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## STANDARDS FOR THE ENGLISH TEACHER<sup>1</sup>

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This is not an address, it is a program of work. The development of the National Council of English Teachers from the beginning has been not primarily as a speech-making body, but as an organization of professional experts interested in defining the aims, methods, and conditions governing our profession. We began with the reorganization of the course of study, and the report of the Committee of Thirty has been accepted as the basis for reorganized courses the country over. The report of the Committee on Library Organization and Equipment has been accepted generally as the basis for establishing their standards and in some cases incorporated into state laws. The report of the Committee on Economy of Time is taken as the starting-point for all investigations in this line. The plans of the Better Speech Committee are followed over large areas. The investigation into the cost and labor of English teaching has set a standard for the conditions under which teachers work with regard to hours of work and pupil load. My purpose today is to urge upon the Council a kind of standardization less common in teaching bodies than in the professional associations of lawyers or physicians, namely, a standardization of the members of the profession themselves. This seems to be especially necessary just at present, for in response to the general increase of

<sup>1</sup>An address before the National Council of Teachers of English in Chicago, November, 1921.

teachers' salaries the public has a right to expect increased efficiency, and increased efficiency in the long run depends upon increased standards of professional attainment. No one can define these standards so well as the English teachers themselves, because no one else is in a position to know just what professional equipment is most needed. My proposition, then, is that acting as a whole and also through the co-operation of the Saturday afternoon Conference on Teacher Training and the Committee on Scientific Standards, we set ourselves seriously to the task of defining those attainments that should entitle a teacher of English to professional recognition.

This is not the first time the Council has considered this matter. Following the investigation of the New England Association through Mr. Thomas' committee, and of the Illinois Association through Professor Paul's, a committee of which Professor Baker was chairman submitted a report in 1915 embodying the opinions of over three hundred teachers as to those parts of their training which had proved of most value in teaching and those subjects in which they would like to pursue their studies further. This report is of much value to the prospective teacher in choosing college courses; it does not however undertake to measure the result of those courses. The time now seems ripe for an attempt to set up standards of teacher-attainment, whereby we as a professional body may define what we mean by a professional teacher.

To arrive at a test or series of tests that shall really be standard, three steps are necessary. First, we must formulate in an empirical way what according to our best judgment an English teacher is likely to need and to use in the performance of his regular duties. Secondly, we must select from tests already existing, or where these do not exist we must devise, standard tests for the measurement of these abilities. Thirdly, we must test the tests by trying them out on a large number of teachers whose professional competence is established, and in that way discover which of the tests correlate with known professional success.

The qualifications of a teacher of English may be classified as personal, academic, and professional; the personal qualifications being largely matters of inheritance, social background, experience

of life, human sympathy, and ideals; the academic comprising such command of subject-matter as may be acquired in school and college courses, supplemented by regular habits of private reading and study; the professional having to do with various specific duties of the English teacher, the reasons for them, the best methods of accomplishment, and the applications of scientific knowledge to the teacher's problems.

The personal qualifications for English teaching are of primary importance. They include physical vitality and vigor; a real enjoyment of young people and insight into their life; a tolerable speaking voice; good eyesight, capable of standing the perusal year after year of thousands of pages of manuscript; a tradition of culture, such as comes from long association with the right people and books; the established habit of turning to good literature for recreation and refreshment; willingness to accept and play one's part in the community life; professional self-respect; and a hopeful attitude toward human life, lightened by a sense of humor. To these considerable items may be added as highly desirable some experience of real life, its responsibilities and opportunities, other than the life of the classroom. These personal traits, experiences, and attitudes in themselves are often the making of a fairly good amateur teacher. The lack of them, or at least of the majority of them, renders almost hopeless any specific training. Although they elude analysis and standardization and consequently lie beyond the scope of the investigation we are now undertaking, they are assumed as basic to all that follows.

Academic qualifications, that is to say command of the specific subject-matter of English language and literature, has been defined heretofore chiefly in terms of number of points of college work and description of particular courses. The amount and kind of academic training thought to be most valuable is summed up in the report of Professor Baker's committee already mentioned. Those of us, however, who have had experience of some years in the professional training of college graduates have become aware that to have had a given subject in a college course does not necessarily insure permanent possession, and that what the teacher needs in the classroom is not to have had his subject once, but to

have it now. Therefore it seems well to attempt a definition of academic attainments in terms of the specific classroom needs of the teacher and if possible to analyze those attainments in such wise that certain elements of them, at least, can be definitely measured. In other words, that we may ascertain just what is the range in a command of the voice, of written composition, of linguistic training, or of knowledge of literature among teachers, from the weakest to the best.

