Editor's Note: The editor of IRCJ wishes to thank Pleasant Rowland, founder of Rowland Reading Foundation, creator of American Girl, and author of the Superkids; Beginning to Read, Write and Listen; and Happily Ever After reading programs, for allowing us to publish the following speech, reflecting on her career and lifelong dedication to teaching children to read.

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 being a teacher because it was the only career of the three where you could be in charge, where you could be the boss—even if you were only managing 6-year-olds! 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 1st-grade teacher who would open the wonderful world of words for boys 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 2nd graders in a big red-brick school building in Mattapan, Massachusetts, in 1963. 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.

What seemed to work the best revolved around the central importance of phonics—the work of Jeanne Chall at Harvard, of Isabel Beck and Romalda Spalding. 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. So it fell to me to sustain the interest and enthusiasm of my students as they went about the hard work of learning to read. As many self-reliant teachers do, I created my own materials.
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After five years of teaching 1st and 2nd grades, I was assigned to a Kindergarten class. In the late 1960s, Kindergarten 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 wanting to learn to read, ready to read, and expecting to read. But back then, there was absolutely no formal academic curriculum to teach reading and writing to Kindergartners. So I took all that I knew about teaching 1st graders and adapted it for my students.

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 43 years. Today, it is published by McGraw-Hill. It remains exactly as it was when I first wrote it. Many schools have used its Letterbooks since the program’s inception and continue to do so today. Clearly, Beginning was an idea whose time had come. Today, it is difficult to find a school that doesn’t begin formal academic instruction in Kindergarten.

Beginning also launched me on my second career as a 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. 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 program to teachers and administrators. The road ahead looked straight and clear. But that, of course, is when the unexpected usually happens! As fate would have it, the Superkids time had not come. 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 on math and science. No longer would the company be in the reading business. Though they had invested more than $25 million in the Superkids program, they stopped all active marketing of it and removed it from their salesmen’s book bags. The program that I had spent five years developing was put on the shelf, never to be actively sold again. Needless to say, I was devastated. 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 as satisfied schools continued to buy it, and satisfied teachers talked to other teachers about their successes with it. In spite of the fact that Addison-Wesley never actively marketed Superkids again, the program continued to grow by word of mouth over the next 13 years. Addison-Wesley was never more than a passive steward simply fulfilling orders for schools who wanted it.
So, while the *Superkids* program chugged along in the shadows on its own steam, I set out to rebuild my career, leaving educational publishing behind. I didn’t leave teaching behind, though; I just found a new way to do it. During the next 15 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 ever 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—indeed, neglected—until then. It, too, was an idea whose time had come.

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. I had been out of educational publishing for so long, I wasn’t even sure anyone was using the program anymore, but I was assured that there was a solid core of devoted users who relied on it. So I purchased the program and, because I had the infrastructure within American Girl to take, fulfill, and ship orders, I became the supplier of the *Superkids* program 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.

**The Science of Reading**

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 (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHHD], 2000). Its report verified that children *must* learn how to read in the primary grades. 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.

So there it was, decades after I had written *Beginning* and the *Superkids*, proof 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. 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 strong systematic phonics instruction as children built the neural pathways that connect the visual recognition of letters to their sounds (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2001). 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.

I read these news reports against the backdrop of reading failure, which continues today across the economic and ethnic spectrum. According to the most recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 80% of low-income 4th graders and 66% of all 4th graders are reading below grade level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Sixty-six percent of 4th graders are not all at-risk children, nor are they just minority students. Many middle-class White children are not proficient readers, either. The costs of reading failure are profound and lifelong; and a growing awareness of the literacy crisis and the complexities of the issues surrounding it are being recognized more and more by journalists, civic leaders, concerned citizens, and parents. With this growing awareness has come the rise of alternative schools—magnet schools, charter schools, religious schools, and private schools. Some have been in the education business for a long time; some are new to the movement. But it is a movement to be sure and it is surging.
As Americans look for solutions that can be adopted and scaled, nonprofit foundations have taken notice and thrown their hats in the ring—or should I say their purses? They are funding, at levels never seen before, schools that are successful and broad educational initiatives that appear to hold promise, hopeful that they can make a difference. But the deeper they wade into the murky pool of American education, the more they realize how turbulent the waters are. Confronted with district and state 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 and often incredible generosity, they have watched their dollars produce limited results.

The best solution is prevention—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. In the last decade, as a consequence of the National Reading Panel’s report (NICHHD, 2000), 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 new demand. Yet, in many instances, these efforts have fallen short of the “explicit and systematic” phonics instruction recommended by the Panel and supported by science.

