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## BIOGRAPHY

### Nila Banton Smith, 1889–1976

**N**ila Banton Smith was totally dedicated to her academic and professional career in reading instruction. A prolific reader and writer, she stayed on top of the research and trends, enabling her to rise quickly in the field of reading instruction and remain among its leaders. "A lifelong teacher and administrator...she never lost touch with the classroom, the student, or the teacher" (Courtney, 1986, p. v).

Smith was born in Altona, Michigan, in 1889. In 1908, she graduated from Carson City High School and began teaching. She completed teacher preparation at Mt. Pleasant Normal School (now Central Michigan State University), and continued teaching in the Michigan school system in 1911. In 1926, she earned a bachelor's degree summa cum laude at the University of Chicago and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

While teaching at the elementary school level in the Detroit school system, she became Supervisor of Reading, and subsequently, Supervisor of Research from 1928 to 1933. To further her academic career, Smith earned a master's degree in 1929 and a doctorate degree in 1932, both from Columbia University. Amidst her doctoral studies, she spent a year as Chair of Education at Greensboro College in North Carolina. Smith's doctoral dissertation, *An Historical Analysis of American Reading Instruction*, was published as a book, *American Reading Instruction*, by Silver Burdett in 1934. Subsequent revised editions in 1965 and 1986 were published by the International Reading Association.

Smith's career in academe advanced rapidly as she served as Dean of Education at Whittier College, California, from 1933



to 1937, where she wrote *Adventures in Teacher Education*. This tenure was followed by two years at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, and in 1939 to 1947, she served as Professor of Education at the University of Southern California (USC), where she also authored the basic reading series *Learning to Read*. During a tenure from 1948 to 1963 at New York University, from which she formally retired, Smith founded the New York University Reading Institute and authored the basal reading program *Reading Instruction for Today's Children*.

Smith also served as a distinguished professor at Glassboro State College, New Jersey, from 1963 to 1968; at San Fernando Valley State College, California, from 1968 to 1969; and USC, from 1969 to 1976. Upon her return to USC, she funded several projects, including the Nila Banton Smith Reading Improvement Laboratory where graduate students specializing in reading could view equipment, materials, and videotapes of classroom lessons. Perhaps this is where she had her greatest influence—with her graduate students, to whom “she was a vibrant, inspiring teacher...able to point the ways to apply modern research and psychology to classroom needs” (Robinson, 1958).

A generous supporter of the International Reading Association, Smith served as its president from 1963 to 1964, and received the Association's Citation of Merit. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, she was instrumental in purchasing the property in Newark, Delaware, where the Association's headquarters is now located.

The death of Nila Banton Smith in Los Angeles on December 13, 1976, ended a life devoted to improving reading instruction. A memorial service was held at USC on January 8, 1977, at which colleagues Millard Black, Constance McCullough, Irving Melbo, Grayce Ransom, and H. Alan Robinson spoke in her memory.



## SOURCES

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