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# THE EDUCATIONAL LEADER



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A Technique for the Counseling Interview and  
the Classroom

Clyde Ray Baird

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VOLUME XVII • NUMBER 2

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# THE EDUCATIONAL LEADER

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## The Autobiography

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Perusal of the literature reveals that the autobiography has been used for many different purposes and objectives. One needs only to read Beers' *A Mind That Found Itself*<sup>1</sup> or a Dostoyevsky novel to see how useful autobiographical material can be in understanding the personality of the writer. We can see its relationship to the Catholic confessional and to Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>2</sup> However, the consideration of it in this paper begins with an examination of how it has been used successfully in the classroom and in the counselor's office as well as in related situations and the contributions that it makes in the understanding of the student's personality. The autobiography, of course, is a means of supplying facts about the student's background, but more important than the mere collection of facts is that it provides a method of obtaining his reaction to these facts. In the narration of his family history, his past experiences, his present outlook on life, his interests, and his ambitions, the student gives clues to his interpretation of his environment and gives a reaction and an evaluation that only he can reveal.

As will be shown by this paper, the autobiography has been used successfully at all grade levels in the school. Although it has much potential value, often it is on a routine, descriptive level, apparently done as a mechanical task with the absence of spontaneity. Too often the reaction of some teachers reflects their indifference to this valuable tool of guidance that has been used successfully by teachers and counselors.

In order to lift the writing above the perfunctory assignment, Preston<sup>3</sup> recommends that children be acquainted with published autobiographies. He suggests that in planning the writing of their

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1. C. W. Beers, *A Mind That Found Itself*, 29th Printing, Garden City, New York, Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1948.

2. Ruth Strang, *Counseling Technics in College and Secondary School*, Revised and enlarged edition, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1949, p. 80.

3. Ralph C. Preston, "Children's Autobiographies," *Elementary English Review*, 23:306-07, November, 1946.

own autobiographies they limit the scope of them since the diversity of experience is too broad. At the same time he emphasizes that children must be assured that the autobiographies will be treated confidentially, because he believes that "unless an autobiography is sincere, reflective, and candid, its writing cannot be regarded as a significant experience."<sup>4</sup> This same point of view is also expressed by Miller<sup>5</sup> and others.

Preston also points out that "a sincere autobiography reveals its author's outlook and preoccupations. It can be authentically interpreted through judging how consistently it dovetails with data about the child which has been secured through other sources."<sup>6</sup> At the same time it will provide information about what children regard as objectional spots in teachers as well as traits and procedures that bring positive responses from children. There is often revealed the need for encouragement and help. One can "discover children's sensitive spots and situations which are irritants and sources of resentment."<sup>7</sup>

In searching for a technique that would give a teacher much information about a child in order to facilitate his learning, Stevens decided upon a combination of the controlled diary, the autobiography, and the scrapbook features as well as various collecting hobbies.<sup>8</sup> The presentation of this standardized autobiography, as Stevens termed it, was built around the usual activities of children both inside and outside the classroom. This involved cutting, coloring, pasting, drawing, collecting, reading, and writing.

Based upon case study principles, the procedure consisted of a skeleton outline that Stevens arranged so that the child filled in blanks with details that were unique to himself. When filled in the outline was a continuous story about the child. "The technique is intended to have appeal to the egocentric nature of the child. He will be motivated to write his life story since that is a satisfying psychological experience. He is highly motivated to participate since it is based on activities that are familiar and interesting to him. The assistance from parents, or other older persons, and his teacher, make it a co-operative venture that lends itself to dynamic and effective participation."<sup>9</sup>

Since Stevens used this with second- and third-grade children, he

4. *Ibid.*, p. 307.

5. Ward S. Miller, "We Write Our Life-Stories," *English Journal*, 29:490-93, June, 1940.

6. Preston, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 307.

8. G. D. Stevens, "Studying the Child by Means of a Standardized Autobiography," *Elementary English*, 24:220-224, April, 1947.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

thought that it was necessary to have some validity check on the material. As a result he introduced the autograph technique. "For example, a child could not record a visit to the dentist and fill in certain information if he did not visit the dentist. Since the autograph of the dentist is included in the section on dental data it will validate the data recorded. . . . By checking the radio programs and numbers of movies the child attends it is possible to know how much sleep the child gets."<sup>10</sup>

Allport has noted that until the age of thirteen or after the child records information in external terms primarily. As a result he has stated that the autobiographies of children have little value,<sup>11</sup> but this point of view is apparently not shared by Stevens and Preston. Both of them have found that this technique can be used very successfully with elementary school children. They would probably agree that what Allport has said is true in many instances, but Preston made this comment:

Personality traits are rather faithfully mirrored in children's autobiographies. There are those children who record nothing but incidents built around friendships and cliques. Others summarize their school years as a succession of teacher personalities. Still others string together remembered plays, trips, and other activities. It is, of course, possible to read too much into children's autobiographies. They are, nevertheless, tremendously fruitful documents. They will reward painstaking attention to the technique of improving their quality.<sup>12</sup>

Those elementary school teachers who may have wondered if the autobiographical technique could be used with younger children will find the experimentation rewarding and challenging. While it is recognized that it will not prove successful in all instances, it can be used with grade-school children to obtain better insight into their personalities by seeing their reactions to their environment.

