Rethinking the "Adolescent" in Adolescent Literacy

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Robert Petrone
Mark A. Lewis

Principles in Practice

ADOLESCENT LITERACY

Dear Reader,

As a former high school teacher, I remember the frustration I felt when the gap between Research (and that is, by the way, how I always thought of it: Research with a capital *R*) and my own practice seemed too wide to ever cross. Research studies—those sterile reports written by professional and university researchers—often seemed so out of touch with the issues that most concerned me when I walked into my classroom every day. These studies were easy to ignore, in part because they were so distant from my experiences and in part because I had no one to help me see how that research could impact my everyday practice.

Although research has come a long way since then, as more and more teachers take up classroom-based inquiry, this gap between research and practice unfortunately still exists. Quite frankly, it's hard for even the most committed classroom teachers to pick up a research article or book, figure out how that research might apply to their classroom, convince their administrators that a new way of teaching is called for, and put it into practice. While most good teachers instinctively know that there is something to be gained from reading research, who realistically has the time or energy for it?

That gap informs the thinking behind this book imprint. Called Principles in Practice, the imprint publishes books that look carefully at the research-based principles and policies developed by NCTE and put those policies to the test in actual classrooms. The imprint naturally arises from one of the missions of NCTE: to develop policy for English language arts teachers. Over the years, many NCTE members have joined committees and commissions to study particular issues of concern to literacy educators. Their work has resulted in a variety of reports, research briefs, and policy statements designed both to inform teachers and to be used in lobbying efforts to create policy changes at the local, state, and national levels (reports that are available on NCTE's website, www.ncte.org).

Through this imprint, we are creating collections of books specifically designed to translate those research briefs and policy statements into classroom-based practice. The goal behind these books is to familiarize teachers with the issues behind certain concerns, lay out NCTE's policies on those issues, provide resources from research studies to support those policies, and—most of all—make those policies come alive for teacher-readers.

The first strand of books in the imprint centers on the issue of adolescent literacy. Each book in this series focuses on a different aspect of this important topic and is organized in a similar way: immersing you first in the research principles surrounding the topic (as laid out by *Adolescent Literacy: An NCTE Policy Research Brief*) and then taking you into actual classrooms, teacher discussions, and student work to see how the principles play out. Each book closes with a teacher-friendly annotated bibliography.

Good teaching *is* connected to strong research. We hope that these books help you continue the good teaching that you're doing, think hard about ways to adapt and adjust your practice, and grow even stronger in the vital work you do with kids every day.

Best of luck,

Cathy Fleischer

Cathy Fleischer

Principles in Practice

The Principles in Practice imprint offers teachers concrete illustrations of effective classroom practices based in NCTE research briefs and policy statements. Each book discusses the research on a specific topic, links the research to an NCTE brief or policy statement, and then demonstrates how those principles come alive in practice: by showcasing actual classroom practices that demonstrate the policies in action; by talking about research in practical, teacher-friendly language; and by offering teachers possibilities for rethinking their own practices in light of the ideas presented in the books. Books within the imprint are grouped in strands, each strand focused on a significant topic of interest.

Adolescent Literacy Strand

Adolescent Literacy at Risk? The Impact of Standards (2009) Rebecca Bowers Sipe

Adolescents and Digital Literacies: Learning Alongside Our Students (2010) Sara Kajder

Adolescent Literacy and the Teaching of Reading: Lessons for Teachers of Literature (2010) Deborah Appleman

Rethinking the "Adolescent" in Adolescent Literacy (2017) Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, Robert Petrone, and Mark A. Lewis

Writing in Today's Classrooms Strand

Writing in the Dialogical Classroom: Students and Teachers Responding to the Texts of Their Lives (2011) Bob Fecho

Becoming Writers in the Elementary Classroom: Visions and Decisions (2011) Katie Van Sluys

Writing Instruction in the Culturally Relevant Classroom (2011) Maisha T. Winn and Latrise P. Johnson

Literacy Assessment Strand

Our Better Judgment: Teacher Leadership for Writing Assessment (2012) Chris W. Gallagher and Eric D. Turley

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Reading Assessment: Artful Teachers, Successful Students (2013) Diane Stephens, editor

Literacies of the Disciplines Strand

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Real-World Literacies: Disciplinary Teaching in the High School Classroom (2014) Heather Lattimer

Doing and Making Authentic Literacies (2014) Linda Denstaedt, Laura Jane Roop, and Stephen Best

Reading in Today's Classrooms Strand

Connected Reading: Teaching Adolescent Readers in a Digital World (2015) Kristen Hawley Turner and Troy Hicks

Digital Reading: What's Essential in Grades 3–8 (2015) William L. Bass II and Franki Sibberson

Teaching Reading with YA Literature: Complex Texts, Complex Lives (2016) Jennifer Buehler

Teaching English Language Learners Strand

Beyond "Teaching to the Test": Rethinking Accountability and Assessment for English Language Learners (2017) Betsy Gilliland and Shannon Pella

Community Literacies en Confianza: *Learning from Bilingual After-School Programs* (2017) Steven Alvarez

Understanding Language: Supporting ELL Students in Responsive ELA Classrooms (2017) Melinda McBee Orzulak

Writing across Culture and Language: Inclusive Strategies for Working with ELL Writers in the ELA Classroom (2017) Christina Ortmeier-Hooper

Rethinking the "Adolescent" in Adolescent Literacy

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NCTE Editorial Board: Steven Bickmore, Catherine Compton-Lilly, Deborah Dean, Bruce McComiskey, Jennifer Ochoa, Duane Roen, Anne Elrod Whitney, Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, Kurt Austin, Chair, ex officio, Emily Kirkpatrick, ex officio

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Interior Design: Victoria Pohlmann
Cover Design: Pat Mayer
Cover Images: Robert Petrone and Thompson-McClellan

NCTE Stock Number: 41137; eStock Number: 41144
ISBN 978-0-8141-4113-7; eISBN 978-0-8141-4114-4

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sarigianides, Sophia Tatiana, 1968- author. | Petrone, Robert, 1974- author. | Lewis, Mark A., 1973- author.
Title: Rethinking the "adolescent" in adolescent literacy / Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, Robert Petrone, Mark A. Lewis.
Description: Urbana, Illinois : National Council of Teachers of English, 2017. | Series: Principles in practice | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017032338 (print) | LCCN 2017047588 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814141144 | ISBN 9780814141137 (pbk.)
Subjects: LCSH: Reading (Secondary)—United States. | Language arts (Secondary)—United States. | Teenagers—United States.
Classification: LCC LB1632 (ebook) | LCC LB1632 .S355 2017 (print) | DDC 418/.40712—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017032338

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Acknowledgments

This project began more than a decade ago, so we have many people to thank for their support. To begin, we would not have a project at all were it not for Nancy Lesko's seminal book analyzing adolescence. When we read her book as middle and high school English teachers, it hit us hard, implicating us in its critique and thereby requiring us to think deeply about how our own teaching of youth and preparation of English teachers needed to be reconsidered from its foundation.

