Think teen or tween and what words come to mind? Hormonal, moody, impulsive, narcissistic, idealistic, and rebellious, perhaps?

When English educators Robert Petrone, Sophia Sarigianides, and Mark Lewis talk to veteran and preservice teachers, they ask them to describe adolescents. Often, they hear words that portray teens in a mostly negative light, including certain common stereotypes.

Teachers aren’t the only ones to hold such views. The attitudes are pervasive—and arguably even worse—throughout pop culture and among the general public, notes Lewis, associate professor of literacy education at Loyola University in Maryland.

He first noticed this when, as a middle school teacher, he would mention his occupation. People would be aghast, suggesting that his students were “some sort of creatures we couldn’t work with” and that his workdays must be “horrible,” says Lewis. Yet he found his students to be a joy—thoughtful, introspective, caring, and empathetic.

Petrone, associate professor of English education at the University of Missouri, has encountered similar attitudes about high schoolers, again in contradiction with his experiences. Or he’s been warned that if he has a child, “it’s like, ‘Oh my God, wait until he’s a teenager’ . . . We would never talk about a whole group of other people that way, with such ease,” he says.

Petrone, Lewis, and Sarigianides, associate professor of English education at Westfield State University in Massachusetts, have studied how adolescents are perceived, and how this mostly negative construct of adolescence affects the teaching of English language arts.

The trio’s book, *Rethinking the “Adolescent” in Adolescent Literacy* (NCTE, 2017), explores how teachers can use this awareness to improve teaching to teens.

When these stereotypes are made visible, they say, teens and teachers benefit in several ways. Teens may realize they are OK after all, while teachers may find that their students are capable of more than they expected.

“The way English teachers think about the students in front of them matters greatly,” says Sarigianides.

When teachers are willing to discuss adolescence as a relatively recent, historically constructed category, “it opens up fresh ways for youth to see themselves, to function in our classes, to function in the world.”

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