As one examines various bibliographies it is interesting to note that there are few references on the autobiography written by counselors. Most of the articles appear to be written by the classroom teacher, and while this might be worthy of conjecture, perhaps greater value can be gained from considering a number of plans used by teachers.

A rather detailed plan for using the autobiographical technique in sophomore English class is reported in the *English Journal* by Crouse.<sup>13</sup> If the students desire a certain grade a required amount

10. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

11. Gordon W. Allport, *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science*, New York, Social Science Research Council, 1942, p. 79.

12. Preston, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

13. Ruth Crouse, "Writing an Autobiography," *English Journal*, 33:264-65, May, 1944.

of work must be done on the autobiography. The minimum length is five chapters averaging 700 words each. For an A grade eight chapters are required. Students are encouraged to make attractive covers and include clippings and pictures as well as certificates and awards. In order that they might integrate the material better and present it in a more interesting style, it is recommended that they read such stories as Clarence Day's *Life with Father*.

From the report by Crouse one can assume that by interesting students in themselves, many classroom discipline problems are solved through the motivating stimulus presented in the project. She found that "pupil attitude toward this work is more wholesome than . . . at any other time. They enjoy writing about themselves."<sup>14</sup>

Crouse followed the procedure of checking each chapter after it was written before approving it for copying into the final draft. Thus attention was called to errors in grammar as they were made. As a result much of the writing was done in the classroom over a month or six weeks' period. She found the project to give most gratifying results, and from the students' point of view it was the highlight of sophomore English.

Any skeptical classroom teacher or counselor could well ponder the significant outcome of the project as reported by Crouse before rejecting the autobiographical technique. She makes this important observation:

The teacher has a more sympathetic interest in *each* of her students; students have had experiences in telling interestingly a personal anecdote — both orally and in writing; each acquired some techniques of research and organization; there has been a practical application of skills in writing; many acquired an interest in reading a good autobiography; there seemed to be an increased understanding by the individual of his own personality; students have developed a sense of appreciation of the abilities of fellow-students; furthermore, the faculty members who are in charge of guidance groups found that reading the stories of students in their groups brought about a clearer understanding through knowledge of background.<sup>15</sup>

Many of these worth-while outcomes are similarly reported by Miller concerning his use of the autobiography in sophomore English class.<sup>16</sup> During the second half of the year the class starts to study biography, and later a few autobiographies of anonymous seniors are read to the class. Then Miller challenges the group to

14. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

16. Miller, *op. cit.*, pp. 490-93.



write their own autobiographies. He suggests these areas to the students as ideas to use in making an outline:

Ancestry—family traditions.

Hobbies and pastimes—how you got started, how it is done, or why you like it.

Trips you have taken—long or short.

Embarrassing moments.

Friends—the type you like and why.

Ambitions—plans for the future.

Faults or handicaps you are trying to overcome.

Pet aversions.

Preferences and tastes in movies, radio, books, politics.

Family—brothers, sisters—are they like you or different? Have you “character” aunts, uncles, or grandparents?

Amusing incidents at home.

Childhood escapades.

Pets.

Ideals—what do you need to be happy?

Organizations you belong to.

Famous Firsts

First trip to the dentist or doctor.

First day at school.

First date.

First public appearance.

First time away from home.<sup>17</sup>

Miller believes, from the English teacher's point of view, “that exercises in sentence building and variety of diction should accompany such a project.”<sup>18</sup> It was also found by him that figures of speech could be studied and various devices in creative writing such as imagery, sense appeals, and other tricks of description could be used effectively.