We also wish to thank the many groups of teacher candidates and teachers from New York, Nebraska, Montana, Colorado, Maryland, and beyond who were the first to listen to, challenge, and try out our ideas that revising conceptions of adolescence mattered in general, but especially mattered in English teaching and in the reading of young adult literature. As seemingly solitary teacher educators trying these ideas out on our own, we would never have known that our idea had wings without your insightful responses to it.

We must also express our gratitude to the academics in the audience at our professional conferences who nodded their heads in agreement—and who pushed back against our suggestions—that reconsidering conceptions of youth could not be ignored in the teaching of English. Specifically, we wish to thank Julie and David Gorlewski, as editors of *English Journal*, who agreed that a special issue on the role of adolescence was in order after they heard our 2013 American Educational Research Association (AERA) presentation. In addition, we are so grateful for all of the incredible educators who submitted manuscripts for that special issue. Each submission helped push our thinking about what reconceptualizing adolescence could mean for our field. We also want to thank the group of scholars attending our presentation on these ideas at the Conference on English Education (CEE) in Fort Collins, Colorado, in 2013. You cannot know how encouraging it was to get a chance to respond to questions we had thought about for so many years.

There are also some colleagues—and now friends—in the field whose own work on adolescence and English teaching inspired us in ours. Carlin Borsheim-Black, Amanda Haertling Thein, and Mark Sulzer, reading and talking about your projects made our own work stronger. Thank you for teaching us about these ideas all along the way. We also want to thank Steve Bickmore and Crag Hill, who have been great champions of the Youth Lens. The three of us also wish to thank several

classroom teachers who got inspired by our ideas enough to try them out in their own classes and to tell us about the ways it impacted the youth it was intended to reach. Nicola Martin, Cassidy Brooks, and Adrianna Caton, your bold efforts to translate your learning into creative, enticing lessons and projects for young people will help many more teachers get these ideas into the hands of middle and high school students.

For all three of us, one of the most supportive emails we received on this journey was from Cathy Fleischer, soon after the 2015 special issue in *English Journal* came out, telling us how much she loved and appreciated the issue. Little did we know that this response would lead to an invitation to write for this imprint. Cathy, no first-time book authors could have asked for a more patient, responsive, encouraging editor. You and Kurt Austin made this project a very fortunate adventure. Thank you.

Finally, we would each like to thank those closest to us, those whose love and support have made all of this possible: James, Alexandros, and Phaedon Stillwaggon; Kaitlyn Baron; Veronica Petrone; Matt Helm; Melissa Horner; and Walt and Janet Lewis. We would not have gotten here without you. So much love and gratitude to all of you.

Adolescent Literacy

An NCTE Policy Research Brief

Causes for Concern

It is easy to summon the language of crisis in discussing adolescent literacy. After all, a recent study of writing instruction reveals that 40 percent of high school seniors never or rarely write a paper of three or more pages, and although 4th and 8th graders showed some improvement in writing between 1998 and 2002, the scores of 12th graders showed no significant change. Less than half of the 2005 ACT-tested high school graduates demonstrated readiness for college-level reading, and the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores for 12th graders showed a decrease from 80 percent at the *proficient* level in 1992 to 73 percent in 2005.

Recent NAEP results also reveal a persistent achievement gap between the reading and writing scores of whites and students of color in 8th and 12th grades. Furthermore, both whites and students of color scored lower in reading in 2005 as compared with 1992, and both male and female students also scored lower in 2005.[1]

The challenges associated with adolescent literacy extend beyond secondary school to both college and elementary school. Many elementary school teachers worry about the 4th-grade slump in reading abilities. Furthermore, preliminary analysis of reading instruction in the elementary school suggests that an emphasis on processes of how to read can crowd out attention to reading for ideas, information, and concepts—the very skills adolescents need to succeed in secondary school. In the other direction, college instructors claim that students arrive in their classes ill-prepared to take up the literacy tasks of higher education, and employers lament the inadequate literacy skills of young workers. In our increasingly "flat" world, the U.S. share of the global college-educated workforce has fallen from 30 percent to 14 percent in recent decades as young workers in developing nations demonstrate employer-satisfying proficiency in literacy.[2]

In this context, many individuals and groups, including elected officials, governmental entities, foundations, and media outlets—some with little knowledge of the field—have stepped forward to shape policies that impact literacy instruction. Notably, the U.S. Congress is currently discussing new Striving Readers legislation (Bills S958 and HR2289) designed to improve the literacy skills of middle and high school students. Test scores and other numbers do not convey the full complexity of literacy even though they are effective in eliciting a feeling of crisis. Accordingly, a useful alternative would be for teachers and other informed professionals to take an interest in policy that shapes literacy instruction. This document provides research-based information to support that interest.

Common Myths about Adolescent Literacy

Myth: Literacy refers only to reading.

Reality: Literacy encompasses reading, writing, and a variety of social and intellectual practices that call upon the voice as well as the eye and hand. It also extends to new media—including nondigitized multimedia, digitized multimedia, and hypertext or hypermedia.[3]

Myth: Students learn everything about reading and writing in elementary school.

Reality: Some people see the processes of learning to read and write as similar to learning to ride a bicycle, as a set of skills that do not need further development once they have been achieved. Actually literacy learning is an ongoing and nonhierarchical process. Unlike math where one principle builds on another, literacy learning is recursive and requires continuing development and practice.[4]

Myth: Literacy instruction is the responsibility of English teachers alone.

Reality: Each academic content area poses its own literacy challenges in terms of vocabulary, concepts, and topics. Accordingly, adolescents in secondary school classes need explicit instruction in the literacies of each discipline as well as the actual content of the course so that they can become successful readers and writers in all subject areas.[5]

Myth: Academics are all that matter in literacy learning.

Reality: Research shows that out-of-school literacies play a very important role in literacy learning, and teachers can draw on these skills to foster learning in school. Adolescents rely on literacy in their identity development, using reading and writing to define themselves as persons. The discourses of specific disciplines and social/cultural contexts created by school classrooms shape the literacy learning of adolescents, especially when these discourses are different and conflicting.[6]

Myth: Students who struggle with one literacy will have difficulty with all literacies.

Reality: Even casual observation shows that students who struggle with reading a physics text may be excellent readers of poetry; the student who has difficulty with word problems in math may be very comfortable with historical narratives. More important, many of the literacies of adolescents are largely invisible in the classroom. Research on reading and writing beyond the classroom shows that students often have literacy skills that are not made evident in the classroom unless teachers make special efforts to include them.[7]

Myth: School writing is essentially an assessment tool that enables students to show what they have learned.

Reality: While it is true that writing is often central to assessment of what students have learned in school, it is also a means by which students learn and develop. Research shows that informal writing to learn can help increase student learning of content material, and it can even improve the summative writing in which students show what they have learned.[8]

Understanding Adolescent Literacy

Overview: Dimensions of Adolescent Literacy

In adolescence, students simultaneously begin to develop important literacy resources and experience unique literacy challenges. By fourth grade many students have learned a number of the basic processes of reading and writing; however, they still need to master

literacy practices unique to different levels, disciplines, texts, and situations. As adolescents experience the shift to content-area learning, they need help from teachers to develop the confidence and skills necessary for specialized academic literacies.

