THE SCHOLARLY AND PROFESSIONAL ROLE OF THE
SPECIALIST IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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I consider this gathering one of the most important events that have taken place in recent English professional life. It is highly significant that for the first time, those who by profession are responsible for the training of teachers of English and of the development of the English curriculum are gathered together in conference. I am deeply sensible of the honor done me in being asked to make this opening address. For all of my professional life I have been concerned with and have been enthusiastic about the preparation and training of teachers of English. No matter what particular university appointment I have held, this task has been uppermost in my interest. Therefore, I am appreciative of the opportunity to speak to you now, and if I do not do full justice to the occasion, it will not be from any lack of interest and desire.

I suppose most of us at one time or another have heard the cynical remark attributed to the late Bernard Shaw, "Those who cannot do, teach. Those who cannot teach, teach teachers." Even if there is some faint element of truth in this generalization, it is one of the most glittering of that class of generalizations which are said to glitter. It does, unfortunately, reflect to some degree a public attitude. In our society the person who is responsible for the preparation and the education of teachers is not looked upon with any great favor, nor accorded any distinction. This is really a remarkable circumstance, since it takes place in a culture in which education plays so significant a part. The American people established and have developed one of the loftiest and noblest theories of education the world has known, that of providing free public education to all children, no matter of what rank or class or of what financial level. This goal is not only for the common grades, but through high school and indeed today largely well into, if not through, college. This is a magnificent ideal, and we are annually coming closer toward achieving it. Yet those members of our civic body, including those who are here, who are responsible for the training and the development of the teachers who accomplish this ideal, do not in general enjoy the prestige and esteem which such a responsibility might seem to give them. The reasons for this lack of recognition are many and complex, and I shall not attempt to analyze them here.

The point that I would like to stress is that we require in our particular profession the same stimulus and strengthening of professional unity and integrity which have elevated other professions to a high place in social recognition. I would remind you that surgeons were once barbers, that in the eighteenth century the lawyer entered the mansion of his client through the servant’s door and was kept waiting in an inferior room until the client deigned to see him, that the doctors of veterinary science once were farriers or hostlers, and that other professions which today hold status in our society at one time were low on the social ladder. We can profit from history and by examining the means by which other professions have brought themselves to
favorable social notice, and we can take steps to do the same. I shall come back to this point later in my talk.

Educational Preparation of the Specialist

The topic assigned to me is the educational and professional status of the specialist in English education. I would like to discuss this topic under five heads, the first of which is the educational preparation of the man or woman who is to become a specialist in the training of the teachers of English. There is no question that one of the first educational requirements is a sound grounding in English itself. This means not only the ordinary major in English in undergraduate collegiate education, but it means also particular training in the English language itself and in the skills of English composition. Therefore, the undergraduate training of the future specialist should be as rich as possible in all aspects of English, and the candidate should show aptitude not only in the reading and interpretation of literature but also in the command of the English language in his own writing. He requires, furthermore, at the bachelor level, an introduction to the history and structure of English.

From this beginning the candidate in our profession should move forward to his graduate degrees. Here the path may divide: he may take his master’s degree in English with a minor in education or he may take a master’s degree in education with a minor in English. In either case he is responsible for familiarity with the basic elements of modern educational theory and practice, for a command of educational psychology, for knowledge of the history of education of the world and particularly the history of American education, and for some command of those techniques of education dealing with measurements and educational testing. Above all, he should develop for himself a sound and workable philosophy of education. This is approximately the level of the master’s degree.

From this point on the candidate looks forward to his doctorate. To candidates now starting I would suggest taking this degree in English, partly because of the richness of the field and partly because of the status it gives them among English colleagues. This is not to say that a degree in education does not qualify the person to teach adequately in our field. It is, however, to the advantage of the candidate to have done a significant piece of research in English of such a nature as will lead to the publication of an article or book in some aspect of English or American literature or in the area of linguistics. But it is equally important that the candidate continue his study of education to be aware of the latest theory and practice and to be able to conduct and develop adequate research and practical projects in education in the school system or the college or university in which he is called upon to pursue his profession.

Necessary Experience

The second consideration is experience. The candidate for English education will characteristically have shown leadership in his teens and twenties in the various activities of young people. He will have taught a Sunday School class, led a youth group in a church or neighborhood house, or become a leader
of boys and girls in recreational activities. The essential characteristics to emerge are a liking for young people and the capacity to lead. As he progresses in his own education, he will grasp opportunities to enlarge this experience, in student teaching or an apprenticeship or internship in a public or private school. Somewhere in the totality of his preparation he must have two or three years of active school teaching in the grades or high school. The programs of training for English education in some universities require a minimum of two years’ full time engagement as a teacher in public or private schools. The significance of this experience is not to have put in time, but to have gathered such a background of experience with students in the school years as will enrich and validate his training of teachers to perform the same tasks themselves.

