Grace Maxwell Fernald (1879-1950)
A Biographical Sketch

Grace Fernald was born in Clyde, Ohio, on November 29, 1879. Her early life with her family was spent in New York and New Jersey. She received her A.B. degree from Mt. Holyoke in 1903, and her M.A. degree from the same institution in 1905. In 1907, she received her Ph.D. degree in psychology from the University of Chicago.

In 1911, she became head of the psychological department and laboratory of the State Normal School at Los Angeles. The remainder of her career was spent at the Normal School and at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Grace Fernald's lasting contribution to the field of education is the method she developed for teaching disabled readers, a method which utilizes not only the conventional visual and auditory approaches, but kinesthetic and tactile cues, as well. The importance of kinesthetic and tactile stimuli in the process of learning to read had been largely overlooked, although references to the use of such stimuli can be found in the writings of Plato, Horace, and Seneca.

Dr. Fernald describes her method in Remedial Techniques in Basic School Subjects, published in 1943 and still widely used by reading teachers. It is one of the few "methods" books to survive for more than 25 years in a field in which great energy has been devoted to the search for new methods. It represents an effort to help disabled readers progress from "zero reading ability" to normal skill. At the beginning stage, the child learns each word by tracing it with his finger and saying it to himself, until he is able to write it without looking at the copy. Dr. Fernald further outlined a series of activities to assist non-readers beyond this beginning level toward that of normal reading skill. Growing sophistication in the diagnosis of learning difficulties in recent years has led special educators to turn increasingly to Fernald's kinesthetic techniques for teaching children unresponsive to the visual and auditory methods.

UCLA's Clinic School was founded by Dr. Fernald in 1921 and is now known as Fernald School. It is a continuing tribute to a person who, some 50 years ago, laid the foundations for much of current practice in the area of remediation of learning disorders.

Grace Fernald died in Los Angeles on January 16, 1950, at the age of 70.

P.I.

BIBLIOGRAPHY