Adolescents also begin to develop new literacy resources and participate in multiple discourse communities in and out of school. Frequently students' extracurricular literacy proficiencies are not valued in school. Literacy's link to community and identity means that it can be a site of resistance for adolescents. When students are not recognized for bringing valuable, multiple-literacy practices to school, they can become resistant to school-based literacy.[9]

1. Shifting Literacy Demands

The move from elementary to secondary school entails many changes including fundamental ones in the nature of literacy requirements. For adolescents, school-based literacy shifts as students engage with disciplinary content and a wide variety of difficult texts and writing tasks. Elementary school usually prepares students in the processes of reading, but many adolescents do not understand the multiple dimensions of content-based literacies. Adolescents may struggle with reading in some areas and do quite well with others. They may also be challenged to write in ways that conform to new disciplinary discourses. The proliferation of high-stakes tests can complicate the literacy learning of adolescents, particularly if test preparation takes priority over content-specific literacy instruction across the disciplines.[10]

Research says . . .

- Adolescents are less likely to struggle when subject area teachers make the reading and writing approaches in a given content area clear and visible.
- Writing prompts in which students reflect on their current understandings, questions, and learning processes help to improve content-area learning.[11]
- Effective teachers model how they access specific content-area texts.
- Learning the literacies of a given discipline can help adolescents negotiate multiple, complex discourses and recognize that texts can mean different things in different contexts.
- Efficacious teaching of cross-disciplinary literacies has a social justice dimension as well as an intellectual one.[12]

2. Multiple and Social Literacies

Adolescent literacy is social, drawing from various discourse communities in and out of school. Adolescents already have access to many different discourses including those of ethnic, online, and popular culture communities. They regularly use literacies for social and political purposes as they create meanings and participate in shaping their immediate environments.[13]

Teachers often devalue, ignore, or censor adolescents' extracurricular literacies, assuming that these literacies are morally suspect, raise controversial issues, or distract adolescents from more important work. This means that some adolescents' literacy abilities remain largely invisible in the classroom.[14]

Research says . . .

- The literacies adolescents bring to school are valuable resources, but they should not be reduced to stereotypical assumptions about predictable responses from specific populations of students.
- Adolescents are successful when they understand that texts are written in social settings and for social purposes.
- Adolescents need bridges between everyday literacy practices and classroom communities, including online, non-book-based communities.
- Effective teachers understand the importance of adolescents finding enjoyable texts and don't always try to shift students to "better" books.[15]

3. Importance of Motivation

Motivation can determine whether adolescents engage with or disengage from literacy learning. If they are not engaged, adolescents with strong literacy skills may choose not to read or write. The number of students who are not engaged with or motivated by school learning grows at every grade level, reaching epidemic proportions in high school. At the secondary level, students need to build confidence to meet new literacy challenges because confident readers are more likely to be engaged. Engagement is encouraged through meaningful connections.[16]

Research says . . .

Engaged adolescents demonstrate internal motivation, self-efficacy, and a desire for mastery. Providing student choice and responsive classroom environments with connections to "real life" experiences helps adolescents build confidence and stay engaged.[17]

A. Student Choice

- Self-selection and variety engage students by enabling ownership in literacy activities.
- In adolescence, book selection options increase dramatically, and successful readers need to learn to choose texts they enjoy. If they can't identify pleasurable books, adolescents often lose interest in reading.
- Allowing student choice in writing tasks and genres can improve motivation. At the same time, writing choice must be balanced with a recognition that adolescents also need to learn the literacy practices that will support academic success.
- Choice should be meaningful. Reading materials should be appropriate and should speak to adolescents' diverse interests and varying abilities.
- Student-chosen tasks must be supported with appropriate instructional support or scaffolding.[18]

B. Responsive Classroom Environments

- Caring, responsive classroom environments enable students to take ownership of literacy activities and can counteract negative emotions that lead to lack of motivation.
- Instruction should center around learners. Active, inquiry-based activities engage reluctant academic readers and writers. Inquiry-based writing connects writing practices with real-world experiences and tasks.

- Experiences with task-mastery enable increased self-efficacy, which leads to continued engagement.
- Demystifying academic literacy helps adolescents stay engaged.
- Using technology is one way to provide learner-centered, relevant activities. For example, many students who use computers to write show more engagement and motivation and produce longer and better papers.
- Sustained experiences with diverse texts in a variety of genres that offer multiple perspectives on life experiences can enhance motivation, particularly if texts include electronic and visual media.[19]

4. Value of Multicultural Perspectives

Monocultural approaches to teaching can cause or increase the achievement gap and adolescents' disengagement with literacy. Students should see value in their own cultures and the cultures of others in their classrooms. Students who do not find representations of their own cultures in texts are likely to lose interest in school-based literacies. Similarly, they should see their home languages as having value. Those whose home language is devalued in the classroom will usually find school less engaging.

Research says . . .

Multicultural literacy is seeing, thinking, reading, writing, listening, and discussing in ways that critically confront and bridge social, cultural, and personal differences. It goes beyond a "tourist" view of cultures and encourages engagement with cultural issues in all literature, in all classrooms, and in the world.[20]

A. Multicultural Literacy across All Classrooms

- Multicultural education does not by itself foster cultural inclusiveness because it can sometimes reinforce stereotypical perceptions that need to be addressed critically.
- Multicultural literacy is not just a way of reading "ethnic" texts or discussing issues of "diversity," but rather is a holistic way of *being* that fosters social responsibility and extends well beyond English/language arts classrooms.
- Teachers need to acknowledge that we all have cultural frameworks within which we operate, and everyone—teachers and students alike—needs to consider how these frameworks can be challenged or changed to benefit all peoples.[21]
- Teacher knowledge of social science, pedagogical, and subject-matter content knowledge about diversity will foster adolescents' learning.
- Successful literacy development among English language learners depends on and fosters collaborative multicultural relationships among researchers, teachers, parents, and students.
- Integration of technology will enhance multicultural literacy.
- Confronting issues of race and ethnicity within classrooms and in the larger community will enhance student learning and engagement.[22]

B. Goals of Multicultural Literacy

- Students will view knowledge from diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives, and use knowledge to guide action that will create a humane and just world.
- Teachers will help students understand the whiteness studies principle that white is a race so they can develop a critical perspective on racial thinking by people of all skin colors.
- Multicultural literacy will serve as a means to move between cultures and communities and develop transnational understandings and collaboration.
- Ideally, students will master basic literacies *and* become multiculturally literate citizens who foster a democratic multicultural society.[23]

Research-Based Recommendations for Effective Adolescent Literacy Instruction

For teachers . . .

Research on the practices of highly effective adolescent literacy teachers reveals a number of common qualities. Teachers who have received recognition for their classroom work, who are typically identified as outstanding by their peers and supervisors, and whose students consistently do well on high-stakes tests share a number of qualities. These qualities, in order of importance, include the following:

1. teaching with approaches that foster critical thinking, questioning, student decision-making, and independent learning;
2. addressing the diverse needs of adolescents whose literacy abilities vary considerably;
3. possessing personal characteristics such as caring about students, being creative and collaborative, and loving to read and write;
4. developing a solid knowledge about and commitment to literacy instruction;
5. using significant quality and quantity of literacy activities including hands-on, scaffolding, mini-lessons, discussions, group work, student choice, ample feedback, and multiple forms of expression;
6. participating in ongoing professional development;
7. developing quality relationships with students; and
8. managing the classroom effectively.[24]

For school programs . . .