Why? There are numerous reasons. In a nutshell, most reading programs and most teachers introduce too many word attack strategies too soon, so there is no clear, linear instructional process that consistently guarantees results for beginning readers. For instance,

- Students are often asked to memorize a barrage of sight words at the same time they are trying to learn the fundamental sound/symbol relationships of short vowels and single consonants. They get confused—should they sound out a new word they meet or try to retrieve it from memory? Confused decoders resort to guessing. Guessing is not reading.
- Students learn the letters and sounds in isolation but don’t spend enough time on the critical step of blending them together to form words. As a consequence, early reading efforts sound like a foreign language when the “big pig” becomes the “buh-i-guh puh-i-guh.”
- Too often, children learn their letters and sounds during core instruction time, but then are given a reader story with words they can’t decode. Essentially, they have been taught one thing and are being asked to practice it by doing something else. The words in the text should contain only letters and sounds that have been explicitly taught before a child is asked to apply them to the text. 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.

Some teachers don’t like the idea of limiting children’s early reading experience to decodable texts. They want their students to be exposed to “authentic books”—books that are presumed to be of higher quality because they’re written without narrow word restrictions. Yet, the quality of a book has nothing to do with its vocabulary controls and everything to do with the ingenuity, talent, and vision of the author. There isn’t a reason in the world that a book that is phonetically controlled can’t be of equal quality to a book off the library shelf. Decodable reading materials should have the same qualities we ask of all good books: good writing, believable characters,
an engaging plot, wonderful illustrations, and an authentic voice that speaks about children's lives with insight, wisdom, and humor. Children should be able to practice their emerging skills with a controlled text that fuels their love of reading—not only because it’s a good book but also because it allows them to be successful, to truly get the words off the page accurately, fluently, and with understanding.

But reading is more than decoding—its ultimate goal is to understand the ideas and concepts expressed by the writer. From the beginning, getting meaning from the text should have equal emphasis as getting the words off the page accurately and automatically. While all important comprehension strategies should be taught to all students as their reading skills gain momentum, good teachers know that real comprehension is built by guiding students through the text and discussing it—and the more limited the child’s background experience and oral language vocabulary is, the more support he needs. Simply putting a book in front of him to read and checking his understanding of it with 10 questions on a comprehension worksheet is not teaching comprehension.

From Kindergarten through 2nd grade, the content of a reading program should expand to include both decodable fiction and increasing amounts of nonfiction so that, ultimately, by the end of 2nd grade, students are able to read uncontrolled fiction and nonfiction. There is a time and a place for all of it in the primary grades, but it needs to be staged and prepared for thoughtfully so the child is not confronted with too many options at one time, before he is a confident, automatic decoder.

The National Reading Panel report (NICHD, 2000), as well as the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) indicate that reading should not be taught in isolation but that integrating reading with the language arts—spelling, writing, grammar, and written expression—gives children a deeper understanding of how the alphabetic principle works. A solid, thorough phonics-based curriculum teaches children to simultaneously encode or spell the words that they decode or read. And letter formation—taught as children learn to recognize a letter, identify its sound, and write it—completes the pillars of multimodal instruction: hear it, see it, say it, write it. Reading leads naturally to spelling and writing, and writing reinforces reading. They are flip sides of the same alphabetic coin.

The Art of Teaching

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. While some teaching skills apply to all grade levels, others are unique to specific grades. I have made a list of some of the hallmarks of an artful primary grade teacher:

- Learning to read is hard work requiring years of practice, but a good teacher keeps children motivated throughout and makes it fun. A good teacher knows how to combine vitamins with chocolate cake!
- A good teacher knows that a clear, linear path of instruction is important because children thrive with structured, familiar routines and become relaxed, confident learners.
- Good teachers help children learn through all their modalities in a variety of inventive activities that strengthen neural pathways.
• Good teachers clarify and simplify, making complex concepts simple. They do not shy away from rigor because they know that the pride children take in mastering difficult skills and concepts builds their self-esteem. There is no substitute for real achievement.

• Good teachers know how to sustain children’s interest and attention. They find countless ways for students to review critical concepts until mastery is reached. And they provide tangible milestones along the way so children recognize their progress and don’t get discouraged.

• Good teachers are ever vigilant. They know that practice makes permanent. If a child practices the wrong thing and is not corrected, confusion builds quickly. Informal daily assessment of each child’s progress is a hallmark of good teaching.

The list could go on and on and each of you could add many more. 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 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 who are simply having a bad day.

A well-designed, carefully integrated curriculum can equalize this 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, prizing quality over quantity. A program where instruction is linear and clear for her and for her students. It should allow her to spend less time planning and more time observing, assessing, and helping individual children. 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.

