

MILDRED WHIDDEN,
*M.A. in Guidance Program,
 St. Francis Xavier University,
 Antigonish, Nova Scotia.*

STUDENTS' DESCRIPTIONS OF REAL AND HYPOTHETICAL ADULT CONFIDANTS

"This changing world" has become a cliché which embraces all facets of life and all classes of people, both young and old. Our high-school students, with whom this paper is concerned, are no exception. A quick glance at the changing structure of family life reveals its effect on these youths. Newly married couples often move to a new environment far from close family ties. As their children grow up and meet frustrations, they can no longer run to aunty or uncle for sympathetic support as was so customary in past generations. If they do find understanding adults other than the immediate family, the relationship is often temporary. The fathers' opportunities for employment often mean numerous changes—transfers to other provinces or to other countries. Our population is not static, but in a constant state of flux. Broken homes are more common, the divorce rate is increasing, the advent of the new morality has swept upon us with confusing issues. The psycho-social price index figures bear testimony to the above statements (Nevison, 1969).

These reasons alone are sufficient to interest us in the type of adults who will influence our students. Without denying the importance of the parents and other family members, is it not reasonable to assume that a great many students will also turn to other adults for advice and example? Is it not also reasonable to assume that schools might be the logical place for these adults to be found? Is it not the duty of our schools to provide such personnel? It is the writer's opinion that this must be the primary function of our guidance counselors. Many administrators, counselors, and parents agree with this statement, but do the students? These and other questions led to this small exploratory study.

Answers to the following research questions were sought.

1. Do students bring personal problems to adults other than their parents and close relatives?
2. If so, what do they report as the characteristics of these adults?
3. If not, will they willingly describe an adult to whom they might bring personal problems?
4. If so, what would they imagine such hypothetical adults to be like?

The word "problem" as used in Question 1 and throughout this study does not necessarily mean a serious difficulty or maladjustment, but we might think of it as "some imminent future adjustment for which some preparation can be made (Bennett, 1963, p. 49)."

Many methods could be used in searching for the answers to these questions, but the most direct seemed to be to ask the young people. The direct and open-ended approach in such a preliminary study has a precedent in a study reported by Harris (1969). In this way, we acknowledge their honesty, common sense, and idiosyncratic set of values. Let us give our youth

more chance to "speak up" before they "speak out" in dissension, riots, and violence. By making a count of their answers, it is possible to assess their needs for adult confidants. Content analysis of the findings can, in addition, be used in building an instrument for a more precise investigation.

PROCEDURE

Sample

Three large high schools of Nova Scotia were arbitrarily chosen for the survey. School A was a large rural high school with students attending from small villages and rural areas; Schools B and C were town high schools serving both town and rural students. The 163 student Ss were all in Grade XI in both academic and non-academic streams, and Table 1 shows numbers of male and female students in each school.

TABLE 1
Composition of the Sample of Grade XI students by Sex and School

	School A	School B	School C	Totals
Male	27	22	25	74
Female	25	25	39	89
Totals	52	47	64	163

Method

Three teachers of Grade XI English, one in each school, used part of an English period to have their students write character sketches of adults with whom they had discussed or would discuss a personal matter. The directions for writing the sketch were on the top of the unlined sheet of paper on which Ss wrote, and were as follows for all Ss:

In space provided (below) please write a short character sketch describing an adult person you talk to when you wish to discuss any personal matter. Do not choose your parents or any relative but someone outside your family. Do not name him/her but tell if the person is male or female, give his/her approximate age and state his/her occupation. If you never talk to such an adult, please describe the type of person you would like to be able to talk to. This is entirely confidential. Do not sign your name, but mark male or female at top.

As it was realized that some students might never have talked to adults other than their parents concerning personal matters, the second paragraph was added to determine their description of a hypothetical confidant. Relatives were excluded because the purpose of this study was to discover the students' preferences in a limited domain. Additional research might include relatives as well as non-family confidants, and proportions of these.

Students were assured of anonymity insofar as was possible as they marked only their sex on the papers. Completed assignments were placed in a stamped envelope, addressed to the investigator; envelopes were sealed in class and mailed by one of the students.

Content analysis of the characteristics of the adults were formed upon inspection of the character sketches. The six most frequently mentioned categories of characteristics were used for this analysis. The first, "understanding," was simple to identify as many students used the word "understanding." Others mentioned synonymous expressions.

"Personal experience" was used when students spoke of adults who "had a tough time themselves" or "learned through experience." Work experiences were also counted in this category as some references were made to adults who "could talk to us because of their training with young people."