Research on successful school programs for adolescent literacy reveals fifteen features that contribute to student achievement:

1. direct and explicit instruction;
2. effective instructional principles embedded in content;
3. motivation and self-directed learning;
4. text-based collaborative learning;

5. strategic tutoring;
6. diverse texts;
7. intensive writing;
8. technology;
9. ongoing formative assessment of students;
10. extended time for literacy;
11. long-term and continuous professional development, especially that provided by literacy coaches;
12. ongoing summative assessment of students and programs;
13. interdisciplinary teacher teams;
14. informed administrative and teacher leadership; and
15. comprehensive and coordinated literacy program.[25]

For policymakers . . .

A national survey produced action steps for policymakers interested in fostering adolescent literacy. These include:

1. align the high school curriculum with postsecondary expectations so that students are well prepared for college;
2. focus state standards on the essentials for college and work readiness;
3. shape high school courses to conform with state standards;
4. establish core course requirements for high school graduation;
5. emphasize higher-level reading skills across the high school curriculum;
6. make sure students attain the skills necessary for effective writing;
7. ensure that students learn science process and inquiry skills; and
8. monitor and share information about student progress.[26]

This report is produced by NCTE's James R. Squire Office of Policy Research, directed by Anne Ruggles Gere, with assistance from Laura Aull, Hannah Dickinson, Melinda McBee Orzulak, and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, all students in the Joint PhD Program in English and Education at the University of Michigan.

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Chapter One

The Underlying Myth of Adolescence in Adolescent Literacy

Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, Robert Petrone, and Mark A. Lewis

In the middle of an interview Rob conducted with a white high school English language arts teacher from rural Montana, the teacher turned the conversation from the topic of the interview—curriculum and teaching—to the topic of conceptions of youth, particularly youth living in rural contexts. The teacher had moved to Montana from a major metropolitan area where she had taught for more than a decade, and she talked about how moving from the city to the "country" helped her think differently about youth and about how youth are understood within schools. She had this to say:

> There are some freshmen that drive tractors that are worth more than I make in a year. They're seriously responsible. Then they come to school and they're little freshmen—they're *ninth graders*. That doesn't work very well. You treat them like a man out there—he's responsible like a man out there—and then he comes to school and it's different.

Through her comments, this teacher lays out one of the central issues we discuss throughout this book. Most of us have been taught that adolescence is a natural category governed by the body. In other words, we have been taught

to believe that adolescence is a naturally occurring stage, roughly between the ages of twelve and eighteen, and that adolescents are those who inhabit that category and, along with it, specific characteristics.

However, the realities of youth challenge this truism. These conceptions of adolescents as age- and body-dependent are not universal; in fact, they are highly dependent on context. For instance, the same youth who is "a man out there" is treated like a "ninth grader" when he comes to school, and "that doesn't work very well." He can handle responsibilities with equipment worth more than his teacher's annual salary on any given day in the field, yet when the same youth arrives to class, the school—and many adults and teachers in the school—regards this youth as a "ninth grader" with all the significations this age-based label carries: He is "little."

The contradictions embedded in this teacher's realizations about youth drive the three of us in our thinking about conceptions of adolescence in English language arts teaching. Specifically, this book is based on the idea that the way we, as white, middle-class, English language arts teachers, think about adolescence and our adolescent students greatly affects what we teach, how we teach, and even why we teach English language arts. In fact, adolescence is such an important concept in secondary education that virtually all of us who have gone through teacher education programs have been required to take courses (e.g., Adolescent Development) specifically focused on understanding our future students *as adolescents*. The ideas we learned in such courses are similar to those circulating in popular culture, as well as in our conversations with other adults and youths themselves: The category of adolescence is age-based, universal, and therefore, predictable. As a result, for many of us, the concept of adolescence shapes our thinking about secondary students in powerful ways.

As teachers who relied on stock views of adolescents to varying extent, the three of us have experienced what it is like to rethink our own conceptions of youth, to pay attention to how such shifts affect our own curricula and pedagogy as well as those of teachers with whom we work. We believe that reexamining assumptions about adolescence may have a similar impact on your teaching and thinking as well. We also hold that revising our teaching through such changes in thinking fits very well with other literacy practices and goals, and that making these changes in our thinking is a matter of social justice for the middle and high school students in our classrooms.

In our work as middle and high school English language arts teachers and now as teacher educators, the three of us have become particularly interested in how specific ideas of adolescence circulate in English teaching and in English education and the effects these ideas have on curriculum, instruction, and the experiences of secondary students and teachers. More specifically, from our independent

and collective reading and research over the past decade, we've come to see that many dominant ways of understanding youth in education have negative consequences for students and teachers alike.

The purpose of this book, then, is twofold. First, we want to make visible the ways many people think about adolescence and, perhaps, help you to reconsider some of these views. Second, we want to demonstrate new possibilities for teaching middle and high school English language arts that become available upon reconsidering beliefs and expectations of adolescence and the youth described by this social category.

In the remainder of this chapter, we do four things. First, we make visible the dominant ways that many people, especially in the United States, think about adolescence. Second, we point out some of the ways these dominant—and problematic—views of adolescence circulate in our field of English language arts teaching. Third, we follow this section by sharing research that has helped us revise our thinking of adolescence by showing that adolescence was not always thought about the way we think of it today. Finally, we close this chapter by sharing how teachers and teacher educators can use a revised view of adolescence to offer new ways of teaching English language arts that will likely appeal to and energize the students in your classes.

What Are the Dominant Ways of Thinking about Youth?

In a recent *Washington Post* article, which was published in the "Health & Science" section of the paper, Arthur Allen summarizes current research on the "teenage brain." In the article titled "Risky Behavior by Teens Can Be Explained in Part by How Their Brains Change," Allen explains how brain-mapping technologies show scientists that teen brains look "slightly different" from adults' brains in the areas that are associated with reasoning and emotion. Allen argues that these differences may be responsible for risky behaviors, particularly when teens are among other teens, as well as "why teens' feelings of aggression, fear, and depression may be more intense than those of adults." Although the article does include arguments for how differences between teen and adult brains might be attributed more to experiences than age, one of the article's main conclusions is for both teens and parents to "be patient" as "science tells us that by age 24 the teenage brain has mostly morphed into an adult version."

Since the 1990s, when research comparing teen and adult brains began, the idea of the "teenage brain" has become pervasive and commonsensical in understanding and talking about secondary-age youth. It dominates as a way to authoritatively understand and explain youths' experiences and behavior. As an example, a recent episode of the popular *Dr. Drew Show* featured a prominent psychologist

who explained a host of behavioral concerns tied to the problematic years of adolescence by invoking the now-familiar image of the "teenage brain," especially its prefrontal cortex. These perspectives on youth dominate covers of science-based, popular periodicals as well, like a recent *National Geographic* cover of a brain image titled "The Teenage Brain." Even prominent cartoonists take up the comical implications of these presumed ideas about youth. We can see this in the caption to a *New Yorker* cartoon that shows parents grounding their teenage son by saying to him, "go to your room until your cerebral cortex matures."