To those teachers who require that the students use an outline for writing their autobiographies, Miller warns against a slavish following of the outline since this may result in a mechanical rather than a spontaneous recounting. By ignoring the outline as such and stressing good paragraphs “the actual organization is likely to be paragraphical and psychological instead of logical, and consequently more spontaneous, more literary, more creative, and better proportioned.”<sup>19</sup>

Convinced that the autobiography would be useful in studying adolescent personality Symonds and Jackson used this technique. They desired to allay suspicion that the autobiographies might be used in studying personality adjustment, and in order to do so they

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 490-91.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 491.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 492. Cf. Strang, *op. cit.*, p. 88.



asked the English teachers to make these a major assignment in classes. The teachers used the same composition standards as for other assignments, and they were free to use any method in securing the autobiographies but the following suggestions were distributed to each pupil:

### *Suggestions for Autobiography*

An autobiography is a story of one's life. In writing one's autobiography one should bear in mind that he is writing something that is interesting for others to read. One might begin by stating that he was born August 12, 1914, in Lawrenceville, Ark., that he moved to Ridgefield, N. J., when he was five years old, etc., but a mere recital of dates, places, and events is not likely to prove very interesting or stimulating to his readers.

Usually autobiographies are not written until one can see his life as a whole. Those who have written the most successful and interesting autobiographies have tried to show the forces which have operated to make them grow up as they are. If they had Irish parents, or lived on a farm, or learned to read at an early age, or were the oldest member of a large family, they tried to relate all of these facts to draw the picture of their unfolding personality. When one writes an autobiography while he is in school he is in the midst of his development. Try to tell your own story as though you were an outside observer or reporter for the *American Magazine*, describing the conditions under which you have developed.

Here are some of the topics you may want to include:

#### Home Background

Places you have lived.

Brothers and sisters and their relations to you.

Advantages and disadvantages in your home.

Pleasures, holidays, ceremonials, heartaches, punishments, secrets, family life, family sorrows, and happiness.

#### Childhood Experiences

First experiences you can remember.

Illnesses or injuries that have influenced your life.

Trips or travels you have made.

Playmates.

Rebellions and crises—have you protested against things that your parents, playmates, or teachers wanted, and what did you do about it?

Failures.

Fears and dreads—what are you most afraid of?

Have you had beautiful experiences of love and affection?

#### School Experiences

Schools you have attended.

Subjects and teachers you have especially liked.

#### Personal Interests and Hobbies

What interesting things have you made or done?

What collections have you made?

What books have you read that you liked very much?

What defects and shortcomings have you recognized in yourself?

### Future Plans

What are your ambitions?

What are your parents' ambitions and plans for you?

What great ideals do you have?

What interesting things have you thought of doing? <sup>20</sup>

It was found in the Symonds and Jackson study that the student tends to reveal in his outlook on life the attitudes toward his early years, his parents, and his brothers and sisters as well as his longings and ambitions. Their study points out that the autobiography possesses much supporting evidence already obtained from the interviews and has much supplementary value.<sup>21</sup> They believe that there are advantages in the autobiography over the interview in that the latter frequently gives only information that is elicited by questions whereas the autobiography is an integrated story that the student takes pride in developing. This suggests to the writer that perhaps the greatest value of the autobiography is that it provides active participation by the student in understanding himself. The counselor should weigh this factor as he reviews the various techniques that he uses in helping students.

Another important point from the Symonds and Jackson study is the fact that the autobiography gives the real feelings about vocational plans whereas the interview often brings forth stock answers concerning jobs very likely to be most acceptable or those with more social status. There is also reason to believe that the autobiography gives ample opportunity for the expression of interest in many things, an opportunity frequently not used in the interview.

This last point concerning the expression of interest is also commented on by Fryer in *The Measurement of Interests*.<sup>22</sup> He points out that in the study of interests the autobiography ought to be useful, since it would permit these interests to be recalled in the normal manner. From the comments that are made one might assume that Fryer would limit the use of the autobiography in the study of interests for he remarks concerning its use with adults of superior mentality and training. He believes that the technique can be used to inform the individual of his own interest development. It is further pointed out by him that the subject should be

20. Percival M. Symonds and Claude E. Jackson, *Measurement of the Personality Adjustments of High School Pupils*, New York, Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1935, pp. 72-73. Cf. John W. M. Rothney and Bert A. Roens, *Counseling the Individual Student*, New York, William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1949, pp. 107-109.

