

**BRING IT TO LIFE:  
YOUTH PERFORMING SOCIO-POLITICALLY  
IN A NORTHERN URBAN ENVIRONMENT**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study seeks to problematize approaches to civic education in British Columbia schools by reframing the pedagogical paradigm from civic knowledge to sociocultural practices and activity. The study examines the ways in which socio-political agency is developed and enacted in three different sites, highlighting their differing approaches to civic subject-formation. Social action theatre, digital technologies and service learning provide contexts for considering differences across these sites in terms of the discourses, practices and cultural tools (Wertsch, 1998) at work and in play in young peoples' representations and expressions of socio-political agency. A post structuralist paradigm informs the theoretical and methodological approach taken, focusing on divergent and potentially competing views and understandings of youth subjects.

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to the remarkable youth who agreed to participate in this research journey with me—their passion for making a difference in this world inspired the work of this dissertation. In particular, the youth at Street Spirits theatre welcomed me into their lives: with their encouragement I learned how to “change the world, one performance at a time”.

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# CHAPTER 1: PROLOGUE, A TEXT IN TWO PARTS

## 1.1 Introduction

A preface usually serves to introduce a reader to the text they are about to read and summarizes the central ideas of the author so that the reader will know if s/he is interested in continuing to read the text that lies before them. A preface is a good thing for a reader to spend time on: it is a useful tool in deciding if the text is worthy of more detailed consideration. While the title might attract, the preface can keep a reader engaged: A well-written preface can signal for the reader if there is (might be) a good match between what the reader seeks to know/explore and the writer wants to tell/convey. Of course, despite the massive effort of the author in its production, it is the reader who decides how the text can and should be interpreted, and through this dialogic engagement with the text, bring it to life. They can also choose to leave the text—an inert product—on the shelf.

So putting together a preface that might be able to attract a reader (you) to read this text (my research story) is probably the most important work I can do in this, the text's first few pages. You will see from the weight of its many pages, I have invested a great deal of time and effort in the writing. I hope this preface will give you a context that will draw you, as it has drawn me, into a discursive space that engages you (us) in new or alternative forms of meaning making.

My research begins from an assumption that the process of written inquiry into one's own stories can provide a critical lens through which analysis and reflexivity can inform and deepen understandings of one's own beliefs, values, and understandings. The postmodern reflexive turn, (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), self study (Feldman, 2002, 2003) narrative inquiry, (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000) or autoethnographic approaches (Bloom, 1998; Ellis, 1999) to research have all emphasized how an examination of the researcher and researched contexts provide an essential dimension to understanding the socially recursive process of meaning making and the complexity of the research process.

The craft of "story telling" in life and in the qualitative research process rely on rich and descriptive texts, ones that engage the listener/reader. The descriptive qualities of narrated texts can create an intimate and emotive depiction of selected life experiences, designed to produce a shared space for the "intimate textual intertwining of writer and reader... The use of memoir, the personal, the remembered and the imagined may infuse everyday educational research with a certain colour and quality of meaning that are not, and indeed often cannot, be expressed solely through technical-rational approaches to research" (Pryer, 2004, p. 4). Memoir is used both as a research methodology and as a hermeneutic strategy: the process of remembering invites a dialectic engagement between past and present subject positions, contributing to self-understanding. At the same time, its material form also creates a discursive space in which readers can question or engage in shared and divergent narratives of pedagogy and teacher identity. In this way the research text can be characterized as generative, allowing for "fresh ways of seeing the

world, and this in turn, leads to new areas of mediation and exploration” (Pryer, 2004, p. 5). Readers then become “active co-creators of meaning” (p. 6). In this preface I seek to create such a bond with readers, by sharing some of my own life stories to situate my work and create a discursive space that might allow for generative knowledge creation.

Another characteristic of the postmodern reflexive turn is its focus on rhetorical and literary methods of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). This approach has re-configured writing as a method of inquiry, blurring the processes of research data collection, fieldwork, narration, and reflection. In blurring the boundaries between research, rhetoric and story telling, this preface seeks to engage the reader in exploring the ways in which our storied selves are reflective of the multiple and contradictory identities we construct and evoke in naming ourselves: in this case, my own narrative of social and political change agent.

It is also considered important for the qualitative researcher to acknowledge her/his beliefs, values, subject positions, and biases in the construction of her/his work so that the reader may situate the research work within traditions or paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lather, 1992) that contextualize how the research data is being considered, interpreted, represented and reported. Our frameworks of analysis, construction of data and its representation are always mediated and subjective and research findings “no more than the peculiar reality of each observer” (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 39).

Additionally, the crisis of representation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; 2000) has illustrated the impossibility of realist texts and how such practices essentially perpetuate the hegemony and power in empirical methods of investigation. Ethnographic practices

have become problematized as partial tales of the field (Van Maanen, 1988) and social science writing as fictional rather than factual tales (Banks & Banks, 1998). In an effort to produce a text that blurs the boundaries between the researcher/researched and illustrate the political and social implications of writing/reporting research, I have also inserted questions at various points in narrative in order to be “explicitly transgressive, perverse, and political” (Britzman, 1995, p. 157) and to work at ways of writing that may help explicate how some narratives reinforce forms of entitlements to knowledge and a means of unlearning master narratives. To more easily identify these disruptions I have altered the text to a different font and bracketed them, suspending, at least temporarily, compliance with the American Psychological Association (APA) rules of academic writing. These textual disruptions serve as points where I might avoid the self-redemptive narrative of a confessional discourse that seeks to relieve “my discomfort...through transcendent clarity” and instead signal a “reflexivity of discomfort” (Willow, 2003, p. 188-189).

### **1.1.1 Performing politically and political performances**

Denzin (2003) suggests that autoethnography is performative and political: “there is no distance between the performance and the politics that the performance enacts. The two are intertwined, each nourishing the other, opposite sides of the same coin, one and the same thing” (p. 258). I am particularly fond of this quote, because I believe that all actions and discourses are politically constitutive within the context of daily life. There can be no false binary between the personal and the political, as each informs and constitutes the other. All actions then, have political implications, and also share the



possibility for social transformation. These beliefs inform my research and political subject positions and are represented in this text.

### **1.1.2 Beginning the tale/s**

I have spent the majority of my adult life as a teacher: for the greater part of twenty years I have worked with children and adolescents in a number of school districts (Victoria, Sooke, Kamloops), although predominantly these have been in five different schools in Kamloops, BC. I have always believed in the values of a public education system [*Whose values? How do these values privilege particular educational outcomes for some rather than all students?*] including its social and intellectual goals: defending the “public goods” of public education became my passion over the years of my social and political activism. A lifelong New Democrat, I embraced a political discourse of creating a more just and equitable society through democratic action. I also spent considerable time as a union activist, working for the rights of teachers, first in a non-union and then unionized setting. Eventually this range of experiences convinced me that I should put my name forward to serve as an elected representative for my community: I represented the constituency of Kamloops in the provincial legislature for five years.

For an intense period of five years I was consumed with practices of partisan political life and decision-making. Probably like most politicians, I didn't spend a great deal of time reflecting on ideological or social purposes, but put my efforts into achieving policy or legislative change that matched my (and my political party's) commitments to creating a more just and equitable society. Particularly in the last days before our electoral defeat, our caucus worked single mindedly to bring into effect laws, policies and regulations that would realize the goals of our party. It was not until I returned to

graduate school at Simon Fraser University that I began to more systematically question what my goals and purposes had been, how policy processes had been a less than perfect tool in transforming or bringing about lasting social change, and the extent to which my own values and beliefs had centrally effected the definition of the policy problem itself, how the policy response was structured, what it was meant to achieve and its implementation. My political status had afforded me an authority to wield my ideological, epistemological, and ontological beliefs, regardless of their effect on others: It served to privilege a particular form of democratic power and agency.

Such reflexivity, while offering a place to situate my growing critical consciousness and understandings of how power had been “in play” in my own social and political experiences, didn’t necessarily open a space for more broadly framed change—in particular, how such reflections might inform socially transformative political practices in schools. This dissertation represents my attempt at bringing this self-reflexive understanding to my inquiry into how schools can produce socially active and just change agents. [*What assumptions are implicit in these expressions of social justice and agency/action? Should this be the work of schools? Or do the normative expectations of schooling make this work impossible?*] What policies and practices might be useful to consider if schools are to become places for developing critically conscious adolescents who will become critically conscious adults? [*In identifying the need for becoming critically conscious, do I construct a binary that positions youth as deficit? As developmentally inferior?* ] How can I “trouble” existing beliefs, understandings and practices of schooling for citizenship so as to conceptualize a different [*in what way?*] kind of democracy in action?

I construct my history of activism in the stories of my life: I was an adolescent in the 60's, participating in protests, rallies, sit down strikes and other community or nationally based campaigns. Engagement in electoral politics seemed a natural extension to me: I participated in my first provincial election campaign as a high school student after hearing a then young social worker (Dave Barrett, future Premier of British Columbia) in a Victoria coffee shop passionately debating the rights of the poor. I was excited about the possibility for change and felt welcomed into the culture of political activism despite my age and gender. This would be just the first of many campaigns I would be a part of throughout my adult life. It was a commitment born of passion in achieving equity and justice for those who were oppressed, treated unjustly, or discriminated against. [*Yet couldn't this story just be one of self-congratulation? If you can trace your desire to be an emancipatory or liberating force in changing the world back to these early life events, how does this assist you in your own political and social goals for success—a self-congratulatory means of recognizing your own desire for political recognition? That would make you no better than the Machiavellian political figure that opportunistically deploys the moral rhetoric that you love to condemn. Or perhaps it is really just another form of “women's work”, putting others (this time the public male political persona) as the one who should be served, not unlike the other care roles that women have been socialized to accept in private life: again a victim of patriarchy... The stories of a liberating moral self mask my self-indulgent political opportunistic and/or victimized subject positions*]. Yet as an adult political figure in the 1990's, when I looked around at the participants in political activity at the local and provincial level, what I began to notice was that fewer young people seemed to be a part of formally organized political parties, such as the party I belonged to. While I had been motivated by a commitment to justice and equity [*perhaps not*] that had drawn me to political activism, I wondered why there did

not seem to be as many youth choosing similar routes [*does this statement help sediment a discourse of a deficit based binary, the “is-ought” question that frames inactivism against the normative practices of engaging in electoral politics?*] to bringing about social change. What I wondered about was how young people in contemporary society actually became committed to what I considered a progressive, “socially just” agenda for change, one that required a commitment to formal structures of political activism as a precursor to bringing about that change. [*This stance acts to privilege strategic rather than tactical actions, and fails to consider how change might evolve through micro spheres of sociopolitical engagement and practices, including the subaltern (Gramsci, 1971) or a politics of affinity (Harraway, 1991).*] What I heard repeatedly was that young people were uninterested in politics and were increasingly apathetic: this was one of the more common media topics around election times in Canada; concerns for the small numbers of young people who actually engaged in political activity, became political party members, and voted was reported frequently<sup>1</sup>. [*In what ways does this call for engagement echo Habermas’s (1989) notion of a consuming culture replacing the debating culture*]

My re-entry into graduate school at Simon Fraser University after electoral defeat offered a chance for reflection and an opportunity to bring together my own personal passion for justice and social justice education in schools. What I was most interested in was how to replicate the desire for justice and equity and its commensurate desire for political change and to look for ways in which educators might activate in today’s youth a similar passion or desire to call for, or initiate social change. [*In other words, I want the*

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Paul Martin, as candidate for leader of the Liberal Party of Canada throughout the 2003 leadership race frequently cited the “democratic deficit” as a concern to Canadians, particularly young Canadians. According to a study commissioned by Elections Canada, only 22 per cent of 18 to 20-year-olds and 24 per cent of 21 to 24-year-olds voted in the 2000 general election. (Source: [http://www.umanitoba.ca/manitoban/20031203/nf\\_01.html](http://www.umanitoba.ca/manitoban/20031203/nf_01.html). December 2003 *Manitoban* newsletter).

*youth I study to become like me, to care in the same ways I do, to replicate my goals, my desires, my hopes: I will liberate them to become me. This ensures a replication of my ways of thinking about agency and engagement: yet is it my conception that should matter? Whose social goods count? ]*

I'm still struggling to articulate why this felt like such important work: I think it comes centrally from a belief in the 'power of the many to overcome the oppression of the few'. Who would continue the battle against the status quo, the privileging of social and political capital among the elite of society if those of us who lived together in a community [*How does this belief naturalize particular conceptions of democracy and the public sphere?*] weren't willing to stand up and fight for what was deserved? There is social value and importance in the struggle; and progressive social change won't happen without struggle and democratic participation in the public realm. [*Is this a utopian community united through the metanarrative of progress and hope? Of universally shared values?* ] So even if I could no longer hold onto the electoral position that enabled the practice of power, I could, I hoped, enjoin others (particularly young people) to recognize the importance of their involvement in political processes, so they could effect the change that I no longer had the power to effect. [*Why do I want the work to continue through others efforts and not my own? If I actually did political work that made a difference, why wouldn't I want to carry on with this kind of public political work? As Britzman (1995) would say, what "stories of origin, arguments of causality or explanations of conditions... engage the limit of thought—where thought stops, what it cannot bear to know, what it must shut out to think as it does" (p. 156) What has become the part of this story that I cannot bear to know? Is it that there really is no way that structured political lives really make a difference? That success is an illusion? Maybe this is why I*

*have to escape from the field of action and into the field of telling others-- I'm afraid, and I can't do it anymore].*

This desire took several forms: during my Masters Degree studies, I focused on the role of the teacher in exploring the issues of justice with adolescents. I completed in depth interviews with three teachers who described themselves as “social justice educators”. In exploring their stories I noticed that each had extensive personal experiences with some form of injustice that they brought into their work with youth. It seemed as if their political engagement was driven by personal conditions from their past: that is, their own experiences with injustice or oppression. Each believed that they, through their personal practices, stories and experiences offered a means of connecting young people with the values of justice (McGregor, 2002). [*In privileging the view of teacher as emancipatory change agent do I reify conceptions of autonomous agency?*]

Continuing into doctoral studies, my interests from this initial work took a turn towards examining teaching practices in critical literacy (Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1997; Quigley, 1996), dialogue and deliberation (Elster, 1998; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Stokes, 1998) as pedagogical means of creating socially just future citizens.

However, immersion in critical, feminist and post modern theory, as well as conceptions of difference, subjugation, power, and social constructivism began to transform my thinking: the greater my efforts in reflexive thought and the more deeply engrossed I became in contemporary studies of education, the more I realized my own assumptions about political activity, agency, justice and equity, the nature of power within democratic societies and the centrality of the teacher as change agent were epistemological perspectives that essentially legitimized the status quo. For example,

while I had prided myself on giving voice to aboriginal “others” in a social studies class, I continued to access a discourse that reified the Canadian immigrant success story and did little to dismantle naturalized narratives of colonization and progress; as a Cabinet Minister recommending and endorsing treaty policies as progressive means of resolving land claim conflict, such practices instead served to naturalize common English property laws in land ownership rather than recognizing different but legitimate cultural forms of land ownership and management.

Perhaps hardest of all has been the effort to see my own limitations as a scholar/writer ensconced in a genre of epistemological certainty through research and experience: it has been extremely difficult for me to move from seeking certainties and truths as a means of achieving significant or lasting change -- “Now I know! And so shall you!” – to be more tentative about possible outcomes, to inclusively and democratically consider multiple worldviews, and to acknowledge that the transformative intellectual (Freire, 1970) must instead collaboratively construct with and among others the possibilities for potential or incremental change.

It feels a lot like the struggle I had as a beginning teacher: putting theory into practice required many false starts, difficult periods where errors and missteps were more common than successes, before progress towards best practice was achieved. Yet it was true that the practice eventually informed the theory: a recursive, reflective exercise in knowledge construction and transformational thinking.

This analogy helps to illustrate my struggle to select and use particular methodological tools in the design and construction of this research study. As my short autobiographical statements above have illustrated, my heart and spirit has been drawn to

the critical perspective: here the work of many scholars in education (Apple, 1995; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1991; Giroux & McLaren, 1994; McLaren, 1989/1994) [*who fail to conceptualize how an emphasis on rationalistic discourse serves to reify androcentric, white male histories of justice and freedom, providing voice to some, silencing others*] passionately advocate for transformational practices in education in order to achieve just outcomes for the marginalized and alienated youth of today's schools and communities.

My pragmatic stance as an advocate for children also draws me to this perspective: I have worked in schools for nearly two decades, and have persistently believed that schooling has the power of transformation [*does this stance come from my own experiences in self-transformation through educational means? Do I privilege the school environment in a way that should be problematized?*], particularly because of the commitment of critically transforming teachers [*how does this conception of teaching afford power to some and not to others? Who is the oppressor? What disciplinary technologies are in of play?*]. Instead, my goal is to work in Ellsworth's (1992) tradition recognize that "my moving about between the positions of privileged speaking subject and Inappropriate/d Other cannot be predicted, prescribed or understood beforehand by any theoretical framework or methodological practice. It is... a practice grounded in the unknowable [and] is profoundly contextual (historical) and interdependent (social)" (p. 115). It requires a move from a pedagogy and practice centered in hope and desire (Ayers, 2004; Edelsky, 1999; Freire, 1970) to one that relies on tentativeness and the possibilities or potentials within socially and culturally grounded performance and practice.

It seems fitting then, to struggle with this tension between methodological orientations as I write this dissertation. The poststructuralist paradigm (Denzin &



Lincoln, 2000; Lather, 1991; Peters & Burbules, 2004; Saukko, 2003) acknowledges the value of recursive and reflexive processes and considers the competing/multiple subjectivities as a part of the interplay between researcher, participants, the research process and the social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which all are situated. We cannot, as was once assumed within the positivist paradigm, through objective scientific investigation, set aside the beliefs, values and positions we hold as researchers and “bracket” or omit how this effect our work (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lather, 1991). So as this research text unfolds, it is my intention to structure the discussion of my research process and theoretical explorations with the context of the newly emerging post structural scholar, finding, if I can, *a/n* [*always already*] place between and among paradigmatic boundaries.

## **CHAPTER 2: CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF CITIZENSHIP AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION**

“Citizenship is always a reciprocal and, therefore, a social idea. It can never be purely a set of rights that free the individual from obligations to others...Citizenship is a powerful idea. It recognizes the dignity of the individual but at the same time reaffirms the social context in which the individual acts...Agency and social practices are mutually dependent. Through exercising rights and obligations, individuals reproduce the necessary conditions for citizenship. Citizenship is a dynamic identity” (Faulks, 2000, p. 5-6).

“One of the essential functions of the school is to contribute to the formation of citizens who believe and live their freedom, equally and in solidarity... A democratic society depends upon the informed and active engagement of all of its members. [To so engage]... the individual must acquire the necessary competencies to play his/her role effectively as a citizen in a society characterized by global and local interdependencies and challenges” (Hebert, 2002, p. 25).

“Citizenship, as a concept, allows us access to the contested terrain of democracy and the very nature of democratic schooling. It also allows us to analyze, from a feminist perspective, critical educational policies as well as the discursive frameworks used by national and international governmental agencies... As Donald rightly argued, citizenship has no substantial identity until it is located within a set of social and symbolic social relations. The radical potential of the concept is, therefore, as important as its discriminatory political history” (Arnot & Dillabough, 2000, p. 16).

“In this society, citizenship is an archaic term. It is not part of the language of everyday life. Its value for understanding this life is not evident either. Of course, political scientists and educators write about citizenship and citizenship education. Does citizenship have meaning outside of such an expert culture? Or, is citizenship a linguistic residue of the modern era that has passed?” (Wexler, 1990, p. 164).

### **2.1 Introduction**

These opening quotes illustrate a contemporary contestation among scholars about what it means to be a citizen and for schools to educate for citizenship. The conceptions and meanings of citizenship, its social, political, economic and cultural

context have become increasingly complex and disputed matters of inquiry (Arnot & Dillabough, 2000; Bottery, 2003; Gordon, Holland & Labelma, 2000; Hebert, 2000; Isin & Wood, 1999). Once conceived of as a collectively shared membership within a nation state built upon common understandings, beliefs and desires for cohesive future (Faulks, 2000) understandings about citizenship are in transformation (Hebert & Wilkinson, 2000, p. 3). Choules (2006) documented three predominant trends among citizenship scholars: first, was a focus on investigating what it meant to be a member of a community with shared values; the second, predominantly concerned with what it meant to be a member of a political community, and the third, what it meant to be a member of a social welfare state, the latter a more frequent concern of recent scholarship (p. 280). Indeed, a focus on social rights that flow from the welfare state has become the primary form of concern among democratic and citizenship scholars (Torres, 1998). In the North American democratic context, conceptions of democratic or inclusive forms of citizen participation and rights to social and political recognition have become central debates among philosophers such as Taylor (1994) and political theorists such as Kymlicka (1995).

There have been of course, considerable challenges to the term citizenship because of its exclusionary history. Feminist and post structural scholarship in particular challenge the legitimacy of a category such as citizenship, contesting its androcentric roots and exclusionary history. For example, Pateman's (1988) deconstruction of the phallogentrism implicit within the social contract in liberal democracies served to illustrate the subordination of women within the nation state and how the reification of public and private spheres limited women's political agency. Other scholars argue similarly, including Torres (1998) who traces the history of exclusion to the Western

ideal of a homogenous citizenry, one that essentially excluded all but white, heterosexual males. He argued that while democracy is conceived of as the great equalizer, such practices have failed: instead, democratic systems have created "dispensable citizens whose marginality is constructed through the process of representation of mass media coupled with their political isolation and fragmentation" (p. 130).

These discussions of social citizenship also inform the discussions of citizenship education and the role school's can or should play in the preparation of students as future citizens. Educational scholars such as Hebert (2000), Osborne (1996), Sears (1994; 1996) and Sears and Perry (2000), have sought to transform the ways in which citizenship education is conceived of and practiced in schools, largely in an effort to more accurately reflect and represent the multicultural complexity of contemporary society, the commensurate challenges to democratic living, and the need for engaged and active citizens to serve as social change agents.

Yet critical and post modern scholars such as Arnot and Dillabough (2000) posit that discursive practices, social and cultural reproduction, contemporary gender relations, and major social institutions (particularly schools) serve to "divide and differentiate pupils and shape their citizenship identities and those of others" (p. 5). Cultural scholars such as Battiste and Segmaganis (2002) also examine contemporary beliefs and understandings about citizenship and citizenship education by unpacking its colonial discourses and subjugating force among aboriginal peoples in Canada. A third example of critique flows from Gordon, Holland and Lahelman (2000), whose study explored how both the formal and informal processes of schooling acted to naturalize the ideal of equality and the discourse of students as non-gendered subjects. These scholars

documented how school practices continued to reinforce dominant social norms, leading to widely differentiated access to practices of citizenship based on gender, social and cultural membership (p. 3-5). Their approach to citizenship education focuses in the main on the experiences of students within official educative discourses and concerns itself with its effects on students' practices of citizenship.

As these three examples illustrate, postmodern scholarship problematizes causal models of producing (or reproducing) "good citizens" through schooling, and in doing so, introduce a layer of complexity to the work of teacher educators in the field of citizenship education. It is against this backdrop of citizenship and citizenship education as essentially contested concepts that this research study is located.

## **2.2 Re-Conceptualizing The Field**

While Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (2002) traced a "veritable explosion" (p. xiv) of scholarship in the field of curriculum research in response to the post modern turn in scholarship, Seixas (2001) lamented the lack of similar advances in the field of social studies education (the curricular home of civic, democratic or citizenship education). In part, he claimed this as a result of blurred disciplinary boundaries, but in his review of the state of the field, he also noted that questions of alternative epistemological perspectives (including an understandings of texts and discourses), subject positionality (race, gender and class) and the linguistic turn, all recent social and cultural perspectives common to other educational fields, have been remarkably absent from the field of social studies research (p. 547-559). In effect, he identified a considerable gap in how the scholarship of social studies research identifies, investigates and characterizes advancements in the field. He concluded by arguing for a

transformed approach to social studies (including citizenship education), one that would focus on the student as subject—one that reads and interprets how many different texts operate to construct youth and their representations of the social world and their implications for understanding the subject-citizen (p. 560).

This research will, I hope, serve as one example of an approach to the field of citizenship education that attempts to address this gap. Drawing upon the reconceptualized field in curricular theorizing (Pinar et al, 2002) this study seeks to explore how citizenship education might be re-conceptualized through a postmodern theoretical lens that considers youth as *socially constituted political agents*. It also considers specific locations—the lived experiences—of youth who are engaged in interpreting and reinterpreting multiple discursive texts which enable and constrain their socio-political performances as social agents. Specifically, it draws upon theories of subjectivity (Davies, 2000), performativity through discursive construction (Bell, 1999; Butler, 1990; 1993; 1995; 1997), sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1980; Wertsch, 1995; 1998) and processes of signification or meaning making (Gee, 1996; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1998/2006, 2001) in describing the experiences of some northern youth as they engage in the processes of “becoming” socio-political agents.