Research Competence

The third consideration is research. To begin with, our candidate in English education will have devised and brought to a successful conclusion a piece of research connected with the teaching of English. Ideally this experience will have been so pleasant and professionally satisfying as to lead him to foresee a continuing series of investigations which will enlarge his own knowledge and will contribute to his growing reputation as a sound man in his field. Such experience of his own will induce him to keep abreast of the researches of others, so that he can claim an awareness of the latest research findings in the teaching of English and can arouse in his students a knowledge of research and a readiness to keep abreast of its findings.

As chairman of the Board of Trustees of the NCTE Research Foundation, allow me to intrude some pertinent remarks here. Among teachers of English by and large the concept of the nature of research is dim. The applications the Foundation has received for grants-in-aid are, in the first place, extremely few, considering that the Council boasts a membership of over 50,000 individual members. Second, those that come in show a naiveté it would be unkind to laugh at. Some teachers believe that a request to have funds to attend summer school constitutes research. In two years of publicized invitation, less than twelve applications have been received. Of these only one was in such form as to be granted outright; two others have been tentatively awarded funds pending their revision into properly structured research. Most striking is the fact that only one of the applications received has come from a person concerned with the training of teachers. It is possible that all such persons have applications in for larger grants from the U. S. Office of Education. It is also possible that some are doing little or nothing to promote research. I leave it to you to decide. But the evidence so far is overwhelming that only a few specialists in English education are actively conducting research, and it is manifest that the teachers they train do not know much about research in the teaching of English. Here is a condition this group can effectively undertake to improve.

Recruitment of Teachers

My next point has to do with the recruitment of teachers. The statistics concerning the need for teachers are now in the public press and I need not enlarge on them. But there is a need beyond the claim of statistics; it is the
need for quality. The strength of the English program in many junior and senior high schools lies in the present continuance of one or two able teachers of high quality. When these teachers are removed by death or retirement, there are few of their stature to succeed them. It may not be true of all parts of the country, but I know it to be true of my own section: the young people who present themselves to be future English teachers are not generally of the first stratum of ability. There has been a slow but steady regression in the capacities of the candidates for English teaching. There are many reasons for this regression: economic, in low salaries; social, in the public attitude toward teachers; personal, in the refusal to perform the onerous and multitudinous tasks imposed on teachers; practical, in the ability to get better jobs with higher rewards. I cannot attempt to analyze and offer solutions to these causes of lowered quality. The situation is another evidence of the paradox with which I opened this talk: our society, which in theory places education at the top of its values, in practice permits economic starvation and social obloquy to stifle the ideal. My point is that so far as we in English education are a profession, we can utilize our corporate strength and wisdom to turn the tide. Specifically this means using every means available to change public attitudes toward the teacher of English as well as all other teachers; to fight for public support of education; and to begin a campaign of a conscious, organized nature to lead young people of high quality to enter English teaching as a profession. We have the same claim to dedicated public service as has the Peace Corps. What is needed is the public attitude to support the claim. On a higher level we must give more attention to the directing of able graduate students into the profession of English education. This means an active, conscious effort at reaching the right people in the upper undergraduate years. Too few able students now embarking upon advanced degrees in English know anything about the opportunities and rewards in our profession. There is a serious shortage of persons trained in the manner I have attempted to outline in this talk. The need for them is constantly increasing. Here is another challenging job for our profession to undertake.

**Needed Statesmanship**

My fifth point has to do with the statesmanship required of the current specialist in English education. In an article not yet published, Professor John H. Fisher, secretary of the Modern Language Association, says, "It is no wonder that a curriculum and a profession of English education have grown up to mediate between the scholar and the teacher. We should all have different specialties. It is normal that some members of a department will be more interested in literary history, some in criticism, some in linguistics, and so on. Those who are interested in the teaching problems of the lower schools should have an equally honorable place in our departments."

These remarks sum up an attitude that is of very great current significance. Departments of English the country over are becoming increasingly aware of a neglected or unrecognized obligation, the obligation to be actively concerned about the teaching of English at all levels. They recognize that this means in practical terms that one or more members of the English department must be concerned with the teaching of English, and that these persons represent
a specialty of the English department on a par with literary history and criticism, linguistics, and English composition. Increasingly departments of English must think of themselves as a composite team of competent specialists each devoted to his own responsibility, but sharing the joint responsibility of advancing the skills and knowledge of English for all students from the kindergarten through the graduate school, and even beyond, in reaching the public through the media of extension classes, radio, and television. In so comprehensive and worthy an endeavor there is really no place for petty rivalries, internal divisions, and belittling of tasks. In some of our great universities such equality of task and honor has been true for many years. I think of Professor Hopkins of Kansas, Rollo L. Lyman of Chicago, Charles C. Fries of Michigan, Sterling A. Leonard of Wisconsin, and Charles Swain Thomas of Harvard as shining examples. There are some here today who enjoy similar standing and prestige. It is a time for true statesmanship to build solid unity between English and education.

