As English teachers, we challenge racial stereotypes in texts, complicate discussions of class in literature, and present gender and sexuality as social categories without a predetermined set of characteristics. We grapple with these challenges to teach our students complex views of a complex world. Yet, many teachers who question and complicate these social categories often leave canned, or stereotypical, representations of adolescence untouched. By ignoring society’s constructions of adolescence, teachers implicitly suggest to secondary students that dominant and mostly demeaning views of adolescence present true expectations for youth. As guest editors of this special issue, we have great concerns about the implications of re-circulating these dominant views in our English classrooms, and we see tremendous potential for students’ literary analysis and analytic and creative writing to critique and to talk back to how the world sees them as youth.

Why Re-think Adolescence?

In preparing to become English teachers, most of us took courses on adolescent development or adolescent psychology. Though our experiences in these classes varied, it is likely that we were taught that adolescence is a stage of life marked by great change—physically, biologically, psychologically, emotionally, and socially. Through phrases such as identity crisis, teenage brain, and raging hormones typically featured in such courses, we learned to expect moody, risk-taking, unpredictable, and peer-oriented adolescents.

We see such expectations in a 2011 National Geographic cover story, “Teenage Brains,” which describes adolescence as a naturally occurring biological phenomenon (Dobbs). The article opens with the following lead: “Moody. Impulsive. Mad-dening. Why do teenagers act the way they do? Viewed through the eyes of evolution, their most exasperating traits may be the key to success as adults.” David Dobbs explains that though culture helps to “shape” adolescence, it does not create adolescence. Adolescence, he argues, is created through biological forces, namely in the brain, which for people moving through their teen years “undergoes extensive remodeling, resembling a network and wiring upgrade.” These biological changes, he claims, result in risk-taking, preferring the company of same-aged peers, and other behaviors typically ascribed to teens as natural and normal. Depicting adolescence biologically and psychologically, and rejecting or diminishing the role of social context, this cover story echoes a familiar, dominant view of youth: nature governs adolescence, leaving little room for nurture’s variations. Consequently, people view adolescence monolithically as a one-size-fits-all, universal experience that occurs regardless of context. Yet, as some of us know from observations and personal experiences, the experience of “adolescence,” much like the experience of “adulthood,” varies widely. For some it is a tumultuous period; for many others it is not. In fact, research suggests that what is typically understood as the “normal” experience of adolescence as a troubled time applies to only 20 percent of youth (Graham).
Furthermore, these dominant ideas typically frame adolescence in terms of deficits. Such deficit views, for instance, often appear in parents’ worries about their young children: “She’s an angel now, but God help me when she becomes a teenager.” To be an adolescent is never good; in fact, it is a phase to be dreaded. Finally, dominant perspectives also suggest that adolescents are generally understood as “becoming” and valued for their promise and potential, yet rarely for who they are now. Putting youth in a position in which their value is not in the here-and-now but at some point in the future contributes to feelings of uncertainty and “crisis.” However, regarding youth as they are, rather than constantly worrying about who they might become, honors their present circumstances.

Although the three of us, as beginning middle and high school English teachers, worked hard to get to know our students as individuals—to understand their unique life histories and learning styles—we still relied largely on these dominant ways of thinking about adolescence (and, by extension, adolescents). We often laughed along with other teachers at stereotypical representations of adolescence—the awkward nerd, the prom queen, the sexually preoccupied jock—present in movies and literature. We also shook our heads at negative stories of “wayward” youth told in newspapers and newscasts. Furthermore, we drew upon these dominant ideas of adolescence as we talked with parents about their children’s progress in our classes, and we made decisions about what we would teach and how we would teach based on these ideas: How could we “harness” students’ “naturally rambunctious” energy? Which of these novels might best relate to the obvious tumultuousness of their adolescent experience? In other words, how we thought of our students as adolescents influenced how we taught English.

However, despite the influence of the dominant lens that shaped our perspectives about young people, as we gained experience working with individual middle and high school students, we interacted with young people who disproved negative depictions of adolescence and adolescents. In fact, more and more we came to see how these dominant ideas broke down in relation to real youth. Did some of our students act impulsively, moodily, contemptuously? Yes, of course. Do youth sometimes act selflessly and generously? Certainly. Did some of the youth we knew engage in risk-taking behavior? Yes. However, could some adults also be described in these ways? Absolutely. More importantly, we recognized that most of our students did not fit these descriptions and should not be expected to do so axiomatically. Also, as we discuss below, there may be other explanations for why so many youth seem to fit these descriptions that do not rely on biological or psychological explanations.