### **2.2.1 Studying the activity and lived experiences of socio-political agents**

In particular, this research study asks the question “How might understanding of political agency among school aged youth be altered or reconsidered if there was a focus on the lived experiences, activities or practices of youth rather than the potential outcomes that citizenship education might/could/should accomplish? And how might consideration of the everyday lives of youth subjects—in classrooms and outside of

them—provide evidence of differing ideas, beliefs, and understandings about what it means to know about or engage in social and political activity in multiply located civic spaces?”

Beginning with an overview of the challenges to citizenship and citizenship identified by a range of postmodern scholars, this research study proposes an alternative theoretical paradigm from which citizenship education might be problematized and potentially re-conceived. In other words, rather than working from a naturalized assumption about the purposes and value of citizenship education, my questions seek to explore how understandings of agency are constituted through discursive means, and then problematizes the conditions and educative outcomes such a position demands. In doing so, it focuses on the perspectives and local practices of selected youth in both school and non-school locations as specific sites of inquiry and asks “what *possibilities* of mobilization are produced on the basis of existing configurations, discourses and power” (Butler, 1995, p. 49, italics added).

This question focuses attention to the social, cultural and political contexts—the tactics, practices, tools and products of action—so that the *activity and enactments* of the socio-political subject are highlighted. In other words, the focus moves to what agents do, how they access particular discursive resources and how these processes have constitutive effects. By invoking the construction of the socio-political subject as a product of signifying practices, agency can be reconceptualized as a performative outcome of sociocultural production. In this way, this study seeks to map out a different terrain for inquiry that may provide a way in which we can redirect our efforts as citizenship educators in supporting and promoting civic agency, investigating “why one,

[cultural tool] as opposed to another, is employed in carrying out a particular form of action” (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 91).

This study’s design was initially focused on the following research question: “In what ways can an inquiry into the beliefs and practices of a group of urban youth in northern British Columbia (BC) assist us in understanding the complexity of developing civic identities in contemporary society? And, how might such an inquiry inform efforts at democratization in schools and communities?” Several specific questions flowed from this general question, and included the following:

1. What discursive resources become differently available to youth as they engage in practices of socio-political performance? How are these discursive resources represented in the utterances and social languages used by these youth?
2. What conceptions of justice and social agency are implicit or explicit in the social practices of these youth?
3. If justice is a sign that is repeatedly accessed as a discursive resource, what modalities do youth use to “fix” particular meanings of justice? What other signs/symbols seem to offer particularly meaningful “affective affordances” among these youth? How are these affordances illustrated in the social languages youth access in different locations?
4. How do concepts of performative utterance (Austin) or gender performativity (Butler) offer a window into understanding how political agency is shaped?
5. What role could school and non-school agencies play in supporting processes for developing a civic identity?



After crafting this research question to investigate, the next step was to identify a range of social locations that might serve as sites where youth were engaged in a range of socio-political activities. Three sites for investigation were chosen: two were within the local school system and included an alternative education high school class and a student leadership class in two different suburbs of a northern urban community. The third site was a community based social action theatre troupe. Each site was selected based on its potential for how observing how youth might practice or engage in different forms of civic agency. At the alternative education site, the teacher, Maggee Starr was a proponent of dialogue and debate as a means of evoking concerns for social justice; in the school leadership class, Jeff Sugar promoted civic service as a means for developing ethical leaders; and at the community site, Andrew Burton the artistic director of Street Spirits Theatre<sup>2</sup> used social action theatre to engage marginalized or at risk youth in community action. Each site also highlighted different social, cultural, and economic contexts despite their relative proximity within a single northern urban community. The processes and rationale for the selection of these sites is described in detail in Chapter Three.

The study was completed over a period of approximately one year, beginning in April 2005 and completing in May, 2006, although given that two of the sites were in public schools, no work was done with these youth participants during the summer months. Work did continue with the youth at the non-school site throughout the research period. In total about forty-six participants, including forty-three youth and three adult teacher/ facilitators were the participants in this study.

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<sup>2</sup> Street Spirits is the actual name of the youth theatre company. It is used as these research participants agreed that the real name of their theatre company should be referenced in this research study. Both Northern High and J. S. High are pseudonyms based on the decisions taken by participants in these other two sites.

## 2.3 The Research Design

In reconceptualizing what it might mean to become a sociopolitical agent in a postmodern world situated in the sociocultural complexity of contemporary life, a culturally informed methodology and research design seemed most fitting to the task. The field of cultural studies highlights the ways in which knowledge and understandings are not objective but always social and culturally situated (Saukko, 2003). Culture is inevitably connected with the ways in which we make meaning in society; primarily sign systems or methods of communication (including processes of interpretation and production) are the means by which this sense making activity takes place (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus, 1997, p. 13). Cultural studies offered a methodological framework that allowed for considering multiple ways of interpreting and representing how particular practices have significance or meaning in specific social and cultural contexts, a frame consistent with a post structural stance.

I also wanted to engage in research practices that would do justice to the lived experiences of the youth in this northern urban community. Given its historical focus on developing research methodologies that explored the sub and resistant cultures of youth (see for example Hebdige's 1979 classic text *Subculture the meaning of style* and McRobbie's 1991 *Feminism and youth culture: From "Jackie" to "Just 17"*), cultural studies methodologies seemed most appropriate.

Within the cultural studies paradigm ethnographic methodology (Brewer, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Reinharz, 1992) allowed a means of documenting how youth enact, re-enact, resist or resignify political discourses and practices. An ethnographic approach allowed for immersion in the field that "enables the fieldworker to directly and

forcibly experience for herself both the ordinary routines and occasions under which people conduct their lives, and the constraints and pressures to which such living is subject” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p. 2). During my ten to twelve months of investigation, I sought to immerse myself as fully as possible into the lives of the youth who agreed to participate with me in this investigation.

## **2.4 Goals Of The Research Study**

This research sought to document how the youth in these three locations communicated, described and enacted their own emerging political understandings and beliefs. My goal was to map some of the discourses and texts available to youth and consider which discourses were in evidence at each site as a means of illustrating their performative and citational potential, that is, the ways in which these discourses became resources for action. Visual texts were also examined, as these enabled and constrained particular social responses and activities. Specific incidents or events were also deconstructed to illustrate their discursive force, including several incidents that seemed to illustrate the potential for resistance and/or re-signification of normalizing discourses and helped to conceptualize agency. Dominant or normative discourses of citizenship and citizenship education were also documented.

### **2.4.1 Implications for practice**

One of the tensions that teaching practitioners must address in using a post structuralist paradigm are the problematics of making recommendations for action, in particular by pinpointing some sort of truth or method that could be generalized or duplicated in classrooms in order to transform our teaching practices. On the one hand, to

generalize is to ignore the complexity of potential responses and multiple truths; on the other hand, to ignore practice is to do a disservice to those whose passion is to work with youth in order to realize the potential for a transformed future.

Despite this tension, in this study I also investigate the ways in which practitioners might productively engage youth in activities or social practices that have agentic potential. In particular, I draw upon Wertsch's (1995; 1998) conception of cultural tools and de Castell, Bryson and Jenson's (2002) conception of productive pedagogies and examine the affordances (Gee, 1996) that particular cultural tools may offer for agentic production. In Chapter Two I will describe these ideas at greater length; however, for the purposes of this introduction, digital technologies were introduced at one research site as a means of exploring pedagogical techniques that may assist in the production of agentic, sociopolitical subjects. This exploration is described in some detail in Chapter Seven.

Finally, the views of the teachers and/or facilitators at each of these sites were sought through interviews and their philosophical and pedagogical orientations included as a means of providing an important context for understanding how particular discourses may have been brought into play.

## **2.5 Contribution To The Field**

### **2.5.1 To citizenship education**

This research study makes an important contribution to scholarship in the field of citizenship (or alternatively referred to as 'civic' or 'democratic') education, particularly by its inclusion of the views and beliefs of the adolescents about agency and social action within specific local contexts. As Sears (1994) noted in his survey of Canadian research

in the field of civics education, there have been no ethnographic investigations of any civics (often social studies) classrooms completed in Canada. My own search of the literature within Canada yields similar results: while there are now more examples of studies that solicit the views of youth about concepts such as citizenship (for example, Torney-Purta's, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999's thirty country study of Civic Education, or Smith & Gorard's 2006 survey of youth's views on equity in schools) even these investigations have assumed the value and validity of citizenship as a normative claim. The approach taken in this study is to examine and trace discourses of citizenship and citizenship education represented in the formal institutions of school and then map the ways in which youth themselves engage in sociopolitical acts, considering where the possibilities for political agency arise. As such this research study also answers Seixas's (2001) call for revitalization of the field, as it is oriented within the postmodern social and cultural paradigm of social science research.

### **2.5.2 Scholarship in youth agency**

This study also contributes to an enriched understanding of how agency is realized and understood among adolescent youth in a particular northern community. By exploring the specificity of local experiences, how youth take up contradictory positions, engage with, negotiate and resist dominant discourses, and how these both enable and constrain thoughts and actions, remains important work for educational scholars who seek to trace the ways in which social action might be understood and practiced. Rather than assuming that youth will "take up" political identities in particular ways, this study adds to a growing body of post structuralist scholarship that problematizes normalized forms of political action and activity.

### **2.5.3 Formal and non formal learning**

This study also adds to the scope of educational research by moving beyond the traditional boundaries of school based inquiry (Freebody, 2003, p. viii-ix). Educative research with youth beyond the bounds of formal schooling has become more accepted. Historically, schools have been the seen as the primary means of formal education for children and youth: yet as the field of new or multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; The New London Group, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) has illustrated, the changing nature of knowledge and educational inquiry into processes of meaning making through and across multiple interpretive and productive modes forces consideration of the many locations in which sense making occur for youth. This ranges from the computer screen at home, the texts of film, television and video, and the everyday activities in school and community.

In the case of this study, one of the research sites, the youth theatre group, is clearly outside of the scope of formal schooling, although some of its participants attend secondary school. The inclusion of this non-schooled site as a part of this research also helps to open the field of educational inquiry beyond the pedagogical privileging of formal schooled practices as the primary means by which youth and children learn.

### **2.5.4 Educational research methodology**

Finally, this research study contributes to the field of participatory research or critical action research (de Castell & Jenson, 2004; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) and arts based inquiry (Butterwick & Selman, 2003; Clover, 2006; Sanders-Bustle, 2003) with youth. First, following de Castell and Jenson (2004), the methodology used with the youth theatre group used more of a “peer based” approach, seeking to involve the research

participants both in the processes of investigation and in its final representational form (see chapter five in this dissertation). Such an approach seeks to provide a stronger role and voice for research participants in the processes of data analysis and representation, in keeping with the principles of polyvocality and the desire to be “truer” to the lived experiences of others, a position of the “new” ethnography (Saukko, 2003, p. 55-56). Peer approaches to research also help to more effectively link issues of educational and social change (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 569) an important goal of this study.

The contribution that the arts can make to educational research has grown in recent years (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Clover, 2006; Piantanida, McMahan, & Garman, 2003; Slattery, 2003); this study seeks to supplement this growing body of literature that illustrates the promise of arts based methodology as a method that may provide insights into educational phenomena.

As a participatory methodology, its “foundation ...is learning for empowerment, action and agency” (Clover, 2006, p. 2). Sanders-Bustle (2003) has argued that “the arts do more than “enhance”, that in fact they can serve as representations of understanding while helping to internalize and develop understandings through affective engagement” (p. 28). These scholars suggest the arts as a “self conscious method” one that promotes reflective and reflexive potential for human subjects.

The generative potential of arts or performance-based methodologies is an important context for this study in its focus on youth agency: in what ways might methodological means assist in the work of authentic and productive sense making activities among participating youth? In this study photography (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001; Wang, Morel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell & Pestronk, 2004) and participatory

theatre (Butterwick & Selman, 2003; Donmoyer & Donmoyer, 1998; Howard, 2004; Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz, 1993) are both used as a process of inquiry and a product for representing the data collected with participants. Participatory theatre, with its roots in Boal's (2000) theatre of the oppressed, is conceived as having transformative potential. Indeed, Boal's (2000) work with Brazilian peasants in the 1960's and 1970's was explicitly in response to oppressive political regimes. In a more contemporary context, Denzin (2003) has also argued that "performance based human disciplines can contribute to radical social change, to economic justice, to a cultural politics... and the principles of a radical democracy to all aspects of society" (p. 3).

In this research text arts-based methodologies are also used to represent understandings of this author, and arts based inquiry is also used as a means of providing insights into educational phenomena, in this case, the lived experiences of the research participants within this study. The narrative and performance turn (Denzin, 2003) offers the potential for creating a readerly text (Barthes, 1967); such an approach is taken in this dissertation in chapter six where readers' theatre, interview texts and participant feedback create a multilayered representation of one of the three research sites.

In the final section of this introductory chapter, I outline the implications for citizenship education as a consequence of taking a postmodern approach to questions of civic agency and socio-political identity construction. In particular, I examine two related and foundational ideas: that of the subject and his/her agency, in order to consider how citizenship education as a field of investigation might be reconsidered. By positing a postmodern agent and his/her social construction, questions of agency become differently



understood; this has important implications for the ways in which citizenship educators and scholars frame their inquiries.

## **2.6 Implications Of A Postmodern Agent In Citizenship Education**

In some ways, what this study of youth as sociopolitical agents sought to do was to make the field of citizenship education moribund. However, that does not mean an end to the work of civic educators but rather requires a move from imagining ideal social worlds to considering how youth engage productively in practices that enable social and political change. In particular, the approach outlined here suggests that as educators we need to consider approaches centered not in pedagogy or epistemological (disciplinary) knowledge, but in the social, cultural and material complexity of enactment (Davis & Sumara, 1999; Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996)—in other words, the everyday experiences of youth engaged in social and civic activity.

To that end, much of the conceptual terrain covered in this writing may appear unfamiliar to traditional scholars in the field. To these readers, I invite their critique and questions, considering the possibilities and problems this narrative reveals to them. Such a reading is certain to continue the debate about how we become political agents and the role of schooling in practices of citizenship.

### **2.6.1 The discursively constructed political subject**

Many scholars from various fields of inquiry, particularly democratic and political theorists have also studied the dynamics of citizenship to address concerns of subjection, discursive constitution, identity and identification, and social, historical and cultural effects. For example, Kenway and Langmead (2000) have posited how transnational

spaces and cyber-citizens are an effect of new technologies in a global environment of unbounded spaces, effectively challenging the geographies of citizenship, particularly notions of national spaces and parallel political structures. Strong-Boag (2002), drawing on the framework of recognition/misrecognition, explored the long standing exclusion of some groups of Canadians (including women, visible minorities and people of aboriginal descent) from full inclusion as citizens, and how this deficit view continues to be represented in the discourses of citizenship education in schools (p.37). Trend's (1994) discussion of the "fiction" of nationality (and by implication, citizenship) as an "acquired language of belonging in space and time to an imaginary community" (p. 225) illustrated his claim that the social construction of national identity is highly influenced by the work of the modern media.

The social and cultural construction of the "citizen" are explored in the work of scholars such as Stone (2000), who investigated how girl's conceptions of citizenship were "consumered" through a particular ideology of "good citizenship" as represented in the American Girl™ line of dolls and other related products. In another example, Zuengler (2004) discusses the hybrid discourses created in an ESL (English as a Second Language) civics class where the instructor and student used commercial iconic images (MacDonalds™, Nike™ and celebrities such as Arnold Schwarzenegger) to explore cultural models of citizenship. Each of these studies serves to problematize any notion of a stable or unitary self that shares a common membership with other like-minded citizens.

Secondly, where once the notion of "one public" interacting in a common space was characteristic of the ideal democratic practice, the nature of globalization, diasporic communities, and instant connectedness in multiply layered spaces through technological

means forces re-consideration of a common space from which citizens operate. For example, the work of Trend (1994) and Hartley (2004) referenced above, explored the ways in which the media and popular culture have become one of many social locations in which civic identities are constructed and agency exercised. Extending this idea of multiple spaces even further, a detailed examination of the everyday practices of social actors in multiple social and cultural spaces, including cyberspaces, might better inform conceptions of social action, agency and the existence of multiple political cultures in which social agents may act. Fraser (1997) argued that the use of the term public sphere, as a signifier, has practical political consequences as it conflates the role of the state, the official economy of paid employment and public discourse as the primary locations for political activity (p. 70). Endensor (2004) also makes this point by arguing that much scholarship has focused on the study of the publicly manifested symbols of citizenship, nationalism and democracy, which serves to naturalize public sites as symbols of political action, and this, in turn, has served to “obfuscate the everyday, taken for granted, culturally commonsensical practices” (p. 9) that may inform what it means to engage with one another as sociopolitical agents. In particular, an approach that considers multiple civic spaces rather than a single public space for engagement may permit a more careful unpacking of the formal and informal means through which civic-subjects engage in their daily lives in practices of sociopolitical agency—that is, their performances/actions provide evidence of the many sites in which civic (or other) identities may be enacted. It also serves to trouble any consideration of singular locations such as the public sphere as the primary site for demonstrating forms of political agency.

How these tensions between public and private, everyday and symbolic events, cultural versus political models of citizenship frame and shape the conceptions of youth in a range of social or cultural locations could provide useful insights into the social and cultural construction of civic agents.

It also highlights another important consideration in the construction of civic agents in the process of socio-political activity: the question of resources or *cultural tools* (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1995, 1998) comes into play. Cultural tools are those resources and artifacts used by social actors in engaging in socio-political activity. In the example used above, scholars have explored a range of discourses, practices and artifacts used by social agents in the practice of civic agency, including spoken discourses, iconic images and social symbols. The ways in which these resources might be accessed and used, their constitutive or performative effects, and their potential or affordances for civic engagement are matters of primary interest in this study. They offer the potential for identifying alternative social locations and local practices that may be important in redirecting our educational efforts in support of youth as active civic agents.

## **2.7 Agency As Central To Conceptions Of Citizenship Education**

In drawing upon conceptions of agency the above discussion serves as an introduction to perhaps the most important foundational concept in theorizing about citizenship and citizenship education: how the human subject is theorized or discussed as a purposeful social actor, enabled to bring about social change in his/her life, community or society has been and continues to be a central theme to many citizenship and citizenship education scholars. Many of these investigations rely on an *a priori*, autonomous human subject who can rationally consider and act upon choices in a

reasoned manner. Deliberation theory (Cohen, 1998; Elster, 1998) in particular has informed both political and educational scholarship in its characterization of the rational human subject who can make reasoned political decisions after conscious efforts in problem solving. Similarly, Gutmann (1999) has argued for deliberative methods of accommodation in the field of civic education, as a means of assuring social, cultural and political inclusion despite differences. In both cases, processes of reasoning are understood to drive the decision of social actors who engage in socio-political or civic activities.

### **2.7.1 Conceptions of the morally motivated agent**

There is a strong link between inclusivity in decision-making, democracy and the practices of the good citizen. Citizenship is envisioned as a participatory obligation informed by attachment to a political community (Magsino, 2000, p. 58); that is, citizens act in ways that are meant to achieve commonly held public goods. In other words, actions of citizens are informed by moral understandings. Moral thinking and moral development then are central conceptions for understanding how sociopolitical action is learned and practiced.

Berman (1997) in his review of how youth develop social responsibility described the predominant approaches to political learning as including personal attribution—that is, the internal beliefs I hold, my inner moral identity—and democratic valuing—values I share with others as part of our common or collective identities. These approaches to civic engagement emphasize that values and moral understandings are the product of individual cognitive functioning and judgment that develop over time (Erikson, 1963; Kroger, 2000; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). As Tappan (2000) summarized, individualistic

models of developing moral judgment and moral action are therefore conceived of as outcomes of psychological processes, and that as one's moral identity becomes firmly established, it becomes a conscious behaviour (that is, a choice) that is a central aspect of an individual's personality (p. 95). Models of citizenship education that give analytical primacy to the reasoning moral agent are likely to draw upon pedagogies and practices that seek to engage with normative discourses of moral agents and their actions, in other words, they take a deontological orientation to political activity. The central orientation in this model is the individual agent engaged in ethically informed and reasoned moral choice: this is an important orientation that becomes central to my analysis in Chapter Seven.

### **2.7.2 Sociocultural models of moral agency**

Alternatively, Tappan (2000) has argued that moral agency is a product of sociopolitical activity; that is, moral understandings are a product of social and cultural contexts, and positive morality a social construction. Drawing upon Penuel and Wertsch (1995), Wertsch (1998) and Vygotsky (1978), Tappan (2000) takes mediated action as the important unit of analysis in which how the individual uses cultural tools—and how they are either enabled or constrained by them—within particular social and cultural contexts as the central frame for considering moral action. In other words, moral agency is a product of human activity, through the engagement of cultural tools, agents and objects in dynamic tension within a social field, not a product of mental functioning alone. What becomes of interest to the researcher then is “why one, [cultural tool] as opposed to another, is employed in carrying out a particular form of action” (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 91). Discourses in particular, have meaning as cultural tools, and

become primary vehicles of analysis that inform understandings of how moral agency is either enabled or constrained in practice, rather than relying on a model that attributes choice to a reasoning and autonomous agent. Moral agency then, is always shaped by cultural tools,

“chief among these... are moral orientations or ideologies that are carried and transmitted via words, language, and forms of discourse. One finds one’s moral identity, therefore, in the ideologically mediated moral action in which one engages, not in the process of reflection on one’s inner moral self. And the development of moral identity... entails a process of “ideological becoming” whereby one selectively assimilates the worlds, language, and forms of discourse of others” (Tappan, 2000, p. 102).

Agency as a product of discursive resource use is an important concept that informs this study and will be developed by considering the work of Butler (1993) and Wertsch (1998).

### **2.7.3 Agency as a discursive product**

Butler’s (1993) conception of performativity problematizes questions of agency by suggesting its discursive construction, much in the same way that subjectivity has been theorized by postmodern scholars. When subjects engage in some sort of social activity, they are drawing upon previously performed social practices that act to both constrain and enable the social actor. Butler describes this process of performativity as the re-iterability or citational quality of performance (Butler, 1993). While affording a particular social, cultural, or normative meanings to the performance, at the same time, it enables an occasion where deviating from this norm becomes possible. It is this space of potential subversion that offers the possibility for individual agency and social change. As Butler (1995) contended, “Agency is always and only a political prerogative. As such, it seems critical to question *the condition of its possibility*, not to take it for granted as an

a priori guarantee. We need instead to ask what possibilities of mobilization are produced on the basis of existing configurations, discourses and power” (p. 46-47, italics added). This approach, as this study will illustrate, has important implications for the scholarship of citizenship education and may serve to inform some of our practices as citizenship educators and researchers.

#### **2.7.4 Mediated action: tools and agents**

Agency, as posited here, is product of discursive action or practice. Wertsch’s (1998) model of mediated action offers a particularly useful theory through which to consider how agency is mediated through the activity of social agents using cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1975; Wertsch, 1995; 1998). Wertsch’s (1998) work, with its emphasis on human action, becomes of central concern to this study, particularly because it provides a theory that develops and traces the relationship between activity, cultural tools and agency, central questions of this study. More will be said about mediated action and cultural tools later in Chapter Two. In the context of this introduction however, the relationship between agents, tools and activity centrally inform how agency is conceptualized as a product of discursive activity, a significantly different approach to theorizing about how youth’s civic agency is practiced and understood.

### **2.8 Summary**

In this first chapter, I have introduced the reader to the postmodern critique of citizenship education in order to demonstrate a need for alternative forms of inquiry. In doing so, I have situated this research within the paradigm of postmodernism by illustrating how theories of subjectivity and agency in particular are central to citizenship



education scholarship. By invoking the construction of the sociopolitical subject as a product of signifying practices in many different social and cultural locations, agency is reconceptualized as a performative outcome of sociocultural production.

A central focus of investigation in this study is the consideration of how a range of cultural tools mediates actions of socio-political agents and either enables or constrains civic practices. Cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1995; 1998) are social resources that are used by human agents in the processes of civic activity. Using de Castell, Bryson, and Jenson's (2004) conception of productive practices and Gee's (1996) conception of affective affordances, this research study will explore the lived experiences of youth in three different northern urban environments to consider how agency is realized and practiced. In doing so, it focuses on the perspectives and local practices of selected youth in both school and non-school locations as specific sites of inquiry and asks "what *possibilities* of mobilization are produced on the basis of existing configurations, discourses and power" (Butler, 1995, p. 49, italics added). Additionally, it seeks to consider how the affordances of particular cultural tools might inform our educational efforts to support youth in becoming active civic agents.

### **2.8.1 An overview of the remainder of this dissertation**

In the remaining chapters of this dissertation, I expand on the framework offered in this first chapter. In Chapter Two I will further explicate the theoretical framework used for this study. In Chapter Three, I provide a rationale for my research methodology and detail the specific methods used in each of the three research sites. In Chapters Four, Five and Six I introduce the reader to the three different research sites, exploring the specific contents and examine each for the specific discourses in play, considering how

these shape the socio-political activities and agency of the participating youth. In Chapter Seven I explore the ways in which image operates discursively and productively and informs the educational landscapes of the youth in this northern community. Finally, in Chapter eight I summarize the findings of this study by making some tentative observations about what was learned and consider how production, activity and agency are inextricably linked in the making of socio-political agents.

## CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

In Chapter one, I set out the framework of my research study including mapping my standpoint as a researcher and explaining how a postmodern rethinking of subjectivity offers a revitalization of the field of citizenship (civic, democratic or social justice) education. This approach places youth as knowing subjects who can inform our understandings of how sociopolitical agency is realized. This is contrasted with the pedagogically informed approaches that many citizenship education scholars have taken in the past, which frequently involves studying how school based civics courses or civic curriculum goals are linked to levels of youth engagement with or commitment to social or political involvement<sup>3</sup>.

Instead, this research study explores, through an examination of the lived experiences of a group of urban youth, “what *possibilities* of mobilization are produced on the basis of existing configurations, discourses and power” (Butler, 1995, p. 49, italics added). In other words, how might the study of youth in their everyday interactions, including attention to how power and discourses come into play, provide evidence of the many ways in which agency might be practiced. A post structuralist approach *decenters*

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<sup>3</sup> for example, Hahn’s (1998) five-country study of youth attitudes in civic education classes concludes that classroom climate, including pedagogical commitments to democratic forms of inquiry are central for meeting goals of civic engagement for youth. Torney-Purta’s, Schwille, & Amadeo’s (1999) thirty country study of Civic Education also focused on school based goals for civic learning, expressing concern about the need for teacher training and more effective program implementation methods. Both of these studies rely on a conception of education for citizenship through school based educational activities and programs in order to meet goals for creating a more active and engaged youth citizenry.

the primacy of programs and instructional methodologies and suggests alternative forms of investigation, including inquiries that explore the actions and responses of youth as they engage socio-politically during everyday events. The focus becomes centered on the social, cultural and political contexts—the tactics, practices and products of action—and the *enactments* of the sociopolitical subject as the central elements of inquiry.

This chapter seeks to delineate the theories and approaches that permit a move from studying programs for citizenship to one centered on the enactments of sociopolitical subjects. The first section addresses cultural learning theories and processes of meaning making, and how these inform conceptions of the socially constituted youth subject, the focus of this study. There follows a discussion about agency, in particular, the ways in which agency is a product of mediated action. Cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1995, 1998) and their potential for enabling and constraining human action are also considered. How the theory of mediated action (Wertsch, 1998) informs how youth agency might be supported using productive practices in educative settings is also considered. Finally, the operation of D/discourses as a particular kind of cultural tool in constituting and positioning subjects is described, as this is an important theoretical concept that informs my analysis of how D/discourses enable or constrain the actions of youth who participated in this study.

### **3.1 Sociocultural Theories Of Learning**

Theories of learning in education in the twentieth century are situated in several traditions: developmentalism, maturation and cognitive theories characterize much of the field. St. Julien (2000) traced conceptions of intelligence and reasoning as primary theories that have informed this traditional view of education. He described this as a

personal competency based view that also reified particular understandings of curriculum, which has been most often understood as a linearly organized series of “knowledge objects” (p. 255). The organizational principles naturalized in much curriculum design reflect the primacy of knowledge acquisition in keeping with developmental theories and practices of schooling that structure increasing levels of required competencies over time.

The central educational inquiry that has driven much educational research has been to better understand how knowledge is personally acquired, as this is a primary function of schooling. More recent scholarship in learning theory has focused on constructivism (Bruner, 1996; Bandura, 1977; Twomey Fosnot, 1996), social constructivism (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978, Wertsch, 1991) and discursive models of sociocultural learning in practice (Gee, 2004; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1998/2006; Wells, 2001; Wenger, 2000; Wertsch, 1998). As scholars have sought to grapple with the social and cultural situatedness of schools and learning processes, there has been increased attention paid to how we theorize about language and communication (for example, Fairclough, 2000; Gee, 2004; Kress, 2001; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001; Wenger, 1998) and meaning making; as a result, sociocultural theories of learning have become more prominent. Focusing on the complexities of socio-linguistic production and interpretation, as well as how these processes are always informed by their social and cultural situatedness, is a necessary feature of an analysis that is concerned with how sociopolitical activity is learned and practiced among the youth involved in this study.

### **3.2 Cultural Processes Of Learning**

In this section, I draw upon the work of Gee (2004), Kress and van Leeuwen (1998/2006), and Werstch (1995; 1998) as sociocultural theorists who envision the complexity of learning through socially constituted action. These models of learning rely on the discursively produced subject who is always situated within a complex web of social and cultural influences. Each of these theorists details important conceptions that inform understandings of how the post modern human subject engages with and among other subjects and objects in their daily lives: that learning is a product of social identification; that it involves the use of a socially constituted communicative sign system; and that transformational change processes (learning) are always a result of mediated actions. I will develop each of these components in turn.

Gee (2004) suggests learning is centrally a process of identification and identity construction (p. 37). His model is of learning as socially and culturally located social semiotic processes that results in a changing/changed subject within particular locations or discursive communities. The process of identification with or against particular discursive communities he argued, is a central means through which the self is changed and learning occurs. In other words, this model of learning does not rely on the transmission of knowledge (which he calls “instructed processes”, p. 11) but instead conceptualizes learning as essentially a product of social identification.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) similarly emphasis the element of dialogism through linguistic production in describing the process of subjective change through communication. On their model of the “communication situation” or the social semiotic production and interpretation of signs, discourses serve as resources accessed and

interpreted by social actors, and produced using a variety of modes of expression. This is a process of production through signification, through sign making.

The maker of a sign [or signs] who remakes the sign in his or her interest out of existing cultural stuff and in the light of a “reading” of the communicational environment in which the sign is made, changes not only the representational resources of the group, but also changes his or her own, internalized set of resources. Remaking a sign in communication is to change the set of resources of the maker. Cognitively and affectively, she or he is not the same as she/he was prior to that remaking. In other words, the theory with which I am operating sees the sign maker as constantly transformative of the set of resources of the group and of her/himself. It is a theory of the constant *transformation of both resources and of subjectivity* (Kress, 2001, p.407, emphasis added).

Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) is also a culturally focused theory of learning, which emphasizes the social situatedness of everyday events, activities and conversations (Wenger, 1998, p. 13). In this model of learning, what becomes important are the social resources available to a human actor in the particularities of the moment in which learning takes place.

Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and... the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community”. “Legitimate peripheral participation” provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. A person’s intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29).

These cultural learning theories stress different elements of how learning occurs. In the case of Gee (2004) the emphasis is on the processes by which identity change is a function of the learning process; Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) stress the relational nature of signification and sign making, that is, the representational aspects of the process of learning, and Lave and Wenger (1991; 1998) argue for understanding the contextual

features of the learning process in and among a community of learners. While all acknowledge to a greater or lesser extent the importance of the other aspects of social learning, each affords greater significance to one aspect or another.

### **3.3 Mediated Action: Bringing Cultural Learning Theory Into A Single Model**

Wertsch's (1998) model of mediated action offers a particularly useful model for bringing together the range of cultural learning theories represented in the work of Gee (1996, 2004), Kress and van Leeuwen (1998/2006) and Lave and Wenger (1991). Like these other cultural theorists, Wertsch's (1998) theory looks beyond psychological processes and focuses on the social and cultural. His conceptualization of the processes of learning draws upon Vygotsky's (1978) work and examines the role of cultural tools as mediational means through which sense making occurs. This model's strength is that it draws together the full spectrum of culture's constitutive force in considering the activity of learning and action as networked across multiple cultural components. His theory also helps to explicate the processes by which active (material) engagement with a range of mediational tools or artifacts (either subject or object) constitutes human action. Wertsch's (1998) work, with its emphasis on human action, becomes of central concern to this study, particularly because it provides a theory that develops and traces the relationship between activity, action and agency, central questions of this study.

Wertsch's (1998) model of mediated action eschews the mind/body split of many cognitively focused theories of learning by focusing on the "irreducible tension" (p. 25) between an agent and his/her tools; the questions of inquiry then becomes a process of teasing out relationships, histories and interactions rather than attributing a particular



force or effect to one or the other. As such, this model invites consideration of the ways in which cultural tools can be considered nodes within a network or field of action (Knappett, 2002, p. 100), effectively refusing the analytical boundary between the human agent and his/her cultural tool in use. This is an important point that will require some elaboration.

### **3.3.1 Cultural tools**

Cultural tools, as Wertsch (1995; 1998) described them can include material objects (such as a hammer, computer, or camera), other subjects, or sign systems (forms of representation such as language). Cultural tools can also be psychological, such as beliefs about something (ideologies), or they can be representational, such as language and discourses, noted above, but also includes things like visual signs, rites or ceremonies, and monuments (McDonald, Le, Higgins, & Podmore, 2005, p. 115). Cultural tools are constructed socially and culturally; that is, they have different meanings and different uses in different contexts, and they may afford many different kinds of activity or action in someone's life.

The key for each kind of tool is the mediational function it serves in providing meaning for the human subject: a tool conveys something to those that use it and the consequences of its use (p. 117). For example, consider a scene in the hallway of a school, in which a teacher is engaged in a heated discussion with a student who is wearing baggy pants, a plaid shirt and wearing a ball cap; another adult, unrelated to the events, is walking past them. In this example, consider the ball cap as a cultural tool. For the young man, the act of wearing this cap might situate him as a member of a particular group or subculture. Wearing the cap in school may also position him as defiant and non-

compliant, given rules about where and when it can be worn, common in many schools. His agency is clearly marked through the use of this cultural tool. However, the other adult observer, unacquainted with the school's "codes of conduct" and the taboo about hats, might view such a scene with puzzlement, the hat providing no clue as to the nature of the interaction. Instead, she might attend to the body language of the two individuals, a different cultural tool, through which to situate the event and to make sense of the scene before her.

This example illustrates, as Holland, Lachicrotte Jr., Sinner, and Cain (1998) have argued, "the actions, the deployment of artifacts... *evoke the worlds to which they were relevant, and position individuals with respect to those worlds*. It is their [cultural tools] pivotal role, as Vygotsky called it—their capacity to shift the perceptual, cognitive, affective and practical frame of activity—that makes cultural artifacts so significant to human life" (p. 63, italics added).

### **3.4 Agency: Using The Master's Language**

In this dissertation I have argued that in taking a post structuralist approach to investigating youth subjectivity and action, the human subject is discursively constituted, fragmented and multiply located, and a product of social relations. Indeed, such an approach eschews a coherent, unified identity, as a rational autonomous agent who can choose to enact his/her agency, ultimately suggesting that "agency is fundamentally illusory" (Davies, 2000, p. 60). As multiply located and fragmented social beings, how then can a term like "agency" be an acceptable one for this inquiry? I argue, following Davies (2000) lead, that reconceptualizing how agency is a product of discursive constitution might allow "access to other ways of knowing and to powerful ways of being

that are not the result of normative judgment from within the dominant discourse made by those positioned as agentic within them” (p. 59). It may also be possible to “develop alternative metaphors and images and storylines to counteract the impact of this discourse” (p. 60).

As an alternative, a theory of agency needs to be consistent with the postmodern subject’s discursive construction:

Agency is spoken into existence at any one moment. It is fragmented, transitory, a discursive position that can be occupied within one discourse simultaneously with its nonoccupation in another. Within current ways of speaking it is readily attainable positioning for some and an almost inaccessible positioning for others... This capacity does not stem from the essence of the person in question but from the positions available to them within the discourses through which they take up their being” (p. 68).

Exploring the ways in which particular discourses and practices (cultural tools) became available (or not) and were used, altered or abandoned by the northern urban youth participants in this study, as well as how their subject positions, including questions of power and subjugation becomes central features of agentive activity, is the subject of this research text. In considering these moments of activity and characterizing the ways in which they are played out in particular social locations, an alternative narrative or story unfolds, one that seeks to inform the ways in which social and political action among youth is understood.

### **3.5 Agency As A Product Of Performance**

The notion of human agent and their tools operating recursively in action is consistent with a socially and culturally constituted theory of agency (Butler, 1993, 1997, 2000; Davies, 2000; Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner & Cain, 1998; Lovell, 2003; Ratner, 2000). Rather than a focus on the individual subject and his/her capacity for individual

decision making capabilities as the unit of analysis, a socially constitutive theory of agency would theorize agency as a product of activity, subject to the social, cultural, historical traces of previous actions and the availability of resources or cultural tools available in a particular moment in time. The unit of analysis becomes the field of activity in which subject position, cultural tools, social, historical and cultural D/discourses enable and constrain the actions taken. In this understanding of agency, as much import is given to how tools are implicated in human action as is how an agent accesses his/her own cognitive resources or the ways in which social and historical contexts shape activity.

However, two important corollaries need to be explicated in this conception of mediated action and agency: the first is that cultural tools are themselves products of social and cultural production, and as such they bear particular meanings, uses, and sedimented histories that shape the ways in which human subjects may access or use these sense making resources (Daniels, 2001, Latour, 2002; McDonald, Le, Higgins & Podmore, 2005). Sociocultural tools are also transformed and/or altered through engagement in social activity, always laden and layered with cultural knowledge while simultaneously transmitting it. The second point helps to conceptualize the process of meaning construction as one of affordance; that is, what might be made possible is a function of the multiple and potentially competing ways in which such tools might be used or understood. With many competing social and cultural resources always in play, mediational artifacts can both enable and constrain human action or agency (McDonald, Le, Higgins & Podmore, 2005; Roth, Tobin, Elmesky, Carambo, McKnight and Beers,

2004; Wertsch, 1998). Understanding the potential and limitations of cultural tools is therefore an important point to consider.

### **3.5.1 Cultural tools constrain activity**

Cultural tools, as noted above, are always laden and layered with cultural knowledge, while simultaneously transmitting it. McDonald, Le, Higgins and Podmore (2005) describe in detail the use of three different cultural tools in the classroom, one of which was a flip chart, to illustrate the features of cultural tool use among students in a classroom. In discussing the flip charts uses by the children, the authors suggest that “the material artifacts told others what actions to take” and the cultural tool “carried the additional message of authority, power, and agency” (p. 118), essentially constraining the ways in which it could be used. In a different example, Latour (2002) argues that a sleeping policeman (a traffic bump in a roadway) is an example of a morally constraining tool, causing human agents to slow and drive more cautiously.

### **3.5.2 Cultural tools enable activity**

At the same time, however, cultural tools may also be used in ways that have the affect of enabling new or altered ways of performing: this is an important feature that may be of particular significance to citizenship educators who seek to provide opportunities through which to support the development of active social agents. For example, Cohen (2005) described the activity and intentions of photobloggers (individuals who collect and post photos on their own web-based blogs) by describing how they use the practices of photography and web based technologies in order to “actively confound the kinds of intentionality that are historically bound up with the

practice of photography” (p. 894). In a different example, Butterwick and Selman (2003) use participatory theatre as a means of creating a “third space” in which difficult social and political work could be productively pursued (p. 10). These examples help illustrate the ways in which some cultural tools may have greater affordance or potential for transformative or generative change; in considering the role of sociopolitical activity and agency, how cultural tools may afford agency is also an important question to consider.

### **3.5.3 Affordances of cultural tools**

Affordances describe the potential or possibilities that are a product of the use of a particular cultural tool. For example, the affordances of a book are different from those of a movie or a film: a book affords a chance for more reflection on its content, while a movie, in its use of image and narrative might afford a greater experiential connection. As the examples in the previous section illustrated, both aesthetic and technological means have been conceptualized as cultural tools that enable action and potential social and political change. Digital technologies in particular are often described as more open learning tools, by design flexible and multifaceted, permitting a “bidirectional transfer of intentionality” (Everett & Caldwell, 2003, p. xix). The arts are also conceptualized as having considerable affordance for self-expression, creativity and activism (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Slattery, 2003). Indeed, the study of cultural forms of activism has exploded since the 1990’s, and as Felshin (2003), argued, the field of aesthetics is one that affords considerable possibility for creativity and authentic expressions of agency in public spaces. The question of authentic engagement is an important one in considering the affordances of different cultural tools and will be considered in the next section.

### 3.6 Productive Pedagogies

Franklin (1990) distinguished between holistic and prescriptive technologies: holistic technologies enable egalitarian relationships through their use, often associated with aesthetic practices and use by Artisans, who guide their own process of production from design to completion. The second category, prescriptive technologies are characterized as being reliant upon hierarchical relationships in which the task is broken down into discrete and identifiable steps, and where knowledge or understanding of the whole can be or is lost. Rather than designs for compliance or control (p. 23), holistic technologies permit the potential for 'redemption' in supporting a bottom up process of positive social change (p. 127).

It is important to acknowledge what Franklin (1990) meant in her use of the term technology. She argued that technology is a practice and system that "involves organization, procedures, symbols, new words, and most of all, a mindset." (p.12). This more inclusive definition permits consideration of a range of social practices as technologies: this is of central concern to this study because it permits consideration of both forum theatre and service learning as potentially productive practices or technologies that support civic agency, and suggests the application of Franklin's (1990) criteria in differentiating between technologies that have egalitarian or hierarchical social outcomes, a useful one to consider. What becomes important then is the affordances of the technologies or cultural tools for the purposes of considering civic agency, and how they enable or constrain such active engagement.

de Castell, Bryson and Jenson's (2002) work clearly draws on holistic technologies in their references to authentic forms of knowledge creation, although they

extend Franklin's (1990) argument to suggest it needs to also enable the contestation of dominant norms or regimes of truth. In other words, the field of agentive potential is enhanced when the affordances of the cultural tool permit a way of reinscribing or altering discourses.

The potential for digital technologies as a tool that can enhance learning and support agency was the subject of de Castell and Jenson's (2001) work with gay, lesbian, and transgendered youth. They sought to engage these youth as co-researchers in documenting a need for housing for 'queer and questioning' youth; their findings suggested that collaborative and productive data collection methods (including, in this case, video production) could simultaneously demonstrate the value of youth experience to policy makers while illustrating how processes of production have educative potential. This approach emphasizes the *production* rather than the *reproduction* of knowledge. The authors argue that when an

educationally orientated invitation to play, to produce, and to diss-simulate expertise—in short, a program for the deployment of digital tools [is] used not for replication and reproduction, but for creation, for *authentic*, that is, *agentive production*"... provides an interesting example of a politically articulate intervention and strategy of representation where agency is evident in the active contestation of oppressive regimes of truth" (de Castell, Bryson & Jenson, 2002, emphasis in original)

then transformational change is a potential outcome.

Other new literacies scholars including Lankshear and Knobel (2003) also described their work with digital technologies with reference to the "productive learning experiences... [that] can occur with when learning and knowing are reconceptualized for a digital regime" (p. 178). Such work argues technologies as cultural tools afford greater possibilities for knowledge construction and permit expressions of agency. It might be



said that the technological object enables an active educative subject, while the educative subject enacts its self-directed knowledge construction through the object, each informing the other. Such conceptions of technologically mediated learning interrupt and disrupt tidy epistemological and pedagogical categories (de Castell, Bryson & Jenson, 2002; Everett & Caldwell, 2003) so that “educationally productive uses of technology... [might] actually serve the aims of developing and supporting a critical, informed and responsible global citizenry” (de Castell, Bryson & Jenson, 2002, ¶ 51). It is this emphasis on technological affordances for social action that is of particular interest to this research study.

In particular, I consider how the notion of productive pedagogies for *civic agency* by considering three different cultural tools, including digital cameras, forum theatre and service learning.

### **3.6.1 Productive practices that enable civic agency**

At one research site, digital cameras are used with a group of youth at Northern High. A number of scholars, most notably the Photovoice studies (Booth & Booth, 2003; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001; Wang, Morel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell & Restronk, 2004), have explored the use of cameras as a means of empowering youth. However, while these studies relied on representation and voice as central constructs through which agency is realized, this study envisions the camera as a cultural tool that both enables and constrains agentive activity, and as such, offers a different lens through which to consider how agency is realized.

Additionally, I want to extend to participatory theatre the same theoretical lens of technological production, to consider how theatre as a cultural tool may enable

sociopolitical activity. Critical scholars, adult educators and community-based activists in particular have afforded participatory theatre with potential for enabling political action and social transformation (Butterwick & Selman, 2003; Mohan, 2004; Prentki & Selman, 2000; Schechter, 2003). Of particular interest to this study is the work of Boal (1985; 1993; 1995; 1998) and the use of forum theatre—a particular form of participatory theatre that involves audience participation—as a means for creating a productive space in which youth agency might be realized. While the representation power of theatre has been explored extensively by the scholars listed above, this study looks to the ways in which its productive qualities, that is, its affordances, might work in ways to authentically engage differently positioned subjects as civic agents.

Finally, the concept of service learning (Billig, 2000; Blank, Johnson, & Shah, 2003; Niemi, Hepburn & Chapman, 2000; Perry & Katula, 2001; Saltmarsh, 2005; Yates & Youniss, 1998), practiced at one of the three sites of this research study, could also be considered a technological productive practice, given the potential affordances direct service to others might provide for participating youth subjects. Indeed, Youniss and Yates (1997) have posited that service can have mediational effects and has the potential to promote both individual and collective action. As such, it is a tool that promotes social responsibility and agency (p. ix).

In summary, learning and activity, theorized as products of mediated action, support an understanding of agency as a mutually constitutive outcome of agents and tools engaged in co-constructed practices, always embedded within and affected by sociocultural context. In educative settings, some cultural tools may afford different possibilities for learning and agentic activity; in the examples explored in this section,

digital tools, participatory theatre and service learning are considered as technological cultural tools that may afford distinctive opportunities for both knowledge construction and authentic agentive action. From the perspective of citizenship education, these productive practices offer promise as a means through which our educational efforts can support youth in understanding and acting to promote social justice and civic agency.

### **3.7 Discourses**

I have used the term “discourse” on a number of occasions in this chapter. While this term is used by a range of scholars I am using the term “Discourses” with a capital D following Gee (1999) to contrast language used by socially meaningful groups or networks (p. 17) with the local or day to day practices of language-in-use in and among social agents (p. 17). ‘Discourses’ and ‘discourses’ will be used to distinguish between the larger scale metanarratives of interpretive communities and the more local day to day practices and narratives of individuals and sub cultures.

Discourses enable performances to be socially and culturally recognizable. Discourses are socially and historically constituted, and are embedded in the many texts of the social world; not simply within language systems but in the ways in which we do things (practices). Foucault (1980) theorized at length about Discourses; much contemporary thinking about how Discourses operate in social life is indebted to his efforts to trace the historical or “genealogical” roots of particular social practices. He famously linked power and knowledge as the primary means by which discourses are afforded performative effect and their role in processes of subjugation.

Gee (1999) also makes several important points about Discourses. First, they are not fixed but subject to processes of ongoing social negotiation; they can be multiply

located, competing and accessible concurrently; their boundaries are always contestable with new, altered, and hybrid Discourses always possible, while others can become moribund. Discourses always involve more than language, and are inclusive of social practices, visual image, rituals and activities.

Fairclough's (2000) conception of 'orders of discourse' also informs how D/discourses circulate in a network of social practices; that is, how social organization acts to limit or control the relationship between signs, meanings, and practices. For example, in the context of this research study, the Discourse of nationalism has been ordered in particular ways that link symbolic events (such as national holiday celebrations) to processes of identification with the nation state. Practices, performances and signs (including visual image) work together to produce particular understandings. "Orders of discourse mediate the relationship between society and culture on the one hand, and language on the other" (p. 173). This is not to suggest a static process of inter relatedness, but a dynamic one, subject to influence by other Discourses, events, or narratives. In effect, a Discourses' intertextual qualities (its social location and its historical sedimentation) are always in play, each citing and re-citing its meaning through the repeated use of normative signifiers. This helps illustrate how and why discourses are persistent, in their constant repetition; however, it is also their recitational qualities that have to be considered in understanding the persistence of discourses (Wertsch, 1998).

### **3.7.1 The persistence of discourse**

Wertsch (1998) offers an analytically useful framework for interrogating the persistence of dominant metanarrative discourses in shaping beliefs. He argues that cultural tools constrain activity not through some constant, pervasive means but rather as

a result of how D/discourses arise when they are cued or induced in certain local ways, through what he describes as the ‘microdynamics of appropriation’ (p. 175-176). Such a reading of how D/discourses shape and inform the performance of the subject not only allows for the ways in which the agent behaves or describes his/her action, but also considers how the instrument itself, the cultural tool, mediates the action “almost in spite of the agents’ conscious reflection and volition...in ways the agent neither envisions nor desires” (ibid). In this way the D/discourses continual re-citation “deeply figures” (ibid) the ways in which we respond and act. In Chapter Seven I illustrate how the utterances of the youth in this study demonstrate this persistent quality of D/discursive use and how these uses shape their conceptions of agency.

### **3.7.2 Visual D/discourses**

Earlier I suggested that Discourses can be reiterated through objects as well as through language. Kress and van Leeuwen (1998/2006) argued that visual elements—people, places and things—combine into visual statements that convey meaning. “Like linguistic structures, visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction...Things can be “said” either visually or verbally...[and] is (sic) also culturally and historically specific” (p. 2). So understanding which semiotic (either visual or linguistic) resources are available in any given context is an important point of analysis in considering how some D/discourses, including visual D/discourses, are “taken up” by human subjects, and how these may reiterate, alter or reinforce particular conceptions or beliefs. Visual D/discourses, like their linguistic counter part, become cultural tools through which subjects engage in processes of meaning construction and mediate human action.

