



Tips for Teachers

A Guide for Using *New Youth Connections*
in the Classroom

March 2001

This Issue's Main Theme: Identity and Self-Acceptance

As an introduction to the main theme of this issue, have your students read "Standing Out, For Better or Worse," p. 3, by Jonathan Maseng. Jonathan describes how several of the following stories show writers finding self-acceptance, although they are not considered "normal" by others. This is a major challenge of adolescence that your students can relate to. Jonathan points out that shame and mockery go along with "being different," but that taking risks can lead to new and valuable experiences.

A Quick Way to Get Everyone Writing:

Letters to the Editor: We welcome letters to the editor and publish most of them. This is an easy way to involve everyone in a short writing assignment (and they will get the satisfaction of seeing their names in print). Writing letters can be an ideal "Do Now" exercise after your students finish reading NYC. Use these prompts to get your students started (a few sentences on one or more of these points will be sufficient):

"I liked/disliked the article because..."

"A point I really agree with in the article, based on my experience, is..."

"A point I really disagree with, based on my experience, is..."

"A solution to one of the problems in this article might be..."

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—How are you considered "different" by your peers? How much do you struggle with the feeling of not being accepted by others?

—At the root of "feeling different" is the sense that no one can understand or relate to your interests or point of view. Have you ever had the experience of being accepted by others in ways you didn't expect? For example, did you ever reveal something about yourself that brought you closer to others rather than distancing you from them? What did you reveal and what was the reaction?

—Jonathan describes "being different" as "stepping outside the box" of life's limitations. Are there ways you wish you could "step outside the box"? How would you like to be different and how would life seem less limiting as a result?

After this general discussion, turn in detail to the articles that follow.

School Daze

Brant Schwartz, in "Restless," p. 2, describes how he's rarely in the mood for school. His mind wanders, he disrupts class, and he's more interested in socializing than studying. He prefers hands-on, experiential learning, but even that isn't enough to keep him interested. Finally, when his friends graduate and he doesn't, Brant gets serious. Helped by a friend who's also in his fifth year of high school and by an alternative school that emphasizes internships, Brant is determined to graduate.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—All of us can relate to at least part of Brant's story—school is often boring. If



A note on the lessons:

The following lessons are designed to promote reflection on the issues raised by the stories in NYC. Each story is summarized briefly, followed by prompts that can be used to prompt discussion and/or brief writing assignments. In addition, roleplays and group exercises are sometimes suggested for more active learning.

A note on the role plays:

You will need two or three teens to act out the suggested role plays in front of class. Make sure the young people understand their roles by briefly reviewing the characters in the stories. Each role play participant has to try to convince the other of her point of view. Let the role play go on for about five minutes. Then have the class discuss what they've seen and relate it back to the themes in the story.

A note on the group exercises:

These activities are designed to have students work together in pairs or small groups. They can then share their work with the larger group.

you were Brant, though, would you have tried to deal with your situation in a different way, before getting to the point of not graduating? What would you have done?

—Brant begins to take school seriously when his friends graduate and he doesn't. Think of a time when something your friends did inspired you to take action or change a behavior. How did your friends inspire you and what did you change about yourself?

—Brant hates to admit it, but he now realizes his parents were right about taking school seriously. Have you come to admit that a parent or family member was right about something you once disagreed with? What is it and why did you change your mind?

—Group activity: students can work in pairs or small groups. Pretend you are designing a new school. What kinds of classes, rules, activities, and structure should the new school have keep students like Brant interested and motivated? Share with the larger group and discuss.



Not Just for the Girls

In "Big Breasts," p. 4, Rasheeda Raji discusses her emotional and physical discomfort with having large breasts. Strangers, friends, and even family members humiliate her with offensive comments, and she dresses in baggy clothes to avoid attention and keep boys at a dis-

tance. She's become more comfortable with her body in recent years, although the threat of embarrassment is always there. In an accompanying article on p. 5 ("Finding the Right Fit Is Tough"), Rasheeda describes the difficulty of finding clothes to fit her figure.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—What is your reaction to the way friends and family treat Rasheeda?

—Is there something about your appearance that makes you feel self-conscious? What is it and how do you deal with it?

—People tell Rasheeda she's lucky to have the body she does, but she doesn't agree. Is there something in your life that hasn't been a source of pleasure for you? (It could be a physical attribute, something about your family, etc.) Have you come to view that aspect of yourself in a more positive fashion? If so, how? If not, why not?

—Rasheeda is teased by males, but also by her aunt. Is it surprising to you that women tease her, as well as men? Why or why not?

—This was not an easy topic for Rasheeda to write about. Write a short letter to her, telling her what you think of her for sharing such a private subject.

A Secret Passion

In "My Secret Life as an Opera Singer," p. 8, Jonathan Maseng describes how, starting in elementary school, he starts singing in operas. He keeps it a secret, though, for fear that his friends will think him not "manly." He feels the opera and his life outside it are two different worlds, impossible to mix. But when his friends finally do find out, they don't make a big deal of it and Jonathan feels relieved.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Have you, like Jonathan, had to keep something you like to do a secret, for fear of being ridiculed by friends? How does it feel to keep it a secret? What would enable you to tell others about it?

