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## SELF-DEBATING AND SELF-STEPPING TECHNIQUES FOR INCREASING SELF-AWARENESS IN INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

Self-awareness represents a cornerstone of effective counseling practice and client development. This literature review examines contemporary approaches to enhancing self-awareness through self-debating and self-stepping techniques in individual counseling contexts. Drawing on recent scholarly work (2019-2025), this review synthesizes research on Socratic dialogue, metacognitive reflection, internal dialogue processes, and experiential chairwork methods. The analysis reveals that structured internal dialogue techniques, including Socratic questioning, metacognitive self-reflection, and chair-based interventions, demonstrate significant potential to foster deeper self-understanding, emotional regulation, and therapeutic transformation. These methods facilitate clients' ability to examine multiple perspectives within themselves, challenge cognitive distortions, and develop more adaptive self-narratives. The review identifies key theoretical frameworks, practical applications, evidence-based outcomes, and recommendations for integrating these techniques into contemporary counselling practice. Findings suggest that self-debating and self-stepping approaches offer accessible, non-pathologizing pathways to enhance self-awareness that honor client autonomy and promote lasting psychological growth.

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## INTRODUCTION

Self-awareness constitutes a fundamental competency in both counselor development and client therapeutic outcomes (Annisa et al., 2025). Recent literature emphasizes that self-awareness involves conscious recognition of one's thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and behavioral patterns, alongside an understanding of how these internal processes influence life choices (Santoso & Herman, 2024). Within counseling contexts, heightened self-awareness enables clients to identify maladaptive patterns, process unresolved emotions, and make intentional changes aligned with their values and goals. Contemporary counseling research increasingly recognizes that self-awareness development requires more than passive reflection; it demands active, structured engagement with one's internal experience through dialogue, questioning, and perspective-taking (Tadung et al., 2024). Self-debating and self-stepping techniques represent innovative approaches that harness internal dialogue processes to facilitate deeper self-exploration and psychological integration (Costa et al., 2024).

Self-debating refers to structured internal conversations in which individuals engage with various aspects of their cognitive and emotional experiences through questioning, argumentation, and synthesis (Reguart-Segarra & Camarero-Suárez, 2023). This process draws on Socratic methodology, in which systematic questioning guides individuals to examine assumptions, identify contradictions, and discover alternative perspectives. Self-stepping, conversely, involves experiential techniques in which clients physically or imaginatively "step into" different perspectives, roles, or internal parts of themselves, commonly operationalized through chair-work interventions derived from Gestalt therapy and contemporary adaptations (Lac, 2016).

This literature review examines empirical and theoretical contributions to understanding self-debating and self-stepping techniques within individual counseling from 2019 to 2025. The review addresses three primary research questions: What theoretical frameworks underpin self-debating and self-stepping approaches to enhancing self-awareness? What evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of these techniques in promoting client self-awareness and therapeutic outcomes? How can counselors effectively integrate these methods into contemporary practice?

Understanding and implementing evidence-based techniques to enhance client self-awareness has significant implications for counseling practice. Research indicates that increased self-awareness correlates with improved emotional regulation, reduced

psychological distress, enhanced interpersonal functioning, and greater treatment adherence. As counseling continues to evolve toward integrative, client-centered approaches, synthesizing knowledge of effective self-awareness techniques becomes increasingly important for both training and clinical application.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Self-Awareness in Counseling Context**

Self-awareness within counseling encompasses multiple dimensions: cognitive awareness of thought patterns, emotional awareness of feeling states, somatic awareness of bodily sensations, and relational awareness of interpersonal dynamics (Multisari et al., 2022). Recent models propose that counselor self-awareness develops across cognitive, emotional, physical, and relational dimensions, highlighting its multifaceted nature. London and colleagues (2023) emphasize that self-awareness development requires integrative awareness processes that span individual intrapsychic work, interpersonal relationships, and broader contextual factors. This integrative perspective aligns with contemporary understandings of self-awareness as a dynamic practice requiring ongoing attention and cultivation (Xiaoja et al., 2025).

