

“On a Day like This” How a Youth Epistemological Approach Can Help Shape English Education

We first discussed the possibility of this themed issue in April 2018 at the *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* editorial board meeting, during the American Educational Research Association annual meeting in New York City [1]. We each came to the conversation having carried out research and written about (re)envisioning pedagogical possibilities for teaching English that draw upon expansive and empowering conceptions of youth and youth literacies, including the “already present” (Hess *et al.*, 2019; Marciano and Watson, 2020) and the “youth lens” (Petroni *et al.*, 2015; Sarginiadies *et al.*, 2017). As we continued to meet and write together, we collectively wondered how reconceptualizing understandings of youth and youth literacies could help advance the teaching of English to be more affirming and purposive of and in the lives of youth.

The historic March for Our Lives demonstration in Washington D.C., just three weeks before our coming together, was a seeming third participant in our discussions. We watched on CNN, like so many on that fourth Saturday in March, and the images of the event lingered: teenagers, one after another, took their place in front of the microphone at the center of the elevated stage to share their words, poems and songs to commemorate the loss of 14 students and three staff members to gun violence on the Stoneman Douglas High School campus in Parkland, FL. Against the backdrop of the US Capital, and before a crowd estimated at more than 200,000, youth largely led the gathering that sparked more than 380 solidarity marches in the USA, more than 100 globally and spurred posts and replies across 3.3 million Tweets (Baram, 2018; CBS News, 2018).

Over the next few weeks, as we continued to discuss ideas for this themed issue, we returned again and again to the March for Our Lives event and to so many instances of youth across the globe leading contemporary movements for racial justice, climate and environmental justice, gender equality, LGBTQ rights, gun control, economic change and lowering the voting age, including, for example, the *Global March Against Child Labor* in India, the *Wedding Busters Movement* in Bangladesh where thousands of young women are fighting for “child-marriage-free zones” and the global *Climate Change Strike*. In looking across and learning with instances of youth-led activism – big and small – we reflected on how young people are not only creating and engaging myriad linguistic and literacy practices to chart, envisage and enact change but, in doing so, they are educating and *teaching*, particularly educating and teaching adults.

We noted, too, from our experiences as teachers, in and with schools, and through our research and work with youth, that while youth are increasingly at the leading edge of linguistic, literate and sociocultural shifts, their schooling experiences at a time of increased curricular standardization and the delimiting of intersectional identities often constrain rather than build with and expand youths’ language and literacy practices. In many respects, the demands of schooling and the opportunities for anti-racist language and literacy pedagogies that build with youth’s lived experiences beyond school are too often moving down divergent paths.

As we bear witness to this division, we wondered if the school subject English, as it is currently understood, is a relic of the past. We wondered with the possibilities of youth and asked: Is the school subject English being left behind *by youth*? From this set of wonderings, and the broader cultural context whereby many youth needed to “circumvent limits on



learning” (Mahiri,2000/2001) imposed by schooling, we drafted the call for manuscripts and began the journey of curating this special-themed issue.

Now, just over two years later, as we come to this editorial to provide some shape to the issue as a whole, we reflect on how the world is (and is not) a much different place. The global COVID-19 pandemic, rendering visible racial, health, socioeconomic and educational disparities and the continued dehumanizing of black lives – including in the week that we were drafting this editorial, the killing of George Floyd while in police custody – has propelled us into a time and space of simultaneous familiars and unprecedented unknowns. And so, as this themed issue initially emerged in and from the milieu of the Spring of 2018, it also heavily traces and is traced by the Spring of 2020 – a time of unpredictability, unsettled loss, intense social unrest and protest.

In further situating, this themed issue *on a day like this*, we turn to Donald Glover, the rapper known as Childish Gambino, and particularly his song, *Feels like Summer*. Glover first released the song as part of a two-song EP in 2018; during the time we initially conceptualized this themed issue. He then re-released “Feels like Summer” on an album that he named for the day of its debut, 3.15.20 (Glover and Goransson, 2018). The 2020 rerelease arrived in a moment of confusion and sudden uncertainty. For instance, the Wednesday before, one of the universities where we teach ordered that we move classes online. By that Friday, a state governor had ordered all k-12 schools closed for three weeks, and later for the year. In eight days, the governor would issue and then extend a stay-at-home order limiting travel and gatherings.

