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PUPILS' JUDGMENTS OF THEIR TEACHERS

By EDWARD WILLIAM DOLCH, JR.

The opinions that pupils have of their teachers are certainly of value if those opinions are honestly and frankly given. Pupils are, on the whole, fairminded, and they are assuredly not deceived as to the character and effectiveness of those over them. Single individuals are frequently biased, of course, but such bias is not a disturbing factor when a sufficiently large number of judgments are secured. Though every teacher is aware that certain of his pupils are antagonistic and certain ones are overdisposed to be friendly, he is also aware that the whole body of his students, taken together, has a very fair idea of his worth, both as a man and as a teacher.

To get such opinions, the English teacher has an unparalleled opportunity. Through the assignment of theme subjects, he is able to explore at will his pupils' experience and thought. Constantly reviewing, as he is, the content of their minds, why should he not turn this review to account? Think of the mass of material that could be accumulated by a number of teachers over a period of years. Of course the information would have to be secured with some care and with as much scientific method as possible. But if the work were done in the right way, the results would certainly be of value.

The report which follows is a suggestion of what might be done in this line of investigation. It is not a model, as will be noted later, but it is an indication of what might be done on a large scale and with more fully controlled conditions.

Three classes of university freshmen were asked to write a short theme on the subject, "My Best High School Teacher." They were told to use the word "best" just as they would ordinarily use it, and to give their reasons for thinking the teacher best as fully as they could within the limits of about two hundred words. As they had been writing on similar subjects for about two months, expressing their personal views on questions of school life and matters of general concern to students, they took this theme quite as a matter of course and to all appearance felt no hindrance to frank self-expression. Their teacher had at all times put them as much as possible at their ease in discussing personal matters and had encouraged sincerity and directness.

As there were very few girls in the three classes, their papers were not considered. There were left, therefore, 82 reports, all from men. Some had given second and third choices, but, for the sake of consistency, only the first choices were taken into consideration in Table I. Here are shown two points, distribution of choices by sex of teachers mentioned and by subjects taught.

TABLE I
HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS "LIKED BEST" BY 82 BOYS AS STATED IN UNIVERSITY FRESHMEN ENGLISH THEMES

82 Total	44 Men	38 Women	Subject Taught
21	11	10	Mathematics
16	10	6	Subject not given
15	3	12	English
8	4	4	History
6	6	0	Physics
3	2	1	Chemistry
3	1	2	Science
2	2	0	Civics
2	1	1	Commercial
2	1	1	Modern Language
1	1	..	Manual Training
1	1	..	Agriculture
1	1	0	Biology
1	0	1	Latin

In the first place, the importance of the choices here expressed needs perhaps to be emphasized. Each of the 82 men had had in high school, on the average, at least 10 teachers, so that each had picked out the one he felt to be the "best" teacher of at least 10. Consequently, the 82 teachers mentioned represent, no doubt, a total number of over 800. The thinking which was back of these reports must, therefore, have consisted of a mental review of the work of all of these 800 teachers, or at least of those who were still prominent in their memory. Indeed, the tone and temper of the writing showed a very thoughtful consideration of the matter by practically all of the students.

In Table I, two points at least are of interest. The first is that just about half of the chosen teachers are men and half are women. Other things being equal, we should expect a boy to prefer a man as a teacher. Either that supposition is false, or other things were not equal. That is to say, a greater total proportion of women teachers would have increased the chances of there being strong individuals among them. Or it might be possible that the women were, on the

whole, more adapted to the work and therefore more likely to favorably impress their pupils. The material at hand does not enable us to answer any of these questions.

The second point in Table I is the distribution by subjects taught. Here the clear predominance of Mathematics and English would seem to need an explanation. The one that would first occur is that these are required subjects, or ones required for several years, and that therefore the chances were in their favor. This might be the answer, except for the argument that the other subjects, being electives in most part, should certainly have proven more attractive, if we assume that pupils elect subjects because they have strong interest in them. A sceptical person might discount the English choices since they were reported in English themes, but no such circumstance would account for Mathematics having first place. Nor was the chosen profession of the student a factor here, the engineering freshmen favoring the mathematics teacher no more than the freshmen in agriculture or arts and sciences. If we can find no other explanation, we are forced to assume that because Mathematics and English were subjects required of all, their predominance is due to the greater number of chances in their favor. In that case, the table seems to yield the conclusion that subject taught was not a factor at all, but that the choices were pretty evenly distributed over the whole of the curriculum. That is to say, a forceful and effective teacher will make a lasting impression on a student, no matter what subject he is teaching.

Table II presents another phase of the report, the qualities for which the teacher was singled out as "best." Here we were able to count those teachers who were described as second and third choices, for certainly they also had the qualities that impress students, though perhaps not in the same degree as the teachers mentioned first. This gives us 120 teachers in all, described by these 82 men as having been the "best," or among the "best," they had known in high school. Some difficulty arose, of course, in tabulating the qualities mentioned, but their descriptions were as far as possible preserved in the students' own words. In no case was one student's testimony twisted to fit another's statement. Keeping the students' phraseology gives the list a rather naive tone, but this very fact furnishes an added interest.

From Table II, one thing is clear. The students took "best" to mean having ability to teach. The phrase used most often, and one from the students' own colloquial speech, was that he or she "knew how to teach." The qualities next in rank are also phases of teaching ability. Personal qualities follow

TABLE II

QUALITIES MENTIONED AS REASONS FOR A TEACHER'S BEING "LIKED BEST"

One Hundred and Twenty Teachers Described by Eighty-two University Freshmen, Some Writing of One, Others of Two, And a Few of Three Persons

Material—English Themes

Times Mentioned	Quality as Described in Themes
69	Knew how to teach
50	Was interested in students
40	Had good discipline
39	Knew the subject
38	Made the work interesting
31	Was good natured
23	Had broad education and interests
20	Was interested in student activities
15	Was fair
11	Was socially popular
10	Had attractive personality
9	Was stern
9	Was practical
9	Had good character
6	Had sense of humor
6	Compelled attention by methods
4	Trusted students

with less numbers, some of those most often thought of by some of us being far down the list.

There is an interesting possibility for an explanation of this predominance of teaching ability. Might it not be that, after a two months' struggle with college work, the students were thinking with gratitude of those high school teachers who had grounded them well in prerequisites and with less regard then formerly of those who had not? There is certainly reason to think that just such a change in point of view would come about with the change from the high school hall to the university campus, yet in the boy who did not go to college, would not increasing maturity bring about much the same change? There might be some comfort in this thought for the high school teachers who feel that adolescence does not sufficiently appreciate good teaching.

The value of any such canvass as this depends, as we have stated, upon the frankness of the opinions expressed. Here it was felt that the students had no motive for a repression of honest opinion and none for the statement of a dishonest one. It is not claimed that these opinions are the same that were held while the boys were still in high school; probably

the change to the university had altered their views. But with which is the high school teacher most concerned, what his pupils think of him while he is teaching them, or what they will think of him in more mature retrospect? Very possibly, not enough statements are represented to show the same result that an investigation of a thousand cases would. Very possibly an investigation of the opinions of women university students would show markedly different results. These are matters for further study and ones that could be easily settled by even a slight co-operation on the part of the English Department of any college or university having a large enrollment. Very possibly, the opinions of high school graduates who go to college would not be entirely the same as those of graduates who do not, or even of those who never graduate. Yet the views of university freshmen should furnish a good indication of those of the whole high school student body.

It remains only to repeat that this study is but a slight attempt in a field that should prove constantly and widely valuable—the investigation of the experience and thought of pupils through their self-expression in English themes.