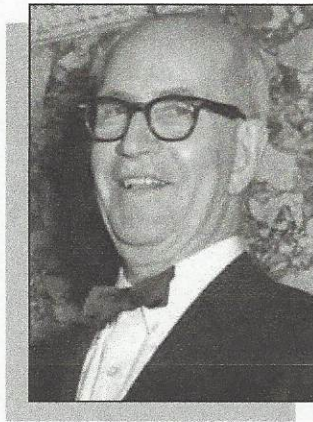


CHAPTER 14



Arthur Irving Gates (1890–1972): Educational Psychology and the Study of Reading



By Misty Sailors

Historical Research Process

STUDENTS OF HISTORICAL research beware: While the Internet is an excellent source of information, personal information about someone you are researching often cannot be located there. Such was the case with my search for information on Arthur Irving Gates to find who he was and what he contributed to the field of reading. Being an avid user of the Internet, I began my search on Gates there to see what the larger community knew and thought

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about him. Using several search engines, many of the websites that I uncovered revolved around four elements: (1) links to the vitae of people who have held the Arthur I. Gates Endowed Chair at Columbia University; (2) Gates's writings that are archived by the *Teachers College Record* (<http://www.tcrecord.org>); (3) Gates's work that centered on perhaps his best-known products, his reading tests; and (4) links to bookstores that sell copies of the books that Gates authored. Although this was a helpful beginning, it did not lead to any significant personal information on Gates, not even a biography.

Because my Internet search left me with so little personal information, I did what all good researchers do. I e-mailed a colleague, Ed Fry, and asked, "Who in the world might have known Gates personally, and where in the world would I find that person?" Ed, known for his unfailing willingness to help, suggested that I get in touch with Walter MacGinitie because he had worked with Gates at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City, New York, USA. I called MacGinitie, and he was more than happy to accommodate my request, initially by sending me a paper he had presented at the 25th Annual Convention of the International Reading Association in 1980 (MacGinitie, 1980), and later by participating in a telephone interview. In this paper, MacGinitie speaks highly of Gates, calling him a "scholar and a gentleman" (p. 1). In the telephone interview, MacGinitie was more than helpful, giving me access to one of the only two other people I could locate who had actually worked with Gates. Walter's paper was, therefore, the first step along a trail that took me to Gates's autobiography and his many contributions to the field of reading and reading instruction.

Personal and Professional Life

Throughout his life, Gates was known to be a dignified and generous person, albeit a very private one. MacGinitie, a recipient of the Macmillan Fellowship at Gates's Language Arts Institute at Teachers College, described him as someone who was very meticulous about the quality of his work. For example, MacGinitie remembered one evening when he and his wife arrived at the Gates's apartment in New York City. They had been invited to join Gates and his wife at the Metropolitan Opera, a cultural event that Gates adored. However, upon arriving they discovered Gates busy at work on a set of proofs he had just received. His decision to edit his work at the expense of attending one of his favorite events was very much in keeping with other deci-

sions that Gates made throughout his life (W.H. MacGinitie, personal communication, July 18, 2005).

The youngest son of William P. and Lenore (Gaylord) Gates, descendants of English and Scottish immigrants to New England, Arthur Irving Gates was born on September 22, 1890, in Red Wing, Minnesota, USA. After moving around for some time, his family settled in northwest California. His father supported a wife, a step-son (Lenore was a widow with a young son when she married William), and two younger sons by working in the lumbering business (Gates, 1971, p. 189).

Gates reported that his mother taught him to read just after his third birthday and it was reading that kept him out of trouble in school during his early years. One teacher allowed him to spend time in the so-called library, a dark attic room open only to teachers. He filled the remainder of his childhood and early adolescent years working on the family farm and at a local general store, organizing a baseball sandlot team, debating on the school debate team, and writing for the county's daily paper. Upon graduation from high school, Gates had to make a decision as to what career path he would take. He was offered a salary to play professional baseball, the chance to continue working at the general store with the promise of becoming a partner, and a scholarship to attend the University of California at Berkeley. At the insistence of his teachers, he chose the last option. During his spare time at Berkeley, Gates again played baseball and joined the debate team, and he wrote for the college newspaper (Gates, 1971, pp. 190–192).

