

# The Contribution to Reading Research and Education of Fred J. Schonell

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The history of reading instruction in the USA has been quite well documented. Studies by Venezky (1987) and Nila Banton Smith (1986) have laid out the major developments across the centuries since European settlement.

Although Australia is a nation with some similarities to the USA, relatively little has been done to preserve, document or conduct research in the history of reading instruction. We do have a small, enthusiastic Special Interest Group on the History of Reading in the Australian Reading Association which owes much to the enthusiasm of Noelene Reeves. A further small indication of awareness of the importance of reflecting on past practices is the issue of a facsimile set of early Queensland Reading Books.

My major purpose is to sketch the career of a significant Australian reading educator who had a major impact upon reading instruction not only in Australia, but in Britain and other Commonwealth countries for three decades. Fred Schonell was born in Perth, Western Australia in 1900, and taught school from 1921-1928. He then studied in England, gaining a PhD at the University of London in 1932, with a thesis on the diagnosis and remediation of difficulties in spelling. He taught at Goldsmith's College, Swansea and Birmingham, before returning to Australia in 1950 as the first Professor of Education in the University of Queensland.

Much of what I am reporting in this paper is based upon articles written by Robert Andrews (1982, 1983), information in a commemorative issue of *The Slow Learning Child* (1963), personal experience and the observations of colleagues who knew Schonell better than me.

Table 1 gives a brief chronology of Fred Schonell, who was the first person I am aware of to receive a knighthood for, in large part, his lifelong work in reading education. It is interesting to note that Dame Marie Clay of the IRA Board of Directors was the next Commonwealth scholar so recognized.

Table 1: An Outline of the Life of Fred J. Schonell

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Australian nation founded 1901	1900	- born Western Australia
World War I 1914-1918	1910	
	1920	
Hadow Report (UK) - 1931 child development individual differences	1930	Doctoral studies at University of London (1929-32)
World War II 1939-1945	1940	- Swansea (1942) - Birmingham (1947) - Remedial Centre
	1950	- Brisbane (1950) - Remedial Centre
	1960	- Vice Chancellor - knighted 1962 - died 1969
	1970	

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It is clear from Table 2 that Schonell accomplished a great deal of research and development work over two decades. (I have not reported several publications in the area of mathematics.) In both Birmingham and Brisbane he established reading clinics which still exist, while two journals he founded have prospered to this day (*Educational Review; The Slow Learning Child*<sup>1</sup>).

Table 2: Major Publications 1932-1950

Research Reports	Tests	Teaching Materials
<i>Spelling</i>		
•An Investigation into Disability in Spelling: PhD thesis (1932)	•Essentials in Teaching and Testing Spelling (1932)	•The Essential Spelling List (1932)
		•A Spelling List for Seniors (1940)
•Essentials in Teaching and Testing Spelling(1932)		
<i>Reading</i>		
•The Psychology and Teaching of Reading (1945)		•Happy Venture Readers (1939 onwards) and other materials
		•The Wide Range Readers (1948 onwards)
<i>General</i>		
•Backwardness in the Basic Subjects (1942)	•The Essential Intelligence Test (1940)	
	•Diagnostic and Attainment Testing (1950)	

From: Andrews (1982)

Among the research studies carried out by his department in Birmingham between 1947 and 1950 were formal and activity methods of teaching English, factor analyses of reading skill and interests at age 10 years, suitability of text and leisure books to the "tastes and capacities of children of different ages," and the intelligibility of school and university textbooks in geography.