21. Cf. Preston, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

22. Douglas Fryer, *The Measurement of Interests*, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1931, pp. 371-419.

asked to tell his story—not justify or explain or give reasons. These directions are suggested by Fryer:

I want you to write an autobiography of your life interests. Do this leisurely. Spend several days in thinking about what you were most interested in doing as a boy or girl, and then on throughout your childhood until you became a man or woman. Try to recall the earliest things as building mud-pies or peeling potatoes. Start with these earliest interests, in writing your interest history. Don't confuse the things you did well with things you liked best. Tell only of the activities, people, and things you liked best or disliked. Recall all of your vocational, educational, and social interests from earliest time. Mention the personality interests that came into your life. Remember, write only about those things which you liked or disliked from earliest days to the present. You should take about a week to do this, making notes when you think of interests to be included in your autobiography.<sup>23</sup>

It may be recalled that about eighteen years ago a broad study of educational facilities in Breathitt County, Kentucky, was undertaken. Part of this was devoted to the development of a guidance program in a social setting with economic and geographical limitations and apparent social backwardness. At that time, as an example, there were 105 schools in the county. Twenty-five of these could be reached by car, and the other eighty were accessible only by footpath or horseback.

In making a survey of human resources, the autobiographical record was administered to 6,106 school children.<sup>24</sup> This was to obtain the educational and occupational interests as well as autobiographical details and needs of out-of-school young people. At the same time it was thought that it would provide some details about the county's adults. One form used "contains more than a hundred questions asking where the pupil now lives and where he has lived, whether his background extends beyond the county; requesting information about his family life and influences, father, mother, brothers, and sisters; what the economic, social, and educational nature and conditions of the home are; his educational history, status, and plans; what his interests are in 'things,' in reading, in school work, in occupations, in group contacts."<sup>25</sup>

A sample portion of the form for elementary school children is as follows:

23. *Ibid.*, p. 372.

24. Wilbur I. Gooch and Franklin J. Keller, "Breathitt County in the Southern Appalachians," *Occupations*, 14: section 2, 1023, June, 1936.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 1024.

## MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

## I. First Facts About Myself:

My name is: last name \_\_\_\_\_ middle name \_\_\_\_\_ first name \_\_\_\_\_  
My address is \_\_\_\_\_. I was born in the year \_\_\_\_\_ on the \_\_\_\_\_  
day of \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. I live in open country, village, town (under-  
score). This has been my home for \_\_\_\_\_ years. Besides by birth-  
place, I have lived in these places: \_\_\_\_\_. My family lived in \_\_\_\_\_  
for \_\_\_\_\_ before I was born. I have visited these places \_\_\_\_\_.<sup>26</sup>

The form submitted to all pupils in all Breathitt county high schools, both public and mission, is not as elaborate as that used by various classroom teachers whose material is included in this paper. Since it is rather short it is included in its entirety here.

## MY FUTURE AND I

1. I want to go to school until I complete the \_\_\_\_\_ grade.
2. Then I want to
  - a. Study at home.
  - b. Go to college.
  - c. Go to a vocational school.
  - d. Farm.
3. I want to make a \_\_\_\_\_ of myself, because \_\_\_\_\_.
4. I understand that this occupation requires \_\_\_\_\_ years in general education and \_\_\_\_\_ years of \_\_\_\_\_ training.
5. I don't know what it requires, but I should like to know.
6. I am uncertain what occupation to choose, and I should like to know about these named below, and whether I am of the sort likely to succeed in any of them: \_\_\_\_\_.
7. I like to
  - a. Read.
  - b. Work with machinery.
  - c. Build and repair things.
  - d. Miscellaneous.<sup>27</sup>

To appreciate fully the use of the above form, one must read much of the material dealing with the Breathitt county survey. As one learns about the educational and social background of the inhabitants he becomes aware that the use of various techniques must certainly be adapted to the type of community if any technique is to be used successfully.

Much of the material concerning the autobiography is written from the classroom teacher's point of view, and it seems worthwhile to consider at this point two articles that show its part in the

26. *Ibid.*, p. 1024. Cf. Ruth Strang and Latham Hatcher, *Child Development and Guidance in Rural Schools*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1943, pp. 199-208. Cf. also Kate V. Wofford, *Modern Education in the Small Rural School*, New York, Macmillan Co., 1938, pp. 485-492.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 1027.

guidance program. Starr has written very interestingly of the approach used in a small Ohio school where he was superintendent.<sup>28</sup>

After a meeting of the history teacher, English teacher, and the guidance counselor, a plan of procedure was devised. It was thought that autobiographies could be a project in the English department and be a stimulation to study of autobiography in the history department. The project was undertaken in this manner: "(a) Students were asked to make a study of several autobiographies such as Lincoln's and Franklin's; (b) a suggestive outline was given for writing the autobiographies; (c) students were asked to write autobiographies; (d) autobiographies were read by members of the committee; (e) a case study was made of one of the autobiographies with the guidance aspect in mind; (f) a consideration of all of the autobiographies with a view to contributions to the guidance program was undertaken; (g) an evaluation of the procedure in relation to the author's conception of the guidance program was made; and (h) suggestions as to the use of autobiographies in this respect were formulated."<sup>29</sup>

The suggestive outline used by Starr and his group has many of the characteristics of the outlines used by Miller and by Symonds and Jackson. As a result it will not be included here, but a comparison of such outlines by the reader may be useful in helping him plan the outlines for his own school.

