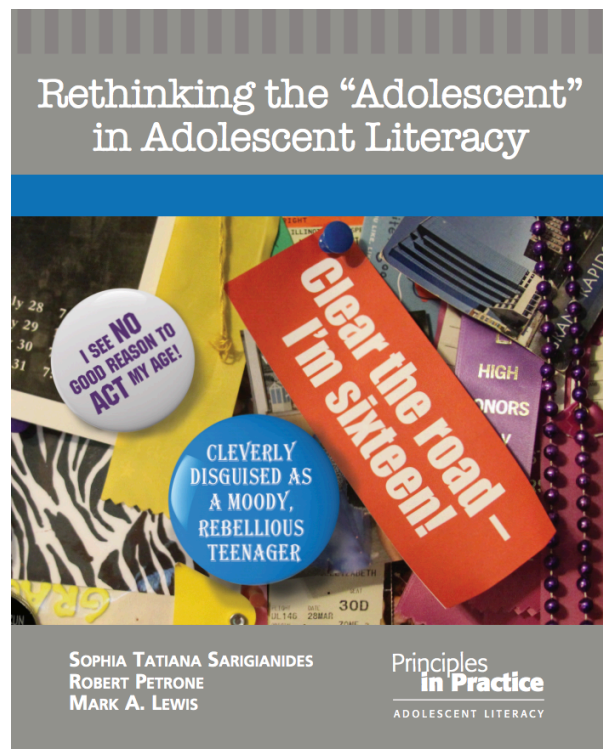


# JOLLE@UGA<sup>®</sup>

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

## Review of *Rethinking the “Adolescent” in Adolescent Literacy* By Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, Robert Petrone, & Mark A. Lewis

Reviewer: Dominique S. McDaniel  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC



Sarigianides, S. T., Petrone, R., & Lewis, M. A. (2017). *Rethinking the “adolescent” in adolescent literacy*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

ISBN: 978-0814141137

## Brief Summary and Overview

In *Rethinking the “Adolescent” in Adolescent Literacy*, Sarigianides, Petrone, and Lewis have written a text that persuades pre-service and in-service teachers to reconsider their conceptions of youth. The authors challenge readers to expand notions of what it means to be an adolescent past the traditional concept. The authors uncover the dominant way of thinking that exists between adults and youth alike. As a result of this particular stance, adolescence is traditionally defined by age-based, universal, and predictable categories to a social approach. The authors encourage teachers and teacher educators to reexamine assumptions about adolescence as a way to inform their teaching and thinking. I recommend this text to both teacher educators and teachers, based on the premise that the book meets both of its central purposes, brings attention to the multiple viewpoints on adolescence, and shows how reconsidering those views and beliefs bring alternative possibilities for teaching middle and high school English language arts.

The front cover portrays an image of the stereotypical characterizations of youth, introducing the dominant language of adolescence the authors are challenging. Over the course of five chapters, the three authors cover a range of topics that relate to rethinking the views on adolescence and its impact on teaching literacy. Chapter 1 explores the underlying myth of the adolescent in adolescent literacy. Here, the authors explain the dominant ways of thinking about youth by explaining how brain science research on the teenage brain is just one way of knowing youth. The authors also explore how negative attributes get attached to adolescence. In addition, the authors explain the link between dominant views of youth and how they affect teaching English language arts,

and how these views can shape in-service and pre-service teachers’ teaching. Furthermore, the book relies on Nancy’s Lesko’s (2012) framework of adolescence as a sociocultural construct as the groundwork for this type of rethinking.

Chapter 2 provides English language arts teachers an example of the way one high school English teacher applied a youth lens (Lesko, 2012) to canonic texts; that is, literature that is frequently taught in middle and high school classes. These texts typically feature adolescent characters or general concepts of adolescence. A youth lens frames adolescence as a construct, instead of categorizing it as a stage of natural development (Lesko, 2012). This construct is often applied to literary text to analyze how adolescents are portrayed within them. A youth lens answers the question: How does this text represent young people? This chapter highlights the curriculum and the ways teachers scaffold learning and provides formative and summative assessments used to evaluate student understanding. Chapter 3 shows how another high school English teacher taught a media literacy unit that afforded students the opportunities to critique and create representations of youth in the media. This teacher used this unit to lead students through an intense process where they engaged in examining and critiquing how youth were depicted in media texts. They subsequently created their own media texts, challenging themselves to portray a more comprehensive representation of youth. Chapter 4 explores the teaching of Young Adult Literature (YAL) by using a youth lens to analyze how adolescents were depicted in YAL. Chapter 5 describes implications for instructional assessment by featuring project ideas which place adolescents in a position as knowledgeable sources.