According to professionals relying on this scientific knowledge, the "teenage brain" concept is often responsible for youth being viewed in diminished ways, explaining their flaws and lack of development in relation to adults. In fact, rarely does thinking about youth and their "teenage brains" yield positive images of young people. Thinking of youth from the perspective of their brains—or similarly as "full of raging hormones"—emerges from biological and psychological domains of reasoning. From these perspectives, we can see that the main source for one dominant way of thinking about youth is fixed within the body: Teens are the way they are because of a biological reality. Though many of these ways of thinking about youth mention that society and culture influence the experience of adolescence, biological and psychological understandings typically supersede these others in popular and even academic and educational discourses.

The three of us are not in a position to refute brain-imaging data, nor are we interested in doing so. Rather, we repeat this common knowledge to point out its pervasiveness: Who refutes science tied to the teenage brain, especially in popular culture? And yet, even scientists studying teenage brains are not always unified in their own conclusions on the research. In the Allen article cited above, for example, the author admits that one of the leading researchers in the area acknowledges that differences between teen and adult brains may, in fact, be more the result of life experiences than age. The article explains:

> Paus [professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Toronto] has examined thousands of images of the teen and adult brains in his work, which is focused on alterations in the coating of brain cells. He sees differences between the two age groups, but he cautions they are subtle. So subtle, he says, that it can be difficult to say whether it is age or experience that causes the changes.

Other scientists even go so far as to say that the results of this research are either inconclusive or actually counter to the story of difference between teenage and adult brains. (For an interesting and quick read on this topic, you might refer to the *Huffington Post* article "The Teenage Brain: Debunking the 5 Biggest Myths" [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-moshman/adolescents-and-their-tee_b_858360.html]). Yet, given the authority that has been granted to medical

science in the last 150 years, such knowledge about youth appears to be certain and irrefutable. And so, most of us accept these ideas about youth as axiomatic.

We argue that scientific understandings of adolescence function as only *one* of *many* potential ways of "knowing" youth and their experiences. Drawing from the popular 2009 TED Talk by author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of the Single Story," we are suggesting that scientific understandings of youth that emerge from brain-mapping technologies have become the "single story" of adolescence, so much so as to render invisible other, equally useful and valuable ways of making sense of the experiences of youth. In her talk, Adichie argues that any single story "creates stereotypes, and that the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." One important goal of this book, then, is to offer more comprehensive understandings of youth so as to engender more expansive and equitable English language arts teaching practices.

Even as professionals who are not experts in biology or psychology, we identify enormous problems that stem from the single story of youth being a medicalized entity. There is a long history in the United States and beyond of scientific professionals connecting specific behaviors—and limitations—to particular groups based on knowledge located in the body: *all* women, or *all* black people, or *all* LGBTQ individuals are to be seen in particular, problematic ways, only to have that "scientific" knowledge later refuted as sexist, or racist, or homophobic. Already, even in the brief references we have shared in this opening, we see sufficient uncertainty even among scientists working with "hard data" to doubt all or some of the foundation on which certain knowledge tied to adolescence continues to be maintained. Yet, with regard to adolescence, the negative meanings mapped onto young people's bodies have not been refuted in mainstream discourses; in fact, they are relied upon as a rationale for the need for youths' surveillance, for adults' much-needed protection of all youth *from themselves* and their proclivities, and for managing what youth see and read in and beyond school.

The impact of social factors like class, race, events like war and trauma, geography (e.g., rural, urban, suburban), religion, family practices, and a host of other sociocultural factors are often denied relevance when it comes to young people. If some young people break from these stereotyped expectations of adolescence, these inconsistencies do not affect ideas about the entire social category; rather, these particular youth—like many of us as youth perhaps?—are considered exceptions to the rule. As one scholar affirms, "unlike other 'cultures,' adolescence is denied diversity. A homogeneity appears to drive the discourse surrounding adolescence" (Finders, 1999, p. 255).

So what are some of the dominant ways of thinking about youth that stem from biology and developmental psychology? For years, the three of us have asked

current and future teachers in our classes and in schools, as well as friends, family, and other people we encounter who ask about our work, the following question: *When you hear the word* adolescence, *what comes to mind?* Though there are of course variations, and though the following list is not exhaustive, repeatedly we have heard the following responses:

- Reckless
- Impulsive
- Moody
- Rebellious
- Insecure
- Narcissistic
- In transition or still developing
- Hormonal
- Risk-taking
- Concerned about fairness
- Idealistic
- Peer-focused
- Irresponsible
- Unmotivated

What do you notice when you review this list?

We notice that though some positive traits appear (e.g., idealistic, concerned about fairness), the majority of the traits ascribed to youth are negative (e.g., insecure, narcissistic), indicate a need for adult oversight (e.g., risk-taking), or portray young people to be passively at the mercy of their bodies (e.g., wholly responsive to "hormones"). When we invite preservice and inservice teachers in our classes to develop these lists, one point we make is this: How many of these traits also describe adults that you know, perhaps even yourself? In other words, the circumstances of our lives often motivate the experiences of many of these traits. So, for example, taking on a new job might make us feel insecure too, even as adults.

We discuss these ideas much more in the chapters ahead, and point out the ways they show up in popular media, common analyses of youth in literature, and in diverse sociocultural settings. For now, though, we want to demonstrate how they also appear in writing focused on English teaching. Because of the prevalence of these problematic ways of thinking about adolescence, perhaps it should not be surprising that ideas about adolescence are sometimes woven into rationales for or explanations of key practices or ideas in our own field of English language arts teaching. It did surprise us, however, and perhaps it might surprise you too, to see

where such ideas can be found and for what purposes. We detail a few of those examples below.

Links between Dominant Views of Youth and Teaching English Language Arts

In their book, *Building Literacy through Classroom Discussion*, literacy scholars Adler and Rougle (2005) explain how their decision to emphasize classroom discussion is grounded in their understandings of the needs and capacities of their students as being at a particular stage of life: middle school. They write:

> Middle school students *need* dialogue. They need to be able to talk about their learning with other students and with their teacher. This book is based on *this truth*. We'll even go so far as to say that dialogic forms of instruction are *ideally suited to this age group*. Why? Because these students are *now capable of independent thinking*; because they *are impassioned*—they have strong opinions about their social, intellectual, and political worlds; because they *pay keen attention to what their peers do and say*. They are *finding* their voices on many levels, and classroom dialogue provides a forum for them to do so. (p. 1, emphasis added)

Rather than arguing for or against the validity of the statements these scholars are making about middle school students, we wish to illuminate that their reasoning for a particular instructional approach (i.e., discussion) is grounded in ideas and assumptions about middle school students and their needs. One way to analyze such generalizing comments about a group might be to ask: Who *doesn't* need dialogue or enjoy hearing what others say? At which level of teaching *aren't* students "impassioned"? Don't we see these needs in younger students also? Adult learners? Are these traits really distinct to middle school students?

