

# BY TEENS, FOR TEACHERS: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF ADOLESCENCE

## AUTHORS

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## ABSTRACT

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*Through a project called "By Teens, For Teachers," 464 short essays were written by teenagers about issues specific to the experience of today's adolescents. In this descriptive study, participants chose from thirteen different writing prompts derived from an extensive literature review to reflect issues in adolescent development. Essays were written specifically to teachers about adolescent experiences, concerns, and dreams. An examination of the distribution of essays written to particular prompts suggest higher than expected interest in writing to teachers about issues of motivation and engagement in teaching. Qualitative analyses suggest six themes along three axes of tension including fearfulness and risk taking, boredom and stress, and frivolity and responsibility. These themes suggest clear lessons for teachers and teacher educators working with today's youth.*

## INTRODUCTION

Through a project called "By Teens, For Teachers," we hoped to provide adolescents an opportunity to speak frankly to a teacher audience about

the lived experience of adolescence. Our hope was that teachers and teacher educators would learn much from the voices of teens that would be useful in guiding the moral, social, and intellectual development of our youth.

Several constructionist (Gergen, K., 1999, 2001) assumptions guided our work methodologically and analytically. First, adolescence and identity vary temporally and contextually. Although we recognize the tendency for development to unfold in reasonably stable stages we believe it more valuable to listen carefully to how adolescents talk about their experiences rather than make assumptions about their development. From this, no better data exists than descriptions of adolescence from teens themselves.

Although we did provide extensive writing prompts developed from a thorough review of literature related to adolescent development, the prompts were framed as "places to start" or "ideas to explore" rather than questions to answer. It was our hope that students would write freely, extensively, and from their experience. Using grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it was our hope to attend systematically to context and the autobiographical accounts of our participants, as per constructionist assumptions about knowledge and experience.

Second, narrative analysis is key to psychological exploration (Bruner, 1990, 1996; Gergen, M., 2001; & McAdams, 1996). Narratives are necessarily rooted in context and are constructed to reveal perspective, values, and experience in ways that questionnaires and interviews do not. We asked participants to tell stories about themselves and their experiences as they responded to the writing prompts. Through the "storying" of their lives much insight and perspective can be gained and a more descriptive "insider" view of adolescence can be portrayed. It is this insider view that is most revealing of youth culture and educative for teachers and teacher educators because these stories are situated, personal, and value-laden.

Third, because identity (another critical lens in analysis of adolescence) is contextual we found the notion of "possible selves" useful methodologically and analytically (Markus & Nurius, 1986). We asked our participants to talk about themselves in the future, as well as the past, and listened carefully in analysis of their narratives for clues about self-perceptions regarding their emerging future selves. It is our belief that any conclusions drawn from teen writing will be more valuable to teachers and teacher educators if we also understand the range of possible future selves our participants imagine for themselves. It seems to be a stereotypical impression of adolescents that adults don't understand them, and

attention to future selves may be one possible route toward remediation of this perceived disconnect. With an emphasis on context, experience, and narrative, the following research study was designed.

## THE RESEARCH

Our research goals were to provide teens an opportunity to speak to teachers about issues in their lives and then attempt to extract potential lessons for the purpose of better preparing teachers to work with today's youth. Teen participants were invited to respond to one or more writing prompts designed to stimulate thinking, thoughtful reflection, and attention to the education of teachers about adolescence. Participants chose from thirteen different writing prompts about experiences and perceptions ranging from drugs and alcohol use, peer pressure, appearance and body image, as well as issues related to academic success, motivation and engagement. Writing prompts were constructed at the conclusion of a literature review designed to explore social and emotional issues of adolescence. Each prompt reflects a body of research suggesting the topic of the prompt is of salience in adolescence. For example, one prompt is included below:

Why are girls (or boys) so mean to each other? Why do they often talk behind each others' backs? Why do they often make up stories, give each other the silent treatment, and treat one another so badly? Do you have any stories that you could share related to this? What do teachers need to know about teens and why they behave this way? What can teachers do to make it better, keep it from happening, or at least understand it?

Clearly, this prompt connects to literature on relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Simmons, 2002) and asks for specific stories as well as for suggestions as to what teachers should know and be able to do about it. See Appendix for a complete list of writing prompts. Table 1 provides a brief summary and labels for each prompt.