Living with this contradiction, we each had pivotal experiences that led us to becoming aware of how these commonsense ideas of adolescence emerged and affected thinking about teaching, students, and English. For Sophia, it began with teaching her first young adult literature course to future English teachers and wanting to challenge their encounters with literature that named its intended audience as “young adult.” For Mark, it began by wondering why he had to constantly defend his middle school students from demeaning characterizations presented by others in and outside of education. For Rob, it began with his ethnographic research on skateboarding culture and his reading of scholarship outside of education in the field of youth studies.
Eventually, we each found our way to Nancy Lesko’s *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, a historical analysis of how contemporary commonsense ideas of adolescence came to be so taken for granted and normal. We found our previous beliefs about adolescence reflected in everything Lesko critiqued: her “confident characterizations” (2–3) of adolescents as hormone-governed, peer-oriented, understandable by their specific age (e.g., what it means to be a 15-year-old girl), and involved in a slow coming of age to adulthood. Her book exposed these dominant ideas as stereotypes tied to a racist, sexist, class-based history, and discussed the varied ways these ideas bound, or constrained, youth, especially minority youth. In general, these deficit orientations position youth passively, present their life circumstances as demeaning, and fail to account for seeing this category, like others, as a social construct, or a package of ideas and descriptors determined by time and place rather than natural or inevitable characteristics. For each of us, reading her book was both liberating as it confirmed some of our previous hunches, and disconcerting as we felt immediately implicated in adhering to those problematic ideas of adolescence.

These experiences have led us to question and challenge the dominant ideas of adolescence that circulate sometimes seamlessly within talk about teaching and learning in English education. We have come to realize that although many within the field of education work diligently to dispel stereotypes tied to race, gender, sexuality, physical ability, and other social categories, few have examined how views of adolescence affect how we teach English. Therefore, in this special issue, we hope to bring to the field of English education a more robust discussion about depictions of youth and how re-thinking adolescence can help us re-imagine how we teach English.

**What Does It Mean to Re-think Adolescence?**

To re-think adolescence means to question or challenge the dominant ideas that characterize it and to think of other ways youth might be understood. An important shift in re-thinking adolescence involves viewing adolescence as a construct. English teachers who enjoy teaching their students how to employ critical lenses such as a feminist lens, for example, recognize the term construct easily. Just as a feminist lens exposes gender as a construct rather than as a natural set of behaviors we should expect of women or men, viewing adolescence as a construct means that the behaviors we have been taught to expect of youth are socially imposed and culturally ingrained much more than biologically or psychologically programmed. To think of adolescence as a construct means that the period of life typically ascribed to people between the ages of approximately 12 and 19 does not exist as a naturally occurring, inevitable, and universal experience for all people. Instead, the experience of people known as adolescents is developed in conjunction with the contexts in which they exist. Adolescence is not fixed, nor stable, nor tethered to the will of the body. What we expect of adolescence and adolescents fluctuates with contexts and circumstances.

Much research within the social sciences (e.g., sociology, anthropology), humanities (e.g., history), and youth/cultural studies has demonstrated how the experience of the time of life known as adolescence differs, sometimes dramatically, across cultures. Being a teen in the United States may differ greatly from being a teen in Mexico, Zimbabwe, or Finland. Similarly, even within a country, the experience of what is known as adolescence varies in relation to social class, gender, race, ethnicity, or religious affiliations. For instance, a working-class youth in the United States may face a different set of expectations from those of a middle-class teen. Attitudes toward extracurricular activities, for example, may vary according to class. A teen who needs to contribute economically to his family has a different impetus for finding an after-school job. A young person who needs to succeed athletically because it is her only chance of attending college has different motivations for joining school sports.

Likewise, historians have demonstrated how understandings of adolescence have differed across historical periods (to the extent that ideas of adolescence existed at all) and, consequently, led those who would be labeled “adolescents” to experience adolescence differently. For instance, people who today are known as adolescents were at different moments in
US history known primarily as parents, husbands and wives, home- and landowners, laborers, and so on. Overall, historical scholarship reveals that, despite biological and psychological occurrences (e.g., the “teenage brain” or “raging hormones”), adolescence is not a universal experience. In fact, by understanding the historically situated role of adolescence—by understanding that youth were not always regarded as irresponsible, as incapable, as yet to fully mature—we can look differently upon the rigid expectations to which we now hold youth, and see how limiting these roles are for them.