Beyond the personal and the academic attainments are certain professional qualifications for English teaching which are of very recent development, being dependent upon the rapidly growing body of technical knowledge that has come to us in the past few years from the psychologists and other educational investigators. It is only within the past generation that we have begun to think of a teacher professionally trained in this newer sense, just as it is only within the present generation or two that we have begun to think of professionally trained nurses, farmers, or housekeepers. There were good nurses, good farmers, and good housekeepers before the trained nurse, scientific farmer, the household arts expert. There is still a great deal of successful home nursing, amateur farming, and traditional housekeeping without the aid of the training specialist. So there is much good English teaching of what may be called very superior amateur standing carried on by "born English teachers." But the born nurse is being superseded by the nurse trained to give a hypodermic and to keep a temperature chart; the born farmer by the farmer trained in soil analysis and seed testing; the born housekeeper looks now for leadership to the expert in household budget or in vitamins. So with the born English teacher—in positions of leadership, at least, he requires that knowledge of the technical advance of his art that makes him a professional expert.

The detailed formulation of these requirements, academic or professional, I shall not here attempt, but I select a few details on which concrete data are now available, to illustrate a method of attack.

Take, for example, reading. Obviously, an English teacher should know how to read, but how well should he know how to read?

We do not know; but we can ascertain how well he actually does read, through standard tests already in existence, such as those prepared by Professor Thorndike or Professor Haggerty. An advanced reading test for the understanding of paragraphs, prepared by Professor Thorndike for testing Columbia Freshmen, has been tried on groups of graduate English students. In one series, the total possible score is one hundred twenty-nine; the median attainment of Freshmen is about sixty, and of graduate students ninety. In trying this with English teachers of a superior type, namely, thirty-four advanced students most of whom were heads of English departments, I found scores ranging from 67.5 to 112, the median being 89.5. This would confirm the impression one gets from other measurements that the actual ability in English of the teacher ranges from a point not far, if at all, above the high-school level to something distinctly superior to the average college graduate.

A teacher should carry away from his reading a body of detailed information, so that his mind becomes enriched and able to respond quickly and accurately to familiar allusions. One recognizes this familiarity with the concrete data, the leading characters, the standard references and quotations, and the like, as one mark of the well-read man. This power can easily be tested by such a device as the selective word list in which one marks the right word out of five to complete a sentence correctly. Such a list I tried recently on a group of teachers in a methods course, giving them such questions as these: Becky Sharp is a typical artist, schemer, suffragette, gossip, New England housewife. Pegasus was a mountain, god, horse, city, orator. *Bob, Son of Battle* is a story of a New England boyhood, of pirates, of a faithful dog, of the War of 1812, of the young heir to a legacy. Kim is a brand of cigarettes, musical comedy, a ranchman's pony, a boy in India, a Jack London character. *The Pilgrim's Script* is a novel, poem, essay, allegory, collection of aphorisms. Thirty-five such questions, ranging in difficulty between the extremes indicated in these samples, were given to fifty-nine students, most of them English teachers of experience and graduates of a great variety of colleges. The number of questions answered correctly ranged from six to thirty, with a

median attainment of twenty correct answers. To be sure, as one of my friends remarked, "A knowledge of literary facts is like a picket fence: you are apt to strike a gap as often as you strike a picket." But surely in any fence there ought to be a reasonable number of pickets. A teacher who can identify thirty such facts is clearly better read and better prepared to teach than the one who can identify only six. Should we not, for example, draw the line somewhat above the teacher who thinks that Becky Sharp was a New England housewife, and Pegasus was an orator? This type of question might easily be used as an index of the range and quality of the reading in current literature. Is *North of Boston* a melodrama, a book of essays, a book of poems, a novel, or a guide-book? Is *Margot* a French maid, a patent medicine, a Parisian dialect, a legal edict, or an English society woman? Is *Don Marquis* a hero of Ibañez, a poem, a tale of the Mexican Border, a newspaper columnist, or a cow pony? Does *A Son of the Middle Border* deal with life in Scotland, the north-central United States, the Rhine Provinces, the Deccan, or the Pampas? We might be willing to forgive ourselves for missing one or another of these, but to miss all of them—or at least to miss all or most of a list, say, of fifty comprising the more important recent books of many types—would at any rate suggest that one could make little pretension to keeping up with literature of the day. It would not be difficult to prepare several hundred such questions of fact, being sure that the facts asked for were all significant details of important books, and to standardize these questions by the usual method.

An English teacher ought similarly both to know poetry and to have a measurable degree of appreciation and judgment regarding it. Knowing poetry almost necessarily involves knowing by heart certain at least of the great classical passages, if not well enough to quote, at least, well enough to locate in their context. It seems not unreasonable to submit to a group of prospective English teachers a list of such quotations as "A gentle knight was pricking on the plaine"; "I could not love thee dear so much, loved I not honor more"; "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes"; "A thing of beauty is a joy forever"; "Old unhappy far-off things and battles long ago." As an opportunity for the more widely read, "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?";

“Cover her face, mine eyes dazzle; she died young”; and, “Life like a dome of many-colored glass.” Of twenty-nine English teachers on whom this list was tried, the median number of quotations correctly identified was eight, the range being from three to seventeen. Almost everyone knew “The quality of mercy;” “He was a verrey parfit gentil knight,” and “A thing of beauty is a joy forever.” On the other hand only five identified “Old unhappy far-off things”; “The world’s great altar stairs that slope through darkness up to God.” “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” was attributed variously to Shakespeare, Tennyson, and the New Testament. As evidence, this is of course the merest straw, but it seems to indicate a wind blowing from a quarter not wholly favorable to the teaching of poetry.