Gates was uncertain as to what he would major in as he entered Berkeley. His teachers encouraged a career in teaching, medicine, or law. Gates, however, became very interested in psychology during his freshman year. Not caring that people at the time thought of psychologists as “vagrant mind readers” (Gates, 1964, p. 297), Gates followed his “compulsion to be a scientist” (p. 297) and study psychology. After a year off from college to recoup financially, Gates returned to Berkeley as a student assistant in the psychology department. His undergraduate work took a turn toward the unfamiliar when his advisor, Warner Brown, suggested that he read more and attend lectures less. Brown also suggested that Gates engage in research before his senior year. Gates followed this advice and during his senior year conducted two lines of research—laboratory experiments and group tests. The latter produced data that Gates evaluated statistically and then used for closer study of individuals from the group (Gates, 1971, pp. 192, 194–195). Three of

his first experimental studies were published that year; he joked that his career was founded upon a yawn since in one of the three studies he demonstrated that most people get a little drowsy after lunch (Gates, 1964, p. 297). Gates received his bachelor's degree in 1914.

Although Gates began his first two years of graduate work in California, he found himself becoming increasingly attracted to the work of James McKeen Cattell (see chapter 1, this volume), Robert Sessions Woodworth (see chapter 2, this volume), and Edward Lee Thorndike (see chapter 5, this volume) at Columbia University. Once again, Gates found himself making a career-guiding decision: He was offered both a fellowship at Stanford University and a teaching assistantship at Columbia University. His attraction to the unfolding research at Columbia clinched the decision, and Gates chose the Columbia position (Gates, 1971, p. 195). While he was a graduate student at Columbia, Gates's primary appointment was spent assisting his mentor, Cattell, in his classes as well as tutoring Cattell's children in their home. He once described the Cattell children as full of life and told stories of how they would bring snakes in from the outdoors and place them under his chair (J. Nurss, personal communication, July 19, 2005).

It was during his graduate years at Columbia that Gates enrolled in one of Thorndike's general school psychology courses, which Gates (1971) described as "new, ingenious, exceedingly interesting, and often puzzling" (p. 196). After the completion of his dissertation in 1916, Gates was invited by Thorndike only a year later to join his department at Teachers College. Left speechless by the offer because he had never taught a day in his life, Gates quickly accepted the position. In an address made at the 50th anniversary celebration of a chapter of Phi Delta Kappa at Berkeley, Gates (1964) reported that in his early years as a professor at Columbia, he often struggled at times to "desperately get my head above the torrent for an occasional breath of sanity" (p. 298). His colleagues, whom he described as engaging in "enthusiastic, fearless, and wacky activity" (p. 298), included John Dewey, Woodworth, and Cattell at Columbia as well as Charles Hubbard Judd of the University of Chicago (see chapter 4, this volume). He reported that he enjoyed every minute of the work he did with these "extraordinarily brilliant, energetic, courageous, and well-informed thinkers" (p. 298).

Later Gates summarized his relation to progressive education, the school of thought led by John Dewey. For the first quarter-century of his professional life (from about 1917 to 1942), he said he had incurred criticism for

not being a sufficiently enthusiastic supporter of Dewey. During his last quarter century, he was also criticized—but this time for being a naive supporter of Dewey's progressive ideas (Gates, 1971, p. 211).

One of Gates's most well-known early studies (Gates, Batchelder, & Betzner, 1926) was in effect critical of progressive education. Gates investigated the differences in the performance of children from a classroom in which a "systematic" method of teaching was employed and a classroom in which an "opportunistic" method of teaching was employed. He defined the "systematic" method as consisting of daily lessons that were defined, prescribed, and strictly adhered to, based on the nature of the subject matter (p. 681). He described the "opportunistic" method as a less definite program of studies and activities that was meant to conform to the inclinations and interests of the students in the class. The teacher in this classroom followed the "self-initiated urges of the pupils to learn to read, write, spell, etc." (p. 681), while still setting up a lesson and projects in which the students were encouraged to participate (such as writing a response to an invitation to a birthday party). These lessons were the impetus for necessary information and skills.

Through this yearlong study, Gates documented the differences in teaching methods and measured the differences in learning by the children in the two classes. He found that both groups were equally interested in school activities and that "opportunistic teaching" resulted in slightly higher achievements in the motor functions of children than "modern systematic teaching." However, "modern systematic teaching" resulted in considerably greater average achievements in the other school subjects—arithmetic, spelling, and silent and oral reading (p. 693). Herein lay what Gates described as the crux of the study; that is, one method achieved academic achievement results and the other paved the path for children to learn to like to read. Surely this study influenced the future work of this pioneer and others that followed him.