From this idea of adolescence as a construct, we see many opportunities to re-think secondary English and the assumptions that undergird it; in fact, the framework of adolescence as a construct demands a reevaluation of what we teach, how we teach it, and for what purposes. For instance, our reasoning that particular texts might be good selections for our students because they are “adolescents” or because they can “relate,” given their adolescent status, suddenly appears suspect. We believe that it is time for us to begin the process of reworking our assumptions about people who are understood as “adolescent.” How we think of adolescence and young people affects our identities as teachers of youth; determines the limits and possibilities of ELA curriculum for youth; and, ultimately, how we regard students burdened with this label.

Re-imagining English through a Youth Lens

One of the ways the three of us re-imagine English by re-thinking adolescence is by employing what we call a youth lens when guiding students to read young adult literature. In essence, a youth lens (Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis) takes the idea of adolescence as a construct and applies it to the analysis of literary texts, particularly those designated as young adult literature. Two overarching questions direct a youth lens: How do texts represent adolescence and adolescents? How do these representations reinforce and/or critique dominant ideas of adolescence? In asking students to engage texts through a youth lens, our hope is that they will more critically examine how ideas of adolescence and representations of youth come to shape their lives, including how they view themselves.

Re-imagining English helps re-imagine the teaching of English. In our other work on the youth lens (Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis), we offer a set of “entry points” for employing this approach using literary elements such as characterization, plot, setting, theme, and figurative language. To complement the entry points already offered as a means of employing the lens, here we pose additional questions as prompts for considering representations of adolescence and adolescents in texts through a youth lens. Since we understand this approach to examining texts to be emerging still, we begin with one extensive example of how to use a question generated by this lens and we follow with additional questions one might pursue.

Age is often used as a signifier for how one thinks about another person. In terms of adolescence, as Lesko discusses, the “confident characterizations” of youth establish the often-false idea that knowing a youth’s exact age gives us specific information about him or her. In other words, if we know a person or character is a 15-year-old girl, these details trigger an immediate download of assumptions about her as one whom we would expect to be focused on her sexuality and likely her looks. The assumptions we might make about a person or character who is a twelve-year-old might differ, but that information also comes with its own set of highly specific expectations likely tied to psychological stages and biological expectations of brain development. Given this “confident characterization” of youth, what happens when a character’s age is not shared in the text? For example, Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat* features a protagonist, Weetzie, who is sexually active, who desires to parent, and who does so successfully. Though the book mentions high school as the site where Weetzie meets her best friend, Dirk, time and age references are altogether left out of the narrative, leaving readers to wonder about characters’ ages at particular moments in the plot, such as when Weetzie and Dirk find an apartment or when Weetzie decides she wants to have a baby.

When teacher candidates read this text in classes they are eager to know characters’ ages, leading to discussions about why youths’ ages matter so much to us. Often these teacher candidates are unsettled by not knowing how to locate the characters in the novel within dominant understandings of youth, particularly those tied to age. They
seem to need certain information about a character's age to provide a more accurate interpretation of a fantastic/realist text that includes genies and witches, but also pregnant youth who parent at a socially inappropriate time. By utilizing a youth lens, the question—What role does a character's specific age play in the plot, characterization, and theme of the novel?—exposes cultural assumptions about adolescents' "proper" development that are fruitful to examine in classrooms. Such examinations might ask: What do you notice about how—and whether—texts mention a youth's age? What meanings seem to attach to age as a signifier? Do these meanings reinforce existing thinking about adolescence, subvert these ideas, or both?

Additional possible questions to pursue through a youth lens:

- What determines "adult" versus "adolescent" behavior in a text? Are these distinctions firm, and if so, what meanings collect around age-based behaviors?
- How do various sociocultural constructs—such as adolescence, class, gender, race—interplay to constrain and afford possibilities for fictional youth? Are inner-city minority youth portrayed differently than suburban majority youth? Do young women have dissimilar social expectations than adult women?
- How are religious teens who observe celibacy until marriage depicted with regard to "raging hormones"?
- How does U.S. citizenship or immigrant status affect the life trajectories of adolescent characters?
- Outside of young adult literature, how are youth portrayed? Are these portrayals significantly distinct from depictions in YA texts? What roles and performances are available to adolescents in canonical or world literature?