Similar arguments are seen among adolescent literacy scholars who promote the value of young adult literature. Again, we are not interested in arguing for or against the particular ideas of adolescence these scholars are pointing toward. For us, what is important is how and why they link particular ideas of youth with recommendations for curriculum and instruction. For example, in the opening of their book on young adult literature, Herz and Gallo (2005) write the following:

> YAL's value lies in its ability to connect students to the story immediately, because it deals with real problems and issues that are central to their lives. It helps teenagers in their search for understanding the complex world of today. The questions Who am I? and Where do I fit in? plague most adolescents during most of their formative years. (p. xvi)

Similar to Adler and Rougle, Herz and Gallo link particular ideas of youth (e.g., they are "plagued" by questions of identity) with specific curriculum for English

language arts (e.g., YAL). In our own teaching, we like to ask college students questions we also ask ourselves: "Aren't you also asking questions of who you are and what the complex world is about? Isn't your own identity still shifting?" Labeling such common dynamics as "plaguing" when it comes to young people—and not to others experiencing similar identity shifts—only builds on and contributes to the problematic language enveloping and defining youth.

In one more example of many others we could share, we see how Smith and Wilhelm (2010) rely on familiar tropes of adolescence to guide teachers to improve their instruction of literary elements. In their book *Fresh Takes on Teaching Literary Elements*, one chapter focuses on conveying the importance of genre. The authors cite Northrop Frye's four basic narrative patterns of romance, tragedy, satire/irony, and comedy to do so. To discuss romance, the authors offer characteristics such as magic, love, uplifting, and positive themes. To move to the second pattern of tragedy, here is how they explain the genre:

> The second pattern is tragedy. Tragedies tell of challenge and failure and profound disappointment. *It is the pattern of adolescence, of disappointment, of misguided and failed quests. This pattern can be seen as a reaching toward maturity, of the struggle and failure that is necessary to growth.* Seasonally, it is autumnal. The themes of tragedies focus on the loss of innocence or of life, and on *the inevitability of decline*. (p. 161, emphasis added)

They close their discussion of genre by saying, "When we understand the genre of a text, then we will know what kind of conversational turn is being taken on the issues, and we will know what kinds of themes can be expressed" (p. 161). Though we agree with Smith and Wilhelm about the significance of using a text's genre to anticipate and analyze its reliance on or breaks from familiar themes and tropes, we want to draw attention to *how* they make this point. In addition to what these authors suggest "we will know" through their discussion of genre is an entire century's worth of built up ideas about adolescence as tragedy, as disappointment, as "misguided and failed quests," and as being associated with "the inevitability of decline."

As these examples show, understandings of adolescence are not scientifically or socioculturally neutral; neither are the understandings built into our field of teaching English language arts about adolescence and the texts youth are working to interpret and author themselves.

Though the above three examples reflect stereotyped views of youth as common knowledge woven into rationales to promote specific approaches to teaching English, in recent years, scholars in English education have engaged in research to map the effects of such ideas of youth in the real world of teaching. In our own research, for instance, we have shown how ideas of adolescence powerfully shape pre- and inservice English language arts teachers' conceptions of secondary

students, possibilities for curriculum and instruction, and even figurations of their own identities as secondary English teachers. In two studies, Mark and Rob (Lewis & Petrone, 2010; Petrone & Lewis, 2012) reveal how a group of preservice teachers relied on many of the dominant ideas of adolescence in their thinking of their future students and in doing so, developed curriculum as a way to intervene. For example, many of these teachers viewed adolescence as a "time of identity formation" and a "dangerous terrain" (Lewis & Petrone, 2010, pp. 401–2); therefore, they built literature curricula that focused on helping their students connect to adolescent characters so that they could learn lessons about making "good" choices for personal growth.

By relying on these staid tropes of youth, these preservice teachers limited their range of possibilities for curricular and instructional approaches and thus reified both diminished views of youth and paternalistic and quasi-therapeutic conceptions of the school subject English. Michelle Falter (2016) built on this research to attempt to have her preservice teachers explore alternative viewpoints about youth and adolescence in order for them to more critically examine the images and representations of young people in popular culture (e.g., the comic strip *Zits*, teen magazines) and in young adult literature. She reports being mostly successful, yet some of her preservice teachers remained hesitant to rethink many of the dominant views we discussed previously.

In Sophia's research (Sarigianides, 2012), she shows how easily one preservice teacher drew from circulating ideas of adolescence as a period of "serious emotional and social hardships" to justify selecting *The Catcher in the Rye* for her unit: She believed that youth in the class who are also experiencing a scripted "middle adolescence" would identify with Holden's suffering. In another study (Sarigianides, 2014), Sophia examined how experienced inservice teachers raised concerns about potentially having their middle and high school students read Block's (1989) novella, *Weetzie Bat*, about youth who are sexual and who desire to parent and who do so successfully. Teachers expected the youth portrayed in "risk-taking" behaviors like sex and early parenting to be depicted in moralistic terms, as necessarily suffering as a result of these behaviors. Because the characters instead portrayed happiness, teachers worried that their own students would see the book as an endorsement and encouragement of behavior that likely dooms youths' real futures from any "promise of happiness."

In addition to this research, several other scholars in English education have demonstrated a range of links between conceptions of adolescence and English language arts curriculum and pedagogy. For instance, in an early study that has been influential for the three of us, Margaret Finders (1999) explains how ideas of adolescents as being "full of raging hormones" both prompted a group of preservice English language arts teachers to prioritize classroom management strategies above

instructional approaches and made it difficult for them to see their secondary-age students as capable and able literacy learners. From this, Finders explains how dominant ideas of adolescence operate as "filters" whereby future English language arts teachers see certain things and disregard others.

Finally, English education scholars are also beginning to track the ways the publishing industry promotes and recirculates distinct, problematic views of youth in texts aimed specifically for a young adult audience. For example, Amanda Thein, Mark Sulzer, and Renita Schmidt (2013) analyzed two versions of Wes Moore's memoir, *The Other Wes Moore*, one marketed for adults and another revised for the young adult market. They found that there were significant differences in the narrative structure and content between the two versions. For example, the adult version asks readers to think about how complex societal and institutional forces influence people's lives, while the young adult version omits such questions in favor of cautioning the reader on how poor individual choices result in negative consequences. It became clear that the revisions made to the young adult version relied on assumptions about young people as being especially susceptible to poor decision making that might effect negative "adult" consequences. (For more on related research, see the annotated bibliography at the close of this book.)

Both for our students and for our own understandings of the ideas we may unwittingly be promoting through our teaching of English language arts, it makes great sense—and has enormous repercussions—for us to revise our thinking about adolescence and the youth subjected to its norms and expectations. In the next section, we share ideas gleaned from scholars who have helped us rethink ideas about youth, particularly the work of one scholar, Nancy Lesko, who has studied adolescence as a historical social category.

Reconsidering Dominant Ideas of Youth: Adolescence as a Sociocultural Construct

Adolescence was not always thought about the way we think of it today. The ideas that ground this book build on scholarship that shows how our dominant views of adolescence rely on ideas about youth constructed at a specific historical moment—the 1890s–1920s—in response to national worries and hopes about the enormous social changes taking place at the time, especially in the United States (Lesko, 2012). In fact, prior to this time that led to enormous shifts in thinking about adolescence, youth occupied positions of greater social responsibility, maintaining apprenticeships, even instructing other youth in classrooms.