It was Starr's conclusion that while the autobiography frequently pointed out characteristics previously recognized in the student, it often provided the information upon which to base an interpretation of such characteristics. It was found that every autobiography had some information that was of value to a person in an advisory capacity. Recognizing that this technique must be used in addition to others he, nonetheless, firmly believes "that student autobiography will produce a source of information which cannot be attained by other methods such as tests and interviews that are frequently used."<sup>30</sup>

The autobiography is a definite part of the guidance program at Howe Military School where the development of guidance records is based upon the recognition of three problem fields: (1) Self-guidance in order to help the student become self-reliant and make choices and adjust to new situations; (2) professional adjustment in terms of career selection and the appropriate education; and (3)

28. G. G. Starr, "An Evaluation of Student Autobiography as an Aid in the Guidance Program," *Education*, 63:40-47, September, 1942.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 44. Cf. Symonds and Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 74 and Preston, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

self-appraisal where the student may see his weakness and strengths and evaluate his progress.<sup>31</sup>

Information is compiled during the freshman year in this secondary-level school. This includes achievement in basic fields as well as intelligence tests and personality tests. Reports from teachers and superiors are included to give an idea of work habits, conduct, and social adjustment. There is also the student's autobiography and the counselor's summary.

The officials have found that autobiography is indispensable in helping the student to know himself. This is written in the freshman year and revised each year. It is filed in the counselor's office with other cumulative material and is considered confidential. The outline for the autobiography is divided into the following areas:

- I. Life History
  - (a) Ancestry.
  - (b) Description of home life.
  - (c) What the boy thinks the parents expect of him.
- II. Difficulties
  - (a) School.
  - (b) Home.
  - (c) Social.
  - (d) Physical.
  - (e) Any other personal problems.
- III. Achievements
  - (a) Records, medals, etc.
  - (b) Sports.
  - (c) Jobs held.
  - (d) Money earned and money saved.
- IV. Interests, hobbies, and activities
  - (a) Description of interest in hobbies.
  - (b) Amusements preferred.
  - (c) Reading interests.
  - (d) Travel.
- V. Emotional needs
  - (a) Personal and social adjustment in school.
  - (b) Religious.
- VI. Life plans
  - (a) Professional interests.
  - (b) Vocational experiences.
  - (c) Analysis of abilities in relationship to chosen fields of occupations.
  - (d) College and technical school plans (seniors).
- VII. Summary

A short interpretation of the implications of the test results in comparison with the autobiography and future plans as previously made with parents.<sup>32</sup>

31. Forrest H-witt, "Guidance Through Self-Appraisal," *Educational and Psychological Measurements*, 4:245-250, Autumn, 1944.



This outline includes some suggestions that do not appear in other outlines. The writer has particular reference to the area dealing with analysis of abilities in comparison to occupations in which the student has expressed an interest. At the same time part seven is an area often neglected in other outlines.

Hewitt stated that a revision of parts of the outline is made from time to time and brought up to date. The counselor reads each autobiography carefully, and if it is incomplete or poorly written, it is redone by the student. The writer of this paper can see the value in revision, especially if the student is challenged to do it as he has new experiences and as he develops new insights and can see its purpose. However, one cannot help wondering if the counselor is not placed in a disciplinary or authoritarian role when he directs that the incomplete or poorly written autobiographies be redone. In the classroom this would be a different matter since it could be part of class assignment, but it would not seem to make for a permissive atmosphere in counseling.

Despite the critical comment made by the writer on the above point, the autobiography has been used effectively at Howe Military School. A senior who enrolled in the school for the first time at the beginning of the senior year made this statement concerning the technique, "I still don't know exactly what I want to do, but writing this has helped me to know myself better, and I think by the close of the semester I will be able to make an intelligent decision."<sup>32</sup>

This statement shows that students are interested in themselves. They take personal pride in working on a project that is built around them. Taking this idea as her cue, Sobotka reports on her assumption that "I," the first person personal pronoun, is of the utmost importance to students. In junior college English she was careful to avoid the negativism that is frequently encountered in making an assignment in autobiographical writing. She stressed character analysis instead of an order of events.

To begin with Sobotka lead informal discussions concerning observation or the lack of it. To avoid stereotyped phraseology she made a special plea for an analysis of character with illustrative incidents. As models for their own writing the students read character sketches together and discussed them. At the same time they were also reading biography or autobiography that was followed

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32. *Ibid.*, pp. 249-50.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 248-49.



by critical discussions of the subjects of the books. A list of positive and negative qualities of these persons served as a guide for each student's own character analysis.

