From the Editors

This world demands the qualities of youth; not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the life of ease.

—Robert F. Kennedy, “A Ripple of Hope”

The illusion is reality. The only contradiction is the observer.

—Lionel C. Saggs, Solecism

As lovers of language, literature, and learning, English teachers appreciate the complex interactions among appearance, perception, interpretation, and reality. We construct our own identities, in part, on the basis of how others perceive and respond to us. How we perceive and react to the young learners in our classrooms, then, is an important aspect of how they see themselves and who they become. In this issue, guest editors Sophia Sarigianides, Mark Lewis, and Robert Petrone investigate, explore, and reveal how society’s conceptions of “youth” affect the ways teachers and texts view and portray adolescents.

Our students are neither empty vessels nor unformed lumps of clay. They, like us, are humans who are continuously becoming, shaping and being shaped by the contexts in which they exist. Despite the diversity of their conditions and identities, youth are often portrayed in ways that highlight their deficiencies, rather than the funds of knowledge and talents they possess. As teachers, we know that young people demonstrate endless capacities for kindness, courage, and wisdom. They can also be maddeningly self-absorbed, capricious, and cruel. These characteristics correspond quite well to those of the adults with whom we interact; however, US society’s perspective on youth emphasizes immaturity, selfishness, and even tendencies toward violence (Giroux). Contemporary media, in particular, highlight young people as potentially dangerous and in need of control; consequently, consumers of popular media unknowingly develop a lens through which youth are perceived as impulsive, unpredictable, and not quite fully human. Because we interact and form relationships with young people, teachers are in an ideal position to challenge negative stereotypes associated with young people. We might even empathize with this condition, since teachers are often perceived in ways that fail to understand the complexity of our roles and responsibilities—and that minimize the passion and commitment that meaningful education requires.

But resisting the negative influences of the adult-centered perceptions of young people requires more than empathy; it requires action. In this volume, Sarigianides, Lewis, and Petrone provide a framework for that action, as well of examples of how it can work in practice. The guest editors begin by arguing, in their “EJ in Focus” piece, for a shift toward a “youth lens,” a perspective that calls into question many of the ways young people are typically understood—as uniformed, uninformed, wildling creatures who must first be controlled and then made compliant.

Authors in this issue reveal how the shift to a youth lens can transform their own practice as well as engage students as active learners constructing authentic knowledge. Alyssa D. Niccolini describes how she used banned books to illuminate how “normal” adolescent development has socially constructed...
meanings. William Kist, Kristen Srøen, and Beatriz Fontanive Bishop examine how social media and a bullying incident set the stage for reimagining how “kids today” are envisioned. And David Bruce describes how students can use media literacy tools to deconstruct contemporary representations of adolescence and apply those tools to claim and reconstruct their adolescent selves. These authors, and many more, offer English teachers exciting and innovative ways to imagine, with our students, how young people can participate in the construction of a better, more just world—one classroom at a time.

Julie Gorlewski and David Gorlewski are assistant professors in the School of Education at the State University of New York at New Paltz. Their most recent book, coedited with Jed Hopkins and Brad Porfilio, is Effective or Wise? Teaching and the Meaning of Professional Dispositions in Education (Peter Lang, 2014).

Claiming Spaces

“Do You Feel Alive?”
Chalk written on the stairwell door to the hall of faculty offices.

A student, I suppose. feeling creative or defiant—furtively jotted this simple question. Perhaps, after just leaving a philosophy lecture.

I pause, hand on door reading and then rush on to my class.

I admit thoughts of Virginia Tech first come to mind. My post 911, post Columbine, post violence mind hovered over the words feeling for threat.

Later, the message gone, but my answer—“most days” still held.

—Kjersti VanSlyke-Briggs

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