Yet, as education scholar Lesko details, in response to massive social changes—changes like large influxes of immigrants, the invention of tremendous technological advances (e.g., the safety bicycle, the airplane), shifts from rural to urban

settings, more women in the work force and the creation of organizations like the NAACP—social leaders developed great fears and worries. Their fears centered around shifts to the status quo that might jeopardize the standing of white, middle-class men and national and international prominence for the United States. These fears also led to changes that profoundly affected what was believed about and thought possible and best for youth.

In fact, according to Lesko, youth became the receptacles of hope *and* worry meant to address a national and social future of tremendous change and uncertainty. As a result, a range of experts that included G. Stanley Hall (1904), the "father" of adolescence, began recommending optimal activities and developmental timelines for actions that would best lead youth to an adulthood that would move the country and those particular youth "forward." It is important to note, though, that Hall and others had very particular ideas of which youth or which conceptions of youth were deemed as ideal—namely white, heteronormative, middle- to upper class youth. Some of the changes tied to ideas about adolescence that took place at the time—like child labor laws and a juvenile justice system that differentiated youths from adults—arguably improved youths' lived experiences. Yet, in many ways, the new thinking that emerged at the time—and that continues in our minds today—put changes in motion that debilitated and continues to demean youth from how they were once thought about, with particular negative consequences for youth not aligned with white, middle-class, heteronormative values and social positions.

Of course, experts' responses to problems always reflect the thinking that prevails at the time. And scholars like Nancy Lesko have shown that many of our existing beliefs about adolescence are built upon a foundation of racist, sexist, and classed beliefs from the turn of the prior century that have since been disproven. Yet, the ideas about adolescence that emerged from this problematic foundation remain largely static and inform ways that families, schools, medical professionals, and institutions still function today. In other words, while many of the racist, sexist, and classist ideologies that shaped original conceptions of adolescence have receded, the idea of adolescence as a naturalized stage of life they gave birth to has prevailed—and now exists as normative, as commonsensical.

Though we cannot do justice to the complex sociocultural history detailed in her book, *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, we want to share some of the ideas gleaned from Lesko (2012) that lay the groundwork for ideas that we pick up in the chapters ahead. To start, the foundational concept of the entire book is that adolescence is a sociocultural construct (like gender or race, for example) and not an inevitable, predictable function of biology. However, as many scholars explain, constructs become so cemented as beliefs or certainties that they appear natural. So, Lesko's efforts—like those of many other scholars—involve

making visible the history that led to these beliefs to help us question and challenge problematic expectations about youth in the present.

Understanding adolescence as a sociocultural construct means seeing adolescence as a historically situated category—a set of beliefs that has a specific historical provenance—more than a natural category whose expectations can be fully predicted and accounted for by the body's mechanisms. If, for example, you understand femininity as a cultural construct—that expectations handed down for centuries about what women are *supposed to* do and be like has more to do with a patriarchal history in control of describing others, especially women—then thinking of adolescence as a construct works similarly. Without knowing that adolescence has a long history of having been shaped in particular ways, by specific thinkers (e.g., G. Stanley Hall) and other powerful actors who put in motion scores of policies (e.g., strict age-based schooling), at particular times (e.g., from the 1890s through the 1920s), the ideas that we have come to expect and believe about youth appear as "truth." Scholars like Lesko help us to trace a specific history to this social category, indicating the problematic assumptions built into changes expected of youth, and especially showing us the even more problematic implications for young people that continue today as a result.

To get more specific, Lesko, in her analysis of adolescence as something that is historically situated, discusses a set of "confident characterizations" that many hold to be true about young people. These are not all the beliefs that "stick" to adolescents, but they indicate four key beliefs that recur in our minds when many of us think about this social category. Adolescents

1. can be understood by knowing their exact age;
2. focus nearly exclusively on their peers;
3. are governed by their hormones;
4. experience a slow, leisurely coming of age into adulthood (pp. 2–3).

Though we refer to these "confident characterizations" explicitly and implicitly throughout this book, we delve more deeply into them in Chapter 4 when we discuss new approaches to reading and analyzing young adult literature.

You might notice that these four beliefs characterize many of the negative traits we discussed previously, those traits generated by people when we have asked them to share what they think they know about adolescence. Importantly, such beliefs ignore differences among youth tied to race, class, culture, current events, gender, sexuality, and religious practices and disallow the kind of agency, dignity, and space for resistance reserved for adults. In addition, such beliefs perennially position youth in opposition to a distinct adulthood while judging them for their differences from the adults who occupy that category by age alone. In other words, adolescents are defined in relation to adults and mocked for their immaturity,

irresponsibility, and lack of (adult) judgment. Yet, if youth take on behaviors reserved for adults and adulthood—like job-related responsibilities at the cost of formal schooling, or sexual experiences—they are judged as moving too quickly out of an expected "slow, leisurely transition" to adulthood.

In short, adolescents have a narrow tightrope of social expectations to negotiate, expectations that automatically exclude nonwhite, poor, nonheteronormative youth who cannot fit within these strict guidelines and norms. For example, while a "slow, leisurely transition to adulthood" is expected of adolescence, poor, working class youth expected to contribute to the family finances in order to have food and shelter are refused the ideals connected to this seemingly "natural" expectation. Similarly, youth who are "parentified"—that is, they are responsible for the well-being of their parents or younger siblings due to any one of myriad reasons (e.g., parents working multiple jobs, alcoholism, illness, absence), are not afforded a "proper" pathway to adulthood. Immigrant youth, too, often defy normative tropes of "coming of age" as they may be expected to function in various "adult" capacities within their home life. This idea is illuminated, too, at the very opening of this chapter when a teacher discusses how many rural youth are treated as adults on the ranch or farm but are ascribed meaning in schools connected to their grade level and age.

If all this sounds new and even a little disconcerting to you, that would make sense. While this and other research about adolescence as a cultural construct has circulated in academia for almost two decades, it has only recently begun to reach into teacher education courses and, even more recently, into middle and secondary English classrooms. For this reason, many of you reading this are likely encountering these ideas for the first time, as we did, deep into our teaching careers.

In the next section, we share some of the sites where this research has begun to touch our field of English language arts teaching in very recent scholarship, and in the ideas that we share in the upcoming chapters of this book. We hope that as readers of this book now, you will become knowledgeable about these ideas, and, if our own experiences in classrooms are any indication, your current and future students will be enormously appreciative of gaining access to this trove of information focused on who they are and are supposed to be.

How Does Reconsidering Adolescence as a Cultural Construct Matter for Teaching English Language Arts?

As demonstrated by NCTE's policy brief on adolescent literacy (reprinted on pp. ix–xix), the field of literacy education has come a long way in recent years. Specifically, scholars and educators have helped to counter many deficit perspectives of adolescent literacy by examining how adolescent literacies are multiple, diverse,

social, and sophisticated. In addition, the field has pushed English teachers to conceptualize and create ways to make links between everyday adolescent literacies and school-based literacy practices (e.g., Alvermann & Hinchman, 2012; Kirkland, 2008; Morrell, 2004). The brief also reminds teachers of the typical reach of the language of "crisis" with regard to adolescent literacy, language that problematically situates youth and their literacy performances in terms of deficits.

