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Pioneers in Reading III: Paul Witty

Paul Witty, Professor of Education and Director of the Psycho-Educational Clinic at Northwestern University, is basically a psychologist. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the field of reading, where he is most widely known, he was among the first to speak of "developmental" reading. Indeed, the concept of the development of the individual is a major unifying principle that runs through his long and productive career of teaching, research, and writing in the fields of Child Psychology, Mental Hygiene, and Reading. In these he has sought to evolve techniques of diagnosis, instruction, and evaluation in an approach which aims to bring about the maximal growth of every young person in terms of his unique nature and needs. He views the development of reading skills as a phase of the psychology of learning. He emphasizes the need for perfecting reading skills so that the act of reading may be enjoyable. But paramount in his thinking is the idea that reading materials which are appropriate for the interests and needs of the child can be a potent means for his personal and social development. Reading and growth are thus conceived of as intimately related.

Although nothing relating to human development has been alien to Dr. Witty's interest, the profile of growth and reading in the exceptional child was one of his early concerns and has continued to be a prominent subject for research throughout his career. In such a child the qualities of defect or excellence stand out

conspicuously and call for special attention. Most of Dr. Witty's contributions have been applicable to the mass of children, but his unique contribution in the field of child development has been research upon the exceptional child, especially the gifted.

His earliest professional work was as a school psychologist in the Scarborough, New York schools. His earliest publications of research were in the psychology of children's play activities. Later at the University of Kansas, where he was director of the Psycho-Educational Clinic, he worked with all types of children, but especially with the extremes, the slow-learning and the gifted. His *Study of 100 Gifted Children* was the first of many publications relating to exceptionally endowed youth. He has worked earnestly as research scholar, clinician; consultant, and lecturer on this type of child. In his many years as Director of the Psycho-Educational Clinic of Northwestern University he has interviewed



Paul Witty

and tested thousands of such children and conferred with their parents on desirable means for helping them work out a pattern of study and activity appropriate for each child. He was the helpful godfather of the Quiz Kids of radio fame.

The volume *The Gifted Child* (D. C. Heath), edited by Dr. Witty in 1951 for The Association for Gifted Children, is only one of the evidences of his great interest in the

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problems of education for gifted children and youth. For parents who have children of exceptional ability and talent he has prepared the Science Research Associates pamphlets *Helping the Gifted Child* and *Helping Children Read Better*. He has also counseled them in the pages of the *National Parent-Teacher* magazine and of other journals.

Reading and the Educative Process (Ginn), published in 1939 by Dr. Witty and Dr. David Kopel, is a landmark in the history of reading instruction in this country. In it reading is viewed in relation to the general goals of education and is conceived of in terms of a developmental philosophy. Included are the results of many research projects on special phases of reading, but most noteworthy is the fully documented conclusion concerning the multiple-causation of reading retardation. The book demonstrates elaborately the role of interest as a factor in reading. Since the Interest Factor in Reading has come to be associated with the name Witty, it should be noted that nowhere has he advocated fitting reading exclusively to the present limited interests of the child. Everywhere in this book, as well as in his numerous articles on reading, he has asserted that gaining vital information about the child, his interests and needs, can be an efficacious aid to teacher and librarian in guiding the child's reading so that he will enjoy the act of reading and will profit in growth from materials suitable for him as a unique being. Present interests are a clue for guidance toward a process of development which may branch out in many directions.

Dr. Witty exemplifies the caution of the General Semanticists (on whose Board of Directors he has served) against preoccupation with the general instead of the specific: he has continuously maintained that educators should focus on *a* child, unique and individual, rather than on *the* child, a type of creation. Awareness that children are people with individual differences can result in educational procedures and

the selection of reading materials suitable for the individual. In *Reading and the Educative Process* the Witty-Kopel Interest Inventory is presented as a part of a Diagnostic Child Study Record, an instrument for obtaining an understanding of the child which must precede proper guidance. In this form, and in later forms as revised by Dr. Witty in collaboration with his assistant, Miss Ann Coomer, the Witty Interest Inventory has proved a most effective instrument through which teachers gain a better understanding of children. Its use adds vital information to that obtained through the use of diagnostic tests, and it contributes to an understanding of the complex nature of each child. Without varied types of information neither a correct diagnosis of his reading problems nor effective guidance of him in reading experience is possible. By knowing the total pattern, the teacher has cues for giving the greatest help.

A decade later there appeared Dr. Witty's *Reading in Modern Education* (D. C. Heath) in which reading is presented as a developmental process. The seeds of this philosophy, presented basically in the earlier volume, have here blossomed into an approach to language growth. Here, as in many other places, Dr. Witty has shown an awareness of the need for remedial reading in our schools and has noted desirable practices in remedying reading retardation.

As a psychologist and a student of language arts in general (he once wrote with Lou La Brant a monograph entitled *Teaching the People's Language*), Dr. Witty has collaborated with teachers and librarians in the effort to select the right book for the child at the right time. Sincerely convinced that reading materials should be related to growth potentials, he has devoted much creative energy and ability in the effort to produce materials of this kind for children. In collaboration with teachers in elementary and secondary school classrooms and libraries he has lent his understanding of children and adolescents, his knowledge of language

growth, and his own literary sensitivity to the making of two series of readers, *Reading for Interest* and *Reading Round-Up*, published by D. C. Heath. His eagerness that children have reading materials that will challenge them, interest them, and help them grow in personality also led him to sponsor and assist in the editing of periodical materials like those in *My Weekly Reader*, *Story Parade*, and *Highlights*. Unique among reading materials are his readers *It's Fun to Find Out* (D. C. Heath), a series for use in conjunction with films. Dr. Witty has also created imaginative books for children like his *Salome Goes to the Fair* (Dutton). Also, he has in several books presented for very young children essential information about our democratic way of life: *You and the Constitution* and *Freedom and Our U. S. Family* (Childrens Press, Chicago).