### **Book's Pertinence to Audiences**

The book is geared toward both teachers of middle and secondary high school English language arts, as well as teacher educators in literacy. Pre-service and in-service teachers can use many of the instructional and assessment resources provided by the authors. Teacher educators will find these particularly useful to empower their students and become more reflective practitioners themselves. Other potential uses for professors include the ability to become more well versed in rethinking adolescents, using a youth lens, and offering non-dominant implications for guiding teachers on how to teach literacy to adolescents.

### **Critical Evaluation of Strengths and Weaknesses**

*Rethinking the "Adolescent" in Adolescent Literacy* successfully combines theory with practical, instructional activities that teachers can use in their classrooms. Often times, teachers' response to theory is, "this sounds good, but how can I apply it in my classroom?" The authors of this book have answers to this frequently asked question. They not only introduce readers to a wide range of instructional activities, but they also each share their individual experiences of considering a sociocultural view of adolescence and how it changed their teaching and their teacher educator stances. Sarigianides, Petrone, and Lewis include an annotated bibliography at the end of the book that summarizes each highlighted article, allowing teachers to quickly and efficiently find a resource based on their individualized area of interest.

The three authors, all former middle and/or high school teachers of English language arts, offer insights into how a sociocultural

perspective can be applied to views of adolescence. They realize that not all of their examples of instructional activities are perfect. This transparency of limitations allows the authors to offer other ideas that require minimal resources and time that can be used in place of their initial suggestions. Teachers will appreciate the authenticity and relatability of these authors.

In Chapter 1, the authors: (1) show the dominant ways in which a lot of people in the U.S. think about adolescence, (2) point out the problem with viewing youth in this manner, (3) share research that has influenced their own rethinking of youth, and (4) provide ways that teachers and teacher educators can practice a revised view of adolescence to create new ways of teaching English language arts. In my opinion, this is the book's primary contribution to the field of adolescent literacy: it is a call to instructional action through the purposeful rethinking of how teachers see the individuals they are teaching. This chapter is enhanced by Table 1.1, (NCTE, 2007, p. 27) which reviews the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (2007) policy brief on adolescent literacy. The authors successfully raise questions with a sociocultural view of adolescence in response to the language from the brief by the NCTE. These questions serve as a model for the type of thinking the authors are encouraging.

At the end of Chapter 2, Sarigianides provides suggestions and prompts for pre-service and in-service teachers to start considering how they might implement these strategies in their own classroom. This chapter serves as a valuable component of the book as it is rooted in real-world connection to application.

In Chapter 3, Petrone has students engage in activities that may be seen as controversial to

schools and parents alike. Some teachers may even be uncomfortable with some of the instructional activities offered. For example, students in one teacher's class were given a homework assignment to find examples of teenagers being depicted in the media. In class, categories were constructed which portrayed themes through images. These broad categories were: "sexual," "party-goers," "immature," "social," and "self-absorbed/self-image." Depending on the school and community environment and culture, this type of activity could receive criticism. However, I argue that Petrone's inclusion of this controversial activity serves as a strength in the book. This chapter is further useful because the author provides an account of a teacher making content relevant and using material of high interest, therefore engaging students. As students begin to understand the idea of adolescence as a construct, they become more well-versed producers and consumers of media.

In addition, teachers would appreciate the inclusion of Common Core English Language Arts (ELA) standards linked to instructional activities in Chapter 3. This link to teacher application supports teacher educators and teacher researchers with creating student buy-in. It also helps in-service teachers link youth lens instruction to standards.

