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Source: *Elementary English*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (APRIL, 1958), pp. 252-254

Published by: National Council of Teachers of English

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41384747>

Accessed: 11-10-2015 15:54 UTC

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## Pioneers In Reading VI: Emmett Albert Betts

It was Monday, February 2, 1952, and more than 600 persons from most of the 48 states, Canada, and several additional foreign countries had gathered for the annual reading conference at Temple University. In years past other such conferences had been held at Pennsylvania State College, State College, Pennsylvania, and at the State Normal School, Oswego, New York. All of these had been under the direction of one of America's truly great pioneers in the field of psychology and education, Dr. Emmett Albert Betts.

Many of the people present at the Temple conference on this Monday morning knew Dr. Betts personally. Many of the others knew him only by reputation. However, when he appeared in Mitten Hall, accompanied by his charming co-worker and wife, Carolyn Welch, and carrying his ever-present brief case, there was little doubt that this famed scientist's reputation was well deserved.

After the program started, and as the conference progressed, the feeling grew that the philosophy Dr. Betts advocated was not opinion based upon theory, but conclusions based upon the research gathered while working with 20,000 children over a period of 30 years.

Dr. Betts maintained that too often teachers and parents permitted their thinking to be circumscribed by the grade concept. This idea caused "regimented instruction" which placed

all children in a given grade on the same page of the same book at the same time. Thus, the reading specialist explained, 40% of America's children were completely frustrated as a result of these arbitrary standards. Children who had reading disabilities were being asked to perform tasks which were at the time impossible for them. On the other hand, he stated, many bright students were being asked to conform

to routine in areas in which they had already acquired a high degree of proficiency. Delegates to the conference were told that something could be done about these problems. To begin with, Dr. Betts pointed out, "learning the child must precede teaching him." The present achievement levels of children should be established. Relatively simple and easy techniques which teachers may learn in order to establish these achievement levels were described at the conference. One of the best techniques, the Informal Reading Inventory,

was *demonstrated* and those present were given the opportunity to learn to use it.

When achievement levels were estimated, Dr. Betts said, the teacher should form as many groups as she could handle regardless of the so-called grade the child was in. This would mean that some children would be reading below grade level, others would be

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Dr. Betts

reading at grade level, and still others above grade level. Thus, most reading difficulties could be prevented, and children would be in learning situations that challenged rather than frustrated them. This he called "differentiated instruction," a term which has been heard around the educational world, and, where used, has given all children the right to learn.

The Temple conference was this writer's first contact with Dr. Betts. Over the years this association has grown closer. There have been many other conferences and many contacts, but the uniqueness of this man has never ceased to amaze those who know him well.

Although every aspect of child growth and development interests Dr. Betts, he divides his time equally between the children in the Betts Reading Clinic at Haverford, Pennsylvania, of which he is director, and the children in the classrooms of the nation. He advocates the developmental approach to the teaching of reading in the classroom, and, to this end, he has acted as reading consultant for school districts in all of the 48 states. He is dedicated to the ideal that all children shall have "Equal Opportunity to Learn." This is the motto of his reading clinic. The clinic, a monument to his life work, was established to enable him to pursue the research which is so much a part of him.

One has only to visit the reading clinic in order to feel the care and devotion with which he rescues children with reading problems.

Dr. Betts' research and experience goes back to his first position in Orient, Iowa, in 1922. At that time, he became interested in educational problems that kept him occupied for years to come. His years from 1922-1931 were full ones. During that time, he received his B.S. degree from Des Moines University, his M.A. from the University of Iowa and his Ph.D. from the same University. In this period of work, he held positions, not only at Orient, but later at Northboro, Iowa before moving on to become Research Assistant at the University.

After receiving his Ph.D. he subsequently became Director of the Reading Clinic and School Psychologist at Shaker Heights, Ohio; Director of the Reading Clinic and Director of Teacher Training at the State Normal School, Oswego, New York; Director of the Reading Clinic and Research Professor at Pennsylvania State College and Director of the Reading Clinic and Professor of Psychology at Temple University.