Still, the brief's impact could be bolstered significantly by attending to one additional myth or misunderstanding with regard to adolescent literacy: commonsensical ideas tied to "the adolescent" in "adolescent literacy." Though we appreciate the ways that adolescent literacy scholarship has worked to complicate dominant views of adolescence (e.g., Alvermann, 2009), and the ways that many scholars rely on research that presumes youth to be capable literacy consumers and producers (e.g., Morrell, 2005), much more attention must be paid to our assumptions about "the adolescent" in "adolescent literacy" and teachers' "adult" roles in supporting and facilitating literacy practices with youth. In Table 1.1, we engage with some of the language and content of the brief to show some of the questions that we raise in relation to its efforts to address adolescent literacy in complex ways.

Table 1.1. A Review of NCTE's Policy Brief on Adolescent Literacy

Language from the brief	Questions raised by a sociocultural view of adolescence
"It is easy to summon the language of crisis in discussing adolescent literacy" (p. 1).	In what ways does the language of crisis embedded in discussing adolescent literacy reflect staid conceptions of adolescence as a social category?
Review of myths addressed in brief ⇨ Literacy refers only to reading. ⇨ Students learn everything about reading and writing in elementary school. ⇨ Literacy instruction is the responsibility of English teachers alone. ⇨ Academics are all that matter in literacy learning. ⇨ Students who struggle with one literacy will have difficulty with all literacies. ⇨ School writing is essentially an assessment tool that enables students to show what they have learned.	How might the very idea of "the adolescent" be a "myth" to consider within the context of "adolescent literacy"? How might such considerations advance the field of literacy education in novel ways?
"texts are written in social settings and for social purposes" (p. 3)	How might we reexamine the genre of young adult literature—a body of writing that names its readership, "young adults"—as texts "written in social settings and for social purposes"? How might students examine how texts represent adolescents/ce?
"Motivation can determine whether adolescents engage with or disengage from literacy learning" (p. 4).	In what ways might literacy curricula that focuses on critiquing and creating texts for their representations of youth motivate secondary students? How might this help to uniquely position youth as experts, increasing the likelihood of motivation for academic literacy practices?

Elsewhere, in a 2015 themed issue of *English Journal* that the three of us guest edited, literacy teachers and researchers focus on the ways rethinking adolescence can affect a rethinking of teaching the English language arts. For example, Alyssa Niccolini explores how banned and challenged books can provide a unique glimpse into how teachers' unease with certain topics can illuminate their own and their students' views of "healthy" adolescent development. In another article, Amanda Thein and Mark Sulzer demonstrate how analyzing the narrator, narratee, and implied reader in first-person narratives, which tend to dominate young adult literature, can reveal several assumptions about youth and adolescence present in the overall genre. In another, Tiffany DeJaynes and Christopher Curmi provide a counter-narrative to views of youth as disengaged and disaffected through a series of classroom moments that reveal their students as both "cosmopolitan intellectuals" and invested community members. Similarly, William Kist, Kristen Srsen, and Beatriz Fontanive Bishop share the story of students who initiated the use of Twitter as a tool to stop cyberbullying in their high school.

Aligned with the work of the educators discussed in the above journal issue, our book similarly aims to push the field to be thinking and putting into practice a range of ways to revise English language arts teaching through reimagining adolescence. One way we do so is by looking at two different classrooms in diverse contexts across two states, to offer textured views of what it might look like to engage in literacy practices grounded in a sociocultural view of adolescence to reenvision literacy instruction and learning. In looking across these classrooms—as well as an in-depth look at young adult literature and nontraditional assessments as a way to facilitate social justice through activism—this book offers future and current English teachers myriad ways to think both incrementally and holistically about how a sociocultural view of adolescence can reshape what they teach, how they teach, and why they teach English language arts.

More specifically, in Chapter 2, Sophia explains how one teacher asked her students to analyze *The Catcher in the Rye* through a Youth Lens (see Petrone, Sarigianides, & Lewis, 2014) grounded in a sociocultural view of youth and adolescence. In Chapter 3, Rob explains how a teacher developed a media literacy unit to help her students critically analyze representations of teenagers in a wide range of media texts and to create their own media texts to either critique dominant depictions of youth in the media or to offer revised renderings of youth in the media. In Chapter 4, all three of us talk about the ways young adult literature teaches its readers about youth, both problematically and productively. In the final chapter of the book, we present new ways to consider assessment by suggesting projects that engage students in advocacy or civic engagement and position them as knowledgeable advocates encouraging other youth and adults to reconsider views of adolescence. Finally, our annotated bibliography aims to guide you toward a range

of resources to deepen your conceptual understanding of adolescence as well as to imagine new teaching practices for mobilizing such ideas for the classroom.

At the heart of *Rethinking the "Adolescent" in Adolescent Literacy* is a call to English language arts teachers to interrogate the very assumptions of adolescence that they may be operating from to reimagine new possibilities for engaging students with the English language arts curriculum. We wonder what might happen if more literacy teachers took up the idea of adolescence as a construct. We wonder what might happen if their students did as well. We believe that the focus of our book will tap into some of the growing momentum around ideas of adolescence already circulating in the field of literacy education to invigorate literacy teachers' motivation to revise and rethink their curricula with fresh ideas about adolescence and adolescent literacy.

Understanding Adolescent Literacy: A Summary

(adapted from *Adolescent Literacy: An NCTE Policy Research Brief*)

Adolescent literacy is a complex issue for all of us: for *adolescents* immersed in new worlds of reading, writing, and new media; for *teachers* trying to help students continue to develop their literacy; and for *others* (e.g., *parents*, *employers*, *legislators*) trying to make sense of the multiple definitions and mandates that are associated with the phrase. When we look at the research, though, we realize there is a lot we *do* know about adolescents and their literacy.

We know:

- **Adolescents face shifting demands on their literacy:** The elementary school emphasis on the basic processes of reading and writing suddenly shifts in secondary school to more content-area learning, often dependent on the specialized literacies of various academic disciplines.
- **Adolescents are immersed in multiple, social literacies:** Adolescents negotiate in amazing ways the multiple discourses of the social groups in which they participate, such as those of popular culture, various ethnic groups, and online communities.
- **Motivation is extremely important for adolescents:** Motivation can determine whether adolescents engage with or disengage from literacy learning. If they are not engaged, even those students with strong literacy skills may choose not to read or write or participate in school-based literacy activities.
- **Multicultural perspectives can make a big difference for adolescents:** Students who don't find representations of their own cultures in the texts they read or whose home languages are devalued in school too often lose interest in school-based literacies.

At the heart of *Rethinking the "Adolescent" in Adolescent Literacy* is a call to English language arts teachers to examine the very assumptions of adolescence they may be operating from in order to reimagine new possibilities for engaging students with the English curriculum. Relying on a sociocultural view of adolescence established by scholars in critical youth studies, the book focuses on classrooms from diverse contexts to explain adolescence as a construct and how this perspective of youth can encourage educators to reenvision literacy instruction and learning.

Working from and looking beyond *Adolescent Literacy: An NCTE Policy Research Brief,* the authors explore the "myth" of adolescence and the possibility of a curriculum that positions youth as experts and knowledgeable advocates fully engaged in their own learning.

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National Council of Teachers of English
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ISBN 978-0-8141-4113-7
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