—Jonathan feels the opera and his life are "two different worlds" that have no connection to each other. Have you ever felt that way about some aspect of your life? (It could be the place you live, your family, or a personal issue that makes you feel cut off from others.) Are those two

worlds still entirely separate in your life? Why? If not, what has helped bridge the gap?

—Near the end of his article, Jonathan says that he "psyched himself out" by keeping his opera life a secret, because when people found out they didn't make such a big deal about it. What does he mean by "psyched himself out"? Was there a time you revealed something secret about yourself, and the reaction was different than you expected?



Outcasts and Tormentors

In "Rice Spills the Beans on Teens," p. 10, Rasheeda Raji reviews "A Density of Souls," a novel by 21-

year-old Christopher Rice (son of vampire-story author Anne Rice). The book describes the struggle of four teens who are rejected by others and seen as outcasts (one of the characters is tormented by others for being gay).

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Rice's novel, for Rasheeda, describes "the darker side" of adolescence, where kids tease those who are different and make them feel like outcasts. How big a problem do you think this is? How do you see it take place in your school or community?

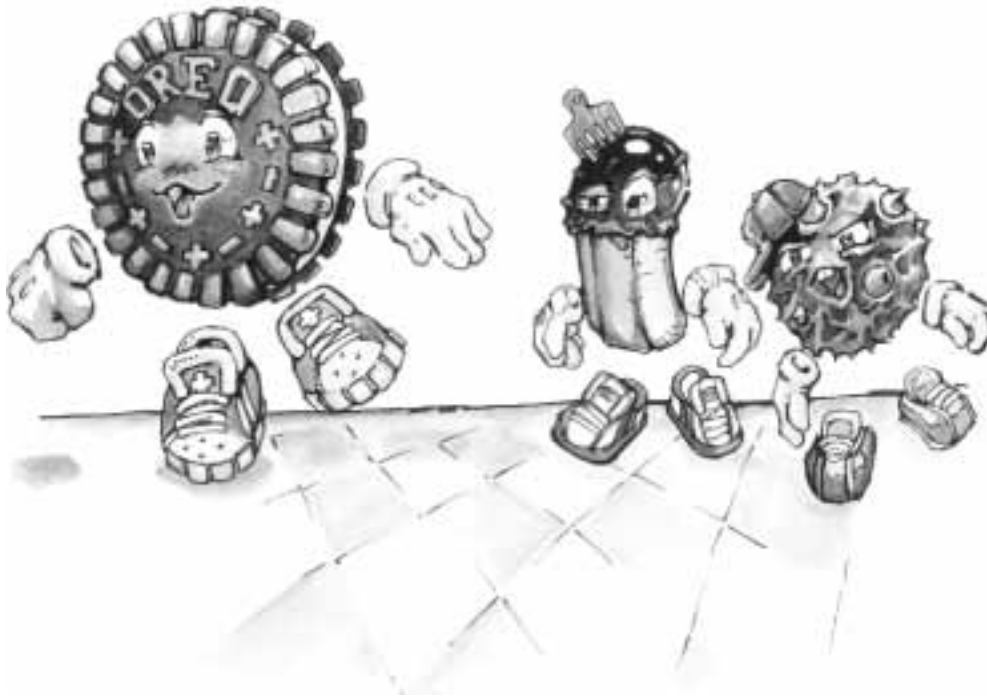
—Rice's novel helps Rasheeda gain a better understanding of adolescence. Think of a book, movie, album or another work that helped you gain a better understanding of teens. Write a few paragraphs, describing the work and how it helped your understanding.

—Pretend you are writing a novel about teenage life. Describe the characters and summarize the plot.

—Group activity: students can work in pairs or small groups. Make a list of the things kids are most commonly teased about. Now make a list of rules that could be followed in schools to make the teasing less common. Share with the larger group and discuss.

"Acting White?"

Dwan "Telly" Carter, in "Princess Oreo Speaks Out," p. 14, describes being teased by fellow Blacks for "acting White" because of her taste in music (Limp



Bizkit), TV shows (“Dawson’s Creek”), inability to dance well, and use of big vocabulary words. But Dwan likes what she likes, and wonders why people can’t be more open-minded.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Have you ever encountered the kind of teasing that Dwan faces? (It may not be about “acting White,” but about some other aspect of your life that others don’t approve of.) How did you deal with the teasing? What impact did it have on your life?

—The “acting White” issue is really about peer pressure. How big a factor is peer pressure in your life? How hard is it to resist the pressure to be someone you’re not? Is it ever possible to totally ignore it? Why or why not?

—Group activity: students can work in pairs or small groups. Each group should come up with a list of the various ways they’ve encountered peer pressure (for not listening to the right music, wearing the right clothes, etc.). Then for each item, describe a time you gave into the pressure and a time you didn’t give into the pressure. Share with the larger group and discuss.