During World War I, Gates had begun teaching courses for and assisting Thorndike, who had been named chairman of the Committee on Classification of Personnel. In one of these classes Gates met his future wife, Georgina Stickland, who graduated with her PhD from the psychology department at Columbia University at the age of 22. The couple married in 1920 and had two children, a boy and a girl. Gates's son, Robert Gaylord, went on to earn a doctor of science degree in mechanical engineering and metallurgy. Gates's daughter, Katherine Blair, was awarded a PhD degree in English literature from Harvard-Radcliffe (Gates, 1971, pp. 197–200).

Although Gates (1971) reported that his most productive line of research occurred between 1920 and 1935 (p. 206)—and, indeed, he published numerous titles on psychology, vocabulary, reading tests, and reading improvement during these years (see later sections of this chapter)—his many years at Columbia gave him the opportunity to work with a number of outstanding graduate students who went on to be contributors to the field of reading. They included Ruth May Strang (see chapter 15, this volume), the future anthropologist Margaret Mead, Guy L. Bond (who became one of the founding members of the Reading Hall of Fame), David Harris Russell (see chapter 16, this volume), and Walter MacGinitie.

In addition to producing research and textbooks for psychology students, Gates is considered to be one of the two “giants” in the field of reading instruction (Smith, 1965, p. 222). Writing for Macmillan in the 1930s, Gates was the senior author of the Work-Play Books, which included the Peter and Peggy readers, the Nick and Dick readers (Gates & Huber, 1930, 1931), and other books. These books, very similar to their more memorable counterparts, the Dick and Jane readers written for Scott Foresman by William Scott Gray (see chapter 13, this volume) and May Hill Arbuthnot (see chapter 9, this volume) and the readers authored later for Ginn by Russell, operated under the same concept—present words as wholes, provide children with multiple opportunities to practice them, and introduce new words slowly. This approach, often referred to as the “look-and-say” or “whole-word” method, was the result of carefully sequenced steps designed to support reading progress through the elementary grades. These leveled readers consisted of preprimers, primers, and texts identified with grade levels. The basal texts were crafted to control for difficulty level primarily through the rate of introduction and repetition of key vocabulary. Gates’s books, in conjunction with Gray’s, Russell’s, and similar series, became the mainstay of U.S. reading instruction, representing the formula for success in teaching reading and a consensus about beginning reading instruction from the 1930s to the 1950s (Chall, 1967).

During his time at Teachers College, Gates was also involved in social activism. For example, during the U.S. Great Depression of the 1930s, he devised a citywide remedial reading project, funded by the Federal Civil Works Administration, that employed about 200 previously unemployed New York teachers. These teachers, under the direction of Gates and 23 supervisors he had trained, went out and worked with children in the city schools who

had severe reading problems. A second project, The Writers' Project, was designed to give unemployed writers the opportunity to construct small and relatively easy reading books with advanced interest levels (Gates, 1971, pp. 208–209).

Gates also offered advice to young scholars. In a speech at a Phi Delta Kappa meeting, Gates warned against yielding to the “pressure of the purse” (1964, p. 299). That is, because academics face poverty early in their career (a natural result of graduate school), the temptation to supplement an academic income through consultant work and the creation of educational materials is considerable. Gates cautioned young scientists to keep these enterprises within reason. He also warned them against becoming infected with “verbalism.” This disease, he said, causes people to use “cumbersome expressions, loaded with professional clichés and technicalities” and is indicative of people whose “ideas are neither very clear nor very original” (p. 299). A rare glimpse of humor can be found in his last statement on this subject:

To the young educator, especially the prospective scientist, I say most seriously: If you don't understand it clearly, don't say it or write it at all. And when you do say it or write it, avoid, as you would the plague, trying to speak or write it like a college professor. (p. 300)

Gates offered more frivolous advice to Joanne Nurss, who was helping him revise his reading tests. She must go, he said, to one of Nila Banton Smith's presentations at IRA because the hats that Smith wore were “absolutely wonderful” (J. Nurss, personal communication, July 19, 2005).