As a result, tracing the presence of visual discourses and how they are taken up by, used, negotiated or re-signified becomes a matter of considerable interest to this study: how do the participating youth in this study make use of particular visual discourses, what meanings do they attribute to them and what performative effects do these visual discourses appear to have? In particular, how might Wertsch's (1998) theory about the persistence of discourses come into play? Are images one of the ways in which particular D/discourses become "deeply figured" in everyday life through their continual reiteration and recirculation?

### **3.8 Discourses, Signifying Practices And Performativity**

An emphasis on understanding the many ways in which Discourses are accessed and used in a variety of communication modes, social languages and practices helps illustrate the social and cultural situatedness of the human subject and the resources that are in play in when engaged in the processes of activity and production; that is, how the human subject enacts and produces his/her understandings in day to day life. I want to return to earlier discussions about how such enactments are socially and culturally constitutive, that particular social practices and activities signify particular understandings within D/discursive communities.

Processes of social enactment are also performative (Butler, 1990; 1993; 1997; 2000). That is, when human subjects enact a social practice, they are simultaneously constrained and enabled by it. In mimicking or repeating a particular practice within a D/discourse, for example, subjects are *constrained* by how particular meanings are attributed to particular pre-existing responses and actions. However, at the same time, the opportunity afforded through the possibility of alternative actions and signifying practices

allows for an array of potential or possible responses; in this way the act can also be considered *enabling*. Agency then, in Butler's (2004) conception is always a product of subordination and subjection in that there are always limits on the possibility of subjecthood, although, "even though my agency is conditioned by those limitations, my agency can also thematize and alter those limitations to some degree" (p. 334).

It is the reiterative, citational quality of a practice that is described as acting performatively (Butler, 1993). Agency is constrained and constituted through citation. In Butler's (1997) words, "a performative provisionally succeeds... not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech [or practice], but only because the action echoes prior actions, and **accumulates the force of authority through the *repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices*** (p. 51, italics in original; my bolding added). As Butler (1990; 1993; 1997) has stated repeatedly in her work, there is "no doer behind the deed", but rather the subject (doer) comes into being, that is, they are constituted, through the "doing".

Within existing Discourses, practices have social or cultural histories that through the continued process of reiteration have achieved normative standing. Foucault (1980) describes discursive power as the process of subjugation, an act of social and self-regulation that results in compliance within existing social practices. Such a view of subjugation suggests an always-present set of oppressive practices that resist alteration.

Agency, then, occurs in those moments in which, as a product of local activity, take up a particular cultural tool that we speak and act from. This should not be construed as a call to 'voice', but rather a more inclusive view of what constitutes an enactment of agency: speech, a look, a body stance, a gesture, even acts of silence can be construed as

agentive activity. The discussion of cultural tools, and how these are implicated in the field of action, is an important conception in articulating the ways in which agency can be realized, enacted and understood. Agency is represented in the moments in which the cultural tool is taken up and put to use by the subject. In addition, as the above discussion of performativity and discourses has sought to establish, acts of agency are always subject to discursive effects, both constraining and enabling.

In some cases, D/discourses and social practices may have greater performative effect on the possibility for agency on the part of some agents, largely as a result of their subject position, as the earlier discussion of Davies (2000) work posited. For example, gender or colour act as social markers that have historically restricted the political and social agency of large numbers of people: in the opening of this study I described how citizenship itself was a Discourse that excluded women and persons of colour from inclusion in the body politic. This is an important consideration in this study, given the subordinate status that many youth face in schools. Therefore considering the ways in which youth subjects, considered as subordinate, engage in practices of agency is an important concept to consider.

### **3.8.1 Agency as resignification**

Butler's (1990; 1993; 1997) discussions of resignification—in which social practices or linguistic meanings are subjected to a break from their normative contexts—is an important way of considering how those who, on the basis of their subject positions, act against, resist or struggle against the normative conventions of systems, discourses and other subjects. Butler's (1990: 1993: 1997) work has explored how gender (1990; 1993) as a socially constitutive category and speech (1997) as an injurious act, can be



resisted or where “action on the limit... produces a new possibility for a subject, one who was supposed to be bound by the limit, one who moves past the norms of civility...to a deformation and contestation of those very norms” (Butler, 2000, p. 33). This space of potential subversion also offers the possibility for agency and social change. In the context of this study, how some cultural tools may enable this form of resistance to social norms and illustrate agentive potential is an important idea to consider.

To reiterate an earlier point, the identification of new cultural tools while “free[ing] us from some earlier limitation of perspective” in order to transform the ways in which we act, at the same time also “introduces new ones [limitations] of its own” (Wertsch, 1998, p. 39). There are always constraints upon the practices we engage in, and new or reconfigured constraints may be realized in subsequent performances. Historical, social, and cultural power or institutional authority (p. 42) are embedded within actions and these meanings provide the contexts in which new actions are situated. The always already situatedness of mediated action helps illustrate the complexity with which subjects are continuously and recursively constructed through socially performative means.

### **3.8.2 The subjugative effects of Discourses**

Using Foucault’s (1980) conception of governmentality—that is the ways in which the state exercises power in order to “define the individual and control their conduct...to produce useful, docile, practical citizens” (Besley, 2005, p. 77) and Bakhtin’s (1981) conception of authoritative discourses—how discourses become authoritative in their connection with institutions and authorities—democratic structures and systems can be characterized as discursive signifiers that reiterate dominant

metanarratives about citizenship and the role and duties of civic agents. These metanarratives are repeated through legal, political, social and educational systems, privileging a conception of shared moral obligation and reciprocity between rights and duties. Loyalty is a value attached to membership to the nation state that signifies belonging. Democratic systems such as elections, voting, public debate and participation are political artifacts that materially reiterate and historically evoke discourses of duties and responsibilities necessary for living as a ‘good’ citizen.

These D/discourses are circulated repeatedly in public life: as Anderson (1991) argued, print technologies became a primary tool through which diverse peoples across a country came to conceptualize themselves in shared discursive spaces, citizens in a shared political community. Print media acted as a cultural tool that afforded the re-circulation and reiteration of the D/discourses of governmentality and citizenship. This continual process of recitation and recirculation of D/discourses through print form also supports Tappan’s (2000) claim that the construction of moral agency is accomplished as subjects “assimilates the worlds, language, and forms of discourse of others” (Tappan, 2000, p. 102). Assimilation of discourses becomes routinized in the constant circulation of messages of about citizenship and a common, morally centred identity.

Images too, as visual discourses are also subject to wide circulation, particularly in the media. As Grover (1989) suggested:

Images in the mass circulation media, for example, possess a power that is rarely successfully challenged precisely because their widespread distribution posits them as representations of widely (and thus popularly) held values. Such images—in the form of advertising, editorial, public service, fashion, sport or photojournalistic photographs—gain much of their power through the (seeming) simplicity of their means, which seek to limit possible readings in favour of central, market desirable one(s) (p. 169).

Foucault's (1980), Bakhtin's (1981), Anderson's (1991) and Grover's (1989) theories help illustrate how power operates through authoritative structures and systems, and how social reproduction, recitation and circulation operate in modern societies to regulate activity through discursive means, including moral or ideological beliefs. As such, the citizen-subject's actions are enabled and constrained through shared experiences, histories, and narratives of what it means to live together in a community of common interest, bound together in conceptions of shared obligation.

Earlier discussions about how the orders of discourse operate to create chains of signification (Fairclough, 2000) also help to illustrate how moral agency remains a dominant theme among social agents. Similarly, Wertsch's (1998) claims about the microdynamics of appropriation' (p. 175-176), also considers how cultural tools mediate the action "almost in spite of the agents' conscious reflection and volition...in ways the agent neither envisions nor desires" (ibid). In this way the D/discourses continual re-citation "deeply figures" (ibid) the ways in which we respond and act.

Power is also implicated in the ways in which discourses persist: following Foucault (1980) and Davies (2000), power needs to be understood as productive. In other words, the power of discourses and practices flow not only through structures and authoritative systems, but through multiply located social and cultural processes in play on a day-to-day basis. A culturally informed theory of power and discursive authority helps illustrate how processes of circulation and reiteration by multiply located social agents also serves to authorize and re-authorize some D/discourses.

### 3.9 Subject Position: The Constitutive Force Of D/discourses

Questions of discursive constitution outlined in this chapter also suggest a need to be clear about the relationship between the human subject and discourse. This is best understood through the concept of subject position. A subject position, according to Davies (2000),

incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons... Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines, and concepts that are made relevant within the particular discursive practices in which they are positioned... An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product, but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which he or she participates (p. 89).

Our subject position is the place from which we act as agents, bringing into our social interactions or activities those understandings, beliefs, ideas—cultural tools—that have been shaped and/or produced through our engagement in a range of discursive communities. An important related understanding of subject position is that it is not fixed, but ever variable, always subject to the ways in which someone takes up (or refuses) particular discourses and practices in action with others. Subject positions are a social construction; that is, they have been assigned particular social and cultural meanings. For example, to be a woman, a wife, or a daughter have particular social meanings attached, and these meanings may vary within different discursive communities.

Positioning focuses on how discourses constitute speakers and hearers in certain ways but also considers how these discourses may be used as resources by both speakers and hearers in ways that result in the negotiation of new positions (p. 105): in doing so we continually re-constitute ourselves in activity.

An important corollary of this discussion is the ways in which power operates: some discourses are difficult to escape and agents can be subjected to their force. Earlier discussions of the persistence of discourses made this point: for example, gender categories have great persistence in contemporary western society, despite repeated efforts by many to reject or resignify their social meanings. As a woman who spent considerable time in politics, gendered patterns of relation continued to position me and other women as less powerful than our male counterparts. This discourse was reiterated in a number of ways: through the social practices of what clothing to wear or how “quid pro quo” became the means of achieving political goals; the language of the institution (“Mr. Speaker” and “maiden speech” being only two of many examples); what alcohol to drink (scotch); in the policies of the institution (for example, absentee policies financially penalized those who were absent from their duties in the legislature for more than five days, even if one was absent for maternity purposes); and reiterated in the physical features of the building (urinals were present in all washrooms, although in women’s washrooms boxed in). As a subject I was positioned by and within these discourses, in many cases reiterating their authority despite other discursive efforts to resist—for example, by using discourses of feminism and gender equality. This example also helps illustrate how subject positions can be contradictory in nature, and that one can take up or be positioned in competing discursive communities.

In this study, subject position becomes an important conceptual idea, as it can be used to consider the ways in which agency is understood and practiced. In particular, given the ways in which youth are typically positioned as less powerful subjects in school settings, looking for traces of how agency might be enacted in different discursive

communities—such as the Alt Ed sub culture discussed in Chapter four—becomes an important area of inquiry.

In this section of the chapter, I have attempted to illustrate the ways in which performativity can be used as a theoretical construct that offers important insights into how signifying practices and discourses operate in everyday life. Performativity is a central conception for understanding how D/discourses and practices shape the contemporary social agent and conceptions of citizenship.

However, post structuralist conceptions of power as well as earlier discussions about the constitutive nature of the postmodern subject provided a context for re-considering agency a socially constitutive product of activity, subject to the social, cultural, historical traces of previous actions and the availability of cultural tools in a particular moment in time. In this understanding of agency, as much import is given to how tools and subject position are implicated in human action as is how an agent accesses his/her own cognitive resources or the ways in which social and historical contexts, including subject position, shape activity. These theoretical ideas form the foundation of the chapters that follow, each designed to explore how civic agency is alternatively understood and practiced in three different sites in a northern urban community.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This chapter will be divided into three sections. First, I provide a broad theoretical discussion of the methodological paradigm of this study, and then elaborate about how this situates the research methods I have chosen to use. This is followed by a description of the specific research sites investigated in this study. After outlining the process of identification of these sites and the procedures used to secure ethical approval for this investigation, the specific research strategies used at these sites are explored. These research strategies draw upon the broad theoretical context established in the opening of the chapter. The final section of this chapter will outline methods of analysis used throughout the research process, including how issues of authenticity and validity are addressed.

### **4.1 Research In Practice: An Evolving Process Of Investigation**

Before engaging in an in depth discussion of the methods used in this chapter, it is important to acknowledge that through the process of engaging in this research study there were some shifts in the focus of the questions initially conceived of and reported in chapter one of this dissertation. Ongoing reflection and analysis as research data was collected, observations recorded and research sites described, led to a gradual shift in my research focus. Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggest that researchers needs to make these shifts explicit; in the case of this research study, the following section is meant to capture the changes made to the original research proposal.

The initial research question asked “In what ways can an inquiry into the beliefs and practices of a group of urban youth in northern British Columbia (BC) assist us in understanding the complexity of developing civic identities in contemporary society?” This question framed the entire investigation of this study; several related questions, including questions that sought to determine the relationship between subjects and discourses, and the relationships between sociopolitical performance, performativity and agency remained central features of consideration and analysis. During the process of analysis however, it became more apparent that there was a great deal to be learned by focusing on the particularities of everyday activities undertaken by youth at each of the three research locations, and in considering how social and cultural contexts enabled and constrained youth agency. In particular, the ways in which social action was mediated by cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1995; 1998) became a focus. The research investigation then centered more carefully on how the affordances of particular cultural tools mediated youth’s social and civic activities and what implications this had for realizing civic agency.

As a result, several other questions, including one concerned with how justice might be implicated in questions of agency, how democratic engagement might be enhanced, and how schools might support the development of civic identities became peripheral to what emerged as the central concern with how agency is realized and practiced among a group of northern urban youth. To engage in prolonged analysis of these secondary questions would have resulted in a much longer document and one that failed to focus on the central findings of this study. As a result, the initial research questions were modified to limit the scope of the study. However, these secondary



questions remain matters of considerable importance that inform the field of citizenship education and will, hopefully, become subjects of more detailed study and consideration at a later date.

## **4.2 A Post Structuralist Paradigm**

This study is situated in the realm of qualitative research design and practice; more specifically, my method of inquiry is situated within the deconstructive paradigm (Lather, 1991, p. 7; 1992, p. 89). Postmodernism and post structuralism are considered “moments” within this paradigm (although even the use of the term paradigm is problematic from a post structuralist perspective). The deconstructive paradigm emphasizes a “critique of dominant institutions and modes of speaking, thinking, and writing—which means it is often set against what is most familiar and comfortable for us, asking us to see the danger or harm even in what we take to be “good” (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 4). Arising from the context of postmodernism, particularly in its challenging of dominant metanarratives or discourses of truth (Lyotard, 1984), post structuralism has as a central tenet the “suspicion of totalizing theories” (Lather, 1991, p. xviii). “Post structuralism holds that there is no final knowledge... whatever the object of our gaze it ‘is contested, temporal and emergent’ (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 18-19, as cited by Lather, 1991, p. 111).

Post structuralism can therefore be characterized as a political endeavour; that is, it is an approach that in its efforts to uncover problematics, offers the opportunity for positive change. It relies on revealing the complexities of power, knowledge, oppression and difference within social and cultural practices, questioning the very nature of these categories and how they are represented in research (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 100).

It is also important to acknowledge that while the post structuralist research process may offer political possibility, it should not be characterized as an emancipatory project. That is, the researcher cannot “free” the disempowered “other” by simply creating a space where contrary views might be expressed. Firstly, the researched cannot be freed from the social, cultural and political constraints of power/authority/knowledge and fully participate as equitable partners; nor can methodological means fully compensate for these social complexities. While there are specific methodological and ethical practices that the researcher can take to reduce power differentials, the research itself will, at least to some extent, reproduce these power/ knowledge relations.

Secondly, the researcher cannot speak “for” the other, but can only make an effort to be with them in a shared struggle that acknowledges different social locations (Ellsworth, 1992, p. 105). Lather and Smithies’ (1997) ethnography *Troubling Angels* serves as an example of researchers “getting out of the way and in the way” (p. xiv), acting as filters and witnesses to the conversations and stories represented by HIV positive women. This type of multilayered text offers a space for the voices of participants “speaking to and grounded in the every day” (Lather, 1991, p. 55).

#### **4.2.1 What is post structuralism?**

From an epistemological perspective, the post structuralist stance contests the presence of particular metanarratives or beliefs about the discernability of absolute truths. Drawing on the post modern philosophy of writers such as Lyotard (1984) who have challenged the dominance of scientific knowledge, the post structuralist stance allows for competing forms of knowledge, arguing that they can and should be legitimized, and that access to knowledge systems is a function of power. ‘Discourse’ and ‘hegemony’ are

important concepts in explaining the way in which knowledge is legitimated in social life. Particular discursive communities (such as those of science) engage in practices which legitimize particular conceptions of what is important, what counts as knowledge, and how such knowledge should be investigated or used. For Lather (1991), post structuralism, in acknowledging the legitimacy of other ways of knowing, also affords political potential, in its inclusion of otherwise excluded voices and perspectives. Principles of polyvocality and inclusivity are central features of post structural research design and practice.

From an ontological view, the post structuralist paradigm rejects a construction of the subject as stable self with a commensurate *a priori* agency. “The subject of post-structuralism, unlike the humanist subject, then, is constantly in process; it only exists as process; it is revised and (re)presented through images, metaphors, storylines and other features of language, such as pronoun grammar; it is spoken and re-spoken, each speaking existing in a palimpsest<sup>4</sup> with the others” (Davies, 1997, p. 4). In other words, the subject is constituted and constitutive through discourse. The importance of language (the discursive turn) is a central theme discussed in chapter two: any sense of self, identity, or agency is an effect of language and discourse. It is this emphasis on how the subject is constructed through discourse that distinguishes the post structural from other perspectives. How the subject is constituted through the practices of power is also a

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<sup>4</sup> Davis (1997) notes that the use of palimpsest as a metaphor can be both reveal and misappropriate particular elements of post structuralism. Its image of writing and re-writing on a parchment which is only partly erased serves as a powerful image that “enables us... to imagine how the unitary, essential, pre-discursive self, constructed through humanist discourses is still there, bumping into and shaping our interpretation of the self-as-process. At the same time... [it is] a conceptual trap. Since the image it may evoke is one in which the original writing is on a blank parchment, the metaphor of palimpsest can... hold in place the idea that there is an original pre-discursive self” (p. 4).

central theme: the processes of subjugation and subjugated knowledges (Foucault, 1980) are also considered a central tenet of the ontology of the post structural perspective.

From a methodological perspective, the post structuralist relies on methods and strategies that are consistent with illuminating the concerns outlined above. This means using techniques that explore the subject positions of many different social actors; using tools of analysis that reveal the multiple discourses within social or cultural locations; putting the study of power and systems of legitimation as a central features of its investigation; seeking to illuminate or deconstruct the means by which subjects are constituted; challenging discourses of objectivity and the role of researcher as “the knower”; and using methods that attempt to capture the lived experiences of others, that do not rely solely on forms of investigation that suggest rationalism and objectivity are the only legitimate tools of research investigation. In other words, post structural scholars “make the case that all inquiry is by definition a form of discourse analysis; and...all research consists of a ‘reading’ and ‘rewriting’ of a series of texts from a particular historical and epistemological standpoint” (Luke, 1997, ¶ 13).

In a latter part of this chapter, I will specifically delineate strategies used in this study that are consistent with this methodological paradigm. Before doing so however, I want to make the case for a post structuralist approach to my research questions.

#### **4.2.2 Why post structuralism?**

The questions from this research study are well suited to a post structuralist paradigm for several reasons. Most importantly, the questions I have framed for investigation are situated in critique of dominant epistemological discourses in the field of citizenship education. As my earlier literature review established, there have been

some questions posed of the dominant developmental theories of youth which have been used as evidence for a particular view of youth as “deficit” and not “ready” for roles of civic involvement. An alternative paradigm that contests assumptions about a subject’s ‘readiness’ could offer a means of reconceptualizing youth agency that challenges this framework.

Secondly, there has already been considerable effort to conceptualize citizenship education within a modernist framework, relying on beliefs of common identities, national loyalty, civic duty/responsibility and civic knowledge as foundational to its curriculum and pedagogy. As Seixias (2000) argued, it is time to move beyond this focus on civic knowledge and theories of inclusive decision making to one that envisions how youth subjects can “construct their own representations of the social world” (p. 560): I believe that a post structuralist re-conceptualization of citizenship education can advance this goal. Moving from an emphasis on rationality and cognitive forms of knowledge construction among individuated agents, a post structuralist perspective affords a look at a more socially complex orientation to meaning making, positing human subjectivity as a product of processes of social signification and sense making in every day life. As a result, theorizing about sociopolitical agents becomes implicated in activity, practice and performance, an emphasis reflected in this research study.

Thirdly, in keeping with the principle of polyvocality, the research questions in this study seek to map the discourses and beliefs of a number of different youth, exploring their stories and understandings in order to consider the possibility of multiple and competing identities, and how these subjectivities affect the nature of their beliefs and practices as social agents. Rather than assuming that there should be a personal

commitment to democracy or civic engagement, the post structuralist approach relies on the voices of participants to express their own beliefs and understandings processually, seeking to map difference, diversity and emergence rather than looking for patterns of generalizability and stability. Moreover, the post structuralist paradigm insists that dominant narratives and discourses be questioned, deconstructed, and unpacked, to illustrate the ways in which power has afforded privilege to some voices, some forms of knowledge over others. This too is an approach that this research study takes.

Finally, an important role that the questions of this study emphasize is the need to query the continued differentiation of public and private life in terms of political agency and citizenship. As the earlier literature review noted, modernist conceptions of citizenship rely on understandings of the role that subjects play in political life; these roles are seen as central to the operation of the public sphere. For example, voting, deliberative dialogue and debate are all seen as practices of public involvement in the structures of modern democracies. The civic sphere is intentionally conceived as a public location.

The post structuralist paradigm critiques this view, and offers instead a way of conceptualizing the alternative spaces where agency may be activated, including the private and the everyday. One of the intentions of this study is to explore the familiar, to consider how youth perform their identities and act as social agents within their daily lives and how these everyday enactments might help re-direct our educational efforts to support youth in understanding and acting to promote social justice and civic agency.

### **4.2.3 Limitations of the post structural paradigm: the crisis of representation**

There are significant challenges to post structuralist research. As Lather (1991) described, the inevitability of reductionism is an inherent tension: how can this, or any writing, capture the full complexity of social life or adequately represent the voices of its study? Issues of representation and interpretation are always front and centre in post structural methods: the inadequacy of any method to fully represent human subjects and their actions or to fully capture meaning through research texts is a primary concern. Yet in spite of these limitations and the contradictions inherent in the act of research itself as always a form of representation, the post structuralist researcher needs to continue to “work the tension”. As Lather (2001) noted, this approach needs to detail and explore the “tension between the desire to know and the limits of representation” ... [allowing a] move from paralysis to possibility... [working both] “within/against location” (p. 204).

### **4.2.4 Questions of authenticity**

Another limitation of the qualitative post structuralist paradigm is described as the crisis of legitimation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). If grand narratives, including those of science are in question, including standards of objectivity and positivism, how is it possible to assess the worth of any scholarship? What new standards might be appropriate in work that seeks to emphasize multivocality, multiplicity, and a study of the particular rather than the generalizable? And if the means of representation are also in doubt, how can any legitimate means of authenticity be established? How this study responds to these questions will be afforded greater discussion in a later section of this chapter; however, at this point I will simply acknowledge that these issues continue to be debated as a part of the fifth, sixth and seventh moments of qualitative research (Denzin

& Lincoln, 2000, p. 24) that delineate the “tensions, contradictions and hesitations” (ibid) inherent in struggling to address issues of research legitimacy and representation.

#### **4.2.5 Critique versus nihilism**

Another well documented concern is the contradiction inherently afforded by the post structuralist stance: in its effort to reject metanarratives and the limitations afforded to social, economic, political or cultural structures, it imposes a nihilistic view of society (Lather, 1991, p. 114; Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 4). That is, if all knowledge is contingent and subjective, and if formal structures must be rejected as the result of hegemonic privileging, then can any values or knowledge be legitimized? This frames any research as an empty practice. Such criticisms are often used to dismiss the post structuralist or indeed any post modern perspective, outright. Yet as Butler (1995) attests, “to deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most importantly, to open up a term... to a re-usage or redeployment that previously has not been authorized” (p. 49). In other words, the reflexivity demanded by post structural approaches to research, affords new ways of considering knowledge and representations of knowledge. As the history of research and scholarship has repeatedly illustrated, this process of moving beyond earlier paradigms or perspectives act as moments where new possibilities for understanding emerge (Lather, 1991). Post structuralism then, offers a powerful lens for problematizing what social and cultural practices have been assumed as transparent, including how power and knowledge operate to privilege some and marginalize others (Peters & Burbules, 2004).

A related criticism rests on identifying the inconsistencies of a paradigm that rejects structuralism, when “post” methods rely on an existing knowledge of and



understanding about modernism in order to define itself as counter to its perceived limitations. Peters and Burbules (2004) seek to deconstruct this argument by problematizing the either/or binary inherent in such discussions. By carefully describing the relational dependency of post structuralism on the knowledge of structuralists such as Saussure and Levi Strauss, they argue that post structuralism is an extension of critical investigation methods and affords new insights into research processes.