Given this design, our specific research questions were: (1) What do participant teens have to say about prompt issues (opinions, experiences, level of understanding and awareness)? (2) What do participant teens have to say about these issues that may be useful or helpful for teachers to know? Our ultimate goal was to distill methods useful to teachers and

teacher education settings in order to understand the adolescent experience and work more effectively with students.

## METHODS AND DESIGN

Researchers worked with three teachers in two high schools in one Western state. The teachers were high school health instructors who had earned teacher licensure through the Western Oregon University and who had expressed an earlier interest in the project. Each teacher asked students in their health classes to participate in the "By Teens, For Teachers" project but gave no credit or penalty for participation. Despite this, 88% (320 of 364) of the students chose to participate by writing at least one essay, suggesting a high level of interest in speaking to teachers about adolescent issues.

Participants came from two medium-sized high schools with very different profiles. The first school, Murphy (all names are pseudonyms), is a medium sized (1,052 students enrolled) rural high school that draws students from over two hundred square miles of river valley and surrounding mountains and has a low socio-economic profile including 77% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The school has a well-publicized problem with students abusing drugs and alcohol, a reflection of the surrounding community which is famous for high quality (and quantity) marijuana growing and methamphetamine production. Once a productive logging community, the area is now economically depressed with high levels of poverty and homelessness. Two of the three participating teachers taught at Murphy.

Washington Park, the second school, is also medium-sized (1,284 students enrolled) but suburban. Washington Park has a unique profile as the only tri-lingual school in the state regularly publishing materials and teaching courses in English, Spanish, and Russian. Although without the major drug and alcohol problems of Murphy, Washington Park qualifies almost 70% of students for free and reduced lunch and has a significant migrant population as illustrated by their 35% annual turnover in student enrollment. The surrounding community has a fairly significant Hispanic gang problem that frequently erupts in violence. Despite this, the community has fairly high academic standards and expectations. Over the last three graduating classes, 81% of seniors planned to continue to higher education as compared to 64% of Murphy seniors over the same period of time.

Clearly, the participant sample is one of convenience and must be considered when drawing conclusions about the trustworthiness, credi-

bility, and utility value of this research. Our goal was to seek a range of student experience and, as much as these two schools provide, we feel our participants reflect within-school diversity.

Our data includes 464 responses to writing prompts from 320 different teens from both Murphy and Washington Park. Of the 219 total participants who attended Murphy, 131 were girls and 88 were boys. From Washington Park, the 101 participants included 58 girls and 43 boys. Ages of the respondents, in the total group, ranged from 14 to 18 years of age with the majority (71%) being 15-16 years old. The distribution of participant ethnicity was 59% Caucasian (189), 19% Hispanic/Latino (61), 12% Russian (38), 6% African American (19), and 4% identified themselves as Mixed or Other (13). In each school, the participant racial profile is representative of the total school population. Other than this general demographic information, all participant writing was anonymous.

### ACROSS PROMPT ANALYSIS

A raw count of essays written to each of the prompts reveals a few interesting patterns. Table 1 shows the distribution of participant essays across the prompt areas. Each prompt is summarized and identified with a descriptive label such as "values and worries" and "music."

The second column reports the number of essays written from each of the 13 prompts listed in the first column. If essays were distributed equally across all thirteen prompts, we would expect one-thirteenth of the 464 essays in each row, or, about 36 essays per prompt, but there is wide variation from this. Several prompt totals are significantly below the expected average (relationships, relational aggression, identity through time, risk taking, and youth culture). Perhaps these prompts were poorly written, unattractive to participants, or even too painful to write about. It is our suspicion that a combination of factors led to their lower response rate including (a) the fact that the prompts may have reflected ideas and issues found in psychological analysis of adolescence but not necessarily the lived experience of youth; (b) prompts may have demanded too much specific writing from the participant, and, in some cases; (c) that the prompts were simply less appealing than other prompts.