Gates retired in 1956 from the Department of Psychology and Research Methods at Teachers College. This mandated retirement did not stop him from doing what he loved best, researching and writing. He stayed active at Teachers College, being scrupulous about staying out of the affairs of the college, especially college politics. That same year, Gates was named supervisor of the Institute of Language Arts, an institute for research that he agreed to finance himself. The only external funding he received was through a fellowship that Macmillan agreed to support. He was provided with one graduate student per year under this fellowship. The first of several recipients of this fellowship, Walter MacGinitie, helped in the revision of the Gates Primary Reading Tests, first published in 1926 (1926a). Known as the Gates-MacGinitie reading tests, the first revised edition appeared in 1965, and it has

been revised several times since then (MacGinitie, MacGinitie, Maria, & Dreyer, 2000).

MacGinitie (1980) notes that Gates continued to do personal research in the Institute. One of Gates's biggest interests at that time was exploring the ways in which children help each other. Although he was not considered to be a classroom teacher, in part because he was not very charismatic (W.H. MacGinitie, personal communication, July 18, 2005), Gates did enjoy working with children on this project, MacGinitie reported.

After his retirement, Gates was the recipient of several prestigious awards that reflected the substantial contributions he had made to the field of education. In 1961, the International Reading Association presented Gates with the William S. Gray Citation of Merit Award. In 1964, Gates was the first recipient of the Award for Distinguished Contributions to Educational Research, now given annually by the American Educational Research Association (AERA). The International Reading Association once again recognized Gates when the organization presented him in 1968 with its first International Citation of Merit for his service and contributions to understanding the reading process and reading instruction throughout the world. In addition, Gates received awards from outside the field of reading. For example, in 1971 the National Society for the Study of Education invited him to write his autobiography for their prestigious yearbook, *Leaders in American Education* (Gates, 1971).

Gates provided much service to his profession at the college, national, and international levels. In addition to other administrative positions he held at Teachers College, he was the executive officer of his department from 1933 to 1956. He served as chair of the educational section of the American Association of Applied Psychology (1940–1942). He was also the vice president (1942) and then president (1943) of the AERA. In addition, he was a member of the American Association of School Administrators, the American Association of University Professors, and the National Education Association. Gates became a council member and then the president of the Educational Psychology section of the American Psychological Association (1948–1949). He also held memberships in Sigma Xi, Alpha Sigma Phi, Phi Delta Kappa, and the Century Club (“Dr. Arthur Gates,” 1972; Gates, 1971; Tostberg, 1971).

After many years of contributing to the fields of psychology and reading, Gates died on August 24, 1972, survived by his wife, daughter, son, and a grandchild. As with other aspects of his life, his funeral was private (“Dr.

Arthur Gates,” 1972). The reading community honored Gates with a posthumous induction as a pioneer into the esteemed community of the Reading Hall of Fame (C. Harrison, personal communication, December 10, 2005).

Philosophical Beliefs and Guiding Principles

Coming of age at the same time that experimental psychology was gathering speed clearly influenced Gates’s principles and the work he did. His research and pragmatic work were guided by the experimental nature of psychology and were heavily influenced by the works of the German psychologists (e.g., Wilhelm Wundt, H. von Helmholtz, and Ernst Meumann); the translated French reports of Alfred Binet and H. Bernheim; and the U.S. psychologists, including William James, Cattell, Woodworth, Judd, Lewis Terman, and Thorndike (Gates, 1971, p. 194).

In the field of educational psychology, Gates was a leader. He wrote his first book on the topic, *Psychology for Students of Education*, in 1923. His second book, *Elementary Psychology*, was published in 1925 and later revised in 1928 (1928a). He also revised Thorndike’s 1912 version of *Education: A First Book* with a bit of trepidation, realizing that he himself deviated from Thorndike’s terminology and systematic theories in his own work (Gates, 1971, p. 205). Gates reported that Thorndike was interested in discussing any differences that this exercise might bring forth. The book was published under the new title, *Elementary Principles of Education* (Thorndike & Gates, 1929). Gates’s final contribution to the field of psychology came in 1942 with the revision of his *Psychology for Students of Education* (1923), now titled *Educational Psychology* (Gates, Jersild, McConnell, & Challman, 1942). It even had a Hebrew edition.