Through the years in all of these positions, research with children consumed a major part of his time. A large number of his findings run contrary to existing educational practices. He has not hesitated to attack these practices. This fact has often placed him at odds with those who are pleased with things as they are. This does not disturb Dr. Betts because he is secure in the knowledge that he can demonstrate all his findings. This he does during his frequent lecture tours throughout the United States and Canada.

Dr. Betts has written more than 500 articles and textbooks since 1925 and has made numerous major contributions to the field of reading and education.

His first efforts were directed toward a study of handbooks of 16 publishers of elementary school textbooks. His findings, as a result of this study, were published in the early 1930's.

The second major effort of Dr. Betts was directed toward problems of vision. Few of his contributions have had a more profound influence than his findings in this area. As a result of years of study, he published the Betts Visual Sensation and Perception Tests in 1934. Developed as a quick means of detecting binocular disorder that may contribute to visual inefficiency, these tests are currently used more than any other tests of this type. A recognized authority on vision, Dr. Betts has participated in conferences sponsored by the Academy of Ophthalmology of the American Medical Association and is a Fellow in the Distinguished

Service Foundation of Optometry and also the Graduate Society of Optometry.

The third major project of Dr. Betts resulted in the publication by Row, Peterson and Company in 1936 of *Prevention and Correction of Reading Difficulties*. Dr. Betts' findings had led him to the conclusion that most reading problems can be prevented. Furthermore, it was his belief that existing problems of reading difficulty are corrective rather than remedial in nature.

In 1925 Dr. Betts started using Informal Reading Inventories and Informal Word Recognition Tests as one aid in discovering specific reading needs. Since that time, the Informal Reading Inventory has become synonymous with his name. Teachers, parents, and doctors throughout the United States have been fascinated as they have watched him demonstrate this technique with children. Although his use of this instrument dates from 1925, it was not until 1939 that he published his first article on the subject.

In 1936 Dr. Betts began a project that was to consume ten years of devoted work and was to drastically influence educational philosophy in the field of reading. It culminated in 1946 in the publication of *Foundations of Reading Instruction*, published by American Book Company. Three complete revisions of the text have been offered by the publisher, with the latest one in 1957.

In addition to these attainments, Dr. Betts is the author of a series of language books, pub-

lished by Row, Peterson and Company; a popular series of spellers and a series of widely used readers, recently revised, published by American Book Company.

For the teen-ager with reading difficulty there is the high interest-low vocabulary American Adventure series edited by Dr. Betts and published by Wheeler Publishing Company.

The total influence of Dr. Betts cannot be fully estimated because he is still hard at work discovering new implications for teaching in all subject areas. His findings are constantly being published in professional magazines. In addition he is Editor-in-Chief of *Education* magazine.

Frequent articles are also contributed by him to *Visual Digest*, *Orthoptist*, *American Journal of Ophthalmology*, and the *Associated Journal of Optometry*.

No profile of Emmett Betts would be complete without mention of his wife, who carries on under her own name of Carolyn Welch. Miss Welch is supervisor of in-service teacher education at the Betts Reading Clinic. She is a reading authority in her own right and co-author of the Betts Basic Reader series.

One writer has called them "modern missionaries who are opening the windows of the mind." To many they are this and more. They are proponents of a philosophy, humane and workable, which engenders enthusiasm in those teachers and administrators imbued with the high calling of pushing aside every obstacle in teaching America's children to read.

### **Junior Literary Guild**

April, 1958, Junior Literary Guild selections:

For boys and girls 5 and 6 years old

*Who Is It?* by Zhenya Gay

Viking Press, \$2.50

For boys and girls 7 and 8 years old

*Taco, The Snoring Burro* by Helen Holland Graham, in collaboration with Barbara A. Huff

Abelard-Schuman, \$2.50

For boys and girls 9, 10, and 11 years old

*King Oberon's Forest* by Hilda van Stockum

Viking Press, \$2.75

For girls 12 to 16 years old

*Dust in the Gold Sack* by Helen Markley Miller

Doubleday, \$2.95

For boys 12 to 16 years old

*Snowshoe Thompson* by Adrien Stoutenburg and

Laura Nelson Baker

Scribner, \$3.00