On the other hand, several prompts received considerably more attention than what we might have predicted (values and worries, drug and alcohol abuse, academic volition, and teachers and teaching). It is possible that the title of the project (By Teens, For Teachers) directed participants' attention to the prompts that seemed most closely related to

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for all Participant Essays**

<i>Prompt Topic</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>% of total N</i>	<i>N from Murphy</i>	<i>N by Minority</i>	<i>N by girls</i>
Values and worries; What's important to you? What kinds of things do you worry about and why?	69	14.9%***	60**	36*	44
Music: Is there certain music or song lyrics that say something important or powerful to you?	41	8.8%	24	19	21
Personality: In what settings and with whom do you show your different personalities? What do these say about you?	28	6.0%	18	16*	14
Relationships: What's important to you in looking for a boyfriend or girlfriend? What's important in relationships?	14	3.0%***	9	7	10
Drug and alcohol abuse: Why do some teens use drugs and alcohol and what do teachers need to know about it?	51	11.0%*	47**	24	24
Relational Aggression: Why are some teens so mean to each other and what do teachers need to know about it?	9	2.4%***	6	6	4
Bullying and acting tough: Why is looking and acting tough so important to some teens?	29	6.3%	27*	14	18
Academic volition: What do teachers need to know about getting teens to try harder in school?	50	10.8%*	24*	25	27
Identity through time: Pick 3-5 adjectives that describe you in the 3rd grade, now, and 15 years from now.	4	.9%***	1	2	2
Risk Taking: Why do some teens insist on taking risks? What do teachers need to know about it?	18	3.9%**	9	10	8
Appearance and identity: Why is physical appearance so important to some kids?	39	8.4%	21	24**	30*
Teachers and teaching: What makes a good teacher? What can teachers do to be more helpful to you?	97	20.9%***	59	46	46
Youth culture: What do teachers need to know about teen culture – your values, aspirations, hopes, and fears?	15	3.2%***	7	7	9

\*p<.05    \*\*p<.01    \*\*\*p<.001

this agenda including the prompts about academic volition and teachers and teaching. Even if this is not the case we should not discount the degree of participation with respect to these two prompts as shaped by the project itself. In fact it suggests the strong desire for teens to speak to teachers about their schooling experiences and their daily lives as students. We will examine the content of these essays more closely in the qualitative reports that follow.

Logic in explanation of the higher participation around the values and worries and drugs and alcohol prompts is even more speculative. Perhaps the lure of conversations about drugs and alcohol was appealing to a broader number of students than the other essays. However, when we look across the table to column four we see that the vast majority of these essays were written by participants from Murphy (60 of 69 total). It is logical that the salience of drugs and alcohol in the Murphy community has educated participants' sensitivity to these issues in a way that compelled them to write in response to this prompt.

Most interesting in our opinion is the large number of essays written in response to the values and worries prompt. One could conclude that participant teens are aware of what is important and worrisome in their lives and feel compelled to share their thoughts and feelings with teachers. As with the content of the prompts related to schooling, we will examine the contents of these prompts more closely as well.

## **WITHIN PROMPT ANALYSIS**

Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), essays were independently read and categorized into similar themes. After much researcher discussion, themes were collapsed, expanded, combined, and re-emerged with researcher consensus as efforts focused on achievement of some degree of interpretive reliability. In the end, we achieved complete consensus on the integrity of each of the six themes described below. Looking across all 464 responses, six themes emerged as common. Interestingly, the six themes seem to balance themselves along three axes, tensions, or opposites. The three axes and corresponding six themes are: fearfulness and risk taking, boredom and stress, and frivolity and maturity. Each set of tensions is discussed next.

### ***THEMES: FEARFULNESS AND RISK TAKING***

Likely the most interesting theme identified relates specifically to fear. Although no writing prompt asked students to write about fear directly, 19% (88) chose to do so anyway. Fear seemed to group itself into three

categories: (a) fear for future such as concerns about war, imprisonment, terrorism, "being poor like my parents," and fears of drug and alcohol abuse; (b) fear for physical safety including concerns about bullying, gang violence, sexual abuse, harassment, and abuse from parents and peers, and; (c) fear for relational issues like concerns around intimacy with boy or girlfriends, concerns about abandonment by either friends or parents, and fear about fostering positive relationships with parents, peers, and teachers. Historically, adolescence is a time of uncertainty about the future, one's self, and the world at large. Fearfulness related to these issues should not surprise us. However, the clarity and emotion with which participants described their frightful interactions with peers, teachers, and parents were shocking. Four girls described feeling trapped with physically violent boyfriends, 7 boys and 3 girls wrote about being physically assaulted, and one girl disclosed on-going sexual abuse at the hands of her step-father.