### **Metacognition and Reflective Processes**

Metacognition, thinking about one's thinking, is a critical mechanism underlying the development of self-awareness. Contemporary research demonstrates that metacognitive processes significantly predict important therapeutic outcomes, including emotional regulation, problem-solving capacity, and psychological adaptation. A structural equation modeling study by researchers examining the relationships among metacognition, emotional regulation, and reflection found that these constructs collectively accounted for 52% of the variance in reflective capacity, with emotional regulation as the strongest predictor. This finding underscores the interconnected nature of cognitive monitoring, emotional awareness, and reflective practice (Kasumi & Xhemali, 2023).

Metacognitive reflection involves the capacity to pause, observe one's mental processes, and adjust responses in light of this awareness. Individuals who demonstrate high metacognitive reflection show enhanced ability to regulate emotions, consider alternative perspectives, and expand their thinking in response to new evidence. These capacities align directly with therapeutic goals of increased flexibility, adaptive coping, and psychological integration (Saleh, 2022).

## **Internal Dialogue and Self-Understanding**

Internal dialogue, the ongoing conversation individuals maintain with themselves, serves as a primary vehicle for self-understanding and meaning-making. From a dialogical self-perspective, the psyche contains multiple self-positions or voices that engage in ongoing dialogue, negotiation, and occasionally conflict. Recent research on reflective processes in psychotherapy identifies internal dialogue as both an interpersonal and intrapersonal phenomenon, co-constructed through therapeutic conversation while simultaneously occurring within the individual's private mental space. This dual nature suggests that therapeutic techniques that facilitate structured internal dialogue may enhance both self-awareness and the therapeutic alliance (Costa et al., 2019).

Metacognitive Reflection and Insight Therapy (MERIT) explicitly utilizes internal dialogue processes, encouraging patients to symbolize, through language, what occurs in their minds and to reflect on therapeutic relationships. Research on MERIT demonstrates that enhancing metacognitive capacity, the ability to think about thinking and to form integrated narratives about self and others, promotes recovery outcomes in psychosis.

## **SELF-DEBATING THROUGH SOCRATIC DIALOGUE**

### **Historical Foundations and Contemporary Applications**

Socratic questioning, rooted in the philosophical method attributed to Socrates, involves systematic inquiry designed to examine beliefs, uncover assumptions, and guide the discovery of deeper understanding. The method functions as "maieutic" or midwifery, helping individuals give birth to ideas through careful questioning rather than didactic instruction. Contemporary psychotherapy, particularly cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), has adopted Socratic questioning as a cornerstone intervention. The method emphasizes collaborative empiricism, wherein therapist and client work together to examine thoughts and beliefs through guided discovery rather than confrontation or persuasion (Cardino & Cruz, 2020).

### **Core Principles of Therapeutic Socratic Dialogue**

Effective Socratic questioning in counseling adheres to several key principles. Questions should: (a) be answerable by the client given their existing knowledge, (b) direct attention to relevant information outside the client's current focus, (c) progress from concrete to abstract thinking, and (d) enable clients to reevaluate conclusions or construct new understandings. The primary goal is to guide discovery rather than change minds through argumentation. This distinction proves crucial. Socratic dialogue in

counseling aims to help clients develop their own insights and solutions rather than accepting the therapist's interpretations (Tomé et al., 2024).

Recent conceptualizations emphasize that Socratic dialogue creates a non-judgmental, collaborative space where clients can explore thoughts and beliefs safely. The therapist maintains curious inquiry, inviting examination of established thought patterns while respecting client autonomy and self-determination.

### **Applications Across Therapeutic Modalities**

This model is closely associated with CBT; Socratic questioning spans diverse therapeutic orientations. Research documents its integration into dialectical behavior therapy to encourage dialectical thinking, rational-emotive behavior therapy to challenge irrational cognitions, metacognitive therapy to challenge rumination, and Adlerian psychology as a primary therapeutic tool (Cisne et al., 2019).

Within Adlerian therapy, Socratic questioning facilitates holistic reflection, guides self-discovery, and encourages client-generated solutions. This application emphasizes questioning's capacity to help clients understand their private logic, the subjective meanings and beliefs organizing their experience. A 2025 analysis emphasizes the Socratic method as therapeutic discourse for mental health, highlighting its utility in fostering critical thinking, self-reflection, and therapeutic alliance across diverse clinical presentations. The method's flexibility and philosophical grounding enable adaptation across various theoretical frameworks while maintaining the core principles of guided inquiry.