It was decided by Sobotka and her group that the writing should be divided into two parts. One was concerned with personality and philosophy with incidents for the illustration of characteristics. The second part was a chronological sketch of life. After assuring the class that no eye but hers would read the autobiographies, Sobotka received much sincere and straight-forward writing, and the titles used by students suggested the originality that went into the writing. She was convinced of the value of the autobiographical technique when she stated:

More important even than the improvement in the organization of material and in the mechanics of writing as a result of interest and concentration on subject matter was the revelation of student background, of character, of hopes and ideals—facts that no office records or files would ever reveal. The students were sincere in their writing, and now I shall be more understanding of them and their problems as a result of their sincerity. "I" is still the most important pronoun.<sup>34</sup>

Thus far we have examined the use of the autobiography in the elementary school, the secondary school, and the junior college as well as the part it plays in the guidance program including that of a military school. It has been administered to college age students rather effectively by Landis who gives portions of student autobiographies to illustrate the characteristics of adolescents and their needs and desires.<sup>35</sup> A reading of his book reveals the frank information that he was able to obtain in autobiographies written by students in his classes. Undoubtedly the students gained much self-insight as a result of the experience.

Symonds has pointed out in his additional experimentations with the autobiography that it revealed the needs of teachers. During a course in mental hygiene in a summer school session he asked fifty teachers to write autobiographies. These were analyzed according to the method described in Murray's *Explorations in Personality*.<sup>36</sup>

According to Symonds the need for *achievement* occurred in forty-two of the fifty autobiographies. The dynamic factors associated with need for achievement included sibling rivalry which may be an important stimulus for achievement. In many cases it

34. Mildred Sobotka, "The Autobiography in a New Guise," *English Journal*, 30:663-664, October, 1941.

35. Paul H. Landis, *Adolescence and Youth*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1945.

36. Henry A. Murray, *Explorations in Personality*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1938.

may be spurred on by a sense of inferiority and inadequacy. Apparently strivings for achievement seem to be a substitute for attractiveness or prominence along other lines. There is evidence, too, that lack of achievement in school is responded to with shame and guilt. Teaching can represent an escape from a situation and entrance into another where one can win respect and one's place.

Symonds also found that the need for *affiliation* was prominent in thirty-eight autobiographies, and he remarked that "although the desire to be with others undoubtedly springs from association with parents in the first instance, in the autobiographies it was most clearly seen in comradeship with siblings."<sup>37</sup> *Infavoidance* was evident in thirty-eight autobiographies, and this feeling of inferiority was found in "(1) timidity with people; (2) sensitivity in general; (3) fear of failure; (4) sensitivity about appearance."<sup>38</sup> It was Symonds' belief that it was caused by a number of things including lack of affection, sibling rivalry, and the receiving of ridicule and criticism.

At least Symonds' study of the autobiographies gives rise to many clues and hypotheses "as to possible dynamic factors which have been responsible for the development of these needs . . . the part that these needs played in causing these individuals to select teaching as a profession, and the way in which teaching contrives to satisfy those needs."<sup>39</sup> It can be seen from this brief examination of Symonds' experiment with the autobiography that there are many areas that can be explored before we understand fully its many possibilities.

It was the study of Symonds that aroused this writer's curiosity about the clinical uses of the autobiography. Although there apparently have not been too many articles written about this approach, a report by Combs<sup>40</sup> should prove of interest in this respect. In a comparative study of motivations as revealed by the Thematic Apperception Test<sup>41</sup> stories and the autobiography, Combs asked forty-six students in mental hygiene classes at Syracuse University to write stories in response to twenty TAT pictures. These students were also asked to write autobiographies throughout the semester

37. Percival M. Symonds, "The Needs of Teachers as Shown in Autobiographies," *Journal of Educational Research*, 36:669, May, 1943.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 476.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 477.

40. Arthur W. Combs, "A Comparative Study of Motivations as Revealed in Thematic Apperception Stories and Autobiography," *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 3:65-75, January, 1947.