Similar to the notions of fear that cut across several writing prompts, no single prompt specifically addressed risk taking in youth culture, but participants wrote about risky behaviors in 125 of the essays (27% of the total). Risks ranged from the thrills of using drugs and alcohol, driving recklessly, participating in violent or dangerous play, engaging in unsafe sexual activity, fighting and bullying, and even taking social and emotional risks in relationships and academic settings. For example, one teen wrote extensively about his motorcycle riding.

I love the way it feels to push myself and my bike to do things I didn't think I could do. It is scary. And sometimes I crash. I raced a train one time and dumped my bike in a ditch because I wasn't going to make it (to be able to pass it safely). I just love to ride hard and the thrill I get from it!

Interestingly, not all stories of risk were related to physical risk, many were about psychological and relational risk. One girl wrote, "I force myself to walk through the crowd of preppy kids. I know they talk bad about me behind my back but it feels good to face them." Another boy wrote, "I told my girlfriend I loved her. She didn't say anything – she just walked away. I'm still glad I told her though." Each of these suggest a similar thrill in the assertion of the social/relational self.

Taken together, the two themes of fear and risk taking suggest that teens are simultaneously unsure of themselves and their place in the world while compelled to reach out, explore, and live life in ways that

help clarify the boundaries of their emotional, physical, and psychological space. Afraid yet eager, cautious yet enthusiastic, needing comfort yet pushing away, each seem apt descriptions of our adolescent participants' experiences. Once again, current theory supports these same conclusions (Garrod, Kilkenny, Powers, & Smulyan, 2002) but they are clearly connected here to ordinary and daily experience.

### **THEMES: BOREDOM AND STRESS**

Research has reported for years that adolescents watch a great deal of television, read too little, and infrequently participate in creative and interactive play. Almost no prompt responses suggested students' involvement in independent exploration or learning. However, though no prompt asked about television, 22 students referred to watching television because there was "nothing else to do," or out of "sheer boredom." In fact, boredom recurred throughout many essays (49 total). In description of their after school lives, their lives at home with family, and in particular, school (37 essays), students used words like bored, uninteresting, and not exciting as descriptors of their daily school experience. Many of these essays about boredom were found in descriptions of teachers and their teaching methods.

Teens wrote at length about their boring and uninspiring teachers (141 total essays) while considerably less (42 total) wrote about positive experiences they had had with teachers. Many teens characterized their teachers as disinterested, dull, and generally apathetic in their work. One particularly articulate teen wrote, "I'm tired of having teachers who don't seem to have much interest in what they're teaching us. I'd like to have a teacher who was really excited about global studies or health." While criticism was doled out easily, constructive suggestions were less frequent. Several teens suggested teachers negotiate class activities, topics for study, and even timelines with students thereby giving them purchase on decisions about their educational experience. One teen wrote, "For once I'd like to learn about what I want to learn about. Does that seem like such a huge request?" Teens who wrote positively about teachers wrote almost exclusively about positive interpersonal relationships rather than teachers who were overtly inspirational or engaging.

Opposite boredom, a large number of students wrote about the stresses in their lives (89 total essays). Often related to the issues described next in the section on responsibility, teens described a great many stressors in their daily lives. These stressors fell into two large categories, roughly equal in size. First, teens reported stress in social and rela-

tional issues (31 total essays) like fights with parents, disagreements with teachers, fights and pressures from friends, and fights and pressures from boy and girlfriends. These conflicts arose from a broad array of sources including peer pressure from friends to act, talk, and dress in particular ways; from boyfriends for sex, sexual experimentation, and the use of drugs and alcohol; through conflicts with parents over rights, responsibilities, and independence; and, from teachers over behavior and academic success. Related to this last issue, the second major category of stress came from school (academic) related issues. Large numbers of essays (42 total essays) described students' stressful lives in terms of the workload, the expectations of academic excellence, the pressures for successful admission to colleges, and performance on qualifying exams like the SAT test. Participants railed against teachers who assigned too much homework, provided too little direction, required busywork or extended projects with little time dedicated to its completion. Eleven students described school as their job and expressed concern about success in school while managing the workload.