"Ability to communicate" was identified by any reference to the adult being "easy to talk to" or the student's being made to "feel at ease."

"Confidentiality" is self-explanatory. Many subjects used the word itself or stressed the idea that what they told would not be spread to anyone else.

"Intelligence" was expressed in many ways to mean that the adult was well-educated or wise enough to give common-sense and sound advice.

"Honesty" was most often expressed by students simply as "he/she must be honest."

"Sense of humor" was written as just that, or "he/she can take a joke."

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the total sample of 163, 154 Ss described a confidant, and 9 refused to do so. Of the 154 confidants described, 100 were "real people" to whom Ss said they had spoken about personal problems. The 54 "hypothetical" persons were described when an S chose option 2 of the directions. These 54 descriptions could be, and were, readily separated into those by students who appeared to be willing to imagine a confidant, and those who were reluctant to do so, the latter often stating that they were completing the task because it was an assignment, or to assist the researcher. There were, as Table 2 indicates, 38 willing responses and 16 reluctant ones. Data in Table 2 are subdivided by sex as well as school.

TABLE 2
Numbers of Students Who Described Real People, Willingly Described Hypothetical Adults, Reluctantly Described Hypothetical Adults, and Who Did Not Describe an Adult.

	School A Students			School B Students			School C Students			Totals
	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.	
Description was of: Real People	8	10	18	12	18	30	19	33	52	100
Willingly Described Hypothetical Adults	8	13	21	6	2	8	6	3	9	38
Reluctantly Described Hypothetical Adults	6	2	8	3	3	6	0	2	2	16
No Description	5	0	5	1	2	3	0	1	1	9
Totals	27	25	52	22	25	47	25	39	64	163

The 100 real people were not, however, all adults in the usual sense of the word. Some 30 Ss described peers as confidants. The preponderance of these were in School C. Therefore, the persons chosen by Ss will be referred to as confidants rather than as adults. The idiosyncrasies of School C Ss in this regard will be discussed later.

Examples of character sketches of real and hypothetical confidants will be quoted below, when characteristics are discussed. The 9 refusers and the 16 answering reluctantly, however, deserve explanation here. Of the 9 re-

fusers, 2 were emphatic in their rejection of the task because of a refusal to take problems to any adult, and 7 gave less alienated responses. Of these 7, it is possible that some or all may simply have felt distaste for the assignment. The response of one of the two emphatic Ss may be of interest:

I don't, never have, nor don't ever plan to take any of my personal problems to anybody, be he adult or someone my own age. I feel that anything I can manage to get myself into, I can get myself out of by myself—. Parents don't care . . . Clergymen and doctors don't care, nor do guidance counselors. They listen to problems only because it is their job and they want to help you solve your troubles because it means they're doing a good job. Nobody cares, *absolutely nobody* . . .

Another who did not describe a confidant in the conventional sense said this:

To answer your question, I must confess that I have no such person to talk with. Perhaps this is because I have a personal contact with the Lord. I have found that He can answer questions and solve problems that no human can.

Life has so little meaning that without a faith in a Maker, it would be totally worthless for man to struggle through life, if at the end of the road we were to die and return to dust. By trusting Him I need nothing, fear nothing, or have nothing.

—A servant of God

Some of the 16 reluctant respondents were also emphatic about their discomfort with the assignment. An example of such a response is: "I have no wish now to have any person to tell my problems. Since I have no choice except describe or abstain, here is my hypothetical Father Confessor . . ."

Responses of the 163 students were examined to find frequencies of age range, sex, and occupation of the adults described. Table 3 shows the results for preference of age. It should be noted that the students in the sample, in Grade XI in Nova Scotia, are in large majority between 16 and 18 years of age. The choice of 37 persons in their teens indicates either that these Ss think of persons from 17 through 19 as adults, or that they were rejecting or deliberately sidestepping the possibility of discussing a personal problem with an adult "over 20." A few of the teen-age confidants were described as college students. Since the preponderance of choices of persons in their teens was found in School C (50% of students choosing teens), a representative response from that school is reproduced here: "The older generation doesn't understand us now and may not understand my problem at all . . ."

TABLE 3
Preferences for Age of Confidants

	School A	School B	School C
Teens	2	3	32
20's	16	17	15
30's	9	16	4
40's	10	3	3
50's	5	1	2
60's			1
70's			2
No age stated	10	7	5
Totals	52	47	64

There can be little doubt that School C is different from the other two in that responses included descriptions of a relatively large number of classmates and age mates, and in that an anti-adult tone was encountered more frequently. The possibility that school or classroom climate might be an influence on the willingness of students to seek adult help *even outside of the school* is an interesting one, and appears worthy of further more precise research.