MacGinitie (1980) wrote that Gates went through a professional identity change during his career. Initially, when Gates came to Teachers College, he viewed himself as an experimental psychologist. Later, Gates began to divide his time between general psychological issues and pragmatic problems in education. He reported that he could do more for education by applying his “kit of scientific concepts and techniques” to the pragmatic problems teachers faced than to just confine them to the “typically narrow and artificial situations” of the experimental laboratory (Gates, 1971, p. 203). This was the beginning of a lifelong commitment to research and influence on reading instruction that spanned decades.

When this shift occurred is unclear, but it is clear that Gates's enrollment in Thorndike's Psychology of the School Subjects class during his first year as a student at Columbia University was instrumental in moving his interests away from laboratory tasks to the "multitude of complex and puzzling problems one must face in the daily tasks of teaching" (Gates, 1971, p. 203). Gates reported that his focus at Columbia changed when he became an administrator. As a result, he moved from analytical, experimental, and theoretical research in psychology to using the "mass-statistical approach" (Gates, quoted in Tostberg, 1971, p. 228), a move that he later regretted (Gates, 1964, p. 300). In short, Gates considered himself to be an educational psychologist who had contributed significantly to the fields of psychology and reading (MacGinitie, 1980).

And contribute significantly, he did. Five years before his forced retirement, Gates (1951/2002) summed up his philosophy of reading and reading instruction: "There can be but two real goals toward which we aim in teaching reading—...to teach children to read well and to love to read" (p. 49). Gates's work shows that he was deeply committed to improving the quality of living, both in individuals and in society, which is evident in his belief that formal education was the fundamental way to remake U.S. society (Tostberg, 1971, p. 229).

Contributions to the Field of Reading

Although Gates was considered to be, both by his colleagues and himself, an educational psychologist and not a reading researcher, the vast majority of his work, especially his later work, focused on reading and reading instruction. In this section, I will highlight the contributions that Gates made to the field of reading, especially in the areas of reading readiness, reading methodology, reading materials, and remedial reading instruction.

Reading Readiness

Gates contributed significantly to the movement of "reading readiness" (Harrison, 1936) with his seminal piece, *Methods of Determining Reading Readiness* (Gates, Bond, & Russell, 1939). He recognized that "pupils differ greatly in their interest and ability in learning to read" and that "failure in reading results from starting to teach a pupil to read before he is 'ready'" (p. 1), an inherently dangerous practice. Using tests on intelligence, auditory

acuity and discrimination, visual function and discrimination, reading readiness (including tests of phonetic abilities), memory, visual perception of numbers and words, the alphabet, and types of errors in word recognition and the ability to complete stories, Gates and his colleagues demonstrated that “the most useful tests for predicting reading achievement in the primary grades are measures of reading attainments at the time” (p. 26). That is, the best way to predict how well a child will learn to read is to measure his reading abilities before he or she can read.

Although he later refused to use the term *readiness* when talking about early reading instruction (W.H. MacGinitie, personal communication, July 18, 2005), presumably because by then the term had fallen into disrepute, he, along with Guy Bond and David Russell, was well ahead of his time in recognizing that “the abilities directly involved in reading are acquired long before a child enters school” (Gates, et al., 1939, p. 26) and that reading readiness is “something to be taught and not a series of attributes for the development of which a teacher can do nothing but wait” (p. 53). The Gates reading readiness tests were a result of this work.

Reading Methodology

Gates’s second significant contribution to the field of reading was a result of the work he began early in his career at Columbia University. He believed that reading should not be taught or learned as an isolated activity. Instead, he believed that it should be integrated into a “well-rounded program of linguistic, artistic, dramatic, constructive, and exploratory activities” (Gates, 1930, p. 193). In other words, reading should not be taught as an end in and of itself, but rather should be taught in the context of activities that children find interesting and essential to the expression of their interests. His first book on reading methodology, *New Methods in Primary Reading*, appeared in 1928 (1928b), soon followed by *Interest and Ability in Reading* (1930). He continued to write about this topic throughout his career. Titles that have influenced the field of reading instruction include *Reading for Public School Administrators* (1931), *Reading Attainment in Elementary Schools: 1957 and 1937* (1937/1961), and *Teaching Reading* (1953/1962).