#### **4.2.6 Working against the grain**

As this short discussion as sought to illustrate, post structural scholarship offers the possibility of focusing on alternative spaces, at the micro political or local levels, within fields of specific practices, providing an opportunity to “work against the grain” of metanarratives and discourses of subjugation. Discourses and practices of schooling are examples of the type of metanarratives that need to be unpacked if we are to reveal processes of subjugation; among them the characterization of youth as ‘at risk’ or ‘deficit’ (de Castell & Bryson, 1997), a Discourse that will be discussed at some length in Chapter Four. Drawing upon Smith’s (1993) conception of “surprising discourse”, the purpose of inquiry becomes unsettling dominant narratives as a way of making space for another (p. 6). Such is the work that this research has attempted to document and represent.

### **4.3 Methods Consistent With Post Structuralism**

Peters and Burbules (2004) argue that post structuralism is better characterized as a movement of thought than a method, and that in its application, it embodies different forms of critical practice and is interdisciplinary by nature (p. 18). Methods of inquiry or

investigation then, can be selected from across different fields of scholarship. In this study I draw upon a number of fields of study, including cultural studies, and more particularly performance and visual culture as research strands within this field. As well, some methods are also drawn from anthropology and sociology, each selected because of their compatibility with the post structural intentions of this study and a desire to explore the lived experiences of the youth participants in this study. In the next sections I detail the methods from these fields I will use during my research investigation.

#### **4.3.1 Cultural studies**

Cultural studies is a very broad category of research methodology; tracing its history is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, Frow and Morris (2000) note how the field of cultural studies has continually evolved in response to theoretical shifts and tensions, including those identified within the postmodern such as the crisis of representation and legitimation, the linguistic or discursive turn, questions of agency, identity and subjectivity, and the move from universalism to particularism. Another important influence on contemporary forms of cultural studies has been the study of media and popular culture, including cyber culture.

There are however, serious tensions that exist with the field; as new lines of inquiry developed in response to the linguistic turn and the discursive construction of the subject, issues of representation, and concern for social, historical, cultural and political contexts, different fields have sought to describe and investigate research in diverse and even contradictory ways (Sauuko, 2003, p. 30-35). Yet Frow and Morris (2000) suggest that cultural studies strength is that it “has been shaped in *encounters between*” (p. 317, italics in original) feminism, critical theory, anthropology, queer and post colonial

studies, indigenous scholarship, as well as media, film, and aesthetic studies. Its central tenet has been to engage in processes of investigation that can describe and analyze the lived experiences of research participants and in doing so, provide a means for exploring alternative perspectives, a stance highly consistent with post structuralism. The attributes of cultural studies arise from its inherent capacity to engage in a kind of double movement of critique and analysis, making it a methodological position that is compatible with post structuralism and the questions of this study.

#### **4.3.2 Studying visual culture**

Visual culture is a field of particular concern to this study because of the ways in which visual D/discourses are a central feature of everyday life (Mirzoeff, 1998) and is increasingly a part of postmodern scholarship (Rose, 2001). Rose (2001) has suggested that “post modernity is ocularcentric not simply because visual images are more and more common, nor because knowledges about the world are increasingly articulated visually, but because we interact more and more with totally constructed visual experiences” (p. 8). How D/discourses address, position, and constitute subjects is an area of priority in this field of scholarship, as was discussed in Chapter Two.

Scholars from this field use a variety of methods to investigate, trace, and engage in analysis of visual D/discourses. While discursive analysis has been a central feature of post structuralist investigation, there has been a tendency to emphasize linguistic forms, as was noted in Chapter One. Methods that investigate the constitutive effects of visual discourses will therefore enrich this study. A more detailed look at the specific strategies used in accomplishing this goal will be described in more detail in a subsequent section of this chapter.

### **4.3.3 Performance methods in cultural studies**

Earlier in this dissertation, I described the focus of this study was to study the lived experiences and agency of participating youth in three sites in which civic identity and social justice were central educational concerns. Performance scholars, among them Conquergood (1986) argue that a focus on performance ensures that culture cannot be reified into discrete categories of analysis or study, but rather becomes centered in the ways in which human subjects interact or perform. Other performance scholars (Alexander, Anderson & Gallegos, 2005; Denzin, 2003; Foley, 2005) also emphasize a decentered subject, and the social and cultural contexts that shape activity in every day life. Considering the experience of research participants as performers evokes the complexity of social and cultural contexts as they are engaged in activity; given the focus on activity and agency in this study, a performance frame is a useful one to consider.

Another benefit in using methods that consider performance as a frame for analysis is its compatibility with Wertsch's (1998) concept of mediated action. With activity and performance as a focus, discussions of agency become based in action and the tools which enable that activity, and support the claims of this dissertation that agency is a product of discourse and practices. Likewise, the nature of performance analysis can focus on how the body itself is a cultural tool that enables and constrains the performance of agency. This emphasis on embodiment is also a focus of new forms of ethnographic research (Saukko, 2003) and helps to accomplish the goal of more accurate representation of the lived experiences of research participants.

#### **4.3.4 Post structuralism: methodological experimentation**

In the opening of this chapter, I alluded to the ways in which the post structural perspective invited evocative and creative use of texts. A number of scholars have opened the door to different forms of experimental research texts as a means of representing the multiplicity and diversity of lived experience (Behar, 1996; Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Denzin, 2003; Ellis, 1997; 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 2001; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Richardson, 1992). The conception of performance articulated here links these ideas together: research texts can be performed as examples of more authentic engagements with research participants, illustrating how knowledge is both performed and performative. Its articulation and representation is also a performance for the researcher, and illustrates the reflexive potential that performance and production offer. Exploring the limits of one's own subjectivity as a research practice may also enable a means of moving beyond these limits, although such efforts need to continually acknowledge the recursive and constituted nature of the work (Davies, 2000, p. 9). The idea of performance and performativity through the research process is illustrated in the methodological approach taken in Chapter Six of this study.

#### **4.4 In C/Site-ing The Research**

Before outlining the specifics of the research site, the post structural scholar needs to acknowledge their own "research location". I began this process early in this study as the opening autobiographical narrative in Chapter One suggests: my experiences and questions about the processes of becoming politically active have driven my desire to engage in this specific research project. As Reinharz (1992) noted, "many feminist

researchers frequently start with an issue that bothers them personally and then use everything they can get hold of to study it” (p. 259).

Each researcher is also influenced by the ways in which they have come to understand the research process itself: as Eisner (1988) affirmed “the categories we are taught, the sources of evidence that we believe count, the language that we learn to use govern our world-views. How we come to see the world, what we think it means, and eventually what we believe we can do about that world are intimately related to the technologies of mind that we have acquired” (p. 19). Thus documenting the “hegemony of [my] propositions” (p. 16) is an important goal of this chapter. I want to begin this work by considering the processes I used to select particular sites for this research project. However, before doing so, I will briefly summarize the research protocols I followed before beginning this work.

#### **4.4.1 Research Protocols**

Research approval was first sought and granted by Simon Fraser University. Following this initial level of approval, I required permission from the school district in which this study was located in order to complete research with students; I also needed approval from the Northern Regional Health authority as one of the research sites I selected involved a health authority employee, and their policies require that any involvement by an employee in a research project receive their approval.

Additional approval was required by each research participant. As per the school district protocol, all youth participants in the school district were required to have parental permission. For the other research participants as well as for the adults who were interviewed as a part of this research project, a research approval form was created that

did not require parental consent. These complied with the policies of Simon Fraser University's research protocols.

#### **4.4.2 The three research sites**

As the first chapter outlined, this research project was conducted in three sites. Each site was located in the northern part of British Columbia in a largely urban centre, chosen for its proximity to my own work location. Site selection was guided by a number of factors including: recommendations of the local school district; the diversity of pedagogical approaches that each educator /or facilitator sought to use in promoting among youth an understanding of social justice and civic agency; formal agency permission; and the individual willingness of site leaders to engage in a research process.

In locating appropriate sites for investigation, my first step was to contact the local school district to seek advice about possible locations as well as determine research approval protocols. This turned out to be a useful strategy as this school district had some very specific requirements as to how contact with school sites could be initiated. Once this formal permission process had been initiated, I was permitted to contact individual schools and teachers.

The nature of my research inquiry was always a guide to how an appropriate site would be identified. My review of scholarship in citizenship education had determined that much of the school based investigation had focused on either a civics class or a social studies class, the subject areas that most frequently discussed and developed notions of democratic or civic engagement. Yet in conceptualizing my study as a means to “trouble” the existing discourse, it seemed important to identify sites that could problematize this view, in particular, by including at least one non-school site. If a goal was to trace the

diversity of sociopolitical practices that youth might engage in, then site diversity needed to be a clear priority. The sites also needed to be locations where youth might be actively engaged in issues or activities that afforded the possibility of demonstrating social activity and agency. These criteria (school versus non-school and potential for experiential agency) served to narrow the field considerably.

I sought the advice of district personnel and the local teachers' association as knowledgeable members of the local educational community. Using a snowball sampling technique (Palys, 1997, p. 139), I followed up by visiting several possible research sites nominated by district staff as well by the local teachers' association office. After these initial site visits and in reviewing my research criteria, I was able to narrow the field to two possible sites within the school district. The first was J. S. Secondary school: here a local teacher had developed a student leadership program. The strength of this site was its experiential focus; in the tradition of service learning (Niemi, Hepburn & Chapman, 2000; Perry & Katula, 2001; Saltmarsh, 2005; Yates & Youniss, 1998; Youniss & Yates, 1997) it was a program that had students directly engaged in school and community based service. Located in a middle class neighbourhood, the school had access to a wide range of resources to support their activities.

The second was an alternate education class at a Northern high school. The strength of this site was that it was made up of students from across the school district that had, for whatever reason, not been successful in mainstream schooling. These students were described as "marginalized" or "at risk" in a number of ways: at risk of dropping out; at risk of being street or drug involved; likely to be poor and/or aboriginal; at risk of being apathetic or socially disengaged. This school was situated in a working



class neighbourhood and has a wide range of ethnicities represented, including a significant aboriginal population. Despite how these attributes might be classed as significant barriers to school success, their teacher was described as someone who worked to empower students educationally and socially.

The diversity and contrast offered by these two alternative approaches to education, their very different social, cultural and economic locations, their divergent student populations, the range of ethnicities present or absent, as well as the possibility of a varied range of views, beliefs, and perspectives by students themselves provided two equally rich environments that would permit a wide scope of investigation.

The third location was a non-school site; the Street Spirits Theatre Company had hosted a local event to premiere a film they had produced about teen pregnancy. While at this event I was immediately drawn to the social action framework the artistic director described in his introduction. This film premiere was also attended by several of the theatre group's youth members: they represented a diverse range of adolescents and young adults, some of whom were school dropouts, others currently attending school, and some street involved. Again, the diversity of the youth represented in this group, as well as their involvement in social action through theatrical means offered another contrasting setting in which to investigate youth agency. It was also a non-school site, a priority criterion I had identified early in my research design process.

#### **4.5 Post Structuralist Research Strategies**

The poststructuralist researcher is very much a bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; 2000), bringing together a diverse series of strategies and approaches to the processes of research design, investigation and analysis. There are not specific methods

that are used by post structuralists; rather, they draw upon the critique offered by its proponents as tools for investigation and questioning.

In this next section, I detail those primary and secondary data collection methods used throughout the study. This will be followed by a discussion of the particular field practices—that is, the ways in which researchers operate while in the field—I used in this research study and the justification for their uses.

#### **4.5.1 Primary data collection methods: ethnography**

Ethnography is a well known methodology; first used predominantly in the field of anthropology, it is now widely used in a number of disciplines by sociologists, anthropologists, dramaturgical and educational theorists, media and communications scholars as it offers a useful framework for researchers who seek to situate their work with explicit reference to social and cultural experiences.

Ethnography, or “new” ethnography, is also a research practice compatible with a post modern or post structuralist research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lather, 1991, 2001; Marcus, 1994; Saukko, 2003). Having moved beyond the “realism” attributed to ethnography’s early forms, “post” ethnographies seek to problematize issues of representation, linguistic and cultural realism, and narratives of empowerment and emancipation. Counter practices such as the use of journals, photo essays, fiction and short stories co-writing, interactive interview formats, reflexive autoethnographic writing (Denzin, 2003; Lather, 2001) are all ways researchers have attempted to blur epistemological boundaries and create “messy texts” (Marcus, 1994) that might be more true to the lived experiences of its participants. This research text relied on the use of some “post” ethnographic methods, described below.

#### 4.5.2 Ethnographic strategies

##### *Field notes*

Like most ethnographers, I used field notes to collect a wide range of data. Field based observation is a well used practice among qualitative researchers; practices range from the traditional ethnographic participant observation (including verbatim and interpretative note taking or recording) to the more technologically oriented use of photograph, film, and video. In the ethnographic tradition, such observations need to be conducted over a period of time, and should result in a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the event(s) or subject(s) under study, emphasizing the cultural contexts in which such performances occur. From this descriptive foundation interpretive steps follow, with a goal of credibility advanced on the basis of an emphasis on direct experience or “the close study of culture as lived by particular people, in particular places, doing particular things at particular times” (Van Maanan, 1995, p. 23).

Throughout the ten months of my study I kept extensive field notes, detailing the incidents, events, behaviours, and social and cultural contexts of my research participants. Following Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) I engaged in practices of “participation in order to write”; I worked extensively with the research participants throughout my study, making an effort to record first impressions as well as my own emotional responses to what I saw, heard, and understood. At various times I focused on sensory action, that is, I looked to the ways in which movements, gesture, facial expressions, and tones as clues and indicators of meaning during discussions or dialogues. This helped me to focus on how events or practices might be conceived of as “performances”. Rather than judge the importance of any event in particular, as much as possible, I recorded as much as I could, whether it appeared at the time to be significant

or not. This practice is encouraged by Silver (1997) who argues that discursive ethnography should focus on what is otherwise naturalized as the usual or routine and should consider how participants

continuously assemble and use the interactional and interpretive resources 'provided' by social settings to construct, defend, repair and change social realities. These reality-constructing activities may involve practices that are so taken-for-granted by setting members that they go unnoticed and unreported. Hence the emphasis by discursively oriented ethnographers on observing...the actual ways in which setting members construct social realities by making sense of practical issues (Silver, 1997, p. 27-28).

I kept a researcher note book as well, in which I explored my own concerns and feelings about the research process as it proceeded, in order to engage in reflective thinking. In particular I noted how the research process caused me to question and re-consider my own conceptions and ideas about the role of the researcher and how I thought about and characterized research participants' activities.

The majority of my field-work yielded detailed accounts of the daily activities of research participants in each of my three research sites. I kept a notebook with me at all times and as much as possible kept short coded notes that served as triggers for remembering details for more detailed recording at the end of the day, which I typically typed up and saved in labelled computer files. On occasion I used photography or film to capture particular events or activities. Photos and video were stored on CD discs to aid in the process of re-viewing and analysis, although in most cases these events were referred to in the written field notes as well. While all notes were kept electronically, I also printed out copies as a means of assisting in my analysis and processes of sense making.

### 4.5.3 Reflexive and personal accounts

Pink (2001) has argued that taking a reflexive stance as researcher is one way in which greater ethnographic authenticity may be achieved (p. 20). Reflexive writing attempts to transgress the boundaries between the researcher and researched and grounds his/her investigation in the subjective experiences of self and others. In keeping with this reflexive tradition, many entries within my field notes reflect on the personal: my own feelings, worries and moments of self understanding that emerge as a result of my immersion in the field. This dissertation text also includes examples that document my reflexive efforts in both Chapters One and Five.

This exploration has also been informed by Behar's (1996) conception of the vulnerable observer: "To write vulnerably is to open a Pandora's box. Who can say what comes flying out?" (p. 21). She has argued that vulnerable writing, particularly in ethnographic forms, helps undo the ethnographic authority and privilege afforded in the tradition of researcher as all-knowing other. This does not mean we should privilege our own self reflexivity and offer it as a "confessional tale" that is "at best self indulgent, narcissistic, and tiresome" (Pillow, 2003). The use of self reflexive methods does not necessarily produce better research. The goal, rather, is to authentically engage in ways that reduce privilege and power differentials as much as possible. In Chapter Six I explore my own experiences as participant, illustrating the "vulnerability" of bringing the self into the process of research and representing this as a legitimate research text. For me, such a narrative/play/performance serves to illustrate the tensions and changing identities I have experienced as a part of the research process and the emotional vulnerability that came from working with these particular youth over an extended period of time.

## 4.6 Visual Methodologies

Visual methodologies are enjoying an increased level of interest among qualitative researchers (Banks, 1998; Rose, 2001; Pink, 2001; Pink, Kürti, & Afonso, 2004; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2003). As Pink (2001) noted, “images are as inevitable as sounds, words or any other aspect of culture and society” (p. 17) and as such form an important feature of any research study that seeks to take a cultural perspective to its research questions, as this study does.

Visual methods have been used in research for many years, although as Grimshaw and Ravetz (2005) argued, they have largely been a technique of anthropological inquiry. Over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, image based technologies became more prominent in ethnographic field work, the camera in particular becoming a critical ethnographic tool (p. 4). Indeed, Harper (2000) posited that the camera became a primary tool of the scientific revolution, the implication of which was the “eye” became an instrument of modernism and evidentiary belief (p. 718).

In contemporary anthropological inquiry, film and video remain popular choices, although photography still remains in use. However, where once visual representations might have been characterized as representations of the real, more recent scholarship argues that all texts (including visual texts) are polysemic, that is, having the capacity to carry multiple sets of meanings, largely dependent upon the interpretation of the reader (Barthes, 1967; Hall, 1980; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1998/2006).

In the field of education, one could argue that visual methodologies have received far less attention, with the bulk of educational investigations and methods of reporting falling within textual forms of investigation. For example, in the most recent *Handbook*

*of Qualitative Research*, only one chapter was devoted to visual methods, and this remains largely a discussion of sociological inquiry. Some exceptions include Prosser's (1999) work that devoted significant attention to the visual sociology of schools, the field of media studies in schools (for example, Alasuutari, 1999; Ellsworth, 1990; Masterman, 1985) as well as the field of media literacy (for example see Luke, 1997; O'Brien, 2001; Silverblatt, 2001), which seeks to promote critical thinking and viewing skills in school aged children. As a result, this study's use of visual methodologies may offer an important contribution to the research practices of educational ethnographers.

In this study, the inclusion of visual texts as a D/discursive resource is highlighted: how these visual discourses come into play is a central feature of analysis throughout this dissertation. Visual methodologies can assist in the process of confirming or developing existing theories (Harper, 2000, p. 729) by eliciting from participants beliefs, values, and understandings through a dialogue initiated by the examination of images, and this study used visual methods to engage in a dialogue with participating youth about conceptions of social change and agency. This technique, described as photo elicitation, will be described in more detail shortly. However, while using photos or images in an interview can be an important prompt to discussion (Canal, 2004), it should not be considered a transparent methodology that allows for a simple reading or interpretation of images. Rather, photo elicitation needs to be understood as a construction of the researcher, both through the selection of the images that will be viewed as well as through the contextual frame created as particular questions are posed to research participants. As Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2003) noted in their discussion of narrative interview techniques, the frame of the researcher questions may suggest a

response that reflects the researcher's discursive field rather than that of the research participants. This may be even more of a concern in a research site where teachers are consistently granted epistemological authority. Taking these perspectives into account was an important consideration in this research.

#### **4.6.1 Photo elicitation**

Prosser and Warburton (1999) discussed how researcher generated images can be a useful tool in discussing concepts and issues among research participants. As my earlier discussion about the predominance of the image in everyday life illustrated, cultural and social conventions are conveyed as much through image as they are through written or oral texts. The premise then of using image with research participants is that it may offer a useful method of eliciting cultural or social understandings among research participants.

Two of the early practitioners of this research technique were Collier and Collier (1986). They used photographs as "communication bridges between strangers that can become pathways into unfamiliar, unforeseen environments and subjects... They can function as starting and reference points for discussion of the familiar or the unknown, and their literal content can almost always be read within and across cultural boundaries" (p. 99). The possibility of creating bridges between the researcher and the researched is an important goal; as Collier and Collier (1986) go on to note, the use of images offered a means of allowing the interviewed subject to take the lead in the inquiry and to describe in much greater detail their own understandings, rather than relying on prompts that came from the experiences and perspectives of the researcher and that had the effect of inhibiting the research participants understandings.



Readers will likely be concerned that this approach may rely on a positivist view of image and photography as ‘truth’ rather than a socially or culturally situated practice. More recent scholarship in the use of photo elicitation has acknowledged these deficiencies. For example, O’Neill, Gidden, Breatnach, Bagley, Bourne and Judge (2002) suggest that photographs can be used reflexively; that is, they can “inspire a more emotionally charged response or rupture our complacency” (p. 73). This possibility reflects the post structuralist emphasis on subjectivity, and provides a means through which subject position and social location may inform the processes of interpretation. In this way, the use of photo elicitation is consistent with the post structuralist imperative for polyvocality and differentiation.

#### **4.6.2 Thickening description through visual methods**

Tracing the responses that members of a particular youth audience make to particular visual texts offers a way of enriching and “thickening” the description employed by ethnographers in educational inquiry, while also providing a means through which to explore how discourses have performative effects. Unlike participant observation, photo elicitation works from the practice of interactive sense making, in which the photo image serves as a cultural tool to elicit the views of participants.

In this research study I was challenged to find a means to explore a number of concepts or beliefs that I believed were central to my research questions, in particular, agency. While my ethnographic observations and focus groups had elicited some examples that helped illuminate how youth conceived of these ideas, I wanted to provoke a more explicit conversation about participating youth’s beliefs and views. While the use of open-ended questions might serve to support the expression of these ideas, I was

concerned that my own language in subsequent probes or re-phrasing might further constrain responses rather than allowing for a more open opportunity where youth views would take centre stage.

Given the polysemic nature of images (Barthes, 1967)—as signs that can be read and interpreted through multiple lens of experience and subjectivities, although always expressed through socially and culturally constructed ‘grammars’ of interpretation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1998/2006)—I hoped to engage the participating youth in a conversation about agency and sociopolitical activity. Following Kress and van Leeuwen (1998/2006) I was also interested in the performative nature of image as signifiers for particular beliefs and/or normative claims. For example, in what ways might particular images of individuals convey particular conceptions of sociopolitical agency? If I were able to find images that conveyed dominant or alternative beliefs about which individuals in our society had agentic capacity, this might provide a useful means of exploring youth understandings. This would also offer a means of exploring the relationship between theories of discursive constitution, subject position, and processes of signification in the social construction of agency.

#### **4.6.3 Selecting the images for use in the interviews**

Rose (2001) argued that researchers need to provide evidence of the means through which visual images are chosen in order to provide a test of validity. While research questions largely frame methodological decisions, they should be made explicit so the reader understands the theoretical or pragmatic reasons for their inclusion (p. 60). The following describes the steps I took to select images for the photo elicitation strategy I used during individual interviews.

The first decision was to determine a source for these images. While there are many potential sources of image that could be used as a selection bank, because of my theoretical decision to focus on the lived experiences of participating youth, I wanted to select image sources easily accessible and popular. I began by collecting a sample of twenty magazines available to youth in the Alt Ed class; their teacher, Maggee Starr<sup>5</sup> kept current and back issues of both “Time” and “McLean’s” magazines on her reading shelf. As these are both examples of mainstream magazines that seek to represent issues of social, economic, and political significance, and were regularly accessed by the students as reading material, they offered a useful source of images. The magazines used covered a range of dates throughout 2005.

Each image was chosen because of its potential for evoking discourses of agency; that is, in what ways might this image evoke a conversation about an individual or group’s ability to taken action or their motivation for taking such action(s)? I also considered: image size (so that it would be easy to determine gender, age, race, social location); if the image was free of accompanying text and that it had no obvious commercial intention (for example, if it was selling a product like an I Pod), I excluded it from consideration. This left me with about 20 images to consider. A concern that immediately became apparent was the lack of cultural, racial or gender diversity: most of the images represented white males. To alleviate this problem, I purchased an assortment of journals including “Mother Jones”, “Tikkun”, and “Canadian Geographic” covering a range of dates (August-October, 2005) so I could add more diverse representations to the image collection. With close to fifty images, I then sorted them on the basis of gender, race or culture and age. The final collection of images included thirteen men and twelve

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<sup>5</sup> A pseudonym

women; among these were five men of colour, six women of colour, three children/ adolescents of colour; and four children/adolescents who appeared white. Two black and white documentary style images were included in the mix: these were selected as potential sources for historical narratives of agency or social action. Several of the images were included for consideration by the interviewees because of their evocative qualities; pictures of the very poor, for example, might prompt a conversation about identification with others as a moral obligation, and an image of a group of protesters might evoke a conversation about resistance. In each case, the images might evoke a conversation about moral worth, moral values and human agency. Two images were also chosen because of how they illustrated some normative conceptions of political agency and activism. For example, one image showed a white man in business suit and carrying a briefcase walking up a set of stairs. In including these images I hoped to see how these “dominant readings” might be accepted, negotiated, resisted or re-signified. A complete list of the images and a brief description of each is included in the Appendix.

