

## Increasing Youth's Self-Understanding

THOUGH the principles presented in this paper apply to all adolescents, special attention is focused upon younger adolescents. There are many things the junior high school youngsters want to know about themselves, about the "important others" in their lives, and about what these important others expect of them.

They are concerned about their size, posture, personal grooming, health, skin condition, sexual maturity, religious beliefs, relations with both peers and adults, especially authority figures, plans for the future, and ability to achieve these plans. They also want to know what other pupils their own age are like, how they feel about things, and how they deal with the problems which they face.

When, for example, a pupil asks about physical and emotional changes, he usually is not only trying to understand the changes that are occurring within himself and to accept the new self, he wants feedback from others. He wants to discover how others feel toward him and to learn how to win recognition and acceptance with them. Perhaps this is why

young people respond to group counseling<sup>1</sup> as they do.

### Answering Youth's Questions

The preceding points should be considered when we try to answer youth's questions. We must try to look at the young person's question through *his* eyes. Too often we fail to listen, and hence we fail to note what he wants to know. Sometimes we answer the questions for which we have the answers instead of the questions for which he seeks answers, or we tell him more than he wants to know at that time, or we fail to put the answers into terms that are meaningful for him. Occasionally, we even try to answer questions for which we do not have the answers or we may try to use instruments which we are not qualified to use.

Pupils have many different reasons for asking questions. For example, they may ask questions to clarify a concept, to obtain information about themselves or a situation, to put a teacher or counselor on the spot, to be reassured, to express dependency, or to enlist aid from some-

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Merle M. Ohlsen is Professor of Educational Psychology, University of Illinois, Urbana.

<sup>1</sup> Merle M. Ohlsen. "Counseling Individuals Within the Group Setting," Chapter 5. *Guidance Services in the Modern School*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964.

one whom they trust. When a pupil expresses feelings of inadequacy, facts alone are not sufficient; he must discuss these feelings before he will be able to accept and use the facts. For instance, at the end of the seventh grade a boy learns that his test scores indicate that he should be able to do well in an eighth grade algebra class. Nevertheless, if he does not believe this fact, he probably will not do well in the class. He needs to express his doubts in a permissive climate in which he feels understood and accepted. He also needs to talk about how to cope with these doubts before he can accept and integrate the test data.

### Changing Pupils' Self-Image

Most youngsters have some preconceived notion about the way they actually are and about the way they would like others to perceive them. From the time a child first has tried to communicate with others, he has been developing an image of himself, and this image is not easily changed even at age 16 or 17.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes he is pleased with himself and at other times he is disappointed. If, however, he has grown up within a wholesome environment, he has learned to accept himself as he is, with both his weaknesses and his strengths, and to plan accordingly. Though he tries to correct those weaknesses that he can correct with reasonable effort, he does not brood about the others.

He realizes that he does not have to be perfect to be accepted and to achieve his goals. The permissive relationship described previously is essential in order for a counselor or teacher (and often this

requires counseling skills which we have no right to expect of a teacher) to help a pupil examine new information which apparently does not fit into his self-image. Failure to provide this relationship probably explains why many who use tests to increase pupils' self-understanding fail to achieve their objective.<sup>3</sup>

### Objectives of Child Study Service

Non-test data must be used along with test scores to increase pupil's self-understanding. Hence, testing should be perceived as only one part of the child study service, and those who use tests should understand the overall objectives of the child study services. These objectives are the following:

The child study service is designed to help counselors understand their clients, to help pupils understand themselves and their own capabilities, and to help teachers understand their pupils so that they can plan appropriate learning experiences for them. Effective child study also enables (a) a pupil and his teachers to determine whether or not the pupil's progress in his school work is satisfactory; (b) a pupil and his teachers to identify and to diagnose learning problems and to plan appropriate remedial work; (c) a teacher to determine a pupil's readiness for a school experience or the next phase of the school program; (d) teachers and counselors to identify pupils for special programs directed toward exceptional children, whether gifted or handicapped; (e) a pupil to discover what he must know about himself in order to make intelligent educational, vocational, and social plans; and (f) a pupil to identify those forces within himself and his environment that interfere with efficient learning and healthful living.