In his seminal publication, *New Methods in Primary Reading*, Gates (1928b) introduced a new method of teaching (and learning) phonetics, as it was then termed. This method represented his growing aversion to the

teaching (and learning) of phonics, which he considered a practice devoid of real reading—that is, of reading for meaning. In his *Interest and Ability in Reading* (1930), Gates expressed his belief that the development of all reading abilities should be the “natural and necessary result” of engagement in reading (p. 194). A reading vocabulary was not the result of artificial word study, he believed, but rather was acquired “more economically and effectively when the pupil repeatedly encounters the words in regular reading contexts” (p. 196). Simply stated, children should be provided with an increase in the amount of reading material based on the words they are to learn, and the words should be practiced within this context until they are learned.

Similarly, Gates believed that the traditional teaching of phonic skills was a “wasteful” way of providing children with useful techniques for recognizing new and unfamiliar words because the transfer of the skills was incomplete. He was convinced that these orthodox techniques provided “no experience in reading for the thought” (1930, p. 202) and that some children overused these habits until they were not able to see words as wholes. Further, and more alarming to Gates, was the fact that teaching by the traditional phonics methods does not allow children to see how the processes of reading interact with one another. He believed the best method of “attack” upon unfamiliar words in reading to be one in which context clues were used at the same time as a “quick perspective analysis of the word-form elements” (p. 202). He dubbed this new method the *intrinsic method* (p. 204) of developing phonic skills in word recognition and claimed that this method would develop them so that these skills would work when and where needed while a child was engaged in the act of reading. (He had already used the term “intrinsic” in earlier publications [e.g. Gates, 1928b, p. 40].)

Reading Materials

The new intrinsic method was presented to teachers and children in the reading materials created by Gates during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, his third contribution to the reading field. Gates’s Work-Play Books were the way in which his idea of the intrinsic method of teaching phonics instantiated itself. Immediately after children read their assigned passages in their basal reader, they encountered a series of questions that had as discriminators words that varied by onsets or rimes (to use today’s terms):

Play you are a fairy's child.

1. What is around your garden?

A light well.

A high wall.

2. What is the wall made of?

brown brick bright

3. How do you get into your garden?

Through a little green gate.

Through a little green great. (Gates & Huber, 1930, p. 32)

The purpose of these exercises was twofold. First, these questions were intended to tell the child if he or she had comprehended the main idea of the selection and to encourage rereading if necessary. Second, and perhaps most representative of Gates's work, these exercises were intended to help the child learn to distinguish between parts of words so he or she would be able to "distinguish the words which express the thought from other word forms that contain similar elements" (1930, p. 207). Reading instruction such as this, Gates believed, would help the child develop an insight into word-form structure and would be more useful than the traditional word study of the time. Through this method children would be unaware of learning phonics, and their minds would be focused on the thought of the passage. The method, Gates believed, provided for the transfer of skills and presented the opportunity for children to use both context clues and word-form clues simultaneously (p. 208).

Gates was innovative in his emphasis on the role that interest and ability played in reading. It was his book on this topic, *Interest and Ability in Reading* (1930), together with his book for public school administrators published the following year (1931) that led to the understanding that materials for reading instruction with children needed to be based on (a) experiences of children; (b) interests of children; (c) a wide range of topics; and (d) a wide variety of genres, including poetry, informative texts, stories, and what he called work-play texts—that is, texts that "direct or suggest to the reader some form of activity to be pursued" (1931, p. 16). In addition, Gates believed that materials in reading programs should be presented topically and followed for a period of two to four weeks. He also insisted that the illustrations in children's materials should be of "real art quality" (1931, p. 24) and that the work accompanying the basal reader should encourage individual and cooperative enterprises.

In 1930, Gates put his theories into practice in his own basal readers (with the help of Miriam Blanton Huber and Jean Ayer), published by Macmillan from the 1930s through the 1950s. The first series produced by Gates and his colleagues was the Work-Play books, published in 1930. Consisting of a teacher's manual and children's readers (grades 1–5), these books were written as a result of Gates's progressive ideas. The authors considered these materials to have a central place inside the reading program and to be a way of providing children with opportunities to engage in “work type” reading (Gates, Huber, & Ayer, 1932, p. 10).