Each picture was numbered for ease of reference. In introducing the picture set to the youth participants, I would ask them to “look through all of these pictures and select ones that you think show someone who might want to take action in solving a problem or wanting to bring about change”. After sorting through each of the pictures, we would discuss those photo images they had selected and why they had made a particular selection.

Photo elicitation was useful tool for opening the imaginative scope of what it might mean for a young person or adult to be a change agent. It also provided insights into how image acts in the construction of social agency and political knowledge and how

visual discourses were implicated in the processes of sense making. The specific methods of analysis used in interpreting the youth's responses to these images are described in more detail later in this chapter.

#### **4.7 Participatory Methodologies**

While theorizing and analyzing the responses of research participants is an important function of research production and knowledge building, another important research outcome is to find ways a researcher can work collaboratively with participants, potentially co-constructing new or enhanced understandings of social and political life, a research goal of this study. Participatory methods are also consistent with the post structuralist goal of polyvocality and inclusivity of multiple perspectives and epistemological locations.

Participatory research grew out of a dissatisfaction and resistance to typical practices of research that effectively "othered" those being studied (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Many of these practices have arisen from research conducted in developing countries (such as the work of Hall, Gillette & Tandon, 1982) or among indigenous researchers (such as Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). In this view, participants are deemed to have knowledge that should be valued and respected as a part of the research design. As Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) argued "the extent that social research ignores the participant view, or imposes itself ( in process of findings) on participants, it is likely to be regarded as illegitimate, to foster alienation, and thus to provoke resistance" (p. 590-591).

In this case of this research study, beyond its consistency with principles of post structuralism, methods of participatory research also offered an opportunity to build

greater trust between the researcher and the research participants. It was also consistent with sociocultural models of learning outlined in chapter two, that offer a challenge to the traditional views of learning as developmental—in this case, youth could be understood as teachers and vice versa.

In this study, collaborative methods were used in two of the sites. At Northern High, the Alt Ed youth were asked to create and share their understandings of social issues through the production of a self-directed photo essay. Digital cameras were provided for participating youth; they spent a period of about two months engaged in taking photos and working in the computer lab creating an image based narrative to share with the researcher and their classmates in the final week of the research study. (A detailed account of this project is discussed in Chapter Eight). By allowing these youth to take the lead in the composition of the narrative, a potential space in which alternative discourses about social or political action was contemplated. For example, practices such as ‘tagging’ on schools or other buildings could be considered a means of democratizing public spaces rather than deviant rule breaking.

At the same time, several discussions were devoted to the ways in which photography could be used as a means of communicating dominant messages or stories. The goal of this part of the project was to move beyond simply a technical understanding of visual images, but to ensure that these critical practices “*lead on to action with and/or against the text*” (Luke, O’Brien & Comber, 1994, p. 143). As such, our mutual exploration of how the camera and computer technologies could be put to use in constructing narratives provided a means through which the research experience was co-constructed and shared. The exploration of image was not confined to simply viewing,

but involved the actual production of image and applying what we had learned collaboratively to the representational task. In this way we were all engaged in functions of design, interpretation and production. The final images were displayed using a number of different technologies including power point slides, a web site and posters.

The research conducted at the Street Spirits Theatre youth site also afforded opportunities for collaborative knowledge building. The conception of collaboration was enhanced by the participatory nature of the work with these youth. An initial condition placed on my research with these youth was that I become a participating member of the theatre company. Over the course of the ten months of study, I joined rehearsals and was selected to participate in three different public performances. The nature of my own learning process and subjective experiences in engaging in public performance became a central feature of my own self-reflection. As an apprentice of the social action theatre method used by the company, I saw myself as both participant and researcher. Not surprisingly perhaps, this subject position opened my research discourse to alternative conceptions, and resulted in the creation of a co-operatively produced research script, which was eventually performed by the Street Spirits Company.

There were fewer opportunities for collaborative research design strategies in the J. S. Secondary school site. In part, this was a function of the limited time these youth participants spent together as a group, and the curricular demands of the program they were a part of, which left little time for open discussions or opportunities to seek advice or ideas. However, Barone and Eisner (1997) point out that participant inclusive research can also include those times when participants are invited to join a pre-designed project, but also provides opportunities for participant generated knowledge creation processes.

At this site in particular, this was my approach. For example, in focus group discussions, the collaborative model of discussion and topic selection was in use. There was also choice in terms of students telling me how comfortable they were with my accompanying them to their community or off site leadership events; in some cases I was included in planning as well as asked to come along during one of their off site projects. As much as possible, I worked as a volunteer and participant when I accompanied students during their field service activities: they used me as a resource to help with carrying materials, food preparation, or clean up. I was also a resource when students engaged in brainstorming or developing ideas about how to approach particular tasks or events as a part of their service work. Finally, I gave them opportunities to reflect on their own beliefs about the curricular goals or purposes of the leadership program as a means of framing my interview questions used in the final weeks of the research study.

## **4.8 Interviews**

Interviews are often used as a tool by the qualitative researcher to gather data from research participants (Gaskell, 2003; Schostak, 2006; Seidman, 1991, 1998). An interview is a very useful way for the researcher to collect relatively large amounts of data in a relatively short period of time and is therefore often considered a very effective research strategy (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Interviews are most often conducted as a means of exploring the perspectives and beliefs of research informants. Fontana and Frey (1994) report that the early use of interviewing was as a means of verifying or quantifying survey data collected from other sources; its purpose was to support generalizability and theory generation (p. 362-363). As qualitative research design became more prominent, the interview became a standard



vehicle through which to explore the personal experiences, beliefs, and understandings of individuals and groups. Silverman (1993) argued the qualitative interview is a form that allows the researcher to “generate data which give an authentic insight into people’s experiences” (p. 91).

However, the use of interviews as an accepted social means of determining truth and facts normalizes or naturalizes particular research processes and practices that, in the post structuralist tradition, require more careful examination. Post modern scholarship has problematized several aspects of the interview process, including researcher location, representation, intimacy and reciprocity, and interpretation. I will deal briefly with each issue before describing the details of the interview process I used in this study.

Throughout this chapter I have highlighted the issue of researcher location, and the degree to which personal beliefs, values, and researcher stance influence or frame how the research is designed, conducted and interpreted. In the context of interviews, this suggests that the post structuralist researcher will engage in reflexive moments and consider how the interview process was influenced or shaped through particular lines of inquiry, or how in the process of dialogic engagement, understandings were built or constructed collaboratively. This implies a form of “creative interviewing” (Douglas, 1985 as cited by Fontana & Frey, 2000) that allows for a more spontaneous and open ended format that may not follow a particular script or list of questions. A post structuralist approach also suggests that the contents of an interview are not objective representations of knowledge, but rather are socially and culturally situated narratives. Interview data might better be described as “negotiated” and “situated” texts, and these

conditions should be reflected in the researcher's summary and analysis (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

A related concern is reported in Soep's (2006) work with youth media producers: she discusses how the use of 'reported speech' is frequently used in research texts as a means of creating authenticity by representing verbatim the views and beliefs of participants. However, she problematizes this approach by considering how a participant might weave varied voices into their utterances (p. 4). "Crowded speech" is the term she uses to explore the complexity and the traces of many voices that may be present in a single utterance. In doing so, she also theorizes that many utterances, as they are spoken, should be considered as rehearsals or ways in which subjects may be 'trying on' many different ways of thinking, evaluating them, if you will, in their expression. As such, any effort to represent utterances spoken as "true" or "real" representations must be rejected and instead characterized as only partial and potentially experimental expressions of understandings.

In Oakley's (1985) field work, scholars are also reminded that interviews, from a feminist perspective, place a high value on developing relationships with research participants rather than concerning oneself with objective and bias free methodologies (cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 27-28). As Oakley (1992) stated, "There is no intimacy without reciprocity" (p. 49). Developing and maintaining trust remains a key goal of a feminist approach to interviews. Reinharz (1992) reports how a number of feminist scholars deferred doing interviews until a relationship had been established and a high level of trust had been achieved (p. 30). This was certainly a strategy that I found beneficial in conducting my own interviews.

## 4.9 Research Protocols

In this research study, I completed interviews with a number of participants at each site. A blanket invitation was extended to all participants; however, logistics and interest limited the number of interviews finally completed. In total, I interviewed twenty-five youth, about seven at each site. As noted earlier, I did not do interviews with the majority of participants early in the process, but waited until the final month of the project to complete these interviews. My greater knowledge of the interviewees enabled by the relationships that had formed over the course of the ten-month period of inquiry helped the interview process proceed with considerable ease. Contrasting the later interviews with the two interviews I completed in the first three months of the research process illustrated conclusively how the later interviews had an ease of conversational flow that came from familiarity between myself and the research participant, as well as having a richer depth of discussion and range of topics explored.

While operating from a semi-structured set of questions, these questions were used largely as a guide; the end result of these interviews produced a number of narratives as well as considerable scope of topics, as the research participants led the discussion into directions that had personal significance to them. Some questions were more specifically targeted to particular research sites, given the range of activities that these youth engaged in at each location.

Not all youth interviews included participation in the photo elicitation section; some declined participation in this part of the interview. Twenty in total participated in the photo elicitation process as a means of exploring the range of views on issues of social change, agency and justice/equity. All interviews were taped and later transcribed.

These interview transcripts were later coded and interpreted following Seidman (1991) "with an open attitude, seeking what emerges as important and of interest from the text" (p. 89).

#### **4.10 Focus Groups**

Another primary means of data collection was through the use of focus groups. Gaskell (2003) suggests that focus groups are a sub category of the interview, describing it as a group interview. However, he notes there are differences in the dynamics and processes used in focus group, advising that they may also have different purposes that need to be considered in the research design.

An in depth interview affords the researcher a somewhat lengthy opportunity to lead the participant through a series of designed questions; even an open ended interview is the product of the researcher's questions, and while it may afford the research participant some scope for alternative directions, it remains a product of the researcher's initial questions and guidance. The power differential in this scenario is also significant. And while my own interview strategy was to complete individual interviews at a later date when trust relationships had developed more fully, in the shorter term, I needed to begin some level of conversation about the nature of my research questions and find ways to engage with these youth in discussing my research interests, approach to the research project, and encourage their ideas for shaping its direction. Using the focus group method seemed the most appropriate way to proceed in the initial stages of the research process as a way of reducing the power differential, but also because it afforded a more open-ended means of exploring concepts and ideas. As Gaskell (2003) suggests:

The objective of the focus group is to stimulate the participants to talk and respond to each other, to compare experiences and impressions and to react to what other people in the group say... and as such the meanings or representations that emerge are more influenced by the social nature of the group interaction, rather than relying on the individual perspective, as in the depth interview... Group interaction may generate emotion, humour, spontaneity and creative insights... the focus group is a more naturalistic and holistic setting in which the participants take account of the views of others in formulating their responses and commenting on their own and other experiences (p. 46).

Madriz (2000) also discussed how the focus group is also an appropriate strategy for the post structural researcher concerned with power differentials. "This technique is particularly useful to postmodernist ethnographers, who attempt to remain as close as possible to the accounts of everyday life while trying to minimize the distance between themselves and their research participants. It is believed that the group situation may reduce the influence of the interviewer on the research subjects by tilting the balance of power toward the group" (p. 838).

I used focus groups in two of the three research sites; given the regulated structure of classrooms, participant observation could not always be the primary means of data collection. The curricular focus of each high school setting meant that opportunities for open dialogue were much more limited, so I sought permission from the two instructors to set up a series of focus groups as a means of engaging these youth in a deeper understanding of my research focus, and to solicit from them their views and ideas about topics related to the research. The third site, the Street Spirits Theatre group did not participate in focus groups, as it was much easier to engage these youth in discussions about topics simply by virtue of being a part of their theatre company. Its relatively unstructured nature provided many opportunities to explore issues related to agency,

social issues of concern to individuals, and how these ideas were linked to their participation in the Street Spirits theatre group.

#### **4.10.1 Focus groups held**

There were four focus groups at Northern High school conducted over a three-month period, between September and November 2005. There were three focus groups at J. S. High school; a fourth was scheduled and cancelled due to the teachers strike, and could not be rescheduled due to participating youth's time constraints. These focus groups were also conducted between September and November 2005. Attendance varied in each of the focus groups. At Northern High school, there was a greater consistency of membership throughout the three-month period due to the fact that these students were usually assigned full time to this one classroom location. Attendance was quite regular for most students and as the focus groups were conducted during class time, there was consistency among research participants.

Attendance was more sporadic and often involved different research participants in the J. S. Secondary school site. This was because these students had only the one class in common, and as a result, focus groups were scheduled over the school lunch hour. This meant that some students had competing priorities, including gym, sports, or other scheduled school club meetings or activities. Communication was also inhibited by the fact that every student had a different timetable, and the school did not have a method of communicating with individual students about external-to-school events. I had to rely on verbal reminders from one session to the next, and on my system of "hallway chatting". By this I mean the way in which I spent time between classes in the hallways of the school when students were moving from class to class; this afforded me the opportunity

to get a stronger sense of the school culture, hear school announcements, watch the interaction of staff and students, and also talk with the students who were a part of my research group.

However, early in my research I discovered that food was a powerful motivator for attendance. I learned this in one of my first class visits, as Jeff Sugar, the leadership teacher at J. S. Secondary school regularly provided pizza during lunch hour meetings to encourage attendance. As a result of limited attendance and the re-scheduling of at least one focus group, I determined to provide food for each subsequent event. After this, whenever I saw students in the halls, they would always ask, “What [food] did you bring today?” In this way, food became a primary means of making consistent contact.

Each focus group was designed to follow up on how the previous discussion had unfolded, by addressing topics of interest to the group, as well as accommodating my research interests in probing for their understandings about particular concepts related to sociopolitical identity and agency. As noted earlier in this chapter, my concern was always to try to not overly influence their discussions by imposing my worldview through the use of particular language or representations of sociopolitical identity and agency. The first focus group therefore afforded quite a challenge.

I decided to begin the process by using examples from the local newspaper as a catalyst for launching the initial discussions. Coincidentally, at J. S. High school, one of the adolescents in this research study had been profiled in the local paper as a student who had fought for changes in school policy. I used this newspaper article as a catalyst into a conversation designed to consider “what can youth do when they are faced with problems that concern them?” At Northern high school, no such example existed, and so,

drawing from the classroom cultural practice of newspaper reading upon school arrival, I engaged them in a formal discussion of issues by using the most current edition of the daily paper. These strategies were successful in that they helped me identify a series of issues of concern that could be used in subsequent discussions and focus group sessions.

All focus groups were recorded on tape and then transcribed. Accompanying researcher notes were added to the computer file that contained a summary of each focus group. In particular, I tried to capture non-verbal communication, notes about emerging or existing dynamics between research participants, as well as ideas about how to modify or alter subsequent sessions on the basis of adolescents comments or views about next steps or topics of interest/concern to them.

#### **4.11 Secondary Data Collection Methods: Document Artifacts**

Another means by which data was gathered during this research study was by collecting various texts and artifacts that provided background information to the various research sites. As Marshall and Rossman (1995) report, these texts can provide a rich source of data that can convey the values and beliefs of research participants, as well as evidence of dominant narratives and discourses in use at particular locations.

In this study, I collected a number of curriculum documents (both provincial and locally developed), as well as some student texts. I also collected local newspaper stories that had significance to this study; in particular, I focused on clipping all of the local stories around the teacher's strike, as this provided useful contextual and discursive information that was frequently cited as a source of information among youth participants. At Northern High, I also examined a number of teacher created curriculum resources that were used by students in their studies.



## 4.12 Strategies For Analysis Or Interpretation?

Using terms like analysis and interpretation quickly get the qualitative researcher into contested territory, and amid debates of qualitative versus quantitative data methods, what counts, and what should count as valid or reliable research outcomes. There are assumed social codes and images attached to the word interpretation: Wolcott (1994) suggested that the use of the term ‘analysis’ evokes scientific processes, white coats and truth claims. ‘Analysis’ presumes something “inherently conservative, careful, systematic” (p. 25). Such conceptions of analysis have the effect of creating distance between the researched and the researcher who analyses them from the position of outsider: an act of power and knowledge.

Instead, Wolcott (1994) argued that more descriptive terms such as *processing* data (the mechanical efforts needed to identify what could be considered significant), and that subsequent readings and processes of inquiry be considered more as modes of *interpretation*. In this sense the purpose is to “make sense” of the numerous pages of notes and texts which have been accumulated during the research process.

I prefer the term interpretation; rather than searching for ways of reducing the data to its essential core or sets of commonalities (that is, a deductive approach), this approach emphasizes how the process is one of discovery, creative and recursive thinking (that is, an inductive process). It is a process of continual questioning, reading, re-reading; looking for patterns as well as anomalies, points of tension or conflict. In the tradition of the post structuralist research paradigm, it is an act of “making the familiar strange”, a process that may open momentary windows into what is socially and culturally normalized. “The more we examine our data from different viewpoints, the

more we may reveal—or indeed construct—their complexity” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 14).

#### 4.12.1 Coding

Coffey & Atkinson (1996) recommend following the general steps advocated by Strauss (1987) in engaging in coding. Beginning with *open coding*—that is, going through transcripts and field notes and make decisions about what aspects of the data to “tag with code”—and then follow this by considering what level of detail is necessary to capture trends, issues, or conflicts. This process is guided by the research questions initially posed by the researcher, although it can also be guided by attention to emerging patterns, absences or surprising moments. This initial reading/coding process is then followed by a more refined analysis of properties and dimensions of these initial ‘tags’, with a search for potential themes and/or theories and engagement in processes of questioning and reflection: “The process of coding is about asking oneself questions about the data” (Coffey & Atkinson, p. 49).

Following Coffey and Atkinson (1996), this approach to data analysis emphasizes “*think[ing] with* and not remain[ing] anchored in the data (notes, transcripts, etc.) alone” (p. 49, italics added). This can also be described as axial or inferential coding (p. 50). Through this dialectic process of reading, coding, and inference, I created categories that could be used to group responses into particular characterizations or themes. This approach was particularly useful when I engaged in the analysis of the interviews described in some detail in Chapter Seven.

#### 4.12.2 Visual analysis

In developing this form of analysis, I drew extensively on the work of two scholars in the field of visual methods and who inform their work through an understanding of social semiotics: Rose (2001) and Kress and van Leeuwen (1998/2006).

Rose's (2001) discussion of audiencing offered an important deconstructive lens that informed my photo elicitation strategy described earlier in this chapter. Instead of assuming that particular subjects can "read" images universally, this perspective suggested that viewers/audiences bring their own experience, knowledge, and understandings to the process of interpretation. Rose's (2001) concept of audiencing is consistent with earlier discussions in this chapter that sought to illustrate how images can be read differently (Hall, 1980), Barthes (1967) concept of images as polysemic and Davies (2000) conception of subject position: each provides theoretical bootstrapping for the consideration of social and cultural practices as a part of any interpretive framework.

#### 4.12.3 Discursive analysis

Discursive analysis (another method of interpretation) is the term generally used to describe the methods by which researchers carefully examine and engage in an in depth analysis of language, utterances and social activities. Gee (1999) describes it as a method of exploring discourse in Discourse: that is, the study of specific "language in use" (discourse) as a part of socially, culturally and historically situated discursive communities (Discourse). As such, "*language has meaning only in and through practices*" (p. 8, italics in original).

Discursive interpretation is meant to be sceptical, to trouble, or to "render the familiar strange". "You need to ask of any given passage: 'Why am I reading this I this

way?’ ‘What features of the text produce this reading?’, ‘How is this organized to make it persuasive?’ and so on” (Gill, 2000, p. 179). Another important element of discourse analysis is to attend to what is absent from a discourse/text, to consider the silences or processes which serve to silence others (Davies, 2000); it also requires that the analyst acknowledge his/her own complicity in the construction and deconstructions of the texts (Saukko, 2003; Lather, 1991). In other words, this is not an objective or neutral process, but one that produces particular readings (Gill, 2000). Throughout this research text, I continually attempted to look for silences and consider how my own subject position may have effected particular events or how my own processes of interpretation may have “read” particular situations through my own social and cultural lenses.

Exemplary examples of conversations or discussions were selected to help illustrate the particular characteristics of the youth discourses at each of the three research sites. Each of these discourses illustrates the “tacit theories” or “ideologies” held by its participants of what constitutes the “right” way of thinking, feeling, valuing or behaving within a particular social location (Gee, 1996, p. ix).

Social and cultural factors are embedded in the language in use, and cannot be understood outside of this context. “Discourse patterns are among the strongest expressions of personal and cultural identity” (p. 59); in other words, the study of discursive patterns and practices also offers a window into particular understandings of the self and others which are in play at a particular moment in time. In the context of this study, examining these discursive practices offered a way of exploring potentially different understandings about identities and beliefs about social or political agents and their actions. The extent to which particular discourses or practices have performative

effects within a particular discursive or interpretive community was also a goal of such analysis.

There is a danger in spelling out in linear fashion the tools a researcher will use to engage in analysis of his/her texts. As I have repeatedly noted in this chapter, the process of research itself is situated in the explicit and implicit beliefs, understandings and theories a researcher brings to his/her work. By “reading” a text within a particular discourse and interpretive framework, there is a danger of reducing a complex and socially determined text to a single interpretation. The post structural scholar, to avoid such possible interpretations, needs to “read” texts against a variety of different perspectives and within a variation or range of social, cultural or political contexts. There is a need to “tease out” the different political and social stances using multiperspectival analysis (Saukko, 2003, p. 106). This strategy was also used in considering how to interpret particular actions or activities at each of the three research sites.

#### **4.12.4 Content analysis**

There are a number of “classic” approaches to content analysis. Bauer (2003) reported that classical content analysis involves coding a text against a series of categories determined by the research questions and methodological stance of the researcher. He goes on to suggest authorial intentions can be traced through the careful study of documents or texts that are part of the social and cultural field in which the research participants are members. These can be carefully quantified and reported.

The post structural scholar I would argue does not conflate the author intentions with one reading; that is, texts are interpreted by readers in a number of ways, and cannot have one “true” meaning determined through a method of study. Instead, the process of

analysis, as noted above, is always a profoundly political act, in that the stance a researcher takes reveals, at least in part, his/her political goals or intentions. This is clearly the case in the process of content analysis as well.

Saukko (2003) suggested that texts need to be considered through a number of lenses; she describes this broadly as a postmodern interpretative strategy (p. 106). These interpretive frames vary based on the interests/concerns of the research. In the case of this research project, my intention was to consider these texts politically by using a genealogical and performative lens. A genealogical approach offers a way of tracing the political and historical purposes of the texts, considering in particular the issues of the power/ knowledge dynamic. In the tradition of Foucault (1970), the issues of surveillance and discipline are also implicated in texts that are a part of formal schooling systems. This practice was particularly in evidence in Chapter Xix, in my discussion of the J. S. Secondary school site.

An additional method of interpretation could be based in examining the texts performative potential. Drawing from Butler's (1997) discussion of the agency afforded to some kinds of language, this reading could consider the discursive performativity of these texts and their expressions through teaching bodies. This approach might consider how particularly constructed texts act as an incitement to discourse and have illocutionary effects. This is also a study in power through discourse and how it acts "to constitute the subject in a subordinate position" (Butler, 1997, p. 18). How various texts act to constitutively shape the youth subject was an important discussion in Chapter Six.

Discourses in key curricular documents were examined at each of the three research sites. In the Alternative Education setting, an important student and teacher text

examined is the Grade 12 First Nations curriculum, as this was a principle source of information about issues related to social equity, fairness, and justice. At the J. S. Secondary school site, two texts were important. The first of these is the new Civics 11 Curriculum, now being piloted in several school districts, which was a resource for teachers to use in meeting provincial curricular goals in the area of citizenship education. The other important curricular text that was considered included a book entitled *The seven habits of highly effective teens* by Sean Covey (1998). This book and its accompanying individual student agendas were supplied by Jeff Sugar for the use of his students in his student leadership class; these texts reinforce several key themes about how youth should engage in particular social “goods”. These texts are used to inform my analysis in chapter six.

Finally, at the Street Spirits Theatre site a discourse that will be examined is social action theatre as conceptualized by Augusto Boal (1985; 1993). Boal (1985; 1993) is a proponent of a particular form of participatory theatre called “theatre of the oppressed”. While specific written texts are not accessed by the youth at this site, the terminology of Boal and other practitioners of social action theatre dominant much of the discourse among participants and its artistic director, Andrew. Unpacking the key ideological beliefs represented in this genre of theatrical performance and considering its potential performative effects was important to consider. Other artifacts examined from this site included three films/videos created by the Street Spirits Theatre members that served as examples of previous efforts with social action theatre in the community.

### 4.13 Truthfulness And Validities In Post Structuralism

In the final section of this chapter, I want to briefly summarize how post structuralist approaches to research are treated in light of the demands for scholarly standards of practice. Discussions related to truthfulness and accuracy are highly contested, particularly when considered from the divergent points of qualitative and quantitative research method. However, as Denzin and Lincoln (2003) suggest, the standards of the qualitative paradigm should not be cast using the same “trinity” (reliability, validity, generalizability) as the positivist tradition. Rather, alternative ways of assessing the scholarship’s credibility should be developed. I use the word credibility rather than validity, as validity has generally been a standard of quantitative research work. Credibility ‘gets at’ the assertions of the research text without necessarily attributing “truth” to the research claims made.

