrant unions, undertrained teachers, deeply entrenched pedagogical practices, and a plethora of passing education fads, they soon realize that schools do not yield easily to change. With the best of intentions, they have watched their dollars produce limited results. Just this year alone the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is investing \$100 million to develop new models for remedial education. But our national report card tells us that remediation is not the answer.

The answer is prevention—in teaching children to read in the primary grades—the right way at the right time. There is an enormous and impressive body of research on the science of reading that tells us what "the right way" is, and, for more than a decade, neuroscientists have validated it with brain research. You in IDA know the evidence well. The "right way" has now been embedded in the Common Core State Standards in a special section called the Foundational Skills directed specifically to the primary grades. The Foundational Skills section of the Standards was co-authored by one of your colleagues, Dr. Louisa Moats. Here are some of the things the science of reading tells us and the Common Core Standards incorporate:

1. Written English is based on the alphabetic code. Mastery of the code through phonics instruction is the critical foundation of reading.
2. Phonics-based instruction builds important neural pathways that link the recognition of letters to their sounds. These neural pathways are strengthened with multimodal practice.
3. Extensive practice with phonetically decodable text is critical to building accuracy and automaticity in reading.
4. When decoding is accurate and automatic, brain energy can focus on comprehending content.

In the last decade, it has become widely acknowledged that teaching a child HOW to read in the primary grades is vastly different from reading instruction in the intermediate grades and beyond. As a consequence of the National Reading Panel's report, virtually all school systems nationwide have added phonics to their curriculum criteria for primary programs, and publishers have revised basals to include phonics instruction to meet this demand. Yet in many instances these efforts have fallen short of the "explicit and systematic" phonics instruction recommended by the Panel, embedded in the Standards, and supported by science.

Decades of research also indicate that reading should not be taught in isolation but that integrating reading with the other language arts—spelling, writing, grammar, spoken and written expression—gives children a deeper understanding of how the alphabetic principle works and how spoken and written language relate.

A solid, thorough phonics-based curriculum teaches children to simultaneously encode or spell the words that they decode or read. But effective integration is virtually impossible to achieve if phonics, spelling, and writing are taught from separate programs where the order that letters and sounds are taught is different in each one.

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Pity the child who is taught short /a/ during phonics while in handwriting he's practicing N, and during spelling he's memorizing words like go and from. Then what's he to do when he meets help and like in his basal reader before he's learned those letters and sounds? The academically advantaged child may be able to tolerate the ambiguity entailed in shifting strategies, but the struggling child will be baffled and become discouraged with the whole process.

If fixing the literacy crisis were as easy as applying scientifically based principles, our national report card would be significantly better. But all education—and especially primary grade instruction—depends heavily on the art of teaching. Teaching is an individual art form dependent upon a person's energy, intelligence, training, personality, experience, interpersonal skills and management ability.

The art of teaching requires years of dedication and practice, and it's not for the faint of heart—especially now when times are tough for teachers who face shrinking budgets, federally required testing, increased oversight, and the difficulty of teaching children who are just learning English or come from incredibly impoverished backgrounds. One can add the challenge of integrating the

literacy curriculum using multiple programs and balancing all aspects of it to meet individual needs. It can take years and years for a teacher to put the pieces in place to achieve this kind of finely tuned instruction and assessment all on her own. But the real world is full of teachers who are new to the job or new to the grade level, who may be burned out or are simply having a bad day.

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District administrators and principals around the nation have become increasingly concerned about instructional consistency from room to room, from grade to grade, from school to school. They know that all teachers are not created equal, but that all children deserve an equal education. A well-designed, carefully integrated curriculum can equalize that teacher differential. It should be the strong solid center point, the core muscle upon which all literacy instruction can rely. Teachers need a program that is streamlined and efficient, a program where instruction is linear and clear for her and for her students. A program should help the first-year teacher become as successful as the experienced teacher in the room next door, guaranteeing that all children have thorough, thoughtful and equal instruction.

Effective programs that combine the science of reading with the art of teaching, that meet the criteria that I have laid out here, do not exist in many classrooms, with the result that far too many children do not learn how to read in the primary grades when they must become fluent readers.

So how are our children being taught to read? What does exist in America's classrooms? Essentially three major types of reading programs dominate reading instruction today– and have for the last 25 years. The first and oldest are basal programs. Basal programs are intended to be the core comprehensive reading curriculum that meets the needs of all students from kindergarten through 5th grade. They are tailored by their publishers to meet criteria laid out by large states with statewide textbook adoptions that promise the most sales. Basal programs have large teams of "authors," experts in different aspects of reading instruction whose different points of view must be represented.