41. For a discussion of the use of this test see Murray, *op. cit.*, and Silvan S. Tomkins, *The Thematic Apperception Test*, New York, Grune and Stratton, 1947.

in a series of assignments. These assignments covered the following topics:

1. Incidents in my life that have a lasting effect on my personality and how I think they have affected me.
2. Factors in my life making for self-confidence and lack of self-confidence.
3. My early life in my family and its effect on me.
4. Feelings of inferiority I have had.
5. My earliest memories and what I would do with three wishes.
6. People in my life and their effect on my adjustments and maladjustments.
7. My autobiography and evaluation of my personality.<sup>42</sup>

Altogether Combs obtained 907 TAT stories and over 1,500 pages of autobiographical material. In analyzing these, a "Desires List" of forty most common motivating desires was used as a means of developing standardized descriptions of desire. While it is not the purpose of this paper to report this matter in detail, it seems worthwhile to consider briefly how the autobiography compares with the TAT stories in order to see possibilities for more scientific research in autobiography.

Relative to this one must consider that since the autobiography is a life story it is primarily concerned with the past and the present. The TAT is an instrument that is useful in learning about the present and future, especially in interpreting desire, hopes, fears, and goals. However, Combs found that both instruments were used often by the individual to express these things:

1. A desire for freedom from restraint, coercion, direction and control. When it is remembered that these subjects are college students in late adolescence this desire does not seem at all surprising.
2. A desire to avoid blame, humiliation, guilt, and to be free from worry, fear, the catastrophe of the unknown, etc.
3. A desire to accomplish, to produce, and to reach life goals.
4. A desire for physical security.
5. A desire to be loved.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to these overlapping areas reflected in both instruments, it also was found that the autobiography tended "to stress the social and dependency aspects of the individual's desires."<sup>44</sup> Combs pointed out that such desires as *to be accepted*, *to be respected*, and *to be attractive* were rather typical of the adolescent in his attempts to gain status. At the same time the autobiography

42. Combs, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

often revealed the desire *to be helped* which shows the dependent cravings. However, he believes that this may be natural since the autobiography is built upon childhood experiences and past history.

Combs became aware that the autobiography is dependent upon the ability of the writer to select information that is important and the ability to express it lucidly. One must recognize that the repressed or forgotten material cannot be included. Relative to this Allport has remarked that "the problem of the early life is always a stumbling block in autobiographical writings. Reminiscence does not extend back to infancy, while, according to prevailing theories, this formative period is of vital significance in slanting the personality."<sup>45</sup> At the same time we must recognize that incidents that make the writer ashamed or are unaccepted within social mores will not be told unless there is excellent rapport. Strang believes that "in no technic is the gaining of rapport more essential."<sup>46</sup>

It was emphasized by Combs that since the autobiography rests upon past experiences and their meaning for the subject's present status, we must be aware that it leans heavily upon his accurate interpretation. Even if this interpretation is by someone else the obstacle rests in the tremendous mass of material. Concerning this mass of material, Allport stated that "first-person documents tend to be bulky; likewise at times, ungrammatical, repetitious, badly organized, and partly illegible."<sup>47</sup> It is believed, nonetheless, that despite this criticism the reading of much bulky material will usually be rewarding.

Perhaps we should return to the Combs study long enough to see his conclusions concerning the comparison between the TAT stories and the autobiography. It was found that the area of overlap reveals "desires of a milder character for security, response, and recognition. The TAT appears to reveal more strongly desires with respect to the present and future, and socially unacceptable and more violent categories of desire. The autobiography emphasizes the past, factual, milder, or socially acceptable forms of motivation."<sup>48</sup> Further study in this area is indicated by this report, but it does suggest the limitation of the autobiographical technique in understanding many of the basic motivating factors in personality. Very likely we will never be able to use it as a clinical instrument to replace the already valuable ones in use, but it certainly has a

45. Allport, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

46. Strang, *op. cit.*, p. 86. Cf. Preston, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

47. Allport, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

48. Combs, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

contribution to make in gathering and interpreting data about the individual.

Allport has reminded us that we must examine personal documents in light of the motives which guided their development. He believes this to be true whether one is considering the autobiography, the questionnaire, verbatim recordings of dreams and interviews, diaries, or letters.

It might be well for us to consider here the motives that might apply to any of these personal documents.<sup>49</sup> In all probability the personal document will not be purely of one kind or the other but may be a combination. Many of these will undoubtedly be reflected in the autobiography written as part of the classroom assignment or as part of the participation in the counseling process.

There is the motive of *special pleading* where the person feels "more sinned against than sinning." While it is true that most personal documents have the self-justification motive to some extent, it is in this area that others are blamed. In *exhibitionism* the egotism runs wild, and the document is dominated by narcissistic references. *Literary delight* is the motive back of some personal documents where literary perfection and artistic expression are paramount. Sometimes such documents give a person the opportunity for *securing personal perspective* as in the case of those individuals who come to some crucial point in their lives, and this method provides a means of stock taking. Sometimes writing will provide *relief from tension* where one finds a disturbance in the adjustments of human relationships.