Lather (2000) makes the point that validity claims are the social and cultural production of different discursive communities. Further, she argues that validity, from a postmodern perspective, needs to move from being characterized as a normative measure of quality to “a discourse of relational *practices* that evokes an epistemic disruption, a *transgression*” (p. 247, italics added). In keeping with other discussions in this research text, a focus on practices allows for a range of possible strategies or actions being taken, and that these actions are subject to the constitutive properties of discourses, cultural tools, social and historic contexts, always an activity of relation among and between social agents. It also allows for a range of possible and experimental methods that might be used as a check for how credibility can be considered.



Some might argue that such an approach would mean an end to any claims of validity; however, in a similar fashion to Peters and Burbules (2004), instead one could argue that ‘post structuralist credibility’ builds on the foundations of the work that have preceded it, and its consideration evokes new possibilities and understandings. Indeed, Lather (2000) traces the historical contexts and changing nature of validity measures in the qualitative field to illustrate how each ‘stands on the shoulders’ of its predecessor.

#### **4.13.1 Deconstructive validity**

In keeping with a notion of ‘post’ validity, Saukko (2003) also discusses alternative forms of validity—what she calls “deconstructive” validity. Situated as post structuralism is in its claims of unpacking or unravelling practices and discourses constitutive qualities, she suggests that research in this tradition needs to be judged on the basis of its ability to mirror its own commitments: does it represent the multiplicity of possible truths, or problematize fixed understandings? Secondly, how does the research text attempt to trace and reveal the historical and often naturalized assumptions of particular beliefs, understandings or statements? Thirdly, to what extent are binaries unpacked so that discourses no longer silence or omit particular perspectives from consideration (p. 21). In this way, it argues for a kind of catalytic validity (Lather, 1991), the ways in which the research process allows for and documents its emancipatory potential, “without becoming impositional” (p. 64). While this list of questions seems comprehensive, I would add a fourth question, and ask how does the research text engage with and represents the social relations and discursive constitution of the researcher and the researched? This commitment to reflexivity is a central tenet of post structural texts in its acknowledgement of the discursive constitution of human agents.

#### **4.13.2 Addressing credibility**

Throughout this dissertation, there are many examples of providing for the many voices of the youth who were participants in this study. This commitment to multiplicity of views and polyvocality was largely accomplished by the inclusion of a full range of verbatim comments made in interviews, discussions and conversations held with the research participants. In numerous cases, voices represent different and often competing understandings; some are representative of normative views while others challenge them. The insertion of anecdotes that troubled and surprised expected outcomes (such as the discussion of Ethan's photo essay in Chapter Eight) sought to expose assumptions and naturalized understandings, particularly of this researcher. On other occasions, the consideration of multiply located subject positions, such as in the discussion of Ruth's attempt to change policy covered in Chapter Seven, sought to unsettle the notion of researcher as knowing interpreter, and to consider the ways in which social situatedness is central to how agency and action can be read.

Some research strategies were selected because they permitted a broader scope of inquiry: for example, the photo elicitation strategy was used because of its potential for opening up conversations of agency and social action: its methodology evoked many fascinating personal stories that enriched the scope of how agency could be characterized in this research text. Rich description of social locations, events and participants also helped to establish credibility as it provided a detailed context in which to situate this research study. My decision to examine both visual and linguistic texts for their discursive content was also a strategy that enriched this study as it traced both normative and competing narratives as well as how these were taken up by different participants.

Binaries are often central to our patterns of sense making: in this research text, my own efforts to refuse the analytical boundary between agent and his/her actions was a central theoretical construct that was repeatedly questioned in the context of considering the actions and activity of the youth in this study. The binary of subject/object was also considered in discussions about cultural tools, a theoretical discussion which sought to blur the boundaries between agent and tool and reconceptualizing agency as a field. Describing in detail the ways in which some discourses acted to subjugate particular youth at Northern High, as well as unpacking the naturalized assumptions that were consistently named and re-circulated in the moral narratives at J. S. Secondary also realizes deconstructivist goals of how discursive and socially constitutive practices might be revealed.

I struggled with the goal of inclusively engaging my research participants in the construction and development of this research text. While member checks were completed at various times in the research cycle, such as after completing the interviews and in reporting on my own observations and sharing the final research text, writing an inclusive text that might be more easily shared, particularly among the youth participants, proved a considerable challenge. I believe that my efforts to describe the work of the Street Spirits Theatre youth allowed for a very inclusive way of constructing a research text, the methods of analysis and writing used for the other two research sites fell well short of that goal. While there were several attempts at both of these research sites to share and articulate my “findings”, I found it difficult to shift from a highly theoretical form of text to one that could adequately communicate what I felt was important about their lives and experiences. This study will, I hope, provide an example of how

collaborative research can be accomplished, but it also sews the seeds for improving my research approaches in the future.

In this chapter, I have sought to provide the reader with a detailed description of the research paradigm, stances, practices and tools that I have used in this research study. I have attempted to map some of the competing claims and issues that qualitative, post structuralist researchers struggle among and between throughout the research process. In particular, I have tried to illustrate what I call “research symmetry”; that is, ensuring that there is a consistency between research methodology, research questions, and research practices. I believe illustrating research symmetry is another way of illustrating the validity of this research work. In demonstrating this, I have tried to consistently apply the paradigmic values and beliefs of post structuralism to the research design, as well as in the ways I have chosen to engage in analysis, self-reflexive thinking, and multiple forms of representation that will serve to illustrate the work I have completed as a part of this dissertation process.

## **CHAPTER 5: NORTHERN HIGH SCHOOL**

In this chapter, I introduce readers to the culture of Northern High and the youth participants who were a part of this study. Using extended participant observation and interaction with and among this group of youth in an Alternative education (Alt Ed) class, I sought to address the research question, “what *possibilities* of mobilization are produced on the basis of existing configurations, discourses and power” (Butler, 1995, p. 49, italics added) at this research site? In other words, how might the study of youth in their everyday interactions, in particular, at the school site where they spent much of their day, provide evidence of the multiple ways in which social action or agency might be practiced? And, if agency is a performative effect or a product of discourse (Butler, 1993; Davies, 2000) then documenting the ways in which discursive resources were accessed or used by the participating youth would be an important aspect of study.

In using the word “culture”, I am conceiving of it broadly as an “open discursive text...a repertoire of meanings” (Hall, 1999, p. ix). School cultures are highly complex and important social locations in which most youth spend a great deal of their adolescent lives and where they explore, negotiate and enact their sociopolitical identities, from a number of subject positions and within and among a range of discursive communities. As such, their actions are both enabled and constrained by their performances.

Observations completed over the ten months of this study are summarized in this chapter using descriptive and discursive ethnographic techniques (Silver, 1997) acting as

an introduction to the culture of the Alt Ed classroom and of Northern High. This written description will make evident, through the exploration of exemplary micro and macro discourses, and through discursive analysis of selected social events, images and texts, the complex social environment that shaped the practices and beliefs of the Alt Ed youth in this study. Content analysis (Luke, 2000; Rose, 1999) was also used as a way of deconstructing a dominant discourse within a particular curriculum (First Nations studies) that was repeatedly accessed by teachers and students at this research site. One critical incident (the expulsion of a student) is also explored as an example of how power operated hierarchically in this school site.

These discursive methods permit a way of looking at both the macro and the micro elements of this culture: by moving between these two layers, a richer engagement in the role of the social and how it shapes civic subjectivities becomes possible. This movement is not formally structured within the written texts in this chapter, but is more fluid, taking up the micro and the macro when it permits another way of seeing D/discourses in play. This ethnographic approach also relies on analytic bracketing (Gubrium & Hostein, 2000) in order to explore issues of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1984) and subject positions (Davies, 2000) and how particular understandings of agency and/or power may have been socially or culturally constituted.

In keeping with the post structuralist paradigm, at moments in this text “I” enter this story, illustrating my struggle for meaning making as I observed and recorded events over the course of this study. In recording my thoughts and reflections as a part of this ethnography, I make explicit my role in as both a participant and observer in this research site, and the subjective grounding of this text. While the “impossibility” of

representation remains a well documented limitation of ethnographic work, (Van Maanen, 1995; Walford, 2002), Pink (2001) has argued that taking a reflexive stance as researcher is one way in which greater ethnographic authenticity and research credibility may be achieved (p. 20). To honour this practice, in the final section of this chapter I look through the “researcher eye/I” in an attempt to deconstruct and trace how my own subjectivities as post structural researcher, classroom teacher, and emancipatory change agent have resulted in conflicting and contradictory practices.

Finally, this chapter is largely written in a narrative style as a means of making the text in its completed form more accessible to the youth who were its participants. I struggled with the tensions between creating an “academic text” that fulfilled my obligation as a new and developing scholar with the desire to simply write an appreciative tale about youth that I came to care very deeply about. I hope this text will be read as an empathetic representation of some remarkable youth.

## **5.1 Northern High School**

Northern high school is the largest high school in this urban northern community. It draws students from across the city as well as from surrounding rural regions. Many students spend more than two hours a day commuting to and from this school site. Built in the late 1960's it has a sprawling campus with many corridors leading off a centre hallway, and a second floor that largely duplicates the first floor design. About 1200 students attend Northern High school; the demographics show it to be one of the more diverse student populations in the city with approximately 20 percent aboriginal students. The remainder of the school population is largely Caucasian, although there are a limited

number of other racial groups, including a small group of Indo-Canadian and black students.

On the day I arrived, two front windows were in the process of being repaired, on both sides of the double doors that lead into the school. The splintered glass around an open hole created a metaphoric view into the school entrance; over the course of this study, I would see these glass windows replaced repeatedly, an expression of the tensions often present in this school culture.

The visual culture is established as you cross the threshold: above the door header and on the walls in the lobby, you are presented with a series of photographs that visually constructs the school as a place of success and youth achievement. There are photos of youth doing science lab work, playing basketball, reading in the library, performing on stage: all emphasize the “performances” of school, a very active and engaged model of learning. In each colour photo students appear to be actively engaged in their efforts to achieve/complete the task, their gazes fixed on the objects of their desire. The impression created is one of action, doing, performance, and engagement. What is also notable is the way “girls do girls work” such as reading in the library and observing boys complete experiments, while “boys do boys work” as athletes and active investigators.

As you look down the corridors on either side, there are other sets of photos. All are in colour, although some are older and now fading coloured shots of graduating class award winners: these form a line down the hall towards the counselling offices and then towards the classrooms. One set of photos portrays students in formal poses that mark the passing years with a numerical title: 2004, 2003, 2002 etc. In these photos students smile directly into the camera, standing closely together, posed holding certificates and or other



awards. Long shots of graduating classes, girls in long gowns and boys in suits also line the corridor. The message that seems to be conveyed in these portraits is that of “rite of passage” from youth to adulthood. Another achievement focused message is represented in the six post secondary posters that feature attract young adults smiling invitingly next to a University or College logo and message. Application deadlines are highlighted in bold black letters along the bottom banner. On each wall beside the counselling room, door the posters act as sentinels to the future, accessible to those who cross its threshold: an entry point into the world of career, achievement, happiness and success?

“Visitors must report to the office” is a sign prominently posted on the glass doors into the office. Other signs hang above the counters in the office, each serving to organize students and inquiries in an orderly way. Students come and go through a marked door; teachers or other visitors through another. One is struck with the impression of a desire to create a highly organized and efficient operation.

The walls in this building are painted concrete and wood. The halls are lined with a single row of lockers down each hallway, with an occasional break for a classroom door. The doors are painted bright colours, and often have a sign on them indicating what classes are offered in them. As I pass each door, I am afforded a brief glimpse inside, usually of students sprawled in desks, heads held up by hands on the end of leaning arms, sometimes with hands raised. I can’t help but notice the contrasting image created with the photos at the school entrance.

### **5.1.1 The Alt classroom**

The Alternative education (Alt Ed) classes are located at the end of the first corridor just past the counselling office. Unlike other classes of students, these students

are assigned to stay in this classroom for at least two “blocks” of instructional time each day; this means that students are in this class from morning until lunch, and then lunch to the end of the day. The door to this classroom is a bright purple colour and there is a sign “Starr’s bawlin’ Alts” written in a stylized script. When entering this class I am struck by its different organization: a line of filing cabinets help create an entry way, and once inside, the typical desks have been replaced by tables set up in a large rectangle, with students seated around the outside edge so everyone is able to see one another. The teacher’s desk is in the corner behind the filing cabinets.

The most powerful first impression however, is created by the huge floor to ceiling wall that is covered with photographs, each done up as a laminated poster with captions and dates. The ceilings in this school are high, and so there are posters stacked above one another, the most recent appearing at eye level and below, while older posters are attached in rows above. In total, there are four giant rows that go from the front to the back of the room. There are pictures of students playing baseball; there are pictures of students who seem to be on a picnic, or eating food together; there are lots of pictures of graduation ceremonies, pictures of students standing in groups, in fancy clothing (likely at the some type of graduation activity). A couple of posters are dedicated to stories of skydiving, and feature Maggee Starr’s (the teacher) first free fall, as well as photos of others engaged in sky diving activities.

The dominant theme however, is graduation. In total there are about four different graduation years portrayed, some have copies of programs, others are just photos. Many of these pictures feature the teacher, Maggee Starr standing with groups or individual

students. All are smiling, attractive young people clearly celebrating their completion of school.

The rest of the room is also atypical. There is a toaster oven, a kettle and a coffee pot in one corner, along with an older TV and VCR on a stand. There are popular magazines and newspapers in another; a rack of novels and envelopes in another. One shelf has a CD player and a computer with a chair. The back wall is made up of large cabinets and an area that has a number of posters of aboriginal peoples. Two walls sport white boards that are all covered with coloured calligraphy-like texts. Today one proclaims:

“Our society has forgotten to teach love. Think of the things that are killing us as a nation. Drugs... brainless competition...recreational sex. The pornography of violence, gambling, alcohol and the worst pornography of all... lives devoted to buying things, accumulation as religion”. John Gatto.

There is one prominently displayed teacher made poster that is headed “Congratulations to you”. This includes a list of student names, dates for “course begun” and “finished” as well as title of the course. There are about twenty entries on the chart, although when the semester changes a new chart will begin again. Other posters are displayed above the white boards; they remind students about the order of the planets as well as distance conversion charts. There is one teacher made chart entitled “BEDMAS” that reminds students of the order of operations in mathematical equations. There is a collection of stuffed animals on top of the filing cabinet, and a box of tissue.

The presence of so many posters and photographs makes this room very different than the others in the school. Unlike many of the sterile classroom spaces I’ve seen in this school, it is highly personalized in a way that creates a more inclusive space, one that recognizes its students both past and present.

The students seem very much at home here. During my first visit, several get up and prepare food for themselves. One person heats up food from home; another makes toast and peanut butter. A third makes tea. Several students have Tim Horton's coffee cups at their seats, others have doughnuts. In the middle of class a cell phone rings, and a student gets up and takes the phone into the entrance area to talk. This goes unremarked by anyone, illustrating for me that this is a usual practice.

Over the course of the months I spend at Northern High, I learn many of the teacher's routines for managing the student's progress. Every Monday, Maggee Starr meets with each student briefly at her desk: she goes over with them goals they feel they can accomplish during the upcoming school week. In this classroom, everyone is individually programmed into different courses, depending on their academic needs. During my time at Northern High I observed students completing courses in First Nations Studies 12; Family Management 11; Science 10; Math 9 and 10; and Communications 9 and 10. In total there are between ten and fifteen students in each of two classes, although this varied over the course of the study. For each course the student is enrolled in there is a written course syllabus with either an accompanying text-book or a course pack of duplicated materials. Specific assignments are required for each chapter, followed by a chapter review quiz (usually) or a series of projects or worksheets. These are marked and recorded by Maggee in her grade book. When the course is completed, a final exam is written. Grades are calculated using these quizzes, projects and final exam results. A self-directed module style course design has students able to work at their own pace.

Over the course of the months I spend with these young people, I learn that there is little large group instruction, although from time to time speakers are brought into

class. The speakers range from public health (discussion about sexually transmitted diseases) to massage therapy and cleansing regimes. The only semi-regular, prominent group activities are the student discussions. These are often student initiated, based on students' own experiences or interpretations of local, school or family events; however, Maggee also initiates these discussions from time to time. She also uses film as a means of generating discussion around social issues. For example, sexual stereotyping and racial discrimination in Disney films and the colonization and mistreatment of aboriginal peoples were both film generated dialogues I observed. On these occasions the students organize pizza and drinks; these are delivered to the school and consumed during the film viewing.

### **5.1.2 The Alt sub culture: the “reality TV” metaphor.**

The relationships between processes of identification and the construction of civic identities are important ideas that this study explores. An identity “exists in relation to representations that anchor the subject in the social world” (Yon, 2000, p. 14). In other words, identities are socially constructed within particular discursive locations and are negotiated between and among these representations. This is where the concept of performativity comes into play again; the citational quality of these representations can shape or affect how particular identifications are made, maintained, resignified or rejected. By engaging in careful observation of the cultural locations of the youth subjects of this study, the competing and dominant narratives about agency and practices of power may become more apparent. In this next section of this chapter, I consider how several competing discourses and social models of authority are in play at Northern high school and how these forces may shape views, civic identities and practices of agency. I'll begin

by describing the Alt Ed sub culture, a powerful sign and discursive location that many of these youth strongly identify with.

One of my earliest encounters with youth in this location was with a young woman named Brandy. Only months away from graduation and with most of her course work completed, Brandy was in an ideal position to serve as an insider who could provide me, the outsider, with useful information about the class, relationships, practices, taboos and routines that would help me navigate my way into conversations with others. It was Brandy who used the metaphor of “reality TV” as a descriptor for the way in which the Alt class functioned.

What are the characteristics of the Alt sub culture that make it seem like reality TV? Brandy seemed to be referring to the gritty and unrehearsed character of the debate between students that I saw on this and other occasions in the class. It was “real” in that discussions were about what happened in everyday life, often triggered by an event in the news or a story about the treatment of a friend or family member in the judicial system, by an employer, and the school itself. Sometimes these discussions were triggered after viewing a film that the teacher, Maggee Starr had initiated, however, most often the discussions were student initiated. The other way the discussions were “real” was the way in which the discussions were monitored; the classroom climate, largely a product of Maggee Starr’s openness to dialogue, allowed students to speak freely and openly, sometimes making highly controversial statements that were hotly discussed or debated. Evidence was most often drawn from personal experiences; emotionally charged narratives were not uncommon, another feature of reality TV. Alt Ed could also be

considered 'real' by the contrast between the ritualized behaviours and identities enacted in 'normal' classrooms and those enacted in this classroom.

One of the few rules that Magee Starr enforced was about using particularly offensive language. Swearing wasn't prohibited, although the use of racial slurs or name calling was. My observations noted how students seemed to feel freer in this setting to really "get into it": at least weekly students would engage one another in discussions of controversial issues in a way that more mainstream classroom practices prohibit. For example, the legalization of pot was a very regular conversation, and students argued the pros and cons of how smoking pot affected school performance.

Like its reality TV counterpart, these moments of conflict provided windows into the beliefs and values of those who participated. Over the course of this study, group discussions ranged over a wide array of topics, including parental and student rights, work, future employment, post secondary education, drug abuse, smoking pot, school policies, city bylaws, driving prohibitions, sexual behaviour, racism and homophobia, drinking, sports, teachers and teaching, aboriginal rights and land claims, the school strike (which occurred in the middle of the study) fashion and television.

Many students do not attend classes regularly; however, they keep an eye out for one another, checking in with Magee Starr about things that have happened to a student: "Madison worked the midnight shift and she's sleeping" or "Luke's brother was in a big fight and the cops were there all night" or "There was a big party, and some heavy drinking last night I think". There is a culture of care and "standing up" for one another that makes this classroom feel almost family-like in its acceptance of all regardless of personal problems or rule breaking. As Luke stated "*Being in Alt is better, there is more*

*interaction. You can work independent, come in knowing nobody, come out knowing every body*". Ethan chimes in, "Yeah, when I'm in regular class and I don't talk to anyone".

The notion of care for peers is another practice that was regularly in evidence: students frequently helped one another to navigate through the course requirements, or assist one another with answers to questions. For example, Ethan and Colleen regularly helped Paige with her math ten course, as she often struggled with how to apply algorithms to problems. Others needed help with their Communication course requirements, and peers would serve as editors to help correct written assignments, or help with spelling. Personal coaching was also evident: for example, when Chloe expressed severe concern over test anxiety, Colleen and Paige offered strategies to help; similarly Colleen provided Sean with moral support when he expressed his lack of capacity to do the work required: "Stop calling yourself down, it's not funny. Why would you do it? If you stopped doing it you wouldn't feel so low". Avoiding negative self-talk is another example of how strategies for helping each other "get through" are an everyday part of this Alt Ed subculture.

This practice of care for others might also be described as a *civic practice* in that it demonstrated support for members of the community and demonstrated an enactment of civic agency. Yet rather than a moral orientation (that is, I rationally decide to do what is right/good), this view situates care as relationally and socially dependent, one of mutual and shared concern in a community of practice. Such care based practices can be considered a feature of sociopolitical agency in that it produces power through collective and shared action and interaction.



### 5.1.3 Images of being Alt

The youth in this and previous Alt classes are represented in the posters on the wall of the classroom and the many other posters from previous years that are stacked on a table at the back of the classroom. Several of these photo essays celebrate “Alt” class events, including an annual “Alt Christmas dinner” at Maggee Starr’s home. Other events captured in images include visits to a local pool hall, a rock climbing wall, a boxing ring, participation in a theatre workshop, at a baseball tournament, or singing and performing Karaoke off the school site. Connections between current and past members of the Alt group are maintained by the photo archive and the dialogue among current members, who will often connect themselves to former class members. The photo archive maintained by Maggee Starr helps document a history of practices that are a part of this youth sub-culture, one that includes activities inside and outside of the classroom walls, bridging between personal lives and interests of these youth and their lives at school.

Finally, current and former classes have created visual collages that seek to represent the Alt culture of the class: one such collage is featured on the back wall. The words are cut and pasted randomly on the page: *creativity, original, breakthrough, nightmare, dream, passionate, friends, trust, opportunity, courage, all kinds of people, faith, you, and Canadian*. Also included are two small images: a stylized maple leaf and a graduation cap. This collage represents many of the sentiments expressed by the students in this Alt class about its safe and inclusive features; it reflects how the Alt class offers a space where these youth can express their own interests and identities without being labelled by others as deviant or deficit.

## 5.2 Alt Discourses: Living In The World

Mostly working class, these students' talk about schooling was instrumental in that they seemed only interested in meeting the graduation requirements so they can get a local job. What I describe as a discourse of "living the world" (practical knowledge) is a higher priority than "knowing about the world" (school based knowledge). This is not unlike what has been reported in other sub cultural studies, including Willis's (1981/1977) classic study of the lads and Hebdige's (2004/1979) study of the teddy boys.

Lankshear and Knobel (2003) have argued that sub cultural styles are socially and culturally constructed on the basis of certain physical markers, such as class, gender and race. The predominantly working class nature of the students in this class suggests class operates in this sub cultural site as a powerful cultural model of "living in the world".

For example, Luke and Ethan talk about their future during one class. Each described the need to "*get some money to buy a truck*". Both aspire to working at a local sawmill, understanding that "*the work is always shitty until you get paid... the pay cheque makes up for it*". Braden, who joins this conversation when he arrives at school, describes his summer work at a mill in a smaller more northerly town as "*seventeen bucks an hour... fuckin' A. I'm buyin' a car, maybe some clothes, dope. Yeah, last summer I spent about a thousand on dope. I made about five thousand in the summer.*" Having a job affords you a lifestyle that enables you to indulge in your own desires; however a truck (or a car) appears to be an important material marker of making it in the real world.

On another occasion, Ethan talks about how finding a job that pays good money is high priority; working at a local pizza place was "brutal" because "*my first pay cheque I*

*could've made that in one day [at a mill]. Yeah, the guy there said to me, you'll probably drop out of school and come back up north and work for us. Yeah*". The discussion of work is almost always related to money; a good job is seen as one that affords a well-understood northern life style.

Stories were often the principle means of sharing cultural understandings among these working class youth. Sometimes stories were constructed as moral or cautionary tales. For example, on one occasion Aidan tells a story about a local doctor and his family who are rich but are "crack heads". While describing the beautiful home, variety of cars, TV's, ATV's, and other signs of obvious wealth, it seemed it served as a moral reminder that money can be at the root of evil: *"rich people, that's the problem, they've got too much money to spend"*. In characterizing money as a problem for the rich, this narrative seems to reinforce a view of working for "the basics" as a preferred model. It also seems to draw on several discourses, including the value of "real world" knowledge over schooled knowledge. It also evokes a moral discourse about not getting involved with drugs, a message that is regularly reinforced in school and community programs. In evoking a binary between good/bad discourses this narrative may help performatively reinforce particular conceptions of work and success as examples of agency.