Realizing that reading is not an isolated phenomenon and that the term itself can be broadly interpreted in relation to all that is visually perceived, Dr. Witty has turned to other media of communication as each has claimed the attention of children. From a series of research projects on children's reading of the comics, he has concluded that giving reading guidance rather than prohibition is the desirable action for parents and teachers. He wisely points out that the intensity and universality of the reading of comics can be channeled to create interest in the reading of books. Similarly, he has in collaboration with others given attention to the interests of high school students in motion pictures and radio. Alterations in habits and tastes of students in these media may carry over into the area of reading. Abreast with the times, he has brought to bear on televising the techniques which he earlier employed in the investigation of youths' interest in reading, comics, radio, and motion pictures. In seven annual reports published in *Elementary English* he has surveyed the amount of time young people spend in televising, some results of T.V. (with special

attention to inroads on time spent in reading), ranks of favorite programs, and teacher and parent attitudes toward T.V.

Long a leader in the field of Mental Hygiene, Dr. Witty in 1955 edited for the National Society for the Study of Education, of which he has been an officer, its Yearbook on *Mental Health in Modern Education* (University of Chicago Press). He has consistently maintained that learning takes place most effectively in the individual who is free from the stress of emotional disturbances, and in the classrooms of teachers who are well adjusted individuals. His studies have demonstrated that emotional problems are frequent in poor readers, but he considers such problems as only one factor among many in reading retardation. In other studies he has given serious consideration to the ways in which development is fostered through reading. Many case studies which he has published show how reading has helped young people to understand themselves and their problems and consequently to attain a greater degree of personal and social adjustment.

Wholesome classroom atmosphere and favorable teacher-pupil relations have an important role in a pupil's success in reading. In Dr. Witty's analysis of thousands of letters written by school children about their teachers he has discovered the characteristics of an effective teacher. Such qualities of personality in the teacher can contribute to favorable teacher-pupil relations and so create in the child the sense of confidence essential for reading success.

Effective also in fostering mental health is creative writing. To encourage such writing, Dr. Witty has experimented with a series of films prepared by Encyclopedia Britannica Films. Films accompanied by readers have also been used experimentally by Dr. Witty and associates in fostering young people's vocabulary development and the ability to interpret printed materials.

Although the developmental approach em-

phasizes the interests and needs of the reader, it also embraces practice in acquiring and perfecting basic skills. Dr. Witty has been an advocate of the use of a combination of techniques in the teaching of reading. Language has symbolic value only when the reader associates words with concrete objects and experiences that are within the realm of his understanding. Even imaginative writing for children must have tangents with that which they have experienced. Such a principle of making language meaningful in relation to understandable referents has been a basic principle in the preparation of reading materials by Dr. Witty and his associates.

The acid test of the functional method ("reliance upon direct experience as the most effective basis for understanding words") came during World War II. As a major in the United States Army, Dr. Witty directed the preparation of reading materials for use in a program which aimed to bring illiterate draftees to a fourth grade level of literacy in eight weeks. Through the compilation of lists of words used by the soldier in his daily life in the army and the employment of film strips like *The Story of Private Pete*, the soldier-student acquired a basic stock of words which created in him readiness for reading in the *Army Reader*. This program succeeded because in it Major Witty employed his developmental philosophy of reading. The functional methods and materials used in this successful army program have suggested to educators in the post-war years techniques and types of materials for developing students' reading and speaking vocabularies.

His experiences in "the conquest of illiteracy" in the army suggested to Dr. Witty that great strides can be made during peace-time in making every man and woman literate. He has therefore frequently been asked to act as consultant in the literacy program of the Office of Inter-American Affairs.

In response to the current widespread in-

terest in reading improvement, Dr. Witty wrote the best selling *How to Become a Better Reader* (Science Research Associates, 1953). In it he tells the reader that in this book there is "... the key that will open many doors to the world about you. It is the tool that will help you to succeed in your studies or in your work. It is the road that will lead you to better reading—for information, for enjoyment, and for a richer life." *How to Improve Your Reading* (Science Research Associates, 1956), for younger and less proficient readers, was constructed on the same functional principle.

Dr. Witty has spoken out clearly and courageously on many controversial issues about reading. To the man who declared that many high school students cannot be taught to read and can get along very well in life without being able to read, he has said: "Try functional methods and materials and they will learn to read for many important purposes." To the man who said that children cannot read today because they have not been taught phonics, he has said: "They *are* taught phonics, but it is more important that they learn words as symbols of concrete objects or experiences." To the critics who have said that children are not being taught to read as well today as they were in the past, he has said: "The materials and methods are different, more in accord with what we now know of child development. But most studies of reading ability in which the same tests have been employed at different times reveal superiority for present day pupils."

If one were to look, however, for the most humanly significant impact of his thought and work, it would be in a classroom, where a teacher, in some way affected by the idealism of this scholar, lecturer, and writer, has learned to nurture in a child those qualities which are his unique self, to guide him in finding solutions to the problems he faces in his growth from childhood to young adulthood, and to initiate him into the wonderful world of books.