Of course, there are those individuals who write for *monetary gain*, but this does not seem to lessen the psychological value. Nor does the writing for an *assignment*. Allport recommends that it is unwise to make the requirement rigid for students, since experience shows when students have a choice in writing autobiography or a case study of someone else that about eighty percent will write about themselves. He points out that this does not tend to carry compulsion and infers that it may result in freer response.

In order that the student or patient might be *assisting in therapy*, writing is undertaken when there is a desire for help. Sometimes such writing may be motivated by *redemption and social reincorporation* where a person may plea for forgiveness and social acceptance. Others are motivated by *scientific interest* where they believe that their personal documents may be of value to psychologists in the study of personality. Other personal documents

49. Allport, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-75.

are aimed toward *public service and example* where the writer may be interested in reform or bettering mankind. There is the *desire for immortality* which moves some people to write in order that they will not be forgotten.

Speaking about all personal documents, Allport found it puzzling which unconscious motive operates in the production of them. However, he emphasizes that the motivations are those that are characteristic of creativity in general. Even documents of students must be considered in view of these possible urges to write about one's self.

As one requests students to write autobiographies he may wonder what length he should expect them to be. Apparently the investigators who have used this technique successfully do not agree on this point. While they would agree that it probably depends upon the purpose for which they are written, Johnson has stated that they rarely should be less than 5,000 words with 15,000 to 25,000 being preferable in most cases.<sup>50</sup> Yet Miller found the writing project could be carried out successfully when autobiographies average about 500 words in length.<sup>51</sup> It was stated previously that Crouse requested a minimum of five chapters averaging 700 words each.<sup>52</sup> This variation among the investigators suggests that it depends upon the purpose and the importance of the project from the standpoint of the teacher or counselor.

The person who utilizes the technique will find that autobiographies tend to fall into certain types or categories. During his discussion in *The Jack-Roller*,<sup>53</sup> Burgess has used this classification:

There is the person who writes a chronicle of his life, putting down in order the external events of his career without explanation, or with only conventional explanations. He might be called the Chronicler. Then there is the individual like Stanley who writes a justification of his whole career. He may be termed the Self-Defender. There are others who reveal what hitherto he has sedulously concealed of the drama upon the stage of his own thoughts. The writer of this document may be called the Confessant. A fourth fairly discernible type is the person who in his life-history dissects his every act and motive. The denomination of Self-Analyst may be applied to him.<sup>54</sup>

It is realized that pure types are rare, but one will probably find

50. Wendell Johnson, *The Influence of Stuttering on the Personality*, University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare, Vol. 5, No. 5, Iowa City, University of Iowa, 1932, p. 103.

51. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 492.

52. Crouse, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

53. Clifford R. Shaw, *The Jack-Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1930.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 190.



that if he is interested in a scientific classification of the autobiographical material he receives from students that the above statements will be helpful. From his own experiences, Johnson believes that another should be added, and perhaps it is worthy of consideration. He would add the "Self-Praiser, who has a more expansive egotism than the mere Self-Defender."<sup>55</sup>

In summary it might be said that the autobiography has many advantages to recommend its use to the classroom teacher or the counselor or in scientific investigation. It can be administered to many students at one time. Actually not too much time need be consumed in the writing, and it can be reread and added to at frequent intervals. Contacts may be limited to motivation and instruction rather than direct supervision, depending upon one's purpose. In one instance it can be very comprehensive and cover many facets of the student's life. On the other hand, it may be topical in its approach and be short and specialized in content. It might follow a standardized form and not be entirely in the author's own words.

"The most outstanding purpose of the autobiography . . . is that of defining situation-as-perceived, of describing situations from the point of view of the individual reacting to them. The autobiographical technique, when efficiently used, can hardly be surpassed in this connection."<sup>56</sup> Allport agrees emphatically with Johnson for he states that "the great merit of an autobiography is that it gives the 'inside half' of the life; the half that is hidden from the objective-minded scientists."<sup>57</sup> While this half may be somewhat distorted intentionally or unintentionally by the writer, at least it gives information that can be obtained no other way. Surely after reading a set of autobiographical accounts one cannot help being "a better teacher, more human, more sympathetic, and more aware of pupils as individuals."<sup>58</sup>

Occasionally there are individuals who object to the self-analysis that often accompanies the writing of an autobiography, but this is the very thing that many teachers and counselors believe to be of primary value to the student. Miller believes that such criticism concerning introspection is unwarranted, since one must have experience to write effectively and since objective narration is the goal in autobiography.<sup>59</sup>

55. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

57. Allport, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

58. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 493.

59. *Ibid. cit.*