Children need teachers as human partners to assist in the process of self-discovery.

Self-insight—
and the Student

SHEILA SCHWARTZ
Associate Professor of English Education
State University College, New Paltz, New York

As he moves through (the) curriculum, how much does each child find that helps him understand himself and build a valid concept of what he is and can be?¹

WHICH experiences and situations help the child to develop self-insight, to acquire the ability to look into his composite of thoughts and feelings and to apprehend its inner nature, to accept and respect his uniqueness, and, as a consequence, to recognize the inescapable human ties which relate his individual self to all others?

Self-insight has not been a traditional concern of educators. Many teachers fear the examining child who must ergo be a nonconformist. That is in part why adults react so strongly to long hair and short skirts. These are the visible signs of nonconformity. And nonconformity makes adults uncomfortable because it forces them to examine themselves and their procedures.

One ninth grade boy, in a composition, wrote:

I wear my hair over my ears, eyes, and the back of my neck, because I think it looks good, and also because I get a big kick out of breaking the rules of our ridiculous society. You don't know how funny it is to walk into a public place and have people turn around and stare as if you were something from a distant planet. I don't understand why I wear my hair the way I do, and I understand less why people react the way they do.

We can assume from reading these words that he is probably not the type of student teachers want. Teachers prefer children:

... who are a little afraid of us, docile, deferential children, though not, of course, if

they are so obviously afraid that they threaten to wreck our image of ourselves as kind, lovable people whom there is no reason to fear."

**The Docile Exterior**

The child who called out that the Emperor was naked shook the very foundations of the establishment. Today's teachers cannot whisk this child away and accept only the docile and deferential. Something is going on beneath the docile exterior. "One of every ten children in today's classrooms seems destined to move one day into a mental hospital." The growth of alcoholism and dope addiction as symbols of growing unrest and alienation have been widely documented.

Teachers can no longer ignore the need for helping students to understand themselves. Children need teachers as human partners to assist in the process of self-discovery. "It is a rare child who, anywhere in his growing up, meets even one older person with whom he can talk openly about what most interests him, concerns him, worries him." They learn to play it safe, to adopt the protective coloration of their peers and to pretend to accept the values of their teachers. They "learn early in life that for unknown reasons they must not talk about a large part of what they think and feel. . . ." As a result, an important source of growth and self-discovery for both teacher and student is forever lost.

Based on the hypothesis that "schools can do more than they are now doing to help people gain in healthy self-understanding and in acceptance of themselves and others," it was decided, for purposes of this article, to go directly to the original source. That is, to the students themselves.

Ten classes of secondary school students from grades seven to twelve were asked to write compositions in their English classes. They were asked to describe any experiences in school that had helped them to know more about themselves and to develop greater self-insight. They were told that these could be in any area of school life or work, were to be unsigned and would not be read by the classroom teacher.

**Students Write**

Some of the findings were as follows:

1. The students confuse self-insight with how they are evaluated through marks, by report cards, teacher conferences and academic failure or success. It is generally self-insight of a negative kind. To illustrate, the following statements:

   I believe that a poor report card could help you face your insights. If you don’t do well

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³*A Climate for Individuality*, op. cit., p. 37.

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in school, you will look back and say to yourself all the things you should have done (Grade 8).

I have learned that I am lazy and my study habits are poor, but I am going to try to change them by not watching television until a certain prescribed time. I know that if I don't amend my study habits they will hurt me greatly in college and high school (Grade 9).

2. The teacher plays an unavoidable role in the development or repression of self-insight, through what he is as a person and through the way he handles subject matter.

Sometimes in school I feel that no one really cares how I do. But it is a glorious feeling when you find out someone really does. One of my teachers and I got to talking one afternoon, and I saw that he was really interested in me. Not in my compositions, not my readings, but me! It made me feel that what I do in school is important. I am only an IBM card if that's all I want to be. But this teacher spoke as though he was talking with me, not to me (Grade 10).

This teacher has given me a thirst to experience everything I can. I find myself many times reaching out for new and different feelings. I want to try everything once . . . . This teacher has made me want to teach other people and do for them what she did for me. That is, make a transition from school to real life through the teacher-student relationship (Grade 11).

The above two statements illustrate positive contributions, though descriptions of negative roles played by teachers were far more frequent.

In sixth grade I had a teacher who I did not get along with to say the least. Very frequently we had some major altercations. I was very fortunate that this particular teacher did not detract from my grades because of my disagreeableness. Because of this sixth grade teacher I have developed the self-insight to hold in pent-up disagreements and emotions (Grade 7).

3. Many students are convinced that schools have little or no interest in the development of self-insight. One student stated this as follows:

The hours spent in school, while they may have been factually enlightening, have never done very much to help me gain any type of insight into myself. Discussion, although it existed, was never allowed to deviate very far from the topic at hand. Classes were based on lecture. Freedom was, and still is, almost non-existent.

Standards have very definitely been imposed upon us, that simply are not, and should not be ours. Perhaps there will be a day when schools feel that it is their obligation to teach their pupils more than facts. They will plan their curriculum in such a way that it will demand self-investigation on the part of the student (Grade 10).

4. Although some teachers attempt to develop self-insight, this is in most schools a haphazard procedure. It is certainly not sequential or continuous. It is rarely a highly regarded value:

The educational system today doesn't give me enough time for myself in the respect of insight. In my classes there is no room and no one really cares what my opinion is. I just have to accept my classes for what they are. Self-insight has nothing to do with it. Things were the same even in elementary school. What did my first grade teacher care
about my developing as a person? She was just interested to see that I could read to push me on to second grade.

The subject of self-insight was never even brought up at all except by some idiot guidance counselor in a feeble "human relations" class. Very few attempts have been made evident to me in which the educational system tries to give the student self-insight (Grade 11).

5. Some students indicate that their self-insight came from interaction with peers:

I gain my self-insight mainly through the actions of others. In elementary school I was persecuted for not liking sports and leaning more towards artistic and creative subjects. I was rejected by elementary school "society" so to speak. Therefore, I have never quite understood persecution and how people can possibly get any fun out of it (Grade 8).

Need for Clearer Aims

On the basis of approximately 300 compositions, I should like to suggest the following ideas:

1. Despite careful explanation, students do not seem to understand what self-insight is.

2. Although most teachers would give lip service to the idea that "The unexamined life is not worth living," there is little time or opportunity provided in school for reflection and for the examination of humanistic questions such as "Who am I?"

3. Our present grading system produces conformity and anxiety rather than an improvement in thinking processes and in self-knowledge.

4. We are concentrating on things rather than on people in our schools.

5. Before self-insight can be pursued as an educational value, the role of the school will have to be reconsidered by all involved in the process of education. If one believes that the most important task for education is to "help the growing person to understand and accept himself," it is evident that our schools are not succeeding in this purpose.

Jersild, op. cit., p. 3.