With regard to judgment in poetry, we have more accurate and full information. A year ago at the college section of this Council, I presented some data regarding a test of the ability to judge poetry. This was based on the selective principle, the persons tested being asked to choose the best from among four versions of a poem. Three of the versions had been intentionally spoiled in predetermined ways so that there was little question as to which really ought to be chosen. For example, Shakespeare’s Dirge from *Cymbeline*. “Fear no more the heat of the sun, nor the furious winter’s rages,” was altered so that in one version the concrete imagery was reduced, “Golden lads and girls” being altered to “Youth and beauty”; in another version the meter was badly disarranged; in another version the emotional appeal was made commonplace and sentimental. The poems used for this test ranged in difficulty from Mother Goose to Browning. Returns are in my hands from a large number of schools and colleges and from considerable groups of teachers. I have tabulated the distribution of correct judgment in a group of two hundred and eighty-four high-school Seniors and a group of two hundred and sixty-one graduate students of English practically all of whom are high-school teachers. The high-school Seniors center about six correct judgments, and the teachers about nine and one-half, out of the possible thirteen; so we may see that on this particular test the teachers are three and one-half points better than high-school Seniors. It is significant, however, that there is considerable over-



lapping, so that approximately one-fifth of the teachers judge poetry no better than the average high-school Senior and approximately one-fifth of the high-school Seniors judge poetry as well as half of the teachers. Two questions are raised by this bit of evidence which bear on our main inquiry: First, what should be the minimum attainment in any particular branch of English knowledge for the high-school teacher—should he be required to do as well as the average high-school Senior, or somewhat better? Secondly, how far in advance of high-school Senior standards should be the average attainment of their teachers? The answers to these questions cannot be determined on a priori grounds. They can be determined only by first ascertaining the facts.

A teacher of English should be able to write at least tolerably well. From the large number of surveys in which standard composition scales have been used, we know about how well pupils in school actually write. We know, for example, that the average high-school Senior writes approximately quality 6.7 that the upper 25 per cent write quality 7.2 (Trabue), and that for admission to college by examination they should write from 70 to 75 (Hillegas) to get a passing mark, on the college board, of fifty or sixty. Several years ago a group of about fifty teachers in my methods course wrote compositions on subjects similar to those used in high-schools and these compositions were multigraphed and scaled. The median writing ability on this particular exercise was about 80, which is clearly above the writing of ordinary college undergraduates; the range was from 88 (which falls well within the bounds of literary achievement) to 62, which would not "get by" college examiners, and which is standard for about the tenth grade. Are we not justified in saying that a teacher who writes no better than the average second-year pupil falls short of professional standing?

Such data as we have just been considering simply confirm what we constantly observe, a wide distribution in the abilities and knowledge of teachers, as of pupils; and a rather constant overlapping in the range of any particular ability in the two groups. It should not be impossible to classify the requisite abilities in speech, in writing, in command of books, in linguistic knowledge, in literary knowledge and appreciation, and in each of these fields to devise a test of a sliding scale of difficulty, so that it would mark at the

lower end the least attainment that should be accepted by teacher-training institutions as a basis for professional preparation, and at the upper end the equipment of the established teacher of superior knowledge and training. Similarly, in the more strictly professional field, one may easily think of a variety of elements—the basic social principles, the laws of learning, the technique of using tests for determining standards and for diagnosing individual cases, the results of important studies and experiments, the sources of professional guidance—which might be made a basis for determining how far a teacher had progressed along the professional way. These standards should, however, be not the opinion of a single speaker, but should be worked out in committee; indeed, all that I have said is merely intended as illustrative of the kind of thing I am proposing that we should all work out together.

If such a series of standard tests should be prepared, I wonder how many members of the Council, or readers of the *Journal*, are in a position, either as trainers of teachers or as heads of departments, to have them tried—for purpose of standardization only—by groups of teachers? No names would be signed, and the test would be so guarded that the results could not be used to any teacher's disadvantage; we should be testing not the teachers, but the tests. If any reader of this article will come in with the eighty department heads, supervisors, and college and normal school teachers who at the Council meeting in November expressed a willingness to give the tests, I should very much like to have their names. Send to me, care of Teachers College, New York City, your address, official position, and number of blanks you can use?

If we succeed in standardizing these tests, what will they be good for? Several uses appear as possibilities. The most obvious use is to steer away from the profession those whose natural endowments and early training offer little promise of success; to spend years of effort in attempting to train the wrong people is unfair both to them and to the profession. Secondly, there may well be a use for such tests in the problem of selecting teachers. Beyond this, there should be for all of us a stimulus, an incentive to self-improvement, in seeing what the attainments of our fellow teachers are, and what ideals they hold up for the teacher who has a right to claim the highest professional standing.