In these readers, children's experiences with reading centered on following directions to complete a project. According to Gates, these books were the incentive for the children who read them to learn to do things. The books represented the research that demonstrated the conditions under which children learned to read, as espoused in Gates's intrinsic methods (Vance, 1985, p. 302). Gates published the Good Companion series in 1936 and revised the Work-Play Books series in 1939 (renamed the New Work-Play Books series) and again in 1945 (renamed Today's Work-Play Books series). Gates published another series in the early 1950s called the Macmillan Readers. Printed with the orange-and-black pictures that represented readers of that era, as the United States struggled out of the Great Depression, the Work-Play Book series of the 1930s was the first to have a design embossed on the back cover of the books (Smith, 1965, p. 223). The series' primer, *Peter and Peggy* (Gates & Huber, 1931), was “apparently the only one of that era to include pictures of literacy in context, such as print in public places or portrayals of parents reading to children” (E.J. Monaghan, personal communication, August 4, 2005).

Perhaps Gates's most significant contribution as a member of the basal reading establishment was the careful control of vocabulary in basal readers as a result of his work on vocabulary, his *A Reading Vocabulary for the Primary Grades* (Gates, 1926b). Gates described the appearance of too many and too difficult words in children's readers as a “burden” for young readers and discouraged the use of heavy vocabulary and the teaching of isolated elements of any sort (Gates, 1931, p. 53). The following excerpts summarize the characteristics of a reading program that Gates (1931) believed would ensure successful experiences with text:

1. Reading materials—story, informative, poetic, and work and play types—are used from the beginning in proper proportions and relations.

2. The various materials are organized...to make a given number of words most widely useful....
3. [Each new word must be introduced with] ample context clues [that] will enable the pupils to derive the meaning and pronunciation of the word with a high percentage of successes [sic]. (pp. 55–56)

In all of this—in his handling of reading readiness, methodology, and materials—Gates emphasized the importance of reading for meaning. His view was that the context of what was read should smooth the way to word identification.

Remedial Reading Instruction

A fourth contribution Gates made to reading and reading instruction centered on his work in the field of remedial reading instruction, or reading instruction with children who struggled with learning to read. (In keeping with the terminology used at the time of Gates's work, I will continue to use his words and phrases.) Gates published his first book in this area in 1922, *The Psychology of Reading and Spelling, with Special Reference to Disability*. *The Improvement of Reading: A Program of Diagnostic and Remedial Methods* was published in 1927 and revised in 1935 and 1947. Another book on remedial instruction was published in 1933, *Reversal Tendencies in Reading: Causes, Diagnosis, Prevention and Correction* (Gates & Bennett, 1933), and a fourth publication on this topic was available in 1942, *Teaching Reading to Slow-Learning Pupils* (Gates & Pritchard, 1942).

It was, perhaps, *The Improvement of Reading* (1927 and other editions) that demonstrated Gates's impressive contribution to the area of remedial instruction. In this book he defines remedial instruction as “first and primarily [an] individual prescription for individual needs” (Gates, 1927/1935, p. 25). Of the first edition of this book Miles A. Tinker wrote, in 1932,

The development of a program of research dealing with materials and methods of the teaching of reading by Dr. A.I. Gates and his associates in the Institute of Educational Research of Teachers College has resulted in contributions that may be classified as among the most important appearing during the past decade. Dr. Gates gives an outline of what promises to become one of our most effective method[s] of teaching reading. (quoted in Tostberg, 1971, p. 223)

According to Gates (1927/1935), contemporary instruction for children who found learning to read difficult (or dull children, as they were referred to at the time) was radically different in type and intent from traditional reading instruction and was characterized by “stunts” that were “novel devices” (p. 26). He went on to remind his readers that the children with whom these devices were employed were the very children who were in the “most need of the best possible teaching [practices]” (p. 26). Gates argued that remedial teaching should follow the same principles that were used in any other type of instruction.

These guiding principles included the careful selection of reading materials, the careful scheduling of the program, and the careful identification of children’s needs through a variety of reading tests. A major portion of Gates’s work centered on the use of appropriate tests to gauge student abilities and needs because “reading is not a single ability which is utilized in every situation but, on the contrary, a number of abilities” (Gates, 1927/1935, p. 40). For the youngest of children, he espoused testing on word recognition, sentence reading, and paragraph reading. For the older children, he advocated four types of tests: (1) reading to appreciate the general significance (i.e., the main idea), (2) reading to predict the outcome of given events, (3) reading to understand precise directions, and (4) reading to note details.