Overall, a surprisingly large number of students described their lives as simultaneously boring and stressful. School was cited as the overwhelming cause of both conditions.

### ***THEMES: FRIVOLITY AND RESPONSIBILITY***

It was surprising to read such a large number of relatively shallow accounts of adolescent values, concerns, and aspirations (not confined, however, to the values and worries prompt). For example, 77 essays (17% of total essays) described worrying about issues that most adults would classify as frivolous or shallow. Many participants described the value of their music collections, clothing, hair, athletic prowess, and outward appearance in general. For example, 16 essays were about participants' cars and the importance of keeping their cars clean (or covered in off-road dirt in one case), adding the right accessories, being seen in their cars, and the seriousness of the offense to belittle another's car. One participant wrote, "I know what I'd do to get back at somebody who humiliated me in front of my friends, I'd key (scratch with a key) their car." In this participant's view, the most serious act of retribution is to violate another's car, the ultimate piece of social capital.

Although some students expressed disgust over the valuing of these items over other, deeper qualities like personality and kindness, these things were described as keys to social success. As one male participant from Murphy described, "School is divided up into groups based on what

you wear. The goths wear black, jocks wear lettermen's jackets, the preps wear their clothes... clothes identify you as a member of a group and so clothes are very important."

On the other hand, a total of 112 participants wrote about responsibilities that govern their lives. Participants described responsibilities in employment, in the home caring for younger siblings, aging relatives, and in one case, a disabled father and a mother with Alzheimer's disease. Participants also described responsibilities as students, athletes, peer leaders, and primary income earners. One very pointed essay written by a Washington Park girl described her routine.

I get up at 6 a.m. to be on the bus by 7, sit in school all day, rush to my job by 4, choke down dinner on the job (if my manager lets me), get home by 11, study 'till 12 and crash so I can wake up and do it all over again the next day.

Clearly several of our participants are living lives filled with a great deal more responsibility than the stereotypical carefree teen. In fact, perhaps this image is one that should be discarded as these 112 essays account for almost 25% of the total essays.

Although the tendency might be to view the valuing of hair, clothing, and cars as frivolous or shallow, these are clearly items that have great social capital in teen culture. Our constructionist stance helps us refrain from drawing conclusions from an adult perspective and instead seeks an insider view of these values.

## DISCUSSION

We occasionally hear adults chide adolescents for their fears and concerns stating, "Just wait until you're in the real world," or other similarly disparaging or discounting remark about the immediate lived experiences of teens. For teens, after all, adolescence is the real world. In fact it is the only world they know, and hope and fears, pressures and successes, tensions and concerns are every bit as emotional and inspirational as the experiences of adults. In this vein of valuing adolescent experiences, our discussion examines each of the major patterns discussed in analysis and attempts to extract meaning or insight useful for teachers and teacher educators.

Much of the participant writing was not surprising as we find literature that echoes many of these same issues. Risk-taking, for example, has a fairly broad presence in the literature (Jessor, 1998), but the broad desire

to express thoughts about risk taking, and its importance in adolescent culture, suggests that teachers and school officials should attend to risk-taking more seriously. Teacher educators should prepare teachers to talk in positive ways with adolescents about risk-taking – both the consequences of it and the role it plays in crafting identity. Perhaps teachers could also seek ways to provide healthy risk-taking opportunities in schools and classrooms so teens feel less inclined to seek more dangerous opportunities outside of school. This would likely also help teachers be perceived as more engaging in their practice.

How is it that school can be perceived as simultaneously boring and stressful? The sheer frequency of responses regarding helping teachers to be more engaging suggests that teens are very interested in how to make their time in school more productive and rewarding. The level of response to these academic prompts suggests great teen interest in improving the everyday experience of schooling. The stereotype of the uninterested, unmotivated, apathetic teen is, perhaps, a misguided stereotype.