### **Evidence for Effectiveness**

Research examining the effectiveness of Socratic questioning remains limited but promising. A 2015 narrative review concluded that there is general agreement that Socratic methodology may be fundamental to CBT effectiveness, though the technique receives insufficient research attention and risks being undermined by interventions lacking Socratic elements. Studies examining therapist use of Socratic questioning demonstrate associations with improved cognitive restructuring, enhanced therapeutic alliance, and increased client engagement in self-exploration (Chadee, 2022). However, methodological challenges in isolating Socratic questioning's specific contributions from broader therapeutic processes complicate definitive conclusions about causality. Clinical experience and theoretical analysis suggest Socratic dialogue promotes self-awareness through several mechanisms: systematically examining automatic thoughts, identifying cognitive distortions, exploring evidence for and against beliefs, considering alternative

interpretations, and developing a balanced perspective (Živčić-Bećirević et al., 2019).

## **METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES AND INTERNAL SELF-DIALOGUE**

### **Metacognitive Awareness and Regulation**

Metacognitive strategies involve systematic self-questioning and internal dialogue to enhance learning, problem-solving, and emotional regulation. These strategies follow processes of planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating one's cognitive activities. Research demonstrates that metacognitive strategies increase self-confidence in completing challenging tasks by helping individuals recognize patterns, process emotions, and understand their responses. The systematic internal dialogue characteristic of metacognitive strategies enables individuals to observe their thinking processes with greater objectivity and intentionality.

Recent studies confirm positive relationships between metacognitive skills, self-regulated learning, and problem-solving abilities. Metacognitively skilled individuals demonstrate the capacity to identify learning difficulties, set realistic goals, and apply adaptive strategies competencies directly relevant to therapeutic change processes.

### **Self-Reflective Questioning Techniques**

Practical metacognitive techniques for enhancing self-awareness include body scanning to identify physical manifestations of emotions, values clarification exercises, expanding emotional vocabulary, identifying cognitive distortions, and assessing boundaries. These techniques share common features: structured inquiry prompts, attention to present-moment experience, non-judgmental observation, and integration of cognitive, emotional, and somatic awareness. Research indicates that counselors who regularly practice such techniques maintain greater emotional clarity and presence, essential qualities for therapeutic effectiveness.

Studies examining reflective pedagogy in educational contexts provide parallel insights applicable to counseling. Systematic reflective practices, including journaling, peer discussions, and portfolio analysis, significantly improve metacognitive skills, emotional understanding, and conscious regulation of learning processes. Participants who engage in structured reflection demonstrate enhanced self-awareness of cognitive strategies, emotional responses, and their capacity for adaptive problem-solving.

### **Integration with Therapeutic Process**

Metacognitive reflection in therapy involves helping clients develop awareness of their own thinking patterns and emotional regulation strategies. Therapists facilitate this

through questions directing attention to mental processes: "What thoughts were going through your mind when you felt anxious?" "How did you decide to respond in that situation?" "What does this experience tell you about what matters to you?"

The integration of metacognitive awareness with emotional regulation proves particularly significant. Research demonstrates that metacognitive attention serves as a prerequisite for emotional regulation and awareness, enabling individuals to attend to emotional responses, filter emotional states, and consider multiple aspects of emotional experience. Therapists employing metacognitive strategies help clients develop what has been termed "metacognitive reflection," the capacity to pause and think, which bolsters the ability to regulate emotions and seek understanding of alternatives. Highly reflective individuals demonstrate being "in tune" with emotions and capable of regulating them effectively.

## **SELF-STEPPING THROUGH CHAIR WORK INTERVENTIONS**

### **Historical Development and Theoretical Basis**

Work interventions, originating in psychodrama and further developed within Gestalt therapy, utilize chairs and their relative positions for therapeutic purposes. These experiential techniques enable clients to embody different perspectives, engage in dialogue between internal parts, and process unfinished business with significant others. Empty-chair work involves clients engaging in dialogue with an imagined other (past, present, or symbolic) seated in an empty chair. Two-chair work requires clients to move between chairs representing different perspectives or parts of the self. Role-play variations involve recreating or rehearsing specific interactions.