Male and female Ss described a confidant of the same sex as their own much more frequently than they named a confidant of the opposite sex, as is shown in Table 4. Sixty-six % of the females and 57% of the males chose same-sex adults to describe, 28% of the females and 24% of the males chose opposite-sex adults, and 19% of the males either did not mention sex or were among the small group who refused to describe anyone, as opposed to 6% of females in this category.

TABLE 4

		Confidant			Totals
		Male	Female	Sex Unspecified	
Describer of Confidant	Male	42 (57%)	18 (24%)	14 (19%)	74
	Female	25 (28%)	59 (66%)	5 (6%)	89
TOTALS		67	77	19	163

The occupations of the confidants are tabulated in Table 5, and show a scattered representation of 11 different conventional adult occupations, plus a large component of students. Forty-four Ss either stated that occupation of an adult would make no difference, or did not mention occupation.

Incidence of mention of the various characteristics of confidants is shown in Table 6 for real and hypothetical persons. Although there are slight

TABLE 5
Occupation of Confidants

	School A	School B	School C	Total
Students	4	4	39	47
Housewives	10	4	4	18
Labourers	3	1	5	9
Office workers	0	7	1	8
Clergymen	1	4	2	7
Teachers	2	1	4	7
Counselors	3	3	0	6
Doctors	5	1	0	6
Social workers	3	2	0	5
Nurses	0	2	1	3
Lawyers	2	0	0	2
Engineer	1	0	0	1
Stated occupation would make no difference, or did not mention	18	18	8	44

differences between the rank orders of these frequencies for the real persons as compared to the imaginary ones, Ss agreed that understanding was the most important characteristic, insofar as it was mentioned most frequently by both groups. Students describing hypothetically appeared to place a somewhat higher premium on confidants' experience and his ability to keep a confidence than did those describing real persons, while the ease with which communication was carried on was noticed more often by those describing real persons than it was hypothesized for imaginary ones.

TABLE 6
Characteristics of "Real" and "Hypothetical" Confidants Described by 154 High-School Students in 3 Schools

Characteristic	Frequency of Mention		Percentage of Mentions	
	"Real" (N = 100)	"Hypothetical" (N = 54)	"Real"	"Hypothetical"
Understanding	61	42	61%	78%
Easy				
Communication	32	11	32%	20%
Experience Life	24	23	24%	43%
Confidentiality	18	18	18%	33%
Intelligence	17	10	17%	19%
Honesty	17	8	17%	15%
Humour	13	3	13%	6%

Note: More than one characteristic could be mentioned in a single description.

Examples from the descriptions written to describe both real and hypothetical persons are quoted for the various characteristics:

1. *Understanding*

Real Adult by a Male, School A:

"Although she is over fifty, she is younger at heart than most people of thirty; she seems to be able to understand all my problems because I think she can see them from my point of view in relation with the times, not relating to fifty years ago, as most older people do."

Hypothetical Adult, by a Female, School A:

"I would like someone who was easy to talk to, someone who would listen, who was kind and understanding and would not dismiss my problems as just silly ideas all young girls have."

2. *Experience*

Real Adult, by a Male, School C:

"His life is now straightened out but he went through very similar family problems as I have experienced. He agrees with my values in life and our interests are very much the same."

Hypothetical Adult, by a Female, School A:

"I think I would like to talk with another female who is about 25 and has experienced many of the things in life, like marriage and bearing children. I would want her to tell things like they really were or are and tell me

experiences in her life that she regrets or remembers with sadness. I would like her to be able to say that my problems are no different than most people at my age. I would not want her to laugh at anything that I said I had done, but to tell me some of the silly things she had done. I would like her to have talked with other people both male and female about their problems. In this way I could compare my problems with those she told me and maybe be relieved of them."

Real Adult, by a Female, School C:

"Maybe it is her nurse's training which helps her be so helpful but I think it is just her feeling toward people and that she thinks of she can help in any way she is helping society."

Hypothetical Adult, by a Female, School B:

"She should be in a profession dealing with young people. She should like to discuss and make young people understand. She should like young people and love her work."

3. *Ability to communicate*

Real Adult, by a Male, School A:

"Her personality just matches her looks perfectly in that she is friendly with people and in just speaking to you she makes you feel like you are worth something. I can go to her and talk about very personal matters without feeling uneasy."

or another, Male, School A:

"He seems to be able to talk to young people in a manner in which they understand. This guy seems to get through to teenagers in a way that takes the embarrassment away from the person. Talking with him seems just like talking to your best friend."