Several techniques were suggested by teens to improve the scholastic condition that included allowing for more self-direction and independent inquiry. We must more closely attend to the wishes of the student who so desperately desired to study something of interest to her. That is not too much to ask of schools and teachers. In fact, theory and research in adolescent development suggest teens are searching desperately for autonomy and independence (Erickson, 1993; Ormrod, 2003). Comments like these support this research and suggest that teachers would be wise to consider ways to allow for more autonomy and independence in the classroom. Teen writing suggests that these techniques might alter the common teen perception of teachers as dull and uninspired. Related to engagement, teachers could also learn to foster more positive interpersonal relations with teens as another avenue toward interpersonal engagement.

It was surprising to read so many consistent references to fear in the responses of our participants. Fears stemmed from a wide array of sources, most of which were connected to the future. Again, this is sensible as teens are beginning to see beyond the issues and opportunities in their local context to a bigger world. Again, it seems that teachers need to be better prepared to help teens express concerns over fears, face them or deal with them in healthy ways, and give adolescents resources and strategies to keep themselves and others out of danger when fears become reality. Perhaps teachers need to be better prepared to guide, counsel, and provide comfort in times of fearfulness. Fear seems incompatible with significant and pleasurable learning, and it seems a reduction in fear, or at

least a mediation of its impact through relationships and discussion, would be conducive to learning.

More specifically, the following list of recommendations was developed in light of this descriptive analysis of adolescence. Briefly, these recommendations include:

1. Reward affect, interest, and motivation in classrooms, not just traditional achievement. Prepare new teachers with effective strategies for engendering motivation and engagement while simultaneously teaching powerful and important content.
2. Better educate teachers about adolescent issues. Teacher education must begin to employ case methods in the study of adolescent issues rather than traditional, theory-driven studies in educational psychology and adolescent development.
3. Better prepare teachers to use counseling skills and assume a counseling stance with teens who may need social and emotional support, in addition to academic support. As teachers often have stronger relationships with teens than counselors, teachers must know how to support and advocate for teens in need.
4. Allow for positive risk-taking in schools. Risk taking is both healthy, powerfully engaging, and, arguably, developmentally positive. Teachers should explore methods for positive risk taking in classrooms such as through role-playing, goal setting, and taking and defending personal opinion.
5. Encourage longer lasting relationships between teachers and students. Explore creative ways to schedule more consistent contact between teachers and students. Although this appears to be a policy issue in schools themselves, teachers can certainly learn to advocate for reorganization.
6. Discard the disrespectful image of the carefree teen and recognize that many teens are working hard and desperately want to be successful both academically and socially. Through simulation and case methods, teacher education should help teachers expose their existing dispositions and stereotypes of teens.
7. Allow for independent inquiry and self-exploration. Teacher education must help teachers learn to use inquiry and self-exploration in the classroom while simultaneously moving toward identified content standards and benchmarks.
8. Reorganize or re-infuse schools with an ethic of care (Noddings, 1992). Teacher education must orient teachers to the social and

emotional work involved in teaching and the moral and ethical role that teachers must play in the education of youth.

Perhaps through attention to adolescent issues we can more systematically educate in ways that support academic, moral, and social growth of all secondary students. We hope this paper serves as a call for renewed work and attention to this topic and obligation.

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**APPENDIX: WRITING PROMPTS**

Teenagers live complex lives. They have hopes, dreams and desires, wrestle with complex and complicated issues, and balance real-world responsibilities. Teachers work with teenagers everyday. They want to help, but often either don't know how, or don't understand what teens are facing. Here is your opportunity to talk to teachers about the issues you're dealing with – to help them to be better teachers, mentors, and supporters of you and what you do. Choose from one (or more) of the following "starters" and write as much as you'd like. Most responses will range between 250 and 750 words – or 1-3 pages. Remember, you're writing to teachers so tell them how it is to be a teen!