### **5.2.1 Discourses of work and agency**

The discourse of work as an essential feature of one's success in the "real world" is one message that can be taken from the conversations of the Alt youth reported here. In this discourse, agency works between several competing discourses, that of the "good" honest worker and the "bad" rich skilled professional. The narrative construction of this discourse serves to draw upon the moral and normative conventions of the school and

community as a means of reinforcing the value of the “real world” as an alternative. An unnamed but foundational discourse that is also represented in this discourse is that of productivity and work. Agency in this reading is naturalized to be synonymous with economic production, and therefore assumes that an individual’s social value is measured by participation in the culture of consumption and production.

### **5.2.2 Gendered narratives of work in the “real world”**

The girls’ narratives of life in the real world were asserted less openly; it was during personal conversations with the researcher that expectations for life after school were articulated. Paige discussed how her goal of school completion was linked to her decision to move to Victoria to be with her already employed boyfriend. For Madison, getting a local job full time and getting married to her boyfriend were in her plans, although alternatively she talked about how she would love to work with animals, be a vet or a vet assistant, but that it would “*take too long and it is too expensive for me*”. Both young women assert that College is “too expensive”.

Rachel also spoke of her life in two parts: one of a continued relationship with her current older and employed boyfriend, while also expressing an interest in future studies that would develop her existing skills in photography and computer editing. Hailey also expressed an aspiration to attend the local college and often engaged in talk about affording herself a better future through education, but admitted that it was unlikely for her in the short term due to cost. Instead she thought she would need to work at some sort of local job for some time before that might be possible. A number of these girls were already employed part time in the service industry, and these jobs were also seen as possible routes to future, full time work.

For the girls described here, there appear to be competing discourses that are differently accessed as a result of subject positions (in this case, gender) that influence their beliefs about their own agency. While some girls express a discourse of educational desire, they simultaneously curb that desire within the social realities of membership in working class families. They also articulate goals as girlfriends and wives (and one might assume, mothers) within a traditional social role. Their views of their agentic capacity is situated within and among these competing discourses, and their expressions of future intention reflect how these discourses have both limited and opened possibilities for them.

How gender based discourses situate these young women within particular social conventions seems another possible reading of these conversations. These discourses may also be operating to reinforce the liberal feminist discourse that women can “have it all”; that is, women can be both care givers and educated workers, straddling the worlds of private and public. The educative discourse of success based upon making good educational “choices” is also represented in this dialogue. Shaped by competing social and educational conventions it appears these young women have characterized their agency within a discursive space that bridges both.

These conversations could also be read as illustrating how economic opportunities either offer or foreclose possible futures: for boys its about what they will be able to ‘get’ or acquire with the financial opportunities they are afforded in local forestry related work, all paying relatively good wages. For girls, it’s about how money might allow them to escape the normative conventions of their gender: traditional roles are an outcome of their economic position. Such findings reinforce the work of other scholars who have

traced how gender regulates desires and activity through the study of conversations among children/or youth in schools (Blaise, 2005; Jenson, de Castell & Bryson, 2003; Weis & Fine, 2001; Blair, 2000).

However, the gender based subject positioning seems to be part of an assumed social practice rather than an explicit expression of desire. For example, despite efforts to initiate discussions about gender differences among these young women on a number of occasions, each refused to acknowledge that gender placed any sort of limitations on their “choices”, although financial resources were considered a realistic limitation on their potential agentic future. An alternative view might argue that the discourse of “gender neutrality” they espoused is a consequence of second wave feminism, which led to the development of educational policy frameworks that sought to create equal opportunities for boys and girls in schooling (Stromquist, 1997). This liberal discourse of equality has been a dominant feature among middle class teachers, many of whom claim that they “don’t see colour or gender” but “see the child” (Howard, 1999). In this interpretation, the girls/young women at Northern high may be interpellated by and through this gender-neutral discourse, a discourse that reinforces notions of autonomy and agency as firmly linked to conceptions of productivity and educational opportunity.

There were moments in these conversations and in my researcher journal where I reflected my deep concern for these young women: their views evoked for me my own experiences as an adolescent and young woman: the invisibility of gender bias within social norms, and the painful process of realizing how many of my “choices” had been a taking up of gendered discourses and normative social practices. I wanted to find ways of influencing these young women’s thinking, to have them choose a better course than I

had done: to rescue and free them from a life I interpreted as oppressed and oppressive. While I resisted lecturing about “shoulds” and “shouldn’ts”, I did share some personal stories that I hoped would have the effect of illustrating common ground while simultaneously permitting a space for questioning assumptions: in particular, my decision to marry at nineteen and have a baby shortly thereafter, divorcing, and being a single mom. Certainly empathy was expressed for my story; yet it seemed only to trigger for them a conversation about how much they wanted to have children, get married, and be mothers.

### **5.2.3 Valued forms of knowledge**

Other important aspects of the “living the world” discourse that was represented in Northern High included what I call “bush knowledge”; this is a significant northern asset, as many live in rural regions surrounding this urban northern centre. Luke articulated the importance of this attribute when he described how his grandfather can drive “*anywhere, out on bush roads, really hauling ass. He knows every road, every bump, every corner*”. With services and people likely hundreds of kilometres away, being able to read, interpret and navigate what can be a harsh environment is afforded considerable status, as was affirmed by the youth involved in this conversation.

There are other important ways in which to “read” and “navigate” difficult social terrain: Luke also described how to traverse through his own neighbourhood where gangs and drug houses operate, as well as how to avoid trouble with the police, particularly when you are an aboriginal youth targeted on the basis of your race. In a similar fashion, Colleen was afforded status through her moral discourse related to drugs, addiction, and

using. These matter of fact descriptions provide additional evidence of the value afforded to “street knowledge” that fit within the discourse of “living the world”.

The “living the world” discourse substantially discounts school-based knowledge. Schooled forms of knowledge were rarely topics of conversation among these youth, although references to projects in shop or cafeteria classes were fairly common. One could posit that shop and cafeteria classes were valued because they offered useful work based skills that would provide access to the world of work that they aspired to join. These discourses of “living in the world” also mediated their understandings of personal and civic agency.

One reading that could be derived from the dominance of the “living the world” discourse was that it did afford a capacity for agency in a way that the schooled discourses prohibited. The students in this class were often placed in Alt Ed because of poor school based performance: grading is typically the measure used to determine school success, and many of the Alt Ed youth had failed mainstream classes. A number of these youth had reading difficulties and regularly sought assistance from their peers (particularly those who could “cut to the chase” because they had already completed the coursework) and their teacher when trying to read and make sense of the print material they were required to manage in order to complete their individualized course packages. With a focus on achievement, grades and success within the formal curriculum of schooling, this dominant school based discourse essentially excluded these youth; a counter curriculum created through practical or street knowledge afforded a place to assert a contrasting authority or agency.



The discourse of “living the world” appears to simultaneously construct and position these Alt youth within a class-based discourse of labour and work, and affords them social and cultural capital in the informal curriculum they value. In addition, as will be explored in subsequent discussions, the discourses of ‘real world’ and ‘work/labour’ may also have contributed to their positioning as disadvantaged subjects in the schooled discourses of success and achievement. I will return to this discussion shortly, after considering how gender patterns were observed and implicated in constructing discursive authority.

#### **5.2.4 Gender patterns in asserting discursive authority**

Story telling or narratives were a way in which local knowledge was legitimized in this classroom. There was a conversational pattern that began with an assertion of belief, followed by a narrative “tale” that helped illustrate the assertion, as the above examples have sought to illustrate. This was true of both boys and girls: “The legitimacy and appropriateness of storytelling rights hints that narrative might importantly establish individuals as legitimate “author”—or authorities—within the social context of a group... narratives establish a *contingent authority* among co-members of a group that is emergent in narrative performance” (Juzwik, 2006, p. 493, italics added).

In the Alt Ed class, for example, boys asserted authority in stories of future employment in the classroom talk about jobs. Girls seemed to acquiesce to this authority through their non-participation in these large group discussions. However, in other discourses, girls were the only ones who participated; for example, discussions about the need for inclusion of racially different others or gay and lesbian students were exclusively led by girls.

The same pattern of narrative story telling was used to establish authority in conversation: assertions were followed by personal stories of brothers, cousins, family or friends who exemplified the previously stated assertion. For example, Jenny's story about being treated differently because she was black triggered a lengthy conversation in which different treatment based on race or sexual orientation was labelled as morally wrong. Madison's story about a gay brother and cousin helped affirm her authority and assertions about the need for social acceptance of gay and lesbian others.

Interestingly, during most of these conversations boys were largely mute, except to assert a competing view, most often at the end of a conversation in which they had largely been absent. So while Jenny and Madison had used the same rhetorical devices to establish their authority, their assertions were challenged. It seemed that the girls' patterns of conversation that drew upon differences and inclusivity were interpreted as a way of contesting and questioning the masculinity discourse that was naturalized in the ways in which boys understood their gendered roles of "living the world". The boys' attempts at re-asserting their authority was significant, although Maggee Starr's interventions sought to mute this authority.

As classroom teacher Ms. Starr regularly asserted her authority in a number of ways, including her verbal and non-verbal signs of approval of the girls' discourses of acceptance and inclusion. Yet the frequency of discussions about gay (although not lesbian) youth in the classroom discussions may be illustrative of how some male youth desired to subvert this more inclusive view with a competing discourse of deviance and non-normalcy. The classroom culture of openness and trust, combined with the teacher's pedagogical practice of exploring competing views seemed to open a discursive space for

assertion of other potentially harmful, but normatively held views. Indeed, over the course of this study, a discussion of homosexuality re-occurred frequently and remained a matter of ongoing conflict that fell largely along gender lines. The continued repetition and re-citing of these normalizing discourses which sought to mark and marginalize gay youth served as examples of how some discourses continually recite and reiterate harmful speech, constraining human subjects and subjugating others. The performative effects of hate speech (Butler, 1997) are exemplified in this example.

The “real world” discourses also seemed to be in play in how the orders of discourse (Fairclough, 2000) were established. As was described earlier, the real world discourse of work and labour was a dominant theme of this sub-cultural group; an unarticulated feature of this discourse was the gendered nature of work and the social roles naturalized in types of work. The importance of this discourse made it one that, when introduced through an assertion or claim, drew in the attention of many others, and the story of work became a central theme until the narrative had run its course. As noted earlier, this was one topic on which boys were observed as having greater authority when asserting their practically oriented knowledge. Girls tended to listen and watch such discussions, or engage in parallel discussions with other girls, a practice that could indicate a belief in authority about work flowing from men rather than women.

This short discussion helps illustrate how discursive authority was established in the Alt Ed classroom while also exemplifying the complexity of how discourses operate to both enable and constrain subjectivities during classroom dialogues. It also helps illustrate how utterances, discourses and identities are recursively linked, as social power is asserted and activated through conversational means. These examples demonstrate how

agency is asserted or afforded through social languages and discursive practices within a particular cultural location, and how gender may afford different capacities for and understandings about agency.

### 5.2.5 The “getting through” discourse

School is, for many of these youth, a process of hoop jumping: many chafe at the rules and restrictions on their activities imposed by the school setting in their everyday dialogue and discussion with their peers. There was a persistent discourse about getting out or “getting through”, a discursive space where issues related to school were discussed. For example, another youth, Connor, talks about “*Figuring out the system and work[ing] around it*” in order to get through: “*We grow up, we do school, we get a job, who cares what it is?*” Connor sees his life as part of a pre-established routine, an already determined process that will unfold over time, and school just a hoop that must be jumped as life unfolds in predictable ways.

“Getting through” also meant “getting out” of high school and its oppressive environment. Brandy was only one of many students who discussed regularly how they wanted to finish their basic schooling at either another alternate program located downtown, or by completing a grade equivalency exam at the college. In fact, Brandy had recently signed up for a scheduled equivalency exam at the local college. When asked why she couldn’t simply finish her course work at Northern High, she claimed that “*It’s so harsh here. I hate it. I’ve got to get out*”.

Discourses of getting out may have served as a competing discourse to the achievement and schooled knowledge discourses that were evident at Northern High. By characterizing the oppression of schooling as a limitation on personal agency, escape is

afforded social power and status because it is seen to allow for autonomous choice. While simultaneously disempowered by the limitations of choice afforded by the schooled knowledge system, these youth could re-situate themselves as autonomous agents through expressions of choice that were afforded through non school sites.

The “getting through” discourse was also emphasized in a number of ways by the teacher, Maggee Starr. The wall chart in the classroom reinforces this theme; it is a visual reminder of how progress is being made towards the goal of school completion. Magee Starr’s practice of setting weekly academic goals to help the students develop a plan for getting through a course, or planning what courses need to be completed to achieve adult dogwood requirements<sup>6</sup> were a constant mantra.

The photo wall is also an important signifier of this discourse: students often gazed at it during class time; leisure time was also spent examining the wall and commenting on friends who have graduated and who are now out in the ‘real’ world. Maggee Starr also referred to the wall frequently, discussing how the youth in this class will be up on the wall too; how she will be sure to photograph them as they achieve the milestone of school completion and their participation in the graduation ceremony. It is an event of considerable social significance that is reinforced in the youth and teacher dialogue, an important symbolic event that marks their passage from youth to adult, and from schooled subject to adult decision makers. The graduation ceremony could be considered a signifier for independence and self directed or autonomous agency.

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<sup>6</sup> Dogwood requirements is a reference to the minimum standards that the Province of British Columbia requires for graduation.

### 5.3 Educative Power As Agency

The term “Alternate class” comes out of the school discourse that locates these students as unable to be successful in the “regular” stream. In other words, they do not meet the standard expectations for academic performance (although sometimes students may be in Alternative classes because they cannot meet the normative standards for behaviour and have been rejected by mainstream classroom teachers as “too disruptive” and that they “get in the way of kids who are *really* trying to learn”).

The achievement discourse is a near mantra at Northern High. In fact, the school principal, Mrs. Headley organized school wide achievement assemblies for grades 8-12 in each semester. I attended several of these and will speak in more detail about these events shortly. In summary however, the message conveyed is about the individual’s responsibility to choose success at school and work to achieve it. Agency in this reading is strongly linked to educative choice. This characterization of personal agency through education links educational achievement with power and success. However, to be educated is to accept the authority of the school to deliver the appropriate knowledge with the collateral duty of personal achievement. There is an implied exchange between the ability to practice agency in the future providing there is a surrender of personal agency during the school years. When students don’t meet these school goals for achievement or expectations for conformity, they are viewed as non-conforming or “at risk”. In other words, youth (or some youth) are at risk of “not performing... [in] certain *preferred or ideal* adult futures” (Kelly, 2006, p. 25, italics in the original).

As noted throughout this chapter, the educational system and teachers themselves use a range of practices to measure students against these preferred or ideal adult futures.

One of the ways in which this discourse is maintained is through the construction of separate classes; another is in the assignment of school based teachers' aides and social workers who regularly visit the Alt Ed class and counsel specific "at risk" youth on a monthly basis. The students who form a part of the Alt class are keenly aware of the discourse and practices that surveil them throughout the school year, as well as how it positions them as having reduced social and cultural status in the school. Some celebrate this notoriety, and this too became part of the discourse of the Alt Ed class and a feature of the subculture I described earlier. This illustrates again the moment where competing discourses come into play and the subject position of Alt affords access to an alternative discourse that enables rather than disempowers.

Maggee Starr also suggested that teachers who work in Alternate classes are afforded less social power in the hierarchy of the school. During my research I noted that Alt teachers tended to talk and work together both on and off site. In the main, Maggee Starr rarely left her classroom, preferring not to join colleagues in the staff room at lunch or after school. She repeatedly stated she had little in common with these other teachers, most often attributing this to a different set of values and beliefs about students, student potential and school disciplinary rules and procedures. Like the Alt students she teaches, Maggee occupies a subject position in which she identifies as non-conforming and uses this position from which to situate herself outside of many of the mainstream expectations for herself as teacher. Later in this chapter an episode that starkly illustrates this subject position as nonconforming teacher will be described in some detail.

The multiple ways in which the discourse of student achievement permeates the culture of this school illustrates its citational qualities; in Foucault's (1980) conception,

such an organizing framework is a way of disciplining bodies. Indeed, school itself has been frequently described as a disciplining regime (see for example, Pokewitz and Brennan's 1998 volume of Foucaultian analyses of schooling). The discourse that positions Alt students as non-performing effectively acts as a regime within a regime. The processes of subjugation within these discourses have performative effects, as can be observed by the behaviours of Alt students and teachers.

### **5.3.1 Curricular discourses: agency, justice and political power**

Maggee Starr is a career teacher, having worked in the Northern School district for more than twelve years. She has held a variety of positions in the school district but all have involved working with disenfranchised or marginalized youth in the public school system. She worked with incarcerated youth for a period of time: she credits this experience, where she saw aboriginal youth disproportionately subjected to criminalized status, as the event that triggered her interest in aboriginal issues. Later, this desire surfaced when she had the opportunity to become a collaborator with the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council in designing a locally offered course (First Nations 12) in the 1997/98 school year. The course was designed to profile the views and knowledge of the northern Carrier tribes and nations.

Not surprisingly, Maggee described herself as a strong advocate for restoring justice to aboriginal peoples and this philosophy permeated her classroom practice, dialogue and pedagogy. A Freirian follower, she described her philosophy as one that means "*giving students the tools to dream, conceive of better lives for all members of society*". She also described her teaching as embedded in "*an ethic of love... [it] is a progressive and mindful undertaking. It involves listening, compassion, reflection,*



*adaptability, sensitivity, endurance, creativity and energy. Humour is definitely an asset; your heart will be broken but joy will find you, as you become more and more open, less limited and judgmental*". She used the metaphor of concentric circles as a way of describing her philosophy of life, relationships and teaching, each joined together at various points. *"The gift is revealed in connections, the synergy formed in the equation of relationships"*. She described her collection of photos as evidence of her belief in connections and relationships over time: *"Pictures connect with a fluid continuity the past, present and future. These pictures also honour and celebrate the importance of our relationships."*

Over the course of this study, ample evidence was gathered to support how central the discourses of justice, agency and processes of political influence and local activism were to the pedagogy, practices and beliefs of Maggee Starr. She described the need to engage her students in processes which "shift consciousness", a way to *"deconstruct oppressive domination and know [that] dualism, 'us against them' is an artificial social construct"*. These are important discourses to unpack, particularly in their potential to shape youth subject positions and beliefs about agency and links to acts of social justice. Because of the centrality of the First Nations curriculum to Maggee Starr's discourses, including her teaching philosophy and pedagogy, the next section of this chapter will attempt to unpack how particular themes and beliefs are evidenced in several written texts present in this class and how these themes are reiterated in verbal discourses.

#### **5.4 The First Nations Curriculum**

While a complete history of curriculum development in British Columbia is beyond the scope of this study, a brief summary of the First Nations curriculum situates

its importance as a text that shapes conceptions and beliefs about agency in this classroom.

In British Columbia, the 1990's marked the beginning of an explicit effort on the part of government to review school approved resources to ensure broader representation of aboriginal peoples and histories. At the same time, a strong political mandate that sought to correct the characterization of aboriginal peoples as colonized others was the product of a series of national and provincial reviews of the status of aboriginal peoples in Canada. In British Columbia the treaty negotiation process became a central feature of public discourse between 1991-2001. As a part of this process, education was identified as a strategy that could bring about social change and enhance inclusion. As a part of this broad initiative, provincial legislation was passed in 1996 asserting the right to equal treatment on the basis of race, culture, religion, ancestry, and place of origin. This legal mandate was used to create policy frameworks; education was frequently identified as a policy tool through which permanent changes to institutional and attitudinal barriers would be achieved, creating an equitable and just society (BC Ministry of Education, 2004). Public policy mandates at the provincial and federal level flowed from these findings, including decisions around creating new school curriculum topics.

The First Nations curriculum was meant to provide an alternative to the “dominant narratives that have historically distorted, ignored, or undermined oppressed groups” (Sleeter, 2002, p. 9). As the most recent British Columbia (BC) provincial curriculum backgrounder on the BC First Nations Curriculum suggested, it is

designed to introduce authentic Aboriginal content into the senior secondary curriculum with the support of Aboriginal peoples, the course provides an opportunity for BC students to acquire knowledge and understanding of the traditions, history, and present realities of BC Aboriginal peoples, as well as a

chance to consider future challenges and opportunities... A curriculum that concentrates on Aboriginal content can lead to *enlightened discussion* of Aboriginal issues and contribute to Aboriginal students' sense of place and belonging in the public school system” (BC Curriculum Standards Branch, 2000, p. 2, emphasis added).

Chizhik and Chizhik (2002) describe this approach as a social justice pedagogy for white middle class students who are encouraged to be introspective about their own biases in order to effect change in society (p. 285).

What these curriculum descriptors also seem to illustrate is a political ideology, one that characterizes aboriginal issues as a social “problem” that can be resolved through educative means. This process will require non-aboriginals to develop a capacity to speak rationally across differences in order to seek solutions to the “problem”. The learning outcomes of the curriculum certainly support this view<sup>7</sup>. These descriptors also imply that the inclusion of selected aboriginal voices, represented in texts, curriculum documents or resources, will serve as the bridge to understanding and lead to aboriginal peoples “inclusion” in schools. This Discourse of “enlightenment” through rational processes that discern truth is reminiscent of the colonialist legacy that continues to “protect dominant interests and signify aboriginal people as a threat” (Harding, 2006, p. 205).

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<sup>7</sup> For example, one learning outcome for this curriculum suggests “The student will demonstrate the ability to think critically, including the ability to:

- o define an issue or problem
- o develop hypotheses and supporting arguments
- o gather relevant information from appropriate sources
- o assess the reliability, currency, and objectivity of evidence
- o assess the role of values, ethics, and beliefs
- o recognize cause and effect relationships and the implications of events
- design, implement, and assess detailed courses of action to address First Nations issues” (BC Ministry of Education, 2000, p. A-3).

## **5.5 Artifacts And Discourses Of Agency In The Classroom**

The discourse of the historical wrongs afforded to aboriginal people in Canada was a persistent theme in the Maggee Starr's conversations. This is not surprising given Ms. Starr's long standing interest in aboriginal peoples: her subject position as a specialist in this curriculum topic was widely acknowledged. Maggee encouraged her Alt students to complete the course in First Nations 12 to meet their social studies requirement for graduation. During the course of this study, as many as eight students were enrolled in this course; as well, regular stream students who visited Ms. Starr's class were often among those who had taken the First Nations 12 course with her in the past or came to access her as a resource, given her position as a curriculum expert.

Concepts of oppression and resistance were regular themes of Maggee's conversation with these students. The course materials she created to accompany the First Nations course provide evidence of the discourses of oppression and resistance among aboriginal peoples in British Columbia. For example, one poster compared the James Bay Cree and the Cheslatta people of BC's efforts to resist development of hydro-electric power projects. Individual aboriginal leaders including Mathew Coon Come and Mary John were featured and their efforts at resistance highlighted in the texts themselves: for example, one short highlighted passage read "A shameful history could repeat itself if the past is ignored, and observations from those affected, like Mary John, dismissed". Other artifacts included local newspaper stories and photos of aboriginal protesters picketing the Kemano site and a pamphlet distributed by local community activists suggesting that letters be written or government officials contacted to lend their voices to the aboriginal protest. Images of local activists, Dene members fighting for land protection, as well as

references to spiritual centeredness, traditional stories and symbolic images such as the medicine wheel were used to affirm power within a cultural and spiritual framework.

The discourses of cultural empowerment and historical oppression were significant features of the formal school curriculum as well as those represented in the films used (such as *Grey Owl*) and represented in the images of aboriginal peoples on the walls of the classroom. This discourse was reinforced in classroom discussions; a number of the students in the classroom self-identify as aboriginal. Sharing knowledge from an indigenous perspective was encouraged; topics such as the benefits of using medicinal herbs were common-place. Stories or narratives that spoke to the power of spirituality or traditions or practices of indigenous peoples were encouraged. For example, Tara was asked by Maggee Starr to share her mother's story of the food basket with other students during a discussion about discrimination on the basis of race. Tara tells her mother's story about an aboriginal grandmother (elder) who shares her food basket with those who initially scorn her. Its lesson supported the cultural practice of forgiveness even when cultural or racial bias was expressed. "Remember the basket Tara" is the concluding line of the story, a re-telling of a traditional tale meant to teach. Maggee reinforces the power of this story, by verifying its truth ("What a wonderful story, Tara, and so true"), agreeing with its moral message.

Local aboriginal leaders were frequently invited into Maggee's classroom. For example, Lillian George, a highly respected Wet'suwet'en woman and parent of a former student was one of many such visitors; she led a "smudge ceremony", designed to cleanse the mind, body and spirit. A talking circle was initiated to encourage discussions related to spiritual and physical well-being, including discussions about addictions.

There were a number of students in this class that self identified as aboriginal, including Luke, Jade, Bobbie, Sean, Tara and Jessica. Maggee Starr often encouraged them to make a contribution to dialogues about the practices, beliefs, histories or actions of aboriginal peoples. Treated as expert sources, