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COMMENTARY

William S. Gray (1885-1960): First IRA President

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Instructional Services

Born near Quincy on June 5, 1885, William Scott Gray, Jr. spent his entire life as a professional educator within the borders of the state of Illinois. Yet, his influence on education and on reading instruction extended across America and around the world. It is still discernable today.

The son of a school teacher, Gray began his own career in education in 1904, teaching in a rural school right after graduating from high school, as did many other young men and women at that time. By age 32 he had risen to the position of Dean of the University of Chicago's College of Education.

During those intervening 13 years, Gray completed his own education, acquired experience as an educational administrator, and initiated a lifelong prolific career as an educational writer and editor. Having acquired 4 years experience as a teacher and principal in rural schools near his home, Gray enrolled in the full 2-year course at Illinois State Normal University, Normal, Illinois. Following graduation in 1910, he joined the faculty as principal of the Normal University's training school. Two years later he left to continue his education, first at the University of Chicago (B.S., 1913) then Columbia University (M.A., 1914). Finally, Gray returned to the University of Chicago, where, employed initially as assistant in education and enrolled as a graduate student, he was rapidly promoted to instructor (1915), completed a Ph.D. degree and promoted to assistant professor (1916), appointed dean of the College of Education (1917), promoted to associate professor (1918), then professor (1922).

William S. Gray's own career and contributions in education were shaped by his contact as a student with three leading teacher-training institutions during an important transitional period in American education. First, Illinois State



William S. Gray, circa 1930

Normal University had long held a reputation for efficient and effective teacher training. Its basic program, modeled after one of the original New England normal schools, Bridgewater, Massachusetts, had remained virtually unchanged until the 1890s. Then it felt the effects of the three major leaders of the new Herbartian movement, Charles and Frank McMurry and Charles DeGarmo (Manchester, 1907, pp. 36, 83-84). In addition to contributions on campus, they published the earliest Herbartian methods texts, widely used by normal schools. They also formed, in 1892, the Herbartian Club which evolved, by 1901, into the National Society for the Study of Education (Graves, 1915, p. 348).

Second, at the University of Chicago Gray encountered the uniquely theoretical approaches of child-entered teacher education and the experimental curriculum initiated by Col. Francis Parker, Flora Cooke, Alice Chipman Dewey, and John Dewey (Goodspeed, 1916; DePencier, 1967; University Record, 1898-1921). Third, when Gray arrived in New York, educators' attentions were shifting from teacher training, i.e., the normal school and Herbartian movements, to the scientific method and social structures. It was the beginning of the Progressive Era in education. In 1913-1914 many proponents of the new movement were on the Columbia and Teachers College faculties, including John Dewey, George Strayer, and Edward Lee Thorndike (Cremin, 1954, pp. 27-33).

At Teachers College the most commonly studied subject during that period was the new field of school administration (Joncich, 1968, p. 297). The national leader in the field, George Strayer published *Educational Administration* in 1913, co-authored with his former teacher E. L. Thorndike whose own 3 volume *Educational Psychology* came out during 1913-1914. Thorndike was at that time in the midst of his work on educational testing, developing tests of word meaning and silent reading. Working with Thorndike, Gray began to develop a test of oral reading, part of his master's dissertation (Gray, 1914). Thorndike included that early draft at the end of his first published report of his own work on reading tests (Thorndike, 1914, pp. 273-277).

Returning to Chicago the following year, Gray continued the work he had begun with Thorndike. He published the *Oral Reading Paragraphs Test* (Gray, 1915) and completed his doctoral dissertation, *Studies of Elementary School Reading Through Standardized Tests* (Gray, 1916). The next year his dissertation was published as the first University of Chicago Supplementary Educational Monograph (Gray, 1917).

From that point on, Gray's career was a blend of leadership in educational administration exerted within and far beyond the University of Chicago, combined with a constant but

varied stream of publications concerning every aspect of teacher education and reading instruction. Within the university, Gray held the post of Dean until 1931 when, on the principle that teacher education was an obligation of the entire university, the College of Education was abolished (Gray, 1931, pp. 426-428). Gray remained in charge of teacher education at the university until 1945, however, as executive secretary of the Committee on the Preparation of Teachers. Upon his official retirement from the university in 1950 he was appointed emeritus professor of education and also director of research in reading. He continued to work actively as research director and writer until his sudden death, while on his annual fishing-horseback riding vacation, the result of a fall from a horse (*New York Times*, 1960).

During Gray's tenure, the University of Chicago was a leading center of teacher education. Among his many accomplishments was the addition to the curriculum of several new basic courses for teachers, including one on the teaching of reading. For 12 years (1925-1937) he was director of an annual conference for higher education administrators. His publications touched every aspect of teaching, curriculum, and administration from elementary school through college.

Regarded as the dominant figure in reading education, Gray can be credited as a founder of the field itself. He actively participated in and published major works about every aspect of reading instruction: testing, diagnoses, developmental programs K-college, remediation, reading and writing, adult literacy, instructional materials, teacher training, evaluation, theory, and research. In addition to publishing oral and silent reading tests, Gray co-authored the *Basic Reading Series* and the *Elson-Gray Readers*, and was senior editor of the Scott, Foresman reading program, the famous "Dick and Jane" series. He was regarded as a leading advocate of the sight method of instruction, the importance of rate and comprehension, K-12 developmental programs, and increasing adult literacy levels.

In 1939, Gray initiated the influential series of annual Conferences on Reading, held at the University of Chicago. He directed the confer-

ences and was contributing editor of the follow-up conference proceedings until 1952. At 12-year intervals (1924, 1936, 1948) he chaired national committees commissioned to evaluate reading instruction K-college and recommend changes, and was editor of those proceedings. In 1925, Gray published *Summary of Scientific Investigations in Reading*, a landmark work covering 500 research reports. An up-date of his original dissertation chapter on previous reading research, it was followed by publication of annual summaries (Gray, 1925-1932; 1932-1960). His total publications list, 1909-1960, includes over 500 titles, consisting of a wide variety of articles, readers, tests, manuals, textbooks, proceedings, and reports.

William S. Gray, Jr., was a founder and first president, 1955-1956, of the International Reading Association. A chair was established in his honor at the University of Chicago in 1960, the William S. Gray Research Professorship in Reading.

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