1. What's important to you as a teenager? What kinds of things do you worry about? Why do you worry about these things? Many adults think teenagers shouldn't have any worries at all. What would you say to them? Why do teachers need to know you worry about stuff? What would you tell them about the issues that concern you? How can they help you?
2. Music is often an important part of peoples' lives. Often particular songs or lyrics speak to us in important ways – say something that is powerful for us. Are there song lyrics that are important or powerful to you? What are they? Why are they important to you? What do you think this says about who you are and what you value or desire? Many adults don't understand teen music. How would you help them understand it - what it means and why it is important to you. What would you say to teachers about your music?
3. Each of us has different personalities – or at least acts differently when we're with our friends than when we're with our families. Describe the different aspects of your personality and how they shift when depending on context. Which of your personalities do you think is the "real" you? Give an example of the "real" you – tell a story that illustrates who the "real" you is? How is this person different from the "you" that most people know? Is it important that teachers know you wear different personalities? Have you ever had a situation where one of your personalities was in conflict with a personality your teacher wanted you to be – or thought they knew? What do teachers need to know about the different personalities you wear?
4. What do teachers need to know about teen romance? What is important to you about a potential boyfriend or girlfriend? What are the qualities of somebody you might be interested in dating? What would you tell a teacher who wants to know what teens are thinking about romance, relationships, sex, and attraction? Are there stories you can tell related to these issues that would be useful for a teacher to hear? Be sure to say why the story might be useful for a teacher to understand.
5. What do teachers need to know about drugs and alcohol use and teenagers? Are there kids out there using drugs and alcohol in school? Why do you think some teenagers are using drugs and alcohol in dangerous ways? What are they trying to be/show/prove/get? Are there things teachers need to know about drugs, alcohol, and teen use?
6. Why are girls (or boys) so mean to each other? Why do they often talk behind each others' backs? Why do they often make up stories, give each other the silent treatment, and treat one another so badly? Do you have any stories that you could share related to this? What do teachers need to know about teens and why they behave this way? What can teachers do to make it better, keep it from happening, or at least understand it?

7. Why is looking and acting tough so important to some boys (or girls)? Have you ever been the victim of a bully? Have you ever been a bully? Have you ever been pressured to fight? How did fighting make you feel? What would you tell teachers about teenagers and fighting? How would you explain to them about fighting and why kids do it? What do teachers need to know about fighting?
8. What do teachers need to know about getting students to try in school? It seems that not trying or not caring about school is all the rage these days. Why is that so? Why is it cool not to care about school or being successful? What can teachers do to help teenagers care about school and want to work harder to be successful?
9. Pick 3-5 adjectives that you would use to describe yourself as a third grader – write a page or so describing the kind of kid you were back then. Next pick 3-5 adjectives that you would use to describe yourself now – as a teenager. What's different? What's changed? Finally, pick 3-5 adjectives that you hope will describe you when you're an adult – say 15 years from now. Write a page or so describing the kind of adult you wish to be. What do these three "snapshots" say about you – who you are, what you value, and the direction your life is going? Why would it be useful for teachers to know this about you?
10. Teenagers are all the time taking risks – they seem to want to drive fast, push the limits, and test the boundaries. Some kids experiment with drugs and alcohol, others drive recklessly, and others take social risks like wearing wild hair and clothes. What have been your experiences with risk-taking or risky behavior? Tell a few stories about times you took risks – not just risks of physical danger but emotional, psychological, social and other kinds of risks too. Why do you think you took those risks? Were they healthy or unhealthy risks? What do you think teachers need to know about kids and their tendency toward risk taking? Should teachers try to somehow provide students the opportunity to take risks? How?
11. Why is physical appearance so important to some teenagers? What is important to you about physical appearance? Or is it at all? Why do teenagers worry regarding their physical appearance? How can teachers help teens feel better about how they look – no matter the size, shape, and attire?
12. What kinds of things can teachers do to be helpful to you? What qualities of teachers do you admire or value? What makes a good teacher? What distinguishes a good teacher from one that isn't very good? If you need to tell a story to illustrate your point, do so. If the ultimate goal of school is to learn stuff – what would you tell teachers about helping you to learn? What kinds of things do you want to learn about that often aren't taught in school? What would you say to teachers about these issues?
13. One of the ways to learn about a group or a culture is to try to understand something about their values – what they hope for, believe in, think about, stand up for... and so on. If we think about teens as having their own culture – teen culture – then it would be important for teachers to know about it. How would you describe teen culture? Are there common values, hopes, ideals, dreams, fears, or concerns that all (or many) teens have? Are there sub-cultures within teen culture that might have different values than the rest of teens? For example, do teen athletes have a different set of values than teens who are in to other things? What should teachers know about teen culture?

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