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Pioneers in Reading VII: Nila Banton Smith

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## Pioneers in Reading VII: Nila Banton Smith

Nila Banton Smith, Professor of Education and Director of the Reading Institute at New York University, is that unusual combination of scholar and practitioner who translates modern philosophical and psychological principles into actual classroom practice. No student leaves her classroom—no reader completes the reading of her publications unaware of how to implement theory with practice.

Dr. Smith is able to achieve this combination for several reasons. First, and probably foremost, because of her own personality. She is warm, human, and understanding. She always has time to listen sympathetically to the problems of students and teachers and help them in searching for solutions. She possesses an inquisitive, penetrating, analytical mind. She has a well developed sense of humor. She is willing and able to work tirelessly in order to do basic research and then make that research completely understandable to others.

Second, as a scholar Professor Smith has carefully studied the works of all the other leaders in the field and continuously keeps abreast with recent research. As a beginning teacher she sought out William S. Gray at the University of Chicago and took every reading course he had to offer. After earning her Ph. B. at the University of Chicago she went on to earn her Master's and Doctor's degrees at Columbia University.

Third, she has been a classroom teacher

and continues to work with children. Dr. Smith began her teaching career in the Detroit Public Schools. After one year as a classroom teacher she was asked to become a critic teacher; then, after one semester as a critic teacher she was asked to become the Assistant Supervisor of Reading. She went on to become Supervisor of Research with her major area of responsibility in the field of reading instruction. Although the remainder of

her career has been on the college and university level, she continues to work with children in clinical, classroom, and demonstration situations.

Fourth, she is a teacher of teachers and is well aware of their needs. Dr. Smith left Detroit to accept a position as Dean of the Broadoaks School of Education, Whittier College. She then became an Associate Professor of Education at Indiana University and moved from there to the University of Southern California as a full professor. She finally accepted her

present position as Professor of Education at New York University in 1948.

When Professor Smith began her work in New York University's School of Education, the Department of Educational Psychology offered *one* course in remedial reading. Now, less than ten years later, Dr. Smith has developed curriculum programs leading to the

Dr. Robinson is Assistant Professor of Reading and Education at Hofstra College, Hempstead, New York.



*Nila Smith*

Master of Arts in Remedial Reading, a sixth year certificate, plus the Ph. D. and Ed. D. in Remedial Reading. The Department of Educational Psychology now offers 27 semester hours in remedial reading under Dr. Smith's leadership. She also serves as sponsorship chairman in guiding all doctoral researches in this area, which has grown to be a very heavy responsibility.

In September of 1953 Dr. Smith was invited to undertake the directorship of New York University's Reading Institute which now services over 2500 students annually from age eight through adulthood. In this enterprise Dr. Smith is responsible for guiding the work of 50 full and part-time teachers.

One of Professor Smith's earliest publications, *American Reading Instruction* (Silver Burdett), is considered a classic in the field today. In this volume she analyzed and evaluated the various methods of teaching reading that have been followed in America from colonial days to the present. Professional books concerned with reading instruction un-failingly make use of Nila B. Smith's basic historic research as set forth in *American Reading Instruction*.

It was with her series of readers, *The Learning To Read Series* (Silver Burdett), however, that Dr. Smith was really able to expand her sphere of influence to pupils and teachers in classrooms throughout the United States. Here she put into practice, from the first grade through the sixth, the practical procedures growing out of her years of experience and experimentation in the field of reading. And, most recently, that sphere of influence has been expanded to the levels above the elementary school. Professor Smith has just published a book on adult reading improvement, *Read Faster, Read Better* (Prentice-Hall). She is also the author of a series of six books on reading improvement for

use with high school students. This series is known as the *Be A Better Reader* series (Prentice-Hall) and features the application of reading skills in the major secondary school content areas. The first three of these books are published and the additional three will be forthcoming soon.

In addition to writing, lecturing, teaching, and supervising, Dr. Smith has taken a leadership role in giving status to the profession in which she is so deeply interested. She was active in the early organization and development of the International Reading Association and was one of the organization's first presidents. She is now chairman of the Publications Committee which has a major share of responsibility in the policies relating to the publication of its Annual Proceedings and of its journal, *The Reading Teacher*. Dr. Smith is invited to speak at many more professional conferences than she is able to accept but somehow finds time to make new and vital contributions at several such conferences annually.

If one were forced, however, to pick *the* area of endeavor which will be most enduring, it would not be phonics, or study skills, or the history of reading instruction. It would not be the directorship of the Reading Institute nor the various publications. Certainly all of these areas are vital and represent real contributions. But most important of all would be what Nila Banton Smith has been able to do for her students throughout the years. She is a vibrant teacher able to inspire the graduate students, mainly teachers, who come to her to learn about reading instruction. And, beyond inspiration, she is able to see eye-to-eye with these teachers in pointing to ways in which they can apply modern research and psychology in meeting their classroom needs. Nila Banton Smith, above all, is a teacher's teacher!