The Future

But let us admit that in the past the position of the specialist in English education has not always enjoyed the highest prestige. In part this has been the result of the inevitable linkage to professional education, an academic discipline, in the past at least, subject to misunderstanding, miseducation, and manifest prejudice. If education has erred in unwise generalizations and the overenthusiastic promotion of fads, the liberal arts have erred equally in arrogant aloofness and haughty ignorance. But we are not concerned with whipping dead horses. I bring back the past only to emphasize the golden opportunity of the present. There has never before been so favorable a climate for the advancement of the profession of English education. Let me sum up the favorable trends. The National Council of Teachers of English is about to publish its volume on the training of teachers, to which distinguished professors of English have contributed. Next will come the final volume in its curriculum series on the teaching of college English. This volume is sponsored in addition by the Modern Language Association, the College English Association, and the American Studies Association. The book represents an effective working coalition of professors of literature and those concerned with the teaching of English, as is evidenced by its co-editors, John R. Gerber, past president of the NCTE, and John H. Fisher, current secretary of the MLA. Last December a meeting of chairmen of English departments was held under the leadership of Professor Robert Rogers of the University of Illinois, the stated purpose being to study ways of implementing research in the teaching of English by departments of English. From this gathering it appears that a continuing organization will develop. Earlier last year, in May, a meeting was held at Pittsburgh under the leadership of Professor Erwin Steinberg to explore the areas of needed research in the teaching of English. Among the participants were English department chairmen, professors of English education, school administrators, directors of teacher training, and professors of education. The report, which many of us have seen, is a mine of information for the pursuit of specific research in the teaching of English. Add to these incentives the Project English of the U. S.
Office of Education, which is encouraging and liberally supporting sound research in the teaching of English, and you find an impetus unparalleled in past experience to advance the knowledge, the practice, and the prestige of those concerned with the teaching of English and the training of teachers of English. This gathering is, in effect, a focus of these influences; from this meeting it is proper to expect much.

What should we expect from this meeting? First, I would suggest, a clarification of our aims, a better understanding of our field of endeavor, and a sharpening of emphasis upon those problems which claim first attention. The program lying ahead of us these next days contains addresses, panels, and discussions to accomplish this purpose. A second purpose, I venture to suggest, is the exchange of ideas, views, and specific practices. We have, of necessity, to work in relative isolation. Many of us are unique in our positions; in the midst of many professors of literature and linguistics, we stand somewhat apart; in the midst of professors of education our subject specialty sets us apart. But here we meet in accord and affinity, bound together in aim and practice by our devotion to the advancement of English education. Professional enrichment will be the outcome of our exchange of fundamental values, our recognition of the major tasks ahead, and our exchange of specific methods of accomplishing these tasks.

**A New Organization?**

A third value to derive from this meeting is the consciousness of our professional unity and the creation of a structure to insure its continuance. I would like to develop this point rather fully, as I suggested above. We are united, in one sense, in the National Council of Teachers of English, our parent organization, whose organizational machinery established this gathering. I would be the last person to suggest any weakening of our ties to that organization and all that it has come to stand for. With equal reluctance I face the prospect of suggesting the formation of another organization in these days of multiplied organization. Yet there are aims to be clarified which are strictly the concern of those here today; there are standards to be established for professional training which are our particular problem; there is that delicate matter of the formation of professional status leading to prestige which concerns us in a peculiar and personal way. With the best will in the world no major and all-inclusive membership such as that of the NCTE can accomplish these goals for us, nor can we, lost among a membership of seventy thousand, find the coherence to advance our peculiar needs. I find myself driven by circumstances to recommend some kind of organization to guarantee the perpetuation of the purposes for which we are here assembled.

I suggest, therefore, within the structure of the National Council of Teachers of English, the foundation of a guild or fellowship of specialists in English education. Membership in this guild would rest upon prior membership in the NCTE. In this relationship we have the precedent of the CCCC, to which many of us also belong. But unlike the CCCC, our purpose would be not so much the advancement of a particular aspect of the teaching of English as the creation of singleness of purpose and the corporate action of a professional group. Its
distinct purpose is unification and identification of a scattered and amorphous professional group. By uniting, we can discover for ourselves and make known to others what we are, who we are, and what we stand for. We can delineate the obligations and privileges which derive from our act of association. We can specify the qualifications for admission to our fellowship. Above all, we can present a professional solidarity, combined with freedom of ideas, to our colleagues in English and education. The values of such an association and the good that it can accomplish for English education are sufficient, in my view, to overcome the reluctance with which I suggest another organization.

In conclusion, I trust I may be permitted to recommend that before this gathering is dismissed an occasion be found to elect an organizational committee to consider the steps to be taken to form a guild, fellowship, or whatever structure may be deemed best, and to submit such proposals to a special section meeting of this group at the next convention of the National Council of Teachers of English at San Francisco in November of this year.