Not only did Gates identify the types of tests that would be helpful in identifying the needs of students, he also offered suggestions for the instruction of such students. For each type of test listed above, teachers could take a number of approaches, all of which centered on the idea that good reading instruction for children with difficulties is just good reading instruction. Children who struggle with learning to read, Gates affirmed, need the same kind of instruction that other children need: They just need it more intensely and regularly.



During his career, Gates contributed to the publication of over 300 books, articles, and presentations (Tostberg, 1971, p. 226). He had a huge influence on the field of reading and reading instruction. His student, David Russell (quoted in Tostberg, 1971), summed up Gates’s contributions:

In the field of reading instruction Gates’s original researches and wide-ranging writings have made him one of the most influential figures in the United

States and throughout the world. His [intrinsic phonics] method, with some later variations, has become standard practice in most American schools. It is no exaggeration to say that [Gates's] books largely changed reading from an isolated and mechanical exercise to a series of consecutive, meaningful, and zestful activities for American children. (p. 224)

Not everyone agreed with Russell's assessment. In 1955 Rudolf Flesch attacked Gates and other pioneers in the reading field for abandoning systematic phonics. A graduate of Teachers College himself, Flesch grouped the work of Gates among works that used the "look-and-say" method and blamed the works of Gates and Gray for the "alarming functional illiteracy" in the United States (Flesch, 1955/1985, p. viii).

Lessons for the Future

In many ways, Gates was ahead of his time because many of the topics he wrote about speak to reading educators today—so much so, that the International Reading Association chose to republish in 2002 an article that Gates originally wrote in 1951. Gates advocates several principles that are highly relevant today in this piece, titled "What should we teach in reading?"

First, he advocates that teachers teach children to read well and to love to read. He describes good reading as "something very different from being able merely to recognize printed phonograms and words or even to pronounce the series of words in a sentence" (Gates, 1951/2002, p. 50). Reading well, Gates argued, was a highly coordinated set of skills (how well the child reads) *and* how much he or she enjoys doing it. Teaching children to orchestrate the techniques involved in reading requires "shrewd guidance" by the teacher (p. 51). Teachers, he writes, can become pressured to "make a quick showing of some kind of skill in reading" (p. 51) through the use of programmed materials focused on phonic drills. Although he never supported the exclusion of phonics instruction—in fact, he addressed it as a necessary part of reading instruction in many of his writings—Gates did believe that children who were taught to read this way would not grow up to enjoy reading.

What is necessary, he wrote toward the end of his career at Teachers College, was the need to provide children with "an abundance of opportunity to read naturally and successfully" (Gates, 1951/2002, p. 51) in materials that are appropriate for their ability. That is, if we want children to learn to love to read, we must provide them with opportunities to engage in print

experiences that are interesting, appropriate, and supported with high-quality instruction.

If we had been sitting in the audience at the 1968 Annual Convention of the International Reading Association, listening to Gates give his talk titled “The Tides of Time,” here are the words we would have heard:

The values of most reading materials and methods depend more upon what children do at the time in school and out, upon attitudes and abilities they possess, and upon the skills and habits of their teacher than upon any inherent, absolute virtue of the material or method itself. (quoted in MacGinitie, 1980, p. 14)

This speech has particular relevance to us as reading teachers today, given the highly politically charged climate of education.

Gates understood deeply the fact that all children come to school with different strengths and different instructional needs. He also understood that there are as many different ways to teach reading as there are children to be taught. In keeping with this fact, Gates advocated that a rigorous, systematic method of investigation be used to provide the basis for every program of reading instruction—no more, no less. We still have much to learn from the work of scholars like Arthur Irving Gates.

Reflection Questions

1. Although he has been described as apolitical and nonideological (Tostberg, 1971, p. 229), what would Gates say about reading instruction today, in general, and more specifically, with children who find learning to read difficult? Would he approve or disapprove of the use of highly scripted reading programs for such children?
2. What would Gates say about government mandates that require teachers to deliver a particular curriculum, rather than make their own choices of instruction and materials? What would he say about the way tests are being used today, in relation to identifying the instructional needs of students, wielding power over teachers and curricula, or both? What is your own opinion on the issues of government mandates and testing?
3. To what did Gates attribute his influence in the field of reading? What were his goals and purposes for working in the field of reading?

4. How was Gates's work similar to and different from the work of those other pioneers who were colleagues of Gates?
5. Do you agree or disagree with Gates's views on phonics instruction? How have his views informed and influenced the ways in which modern research addresses phonics instruction?

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