In Chapter 4, the authors discussed teaching novels and providing ways for students to analyze text through a youth lens. This chapter influenced my own classroom practices by initiating a reevaluation of my teaching. As a current middle school language arts teacher, I have used the young adult novel, *The Outsiders* (1967) by S. E. Hinton, without much thought to adopting a youth lens. *The Outsiders* depicts the story of two teenage rival socioeconomic groups that exploring friendships and experiencing

hardships. With a recently adopted youth lens and reframed thoughts on adolescence, I will teach this text with a different lens. I plan to encourage my own seventh-grade students to identify stereotypical representations of youth, analyze how the text represents adolescence, and become critical in their thinking.

Sarigianides, Petrone, and Lewis suggest ways for readers to rethink assessment based on their rethinking of adolescence. These authentic assessment possibilities, detailed in Chapter 5, foster the idea that positioning youth as contributors and producers, rather than as passive learners with only the ability to recall, builds youth advocacy. The proposed assessments consist of interview/research projects, creative writing projects, visual and media projects, and public speaking projects. I would argue that the authors met their intended goal, as all of the assessments position youth as experts or knowledgeable sources.

Though these assessments are problem-based and engaging in nature, there will be inconsistencies across schools and districts with regard to how they will be received by administration, instructional coaches, and teachers in this era of accountability. In some schools, anything but teaching to the test and a common assessment would not suffice as appropriate. There is a lack of attention placed on the effects rethinking has on teachers' mindset. I would consider this a shortcoming of the book. I also argue that some of these suggestions are more applicable than others in the "real world" of classroom and school culture. For example, due to limited resources, administrative support, and technology within some schools, public speaking and visual media projects could be difficult for teachers and students to implement. To address this challenge, the authors provide a robust list that

would suffice for multiple teaching environments.

There are times where the authors are sometimes vague and implicit, rather than explicit in a few of their stances. For example, I was hoping the authors would explore the idea of critical English education in more depth. They make a claim that a critical English education involving social justice goals gives students the skills needed to think deeply about how they are represented in text and how to speak back through their own writing. However, they overlook the purpose and implication of this type of engagement. In addition to critical English education, I found that the critical media literacy theory was also glossed over. Readers may appreciate a richer discussion on how this framework provides classroom implication.

In addition, the authors spent very little time connecting their sociocultural framework to the idea of adolescence as a cultural construct. If I had not been familiar with Lesko's (2012) *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, I would not have had a complete understanding of the framework.

The authors discuss the theory of the youth lens in Chapter 2. Here, Sarigianides (2017) explores the idea of seeing adolescence as a cultural construct and applying it to literature that represents young people. She enhances the discussion of a youth lens by providing a central question to guide teacher's and student's thinking: How do texts represent adolescence? However, I argue that this question isn't enough. In Chapter 4, it would have been beneficial to incorporate more elements of teaching *students* how to be prepared to analyze texts with a youth lens. I would appreciate the inclusion of multiple ways to scaffold this type

of teaching through modeling and direct instruction. Although the authors do include a teacher account of analyzing text with a youth lens, this section could have been strengthened by providing more strategies for helping youth develop this type of critical thinking. Again, if it weren't for my prior knowledge of the framework of a youth lens, then I may have required more information about this theory. Nonetheless, this lack of information does not take away from the overall effectiveness of the book.

The book is written clearly, has an informal, relaxed tone, and is easy to understand. Another value of this book is that it does not have to be read in a sequential manner. Chapters can be read independently of each other whether you are in a teacher or teacher educator role. In addition, literacy professors in teacher education have the option of choosing what chapters to include in a way they best see fit. I argue Chapters 2-4 would serve best as reads for potential teachers. The merits of the book successfully outweigh the minor shortcomings. In summary, I would describe *Rethinking the "Adolescent" in Adolescent Literacy* as a useful resource for teachers and teacher educators alike. The book is relevant, insightful, and helpful in offering ways in which teachers may rethink literacy education.

## References

Hinton, S. E. (1967). *The Outsiders*. New York, NY: Viking Press.

Lesko, N. (2012). *Act your age!: A cultural construction of adolescence*. New York, NY: Routledge.

National Council of Teachers of English. (2007). *Adolescent literacy: A policy research brief*. Urbana, IL: Author.