The theoretical rationale posits that physically embodying different perspectives or parts facilitates deeper emotional access and processing than purely cognitive discussion. By "stepping into" different positions, clients can experientially explore conflicts, needs, and emotions that might remain intellectually distant in traditional talk therapy.

### **Contemporary Applications and Innovations**

Recent innovations include chair work with the empathic other, wherein the therapist provides need-supporting, person-centered communication while guiding clients through emotional processing. Research on this modification demonstrates support for emotional engagement and processing through four necessary components: experiential access to primary adaptive emotion, intense emotional expression,

articulation of thwarted needs, and shifts in self-other representations.

Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy represents another contemporary evolution of chair work principles. Developed by Schwartz (2021), IFS conceptualizes the psyche as composed of multiple parts, subpersonalities with distinct perspectives, emotions, and protective functions. Chair's work within IFS facilitates dialogue among parts and between parts and the core Self. A three-chair modification of traditional two-chair work explicitly provides a chair for Self, the compassionate, wise presence at individuals' core (IFS practitioner accounts, 2025). This innovation addresses limitations in traditional two-chair work by ensuring the client's core Self participates actively in internal dialogues rather than simply observing conflicts between parts.

### **Evidence for Effectiveness**

Research examining chair work effectiveness demonstrates promising results across various clinical presentations. A 2019 study investigating chair work for divorced women using cannabis found significant improvements in anxiety and depression following the intervention. Studies on empty-chair work in emotion-focused therapy document four essential components for successful outcomes: experiential access to emotions, intense expression of the primary adaptive emotion, expression of thwarted needs, and representational shifts regarding self and other. When these components are present, clients demonstrate significant decreases in psychological distress and increases in adaptive functioning.

Research on IFS therapy examines outcomes related to self-awareness. Quasi-experimental studies demonstrate improvements in self-awareness, self-forgiveness, and trauma processing following IFS interventions. A nine-month mental training program incorporating IFS concepts showed participants demonstrated greater identification of inner parts, particularly negatively valenced ones, associated with improvements in theory of mind capacity. Randomized controlled trials support IFS effectiveness for depression and chronic illness management. A proof-of-concept study with rheumatoid arthritis patients found significant improvements in functioning and self-compassion following IFS intervention, leading to its recognition as an evidence-based practice.

### **Mechanisms of Change**

Chair work facilitates self-awareness and therapeutic change through multiple mechanisms. Physical positioning and movement between chairs enhance embodied awareness, helping clients access emotions and perspectives that remain intellectually distant when seated in one position. The dialogue structure encourages the articulation of

previously unexpressed thoughts, feelings, and needs. By giving voice to different perspectives or parts, clients develop a more nuanced understanding of internal conflicts and competing values.

The experiential nature promotes emotional engagement rather than intellectual analysis alone. Research indicates that combining emotional activation with cognitive processing enhances learning and psychological integration. Chair work also facilitates perspective-taking, the capacity to understand situations from multiple viewpoints. This cognitive flexibility represents a key component of psychological maturity and adaptive functioning.

## **SELF-AWARENESS AS THERAPEUTIC FOUNDATION**

### **Counselor Self-Awareness as Prerequisite**

Before implementing self-debating and self-stepping techniques with clients, counselors must develop their own self-awareness. Contemporary literature emphasizes that counselor self-awareness is a foundational competency that impacts all aspects of therapeutic work. Counselor self-awareness involves ongoing insight into personal emotions, biases, triggers, and communication patterns. It includes recognizing how personal history, values, and assumptions influence clinical work. Without adequate self-awareness, counselors risk projection, countertransference, and ethical complications.

Research on therapist self-awareness and performance demonstrates that listening to recorded sessions enhances therapists' metacognitive awareness and perception of their actual performance. Despite resistance to such practices due to anxiety and discomfort, session recording and review represent valuable tools for developing therapist self-awareness.