Like so many during this time, we texted, called and zoomed with family, friends, students and colleagues, nearby and in places where we had long lived and worked – New York City, Montana, Philly and Detroit. On stay-at-home orders, we read authors’ manuscripts and worked with them on revisions, and we came to situate our interacting and learning with the lived experiences and literacy practices of youth highlighted in the articles in this special issue as in conversation with and not separate from this extraordinary time. This set of circumstances demanded an urgency and presence to the work and compelled us to rethink and remake commonplace notions of classrooms, teachers or teaching, learning and the *relational* in the school subject English.

Glover, in the video accompanying *Feels like Summer*, draws attention to how we may listen to and with youth and communities *on a day like this*. The animated video unfolds like a story that resembles the song’s name: Glover walks down the middle of a neighborhood street with the unhurried stroll of a summer weekday, the round twilight sun turning the sky tangerine behind him. The neighbors on the block are black and Latinx rappers, singers or celebrities affiliated with hip-hop music and culture, a gesture to the summertime photography of Art Kane, who in 1958, on a Tuesday in August, photographed 57 jazz musicians and youth gathered in front of a brownstone in Harlem.

The block in *Feels like Summer* appears full with activity but is uncrowded and not rushed. The neighbors toss a basketball on a driveway court toward a backboard and rim so well used its missing the net; they barbecue; wash a car; ride bikes; together, they braid hair on a porch; dance; and skateboard down a street with few cars (Morgan Britton, 2018). When we listen to the song, or watch the video, through the lens of schooling, we are prompted to consider in these interactions what it may mean to rethink what may be understood as teaching and learning; how youth and communities may be positioned as teachers; and possibilities in asserting such *relational*, youth-led perspectives as civic contributions in and with communities that youth name as urgent to them (Mirra and Garcia, 2020; Watson and Beymer, 2019).

Noteworthy in *Feels like Summer* is how Glover simultaneously positions each of us as contributory participants in this broader, communal work, underscoring the urgency of a global moment that spurred the song's re-release. Glover sings: "Seven billion souls that move around the sun/Rolling faster, faster, not a chance to slow down." In considering the first portion of the lyric through our specific context of the school subject English, we point to this rendering of the communal as a pointedly different approach than narrowed notions that privilege meritocratic, individual success over communal, elder and youth epistemologies. Within and across the articles in this themed issue urging forward considerations of youth epistemologies, the authors ask how we may consider differently our *relational* roles as teachers, literacy researchers and teacher educators who are always also learners. Glover implores us to listen closely – in our work with youth and youth's communities with whom we teach and learn – and in this reconsidering, perhaps particularly so as we write in this moment of a global pandemic, to "slow down." In closing *Feels like Summer*, Glover returns a second time to the song's refrain: "You can feel it in the streets/On a day like this." We glimpse in Glover's words the urgency of English teaching, teacher education and research that builds broadly with and from a youth epistemology.

The authors in the articles across this special issue, *Youth Studies and Youth Epistemologies in English Teaching and Teacher Education*, thus ask questions of what may it mean to intentionally reflect on and (re)conceptualize teaching, teacher education and research approaches and the school subject English as purposefully learning with the vibrant and already-present literacies of youth "on a day like this." Specifically, the authors in this issue extend the accounts of youth engagement and activism that we recalled at the outset of this editorial to reveal how youth epistemologies build with and upon multiple and fluid language and literacy practices that youth name as urgent and important – beyond decontextualized, print-centric, monolingual, canon-based artifacts of literacy in school.

At its core, a youth epistemology questions and critiques power dynamics, particularly in relation to notions of adulthood as normative, and conversely, youth as non-normative, and the adultism and adult-centrism that permeates most social structures, particularly schools. Moreover, a youth epistemology engages the interplay of youth's already present knowledge and varied identities, to assert youth as critical participants and inquirers in their schools and communities. In these ways, this special issue is a call for increased attention to inequitable power dynamics and their effects related to youth; and the authors in this issue thus urgently consider the interplay of youth epistemologies and intersectional lenses.