It is clear that Schonell's work sprang from the emerging discipline of educational psychology, pioneered in England by Burt. Schonell referred to his work as the application of scientific research to reading instruction. In some ways, his contributions seem to fit well with Chapter 7 of Nila Banton Smith's history of reading instruction in which she termed the period 1925-1935 a decade of "scientific investigation in reading," though for Schonell's work the time period was a little later. It is difficult to gauge to what extent he built upon American research. The main contact seems to have been with David H. Russell whom he cites in *The Psychology and Teaching of Reading*. Russell (1963) also contributed a reminiscence in the special issue of *The Slow Learning Child* mentioned earlier. He began

The lives of every school child in England and Australia today have been influenced by the work of Fred J. Schonell. School children of the United States and Canada have also been affected by his research and other work on the psychology and pedagogy of reading, arithmetic, writing and spelling. The influence on Canadian and American children may not be so direct as on the other Commonwealth pupils but it is just as real – and as beneficial. (p. 171)

While Russell indicated that Schonell's influence in the USA had been primarily through his research writings, I have found little evidence of this in citations. Indeed, Schonell's wife and research collaborator seems better known, at least to special educators, through her work in cerebral palsy.

<sup>1</sup>This was renamed *The Exceptional Child* in 1976 and again in 1989 as the *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*.

Russell also commented

One of the interesting parts of the book [*Backwardness in the Basic Subjects*] was Schonell's attempt to apply diagnostic and remedial methods to children's writing or composition. This area of school work is still relatively neglected in educational research. Previous work in the United States had developed quality scales for measuring composition ability in a general way but Schonell's work was among the first to attempt to break down the evaluation of compositions into more specific elements. There is now general agreement that teachers may disagree widely with one another and with themselves in grading children's writing but that marking for certain specifics is more reliable. Schonell's research pointed the way in this direction and should be extended in various ways. (p. 172)

By the time that the 4th edition of *The Psychology and Teaching of Reading* was published in 1961, there is evidence that Schonell was aware of American researchers, including Eames, Anderson and Dearborn, Dolch, Gray, Olsen, Helen Robinson and Spache.

Of course, to have produced a set of readers which were in use almost throughout the British Commonwealth is a heavy responsibility. Even more so, to have popularized a reading test such as his R1 (a list of graded words in which each word added one tenth of a year to the Reading Age) eventually brought severe criticism when head teachers used it to assess progress and class teachers drilled pupils in those particular words.

Schonell himself told some tales indicating how pervasive became the activity of preparing reading books.

On one occasion when Fred Schonell was working on his readers, a salesman knocked on his door and asked if he wanted to buy any children's books. The man was not successful. He was told that the householder was trying to write the things – not buy them. Another incident occurred when the Schonells were entering New Zealand. A Customs Officer, examining the passport of Professor Schonell, said: "I see my son studies your spelling list," to which he received the reply: "Yes, I do apologise, but you are going to let me in, aren't you?" A more personal note was struck in the far north of Australia, when Fred Schonell visited Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. At one of the Mission schools for aborigine children, when he enquired what the class was doing, the children told him that "they were reading Fred's books." (Sanders, 1963, p. 140)

To give you some feeling for the reading series which Schonell produced (assisted by Sergeant and Flowerdew), I have a number of slides taken from his readers.

His publisher at Oliver and Boyd offered the following comment:

We at Oliver and Boyd's worked closely with Fred on all his major works and of course participated in his triumphs. At one sales conference, after a successful promotional campaign in some part of the world, someone facetiously suggested the slogan "The sun never sets on the Happy Venture!" Pause for laughter all round – nevertheless it was true. If one travels from Queensland to New Zealand the long way round, across Australia, and by way of such places as Hong Kong, Malaya, Burma, India, Malta, the British Isles, South Africa, the Azores, the West Indies and Canada, there will always be a place where a boy or girl is learning to read by the help of books written by Sir Fred Schonell. (Stewart, 1963, p. 167)

Schonell, the person, was not only a reading researchers and educator. At one point he was invited to direct UNESCO's Department of Education (Wall, 1963). His interests upon being appointed principal executive (Vice-Chancellor) of the University of Queensland spread somewhat. He initiated studies of females in university education, the education of Aborigines, the impact on families of a child with intellectual disability, and the language of Australian workers.

Perhaps in the United States Schonell would have been more specialized, but particularly upon his return to Australia, he was called upon to exert leadership in many fields, and he left to others the task of developing his early work in literacy research and education.

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