Roleplay: two students, playing Dwan and a friend. Dwan’s friend thinks Black people have to act a certain way in order to be “really Black.” Dwan thinks she’s “really Black” no matter how she acts. Let the role play go on for about five minutes. Then have the class discuss what they’ve

seen and relate it back to the themes in the story.

Performing Despite Anxiety

Although Abilene Selvon in “I Just Want to Sing,” p. 23, doesn’t feel “different” because she sings in church, she had to overcome a lot of anxiety the first time she performed in front of a congregation (she was only five years old!). In an accompanying article, “Music Runs in the Family,” she writes about how family members inspired her love of music.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Singing make Abilene feel totally alive. Describe a hobby or activity that makes you feel that way.

—Abilene felt a lot of anxiety the first time she had to sing in front of people. Describe a time you had to perform or

speak in front of others. What helped you get through it? Would you do it again? Why or why not?

—Abilene learned to love music because of her father and aunt. Describe something you love to do that you learned from a family member or friend. Do you think you would have taken up this interest without the inspiration of your family or friend? Why or why not?

II. Neighborhoods: The Good and Bad of ‘the Hood’

On pages 12-13 (“NYC’s New York City”), several writers describe the sights, sounds, ups and downs of their neighborhoods. Poverty, gentrification, Starbucks, drug dealers, racism, cliques, tantalizing foods, gardens, friendly greetings, gunshots: it’s all here.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Which neighborhood(s) described by the writers appeals to you the most? Why?

—How is your neighborhood similar to the ones described? How is it different?

—Do you see yourself continuing to live in your neighborhood, as you grow older? Why or why not?

—In a few paragraphs, describe your neighborhood, as the writers have described theirs.

—What’s makes a neighborhood feel like a community? Is there a difference between the two? What is it?

—Group activity: students can work in pairs or small groups. Have each group come up with a list of the qualities that would make an ideal neighborhood. Share with the larger group and discuss.

Writing contest, p. 3:

Encourage students to enter our writing contest, which offers \$175 in prizes:

“What is the Most Spiteful Thing You’ve Done or Had Done to You? How Did It Make You Feel and Why?”

You may want to devote part of your class to discussing this topic, before turning to the writing.

III. Latest Drug Fad: The Dangers of Ecstasy

In "The Highs and Lows of Ecstasy" (p. 11), Benjamin Berelson gives the details on Ecstasy, the latest drug craze (especially at all-night rave parties). The drug can cause permanent brain damage, but teens ignore the possible risks to get a high that makes them feel peaceful, empathetic, and energetic.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—A young person quoted in this article says he felt depressed when Ecstasy began to wear off, because when he was on the drug life seemed "better than real life." What does he mean by that? Have you had a similar reaction with any drug you've used?

—Feeling peaceful, empathetic, and energetic is not an easy thing to do. Do you think, in the long run, that drugs are the best way to achieve these feelings? Why or why not?

—Many teens tend to ignore the risks of drugs. Why is that? What do you think makes people wake up to the risks involved?

—Near the end of the article, a teen is quoted as saying that he wants to quit using Ecstasy because you shouldn't be too "dependent on anything to be well in life." What does he mean by this? Does it apply to other things, besides drugs? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

IV. Fixing Schools

Nasty Books

In "All Tore Up," p. 15, Shavone Harris describes the terrible condition of many New York City school textbooks: old, torn, outdated. Some people point to inadequate spending as the culprit; others feel that students bear some of the responsibility by not taking proper care of their tomes and having a healthier respect for the joys of erudition that are found therein.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—Are you satisfied with the quality of your textbooks? Why or why not?

—Sometimes school property—like



the textbooks or the bathrooms—is not in good condition. Where does the responsibility lie: with the school or with the students?

Group activity: students can work in pairs or small groups. Have each group come up with a list of physical things they would improve in their school and rules for keeping them in good repair or condition. Share with the larger group and discuss.

Shortchanged Schools

In "Show Us the Money," (p. 21),

Jonathan Maseng offers insight into the causes of overcrowded city classrooms, shabby textbooks, and crumbling school buildings: state funding favors school districts that are mostly White and suburban.

Prompts for discussion and/or writing:

—If you were in charge of your school's budget, what would you spend the money on? What would be your top three priorities?

—Many advocates say that the state's education budget is based on "political wheeling and dealing instead of community need." Are there other ways our society spends money that ignore community needs? What are they? How do you see this in your community?

—Write a letter to Governor Pataki, expressing your feelings about how the state government gives out funding for education.

Group activity: students can work in pairs or small groups. Have each group come up with a list of their three top priorities for improving the school system. Then tell the group they have a limited amount of money to work with. They can decide to fund each of the three priorities equally, give it all to one, or fund only two of the priorities. The group has to decide how to prioritize the money. Share with the larger group and discuss.



Tips for Teachers is written for the bulk subscribers to *New Youth Connections* to help them use the magazine more effectively with teens in their classes and programs.

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