### **Techniques for Developing Counselor Self-Awareness**

Counselors can employ several evidence-based techniques to enhance their self-awareness: post-session journaling focused on emotional reactions and body sensations; self-reflective questioning during sessions; structured session debriefs; peer consultation; personal therapy; mindfulness practices; and supervision (compiled from current literature). Personal therapy for counselors yields multiple benefits, including enhanced self-awareness, improved mental health management, increased empathy, and modeling of help-seeking behavior. Research on counselors' lived experiences with personal therapy reveals that participants recognize its value for professional development, despite barriers such as stigma and financial constraints.

Self-care practices support the development of self-awareness, though research indicates that self-awareness may result from personal wellbeing rather than self-care activities per se. Humility, openness to continued learning, feedback, and recognition of limitations, facilitates ongoing self-awareness development throughout counselors' careers.

### **Client Self-Awareness as Therapeutic Goal**

For clients, self-awareness development represents both a means and an end in counseling. As a means, self-awareness enables the identification of problematic patterns, the recognition of triggers, and the understanding of personal needs, information essential for effective change efforts. As a result, heightened self-awareness itself constitutes psychological growth, reflecting increased integration, authenticity, and self-acceptance. Self-awareness techniques should be tailored to each client's readiness, current state, and therapeutic goals. Counselors must actively listen and grant clients the time they need, recognizing that self-discovery is a personal journey (Myers qualitative study findings). Premature or insensitive introduction of awareness-enhancing techniques may overwhelm clients or provoke defensive reactions.

## **METHOD**

This review examined scholarly literature published between 2019 and 2025, prioritizing peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical analyses, clinical case studies, and evidence-based practice guidelines. Database searches targeted terms including self-awareness, Socratic dialogue, metacognition, chair work, internal dialogue, and related constructs within counseling and psychotherapy contexts.

Inclusion criteria encompassed: (a) publication dates between 2019 and 2025, (b) focus on individual counseling or psychotherapy, (c) relevance to self-awareness enhancement techniques, and (d) availability in English. Both empirical studies and theoretical contributions were included to provide a comprehensive understanding of current knowledge.

### **Limitations of Existing Research**

Researcher discovers five limitations that characterize current research on self-debating and self-stepping techniques.

1. Many studies examining these interventions utilize quasi-experimental designs or case studies rather than randomized controlled trials, limiting causal inferences about effectiveness.

2. Research often examines these techniques as components of broader therapeutic approaches (e.g., CBT, Gestalt therapy, IFS) rather than isolating their specific contributions. This makes it challenging to attribute outcomes specifically to self-debating or self-stepping methods.
3. Most research relies on self-report measures of self-awareness and therapeutic outcomes, potentially introducing response biases. Objective measures and observer ratings remain underutilized in this research domain.
4. Limited research examines cultural considerations in the application of these techniques. Self-awareness and internal dialogue may manifest differently across cultural contexts, and chair work's physical nature may align poorly with some cultural norms regarding therapeutic engagement.
5. Insufficient longitudinal research examines the long-term maintenance of self-awareness gains following intervention. Most studies assess immediate or short-term outcomes, leaving unanswered questions about durability.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

### 1. Key Findings and Implications

This literature review reveals consistent evidence supporting the value of self-debating and self-stepping techniques for enhancing client self-awareness in individual counseling. Several key findings emerge:

2. **Theoretical Coherence:** Multiple theoretical frameworks, cognitive-behavioral, Gestalt, emotion-focused, IFS, and metacognitive approaches converge in recognizing internal dialogue and perspective-taking as mechanisms for promoting self-understanding and psychological integration. This theoretical convergence across diverse orientations suggests robust conceptual foundations.
3. **Mechanistic Pathways:** Research identifies several pathways through which these techniques enhance self-awareness: systematic examination of cognitions and beliefs (Socratic questioning), enhanced metacognitive monitoring and regulation (metacognitive strategies), embodied perspective-taking (chair work), and integration of dissociated or conflicted self-aspects (IFS and parts work). Understanding these mechanisms enables more targeted implementation.
4. **Evidence of Effectiveness:** While research quality varies, the available evidence generally supports the effectiveness of these techniques. Studies document improvements in self-awareness, emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, symptom

reduction, and interpersonal functioning following interventions incorporating these methods.