Child study is a cooperative enterprise: in an effort to understand a child and to help him understand himself, various people

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Warren G. Findley, editor. *The Impact and Improvement of School Testing Programs*, Sixty-second Yearbook for the National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963. p. 256-66.

share what they have learned about him from observations and tests.<sup>4</sup>

### Research Evidence

Most of the studies concerned with increasing self-understanding have evaluated the outcomes of test interpretation. Typically such studies have used either high school or college students as subjects, and rarely have the investigators obtained increased congruency between students' self-estimates and test-estimates when they used subjects below grade eleven.<sup>5</sup> Lister and Ohlsen's<sup>6</sup> study is one of the few exceptions.

These researchers found that (a) at all four grade levels (five, seven, nine, and eleven) students improved the accuracy of their self-estimates (improved congruency between self-estimates and test-estimates) for all three types of tests (interest, achievement, and mental ability) following test interpretations, and that students maintained a significantly more accurate self-estimate over the two month period following the test interpretation; (b) most students wanted to have their tests interpreted; (c) only limited support was found for the hypothesis that motivation for test interpretation increased accuracy of self-estimates following test interpretation; and (d) students' satisfaction with self-estimates and perceived accuracy of self-estimates increased over the four self-ratings (pretesting, pretest interpretation, post-test interpretation, and follow-up), suggesting students' increased acceptance of test information.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 182-83.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 256-66.

<sup>6</sup> James L. Lister and Merle M. Ohlsen. *The Effects of Orientation to Testing on Motivation for and Outcomes of Test Interpretation*. Co-operative Research Project No. 1344. Urbana: College of Education, University of Illinois, 1962.

Because they probably account for these results, four important points should be noted concerning this study: (a) the counselors who interpreted the tests were selected with care to insure that they were well-qualified for their duties; (b) they were very carefully prepared for their duties, and tape recordings of their interviews were checked periodically to determine whether they followed the prescribed procedures; (c) students were asked to estimate how well they did prior to giving them test data as a means of involving them in the test interpretation process; and (d) counselors tried to detect how students felt about their test results (and seemed to be quite successful in picking up these feelings) and to help them discuss their reactions toward what they learned about themselves.

Apparently self-understanding can be increased. Moreover, self-understanding is essential in order that students may determine what they have a right to expect from themselves, to understand and cope with their learning problems, to make the essential educational and vocational decisions while they are enrolled in the secondary schools, and after they leave school to revise their plans or to define new goals in light of increased knowledge of self and of changing economic conditions.

In summary, let us review some principles which should be considered by those who give youngsters information about themselves:

1. Let them know that you know something about them, that you want to understand them better, and what resources the school has for helping them understand themselves, their peers, and their environment.

(Continued on page 277)

*Career Development*, No. 15A. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1960.

12. L. E. Tyler. "Research Explorations in the Realm of Choice." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 8:195-201; Fall 1961.

—CHARLES GALLOWAY, *Assistant Professor of Education, Department of Education and Psychology, North Texas State University, Denton, Texas.*

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2. Orient young people to the sources of information and give them a chance to react to what they learn.

3. Use only those resources which you are qualified to use. For example, a test should not be given until the school employs someone who is qualified to use and interpret such a test. All too often teachers and counselors are expected to interpret tests which they are not qualified to interpret. Hence, pupils are either given inaccurate impressions of themselves or the experience is not meaningful—increased self-understanding is not achieved.

4. Have more respect for pupils' perception of themselves. Most students have a pretty accurate impression of how well they have done on a test.<sup>7</sup> Also, encourage them to report their self-estimates prior to their receiving information. This method enables the information giver to identify errors in perception and helps him identify pupils' feelings that should be discussed.

5. Be very sensitive to cues which suggest that the pupil does not comprehend, or cannot accept, the information that is being given to him. Obviously, arguing with him does not produce increased

<sup>7</sup> Merle M. Ohlsen, Richard E. Pearson and Paul A. Wurm. *Variables Related to Outcomes of Test Interpretation*. Cooperative Research Project No. S-043-64. Urbana: College of Education, University of Illinois, 1964.

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self-understanding. On the other hand, giving him a chance to ask questions concerning the material which he does not understand or to react emotionally to the material which he cannot accept may produce better self-understanding. If, for example, a counselor is to do this successfully while interpreting a test to a junior high school pupil, he must know a lot about junior high pupils in general, and this pupil in particular, and he must know the test he is interpreting.

6. Be wary lest you let general perceptions of a pupil color objective data. Ohlsen, Pearson and Wurm<sup>8</sup> found that teachers react to pupils in terms of a general perceptual set and that overestimation and underestimation of mental ability are related to this general perceptual set.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

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