Common Challenges to Re-thinking Adolescence

A moment of caution: the three of us have been working on re-thinking adolescence for years now, and we continue to struggle with these efforts, especially in our teaching. For example, even reading this, you might be wondering: "Sure, some of these ideas sound valid, but I know that adolescents are emotionally fragile or volatile or (fill in the apt adjective)." We have each encountered resistance in our classes when we introduce ideas about adolescence as a construct. For this reason, we thought it might be helpful to identify some of the common ways that youth, teachers, and teacher candidates push back on efforts to re-imagine adolescence.

"But adolescents are like that." For many attempting to re-think adolescence, some "real" youth seem to offer ample evidence that the stereotypes are right. In other words, many teens do seem to behave irrationally, irresponsibly, and as though they are bound by the hormone rushes of their bodies. However, we should question to what extent youth are simply showing us what we expect of them when they behave in these conventional ways. In other words, if we tell them, "This is how you are going to be when you turn twelve," and then they do behave this way when they turn twelve, adults may be coaching youth along to this destination far more than the thrust of biology. To respond to this challenge, we have used the now somewhat outdated but still useful PBS documentary, Merchants of Cool, as well as the song "You Can't Blame the Youth" by Peter Tosh to discuss the concept of a "feedback loop." A feedback loop explains how youth imitate the behavior that they have been taught to expect what we expect of them. And this "feedback loop" can backfire, as Margaret Finders demonstrates in her analysis of an alternative-to-incarceration literacy classroom where middle school students savvy about how the world regards them feel that the only way to "succeed" socially is to be "worse" than the low expectations society already reserves for them.

"Not me." Increasingly, we encounter teacher candidates and youth who shake their heads at stereotyped characterizations of youth as depictions that do not match their own experiences. Yet, these same people might still affirm that the depiction holds for other adolescents, though not for themselves as adolescents. "My friends or schoolmates, people in my neighborhood and relatives are like that, but I'm not," might be how you hear this reaction. In a research study focused on teaching youth about adolescence as a construct, Sophia observed a group of predominantly African American students in an AP English class in a Massachusetts high school who often challenged youth characterizations that did not match their own experiences.

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How Re-thinking Adolescence Helps Re-imagine the Teaching of English

school offer this challenge. Describing themselves as responsible, hard-working, academically focused honors students in relation to their sex-crazed, reckless school mates, these youth affirmed that stereotyped depictions of teens were accurate. These AP students argued that they were the exceptions to the rule, but that the rule about adolescents in general holds true. Yet, exceptions to rules actually maintain rules, thereby reinforcing the status quo. For example, to say that someone is an exceptionally rational woman maintains the stereotype that most women are irrational, thereby reinforcing existing views of femininity. Once students understand how exceptionalism works to maintain existing categories, they get interested in thinking about “feedback loops” to consider to what extent their peers might be giving adults and other teens what they think they are supposed to be acting like.

“But they (youth) need us (adults).” If adults give up on thinking of youth as inevitably insecure, incapable, irresponsible, and irrational, then they often question what roles remain for them as adults and as teachers. Re-thinking adolescents unsettles adults and many teachers, especially new teachers just heading out into the field. Re-imagining adolescents as capable, knowledgeable, complex, and contradictory—affordances we allow for adults—affects one’s position in relation to youth in the classroom and in the world. In teacher preparation courses, we pose this question directly to candidates already nervous about heading into classrooms: How does thinking about youth (as stereotypes) make adults look in relation? They point out that it automatically authorizes us as adults in relation to youth who need our guidance. But don’t youth need our guidance, you might ask? Of course. We are trained to know how to talk, write, and think about texts with nuance, but doing so need not rely upon diminished and demeaning views of youth. Rather, the teaching of literature and composition can rely on the capacities of youth to explore and articulate their multifaceted understandings of the self and the world.

Looking Forward

Especially as English teachers, we are all implicated in the development and circulation of ideas tied to adolescence. Our goal and hope with this special issue is to bring attention to how we are involved in perpetuating or interrupting this process, and how we might re-imagine other possibilities, particularly for working alongside youth in English language arts classrooms.

Works Cited


Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides is associate professor of English education at Westfield State University. Her research interests include young adult literature, adolescence, youth sexuality, and teacher professional development. She can be reached at ssarigianides@westfield.ma.edu. Mark A. Lewis is assistant professor of literacy education at Loyola University Maryland. His research examines literary competence, conceptions of youth, and young adult literature. He can be reached at malewis2@loyola.edu. Robert Petrone is assistant professor of English education at Montana State University. His research focuses on learning and literacy in youth cultures, ideas of adolescence in literacy education, and the role of critical literacy and popular cultures in secondary literacy classrooms. He can be reached at robert.petrone@gmail.com.