5. **Complementary Rather Than Competing Approaches:** Self-debating (primarily cognitive) and self-stepping (primarily experiential) approaches complement rather than compete with each other. Integrated approaches utilizing both cognitive inquiry and embodied experiential work may prove most effective for comprehensive self-awareness development.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. Self-debating and self-stepping techniques represent valuable approaches for enhancing client self-awareness in individual counseling. Drawing upon diverse theoretical traditions—cognitive-behavioral, Gestalt, emotion-focused, IFS, and metacognitive frameworks—these methods harness internal dialogue, systematic questioning, and embodied perspective-taking to facilitate deeper self-understanding and psychological integration.
2. Contemporary research (2019-2025) demonstrates promising effectiveness across various clinical presentations, though methodological limitations in existing studies suggest the need for more rigorous investigation. The convergence of multiple theoretical perspectives on the importance of internal dialogue for self-awareness development, combined with accumulating empirical support, provides a strong rationale for incorporating these techniques into counseling practice.
3. Effective implementation requires counselor self-awareness, careful selection of techniques matched to client needs, a progressive introduction from simple to complex interventions, a non-pathologizing therapeutic stance, a collaborative discovery process, multimodal integration, appropriate structure and support, and sensitivity to cultural factors.
4. As counseling continues to evolve toward integrative, client-centered approaches that recognize the complexity of human experience, self-debating and self-stepping techniques offer accessible pathways to enhanced self-awareness that honor client autonomy, facilitate emotional processing, promote cognitive flexibility, and support therapeutic transformation. Future research should prioritize rigorous experimental studies, process investigations, cultural

adaptations, and examination of training methods to advance understanding and implementation of these promising therapeutic approaches.

5. The journey toward greater self-awareness represents a fundamental human endeavor—one that counseling can facilitate through thoughtful, evidence-informed application of techniques designed to help clients explore, understand, and integrate the multiplicity of their inner experience. Self-debating and self-stepping methods provide structured yet flexible frameworks for this essential therapeutic work.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the reviewed literature, several recommendations for clinical practice emerge:

1. **Develop Therapist Self-Awareness First:** Before implementing these techniques with clients, therapists should cultivate their own self-awareness through personal therapy, reflective practice, supervision, and self-care. Therapists' self-awareness serves as both a prerequisite for effective technique implementation and a model for clients.
2. **Match Techniques to Client Needs and Preferences:** Not all clients respond equally to different approaches. Some may benefit more from cognitive Socratic questioning, while others connect more deeply with experiential chair work. Collaborative assessment of client preferences, learning styles, and therapeutic goals should guide the selection of techniques.
3. **Begin with Less Threatening Interventions:** Progressive implementation, starting with simpler awareness exercises (body scanning, journaling, basic self-reflection questions), builds a foundation for more intensive work. Premature introduction of challenging techniques may overwhelm clients or damage the therapeutic alliance.
4. **Maintain a Non-Pathologizing Stance: Following IFS and other humanistic principles, therapists should adopt non-pathologizing attitudes toward all aspects of the client's experience.** Even problematic thoughts, emotions, or behaviors serve protective functions and deserve compassionate exploration rather than criticism or attempts at elimination.
5. **Emphasize Collaborative Discovery:** Whether using Socratic questioning or chair work, maintain a collaborative stance in which client and therapist explore together

rather than the therapist imposing interpretations. Guided discovery respects client autonomy and enhances therapeutic alliance.

6. **Integrate Multiple Modalities:** Combine cognitive, emotional, somatic, and relational awareness approaches. Comprehensive self-awareness requires attention to all dimensions of experience rather than focusing exclusively on thoughts or emotions.
7. **Provide Adequate Structure and Support:** While encouraging client autonomy, provide sufficient structure through clear instructions, psychoeducation about techniques, and active guidance during interventions—balance support and challenge to maintain optimal therapeutic tension.
8. **Monitor and Process Client Reactions:** Pay careful attention to client responses during and after awareness-enhancing interventions. Some techniques may activate difficult emotions or memories requiring additional processing and support. Maintain flexibility to adjust approach based on client needs.

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- 353 | ISCE: Journal of Innovative Studies on Character and Education

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