Given how a youth framework interrogates power relations related to who determines and authorizes what counts as English, such work compels a recasting of not just the school subject English but also ourselves as literacy educators and scholars. In this way, this special-themed issue invites us to consider the interplay of humility with the implications of a youth epistemology for English education. As Freire (1985) reminds us, "humility accepts the need we have to learn and relearn again and again" (p. 15). The stancetaking of humility underscores our reframing of youth as outpacing adult-centered practices and artifacts in what is commonly constructed as English classroom teaching and learning as the way it ought to be. In this way, as Nicole Mirra and the Debate Liberation League (DLL) ask, in a youth coauthored article in this issue: What may it mean for the school subject English to "catch up to youth expertise"?

In the article, "Without borders: Youth debaters reimagining the nature and purpose of public dialogue," Mirra and the DLL examine how middle school students draw upon their intersectional identities to critique normative structures of the New York City debate league privileging whiteness – demonstrating how youth epistemologies help

“destabilize the boundaries of a normative literacy activity.” Specifically, Mirra and the DLL explore how youth brought their familial and home languages and stories to humanize and recalibrate the terms of debate. Moreover, Mirra and the DLL illuminate how literacy activities are always ideological and afford opportunities for political activism. Of particular note is the collaborative authorship between Mirra and youth authors comprising the DLL, underscoring and extending the intergenerational research approach. In this way, the article aptly embodies the spirit of a youth epistemologies approach to English education.

Lauren Leigh Kelly, in her article, “Listening differently: Youth self-actualization through critical hip hop literacies,” examines how centering youth identities and epistemologies can extend robust opportunities for youth critical literacy development and assist educator communities in building with youth in co-constructing more responsive curricula within schools. By situating an English curriculum in a semester-long case study within youth experiences with hip hop, and by highlighting intersections of place, race and gender, Kelley demonstrates how across varied social and educational backgrounds, attending to youth epistemologies can function “as a means by which young people come to know themselves”.

Tiffany DeJaynes, Tabatha Cortes and Israt Hoque, in their article, “Participatory action research in schools: Unpacking the lived inequities of high stakes testing,” offer a consideration of how youth epistemologies might exist within the structures of schooling, namely, through a youth participatory action research project as part of a required course. Specifically, the authorial team illustrates how adults and youth might build alliances within school to work toward justice. The authors also demonstrate how privileging youth epistemologies supports “deep participation” (Tuck and Yang, 2014) and “networks and pathways” for youth engagement in school and, furthermore, in the world. Finally, similar to Mirra and the DLL, DeJaynes, Cortes and Hoque offer an inter-generational research team that puts into action the work of a youth epistemological framework.

Keisha Green, Daniel Morales, Chrystal George Mwangi and Genia Bettencourt, in their article, “Responding to youth epistemologies to create a third space: A reclamation of learning in an English Language Arts classroom,” draw upon third space theory to wonder how centering experiences and perspectives of youth of color within the context of an 11th grade English class facilitates a set of caring relationships between students and teachers. In this way, Green, Morales, George Mwangi and Bettencourt showcase how centering youth epistemologies reimagines the English classroom toward possibilities for engaging critical pedagogical stances and education research in collaboration with students. Moreover, the authors robustly construct a notion of an English classroom that prioritizes the positioning of education as a social justice stance-taking.

In a teacher narrative, Ryan Murfield, in “‘It’s not like this here’: Teaching a youth lens in South Korea,” shares lessons learned throughout his first attempt at teaching a Youth Lens (Petrone *et al.*, 2015). As a white American teaching in an international school in South Korea, Murfield discusses how attempts at critiquing notions of youth must take cultural context into consideration. Furthermore, by framing this piece through a series of “surprises” that he experienced, Murfield offers a meditation on underlying tensions and power dynamics in, as he says, “walking the walk” of a youth-focused curriculum. Murfield demonstrates how we might go about listening to and learning with youth – and the power in doing so.

Jason J. Griffith and Jocelyn Amevuvor, in their article “Variations on the death of a grandparent: An analysis of youth memoir,” challenge the normative – and adult-centric – parameters related to who gets to write and put into the world the genre of “memoir.”