Strong, effective programs that combine the science of reading with the art of teaching can and need to exist in every classroom. The confluence of the National Reading Panel’s report (NICHD, 2000) and the Shaywitz’ (2001) research was the jolt I could not ignore. I had a program that worked, that dedicated teachers had kept alive by word of mouth for decades, and now leading educators and researchers were calling for exactly what I had written so long ago. I simply could not let the Superkids program drift off into oblivion. 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 all I had learned in my previous careers as teacher, author, and businesswoman had prepared me for this moment. And what a moment it is. A moment when American education is in crisis. A moment when a nonprofit foundation with the clear and targeted mission of improving reading instruction in the primary grades is desperately needed.

Rowland Reading Foundation

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 true potential, cannot rise from poverty, cannot become a contributing citizen, cannot realize the American dream. Instead of targeting remediation of reading failure, the Foundation targets prevention through its K-2 reading program—Superkids. This comprehensive, phonics-based core reading program systematically integrates all the language arts—listening, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, and handwriting—and is fully aligned to the Common Core State Standards.
Superkids has been used for more than 35 years by a loyal group of dedicated teachers because it works. It is a time-tested program that has produced exceptional results because it combines the science of reading with the art of teaching. Nonetheless, the Foundation spent its first four years revising the program’s teacher’s guides and augmenting the student materials based on the most up-to-date research; feedback from teachers; and what we, as educators, have learned and what researchers have validated during the past three decades.

Initially, we conducted extensive piloting of the Superkids program and put it to a rigorous national research study of more than 3,000 students in Kindergarten classrooms across the country over a two-year period (Borman & Dowling, 2009). The results were remarkable. Students of all ethnicities and demographics—African American, Hispanic, White, English language learners (ELLs), and low-income children—made extraordinary progress with just one year of Superkids instruction. Tested with the Stanford Early Achievement Test in fall and spring, these students ended the year at the 73rd percentile on average. Of greatest significance, every single ethnic and demographic subset ended the year above the national norm—all ending the year above the 63rd percentile.

Since that time, we have continued to gather data on student progress and teacher satisfaction. Neshaminy School District in Langhorne, Pennsylvania, began using Superkids with about 1,800 students in Kindergarten through 2nd grade in the 2009-2010 school year. An analysis of the district’s 2007-2012 DIBELS data shows an increase from 63 to 78% on the 2nd-grade Oral Reading fluency measure after three years of Superkids—which means nearly 100 more students of about 600 reached the proficient level of reading fluency. During the same period, the number of students performing below benchmark declined from 37 to 22%. In spring 2013, Neshaminy’s 3rd graders scored significantly higher than the state average on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA).

A four-year longitudinal study began in 2011 in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, near Providence. The 5,227 students in this study are highly diverse: 39% Hispanic, 26% African American, 27% White, 85% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 13% ELLs. After two years of Superkids instruction, Pawtucket students scored higher on DIBELS Next Nonsense Word Fluency (Good & Kaminski, 2011) than the comparison schools. Nonsense Word Fluency is a key indicator of students’ knowledge of the alphabetic principle and their ability to blend letters and sounds. In addition, teachers, principals, and parents reported high satisfaction with the Superkids program.

Rowland Reading Foundation and its Superkids program is still relatively new and is small in an industry dominated by enormous and powerful publishers. But we are very determined to get students off to a strong start, closing the achievement gap from the beginning. To this end, Superkids installations include complimentary professional development services, including one-on-one teacher coaching from one of our 40 highly qualified master teachers and administrators, all of whom possess in-depth knowledge of reading research and instruction. Additionally, teachers, students, and parents all have access to the program materials online. Teachers have access to all teacher and students materials as well as to easy-to-use lesson planning and assessment tools. An online parent portal provides parents with education videos, games, and all previously read classroom texts.

My first program, Beginning to Read, Write and Listen, was once new and small, but it has been used to help teach millions of Kindergarten children to read over four decades. It was an idea whose time had come. American Girl was once new and small, but it was an idea whose time had come. So, too, with the Superkids. We re-introduced the program just seven years ago,
yet almost a quarter of a million students will have learned to read with Superkids this year.

A Call to Action

What we are seeing today is an educational system paralyzed by the number of children who cannot learn because they never learned to read the right way, at the right time, in the grades devoted to that purpose. The time has come to attack this enormous problem with renewed resolve, recognizing that the solution doesn’t lie in remediation or intervention, in patching and filling where we failed before. The solution lies in prevention—making children strong, independent readers by the end of 2nd grade. This is a unique moment in a child’s life when he walks in the door with his head high, heart free, and mind open—when he wants to succeed and believes he can.

The chronic failure of our educational system will be reversed only when we make good on this moment of great promise. This is Rowland Reading Foundation’s mission. This is our calling, our commitment, our cause. We must win this battle school by school, child by child. We must. We can. And we will.

For more information about Superkids or Rowland Reading Foundation, please call (608) 441-5555 or visit www.superkidsreading.org.

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