Hypothetical Adult, by a Male, School C:

"In spite of his puritanical and theological upbringing he is easy to communicate with. He doesn't hide in a shell and refuse new thoughts. When I talk to him we kid back and forth."

4. *Confidentiality*

Real Adult, by a Female, School A:

"She is a close friend of my mother but I know that any conversations that we have are completely confidential. This is one thing that helps me to say what I really feel."

Hypothetical Adult, by a Female, School A:

"She must not be the type to go around telling everybody about it, she must be trustworthy and keep it to herself."

5. *Intelligence*

Real Adult, by a Female, School A:

"He is my family doctor . . . He is a very intelligent person. He brings his points of view out in the open and describes them freely."

Hypothetical Adult, by a Male, School C:

"This intelligent man could understand personal matters and offer advice but also accept views and opinions of others."

6. *Honesty*

Real Adult, by a Female, School A:

"He can be both sympathetic and eager to help out but if he thinks you are wrong or doesn't agree with what you say he will lay his cards on the table, so to speak. When anyone talks to him about a personal matter he couldn't discuss with someone else, he can be sure of a sympathetic ear and good honest advice."

Hypothetical Adult, by a Male, School A:

"It should be a person who is willing to listen and have a few ideas and a lot of constructive criticism no matter how harsh it may seem. I feel that I have a lot of bad traits which I myself will not notice but someone else will notice and give possible ideas as what to do to correct the situation. I feel that nobody is perfect and we need a lot of guidance."

7. *Sense of Humor*

Real Adult, by a Male, School C:

"He talks to kids in their own language and can joke along with anyone but also has a serious side."

Hypothetical Adult, by a Female, School B:

"She would have to have a nice personality and a sense of humor and she would be interested in my problem."

The category frequencies partially answer the questions dealing with characteristics that young people consider most important. Some mention could be made of others which were discussed in some sketches but, because of lack of frequency, were not tabulated. The word "respect" was sometimes used and was invariably coupled with "understanding." Eight students referred to religion specifically.

CONCLUSION

From the answers given by this sample of young students, we can readily perceive a great desire from the majority to talk to some adult, to share opinions and to seek advice. Indeed, 100 of them had done just that, and their responses indicate that they were very glad to have done so. An additional 38 evidently had not, yet were willing to imagine a situation in which they would discuss a personal problem. To these, the possibility of both problem and helper were not outlandish, and they formed over 20 percent of the sample. We do not know, of course, whether they had not yet encountered a problem they couldn't handle alone, or whether they had struggled with a problem and had been unable to find a helpful confidant.

Although 163 students from a single province represents a very small sample of young people, their responses may indicate a modern trend—that of youth-adult discussions of youth's problems beyond the immediate family circle. It does point towards a role which is being played, consciously or unconsciously, by our adults whether in home or social life. It cannot be ignored.

These students have aptly described adults to whom they *do* bring problems and adults to whom they *would* bring problems. The more verbal stu-

dents naturally wrote in more detail and weighted the response results. But even the curtest response from the briefest of writers carried this message, "If you have a problem you should discuss it with someone else who is understanding and who could really help you to solve it . . ."

REFERENCES

- Bennett, M. E. *Guidance and counseling in groups*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963.
- Harris, J. G. The best things in life are . . . ? *Canadian Counsellor*, 1969, 3(1), 13-27.
- Nevison, M. B. There is another kind of inflation—and the costs are high. *Canadian Counsellor*, 1969, 3(4), 48-60.

DESCRIPTIONS DONNEES PAR LES ELEVES D'ADULTES VRAIS ET HYPOTHETIQUES QUI MERITENT CONFIANCE

MILDRED WHIDDEN

Afin de découvrir l'opinion des élèves sur la qualité des adultes avec qui ils aimeraient discuter des sujets personnels, une total de 163 élèves de la XI^e année, dans 3 grands écoles de la Nouvelle Ecosse, à qui on a demandé de décrire un adulte avec qui ils avaient déjà discuté des sujets personnels ou de décrire un adulte avec qui ils aimeraient avoir une discussion semblable. 100 ont décrit de vrais adultes et 54 ont décrit des adultes hypothétiques, 9 n'ont pas donné d'opinion. Les réponses ont été analysé, révélant comme choix sept caractéristiques dans l'ordre suivant: compréhension, facilité de communication, expériences de vie, confiance, intelligence, honetété, humeur.

Il est espéré que cette brève étude fournira la base à de futures études sur l'importance de l'orienteur comme étant un adulte à qui on peut faire confiance.