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In the highly competitive marketplace of educational publishing, no basal publisher can afford to be seen as less comprehensive than the next, and all are forced to present themselves as offering all things to all people. Being "all things to all people" means there is not a strong, focused pedagogical point of view that produces clear linear instruction. The result? Confused teachers, confused students, and ultimately, our dreadful national report card.

The second entrenched reading philosophy is called "Balanced Literacy." What could sound more benign? Aren't balanced budgets, balanced diets, and balanced lifestyles to be aspired to? But Balanced Literacy is not so benign. It depends on each individual teacher to be the balancer,

combining a plethora of programs to meet the individual needs of 25 students. What teacher can "balance" all of that? Perhaps a deeply experienced master teacher, but certainly not most.

"Guided Reading" is the third widely used reading system. Here again the name gives false security. Who doesn't want teachers to guide reading instruction? What teacher would not be dazzled by shelves full of attractive "leveled readers" that are the hallmark of Guided Reading. But can students truly "read" those books in the primary grades? Guided Reading is fine for children who can already read, but it was never intended to teach them how to read in any explicit, systematic way. Guided Reading assumes the child has mastered the foundational skills, but doesn't take responsibility for teaching them.

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To make matters worse, Guided Reading is often a part of Balanced Literacy programs—and now the basal publishers are creating content and relabeling their programs as Balanced Literacy to meet the market demand. These programs are all echoes of each other and all retain many of the features and fallacies of whole language. These are the programs responsible for literacy instruction in the vast majority of American schools for nearly a generation. The nation's report card is their report card, too. When two thirds of our children can't read proficiently, it is time to declare that these programs have simply failed.

It is into this troubled environment that I re-entered the world of reading education. With eyes wide open, I formed the non-profit Rowland Reading Foundation in 2004 to try to help. But unlike most philanthropic foundations, we are armed with more than money—I believe we have a solution that can be scaled, that has the ability to make a huge difference. Instead of targeting remediation of reading failure, we target prevention. Our goal is to prevent reading failure by focusing on the foundational skills—the skills every child MUST master by the end of second grade.

And, educators across the country are taking heed. They have become disillusioned with the high cost of remediation and intervention. They know they can't afford it and they see it doesn't work as they watch their standardized test scores slowly decline or, worse, remain stubbornly stuck below grade level for too many children.

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Parents, too, are scared and bewildered. They are looking for answers—especially as they realize their child is slipping behind. They begin to worry that something is "wrong" with their children. For the vast majority, what is wrong is not their child, but the way their child is being taught. Their children are simply not learning the foundational skills of how to read— how to get words off the page accurately and fluently. They are becoming "instructional casualties" and parents are desperate for a solution.

But where are parents to turn? Who can give them answers about what does work? Who will inform them of what reading researchers have known for decades? Who will arm them with questions to ask their local schools about the techniques and programs their child will be taught

to read with? How is a parent to know? And where do they turn to find out? Could the International Dyslexia Association broaden its reach to address the needs of children who are "instructional casualties" as well as those who are dyslexic?

This is a unique moment when they walk in the door with their heads high, hearts free, and minds open—when they want to succeed and believe they can.

Please understand that I, in no way, want to distract this organization from its critical, original focus. I have personally experienced the benefit of your fine work for, you see, my husband and three step-sons are all dyslexic. I have watched in awe at the courage and persistence they have shown in the struggle to overcome their common handicap. Living with four dyslexics has kept me focused throughout my life on the critical importance of the "right" kind of reading instruction—not just for dyslexics, but for countless children who fall through the cracks every day.

What we are seeing today in America is an educational system paralyzed by growing numbers of children who are instructional casualties, who cannot learn because they never learned how to read. It is a moment of great peril, but also of great promise. The time has come to attack this enormous problem with renewed resolve, recognizing that the solution lies in prevention, in teaching the foundational skills that make children strong, independent readers by the end of second grade. This is a unique moment when they walk in the door with their heads high, hearts free, and minds open—when they want to succeed and believe they can. We believe they can, too.

But this will not happen until the public understands and our schools acknowledge that there is something fundamentally flawed with the way we are teaching children HOW to read. There needs to be a firm, reliable, respected voice informing bewildered parents and beleaguered teachers that there is a "right" way and it's time to start doing it. No one knows the "right" way better than IDA. No one is better positioned to be that voice than IDA. I urge you to broaden your reach to include not only dyslexics whom you have served so well, but the instructional casualties who struggle also. Their pain is no less. The price they pay is as high. Please, IDA, please help them, too.