Through an analysis of memoirs written by teenagers published in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards' Best Teen Writing series, Griffith and Amevuvor examine how youth demonstrate linguistic and literate dexterity necessary to craft compelling narratives reflective of their lives. In this way, the authors push back against developmentalist notions of youth steeped in deficit, to promote a broader view of youth as cosmopolitan and introspective. Moreover, Griffith and Amevuvor open up possibilities for how youth epistemologies render emerging discursive and textual representations of youth. A youth epistemological approach can furthermore be generative in facilitating more comprehensive perspectives of youth across cultural artifacts, texts and policies and in asserting youth memoir as important in curricula alongside adult-authored YA literature.

Abigail Rombalski, in her article, "Connected literacies of anti-racist youth organizers," shares about Sincere, a young biracial woman, who is involved in myriad literacies related to her social activism, particularly regarding racism both in and outside of schools. By sharing about how Sincere engages multiple literacies to promote anti-racism, Rombalski demonstrates how youth epistemologies are central to youth experiences in and outside of school regardless of whether or not they are explicitly addressed in their English classes. In these ways, this article builds upon recent research on "fugitive literacies" to underscore roles of youth organizing and youth activist literacies as extending possibilities toward organizing, critical teaching, affirming youth knowledge and rejecting white supremacist notions of independent learning in the context of English classrooms.

In "Oh boy, I ain't playin' no games!": Making sense with youth in the aural imaginary," Emery Petchauer examines how attending to sound and the aural imaginary engages complex notions of talk and interaction across learning contexts. Drawing from teaching and learning with middle school youth and community artists writing songs, rap lyrics and making instrumental beats, Petchauer asks us to consider what we may "gain by tuning in" to youth. Specifically, this article traces how youth engage sound as a vibrant aural resource. In this way, Petchauer asks how educators may envision English education as "already taking place" across a youth-informed aural imaginary, asserting how youth epistemologies are "alive and in motion".

Reading across these articles, we hope to stimulate questions such as the following: How are we – as educators, teacher educators, researchers and adults – learning with and from youth across multiple contexts of teaching and learning? How and what are youth teaching us – about ourselves, about youth, about practices, methodological approaches and possibilities of theorizing language and literacy education? What might it mean to think of "English" in the context of youth epistemologies, youth literacies, cultures and activism? How might and how do youth get a say in what counts when it comes to the school subject English? What might the school subject English provide youth to support the work they are *already* doing in the world? What might it mean to center youth epistemologies in the context of English language arts? How do we, as Nicole Mirra and the Debate Liberation League suggest, "make a traditional academic literacy activity more responsive to youth epistemologies"?

We conclude this editorial by expressing gratitude and acknowledgements. First, we thank the editors of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, Amanda Godley and Amanda Thein, for seeing the potential in our vision for this special-themed issue and for mentoring us through this process. Working on this issue has given us a new appreciation for the "behind the curtains" work that journal editors do – from initially soliciting manuscripts, to finding great reviewers, to working with authors to revise their manuscripts, to managing the logistical issues related to final production of the journal. We express a genuine

gratitude for how Amanda Godley and Amanda Thein have helped us with this process and also for the work they have done and continue to do for the field more broadly by editing *ETPC*. Related, we are indebted to the many scholars in the field who served as reviewers for this issue. We are grateful for the care, time and attention reviewers gave to the manuscripts. We appreciate your coediting with us in those important ways. We note, too, the work of several early-career scholars represented in this themed issue, and we are grateful to and for all of the authors whose work is published herein. Finally, we thank the many young people whose literacy lives are rendered visible throughout the pages of this special-themed issue. We hope this work illuminates possibilities for English teaching, teacher education and research that build with and extend vibrant and emerging critical youth epistemologies *on a day like this*.

Vaughn W.M. Watson

Teacher Education, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA, and

Robert Petrone

University of Missouri Columbia, Columbia, Missouri, USA

Note

1. This line comes from a Donald Glover song, “Feels Like Summer” (Glover and Goransson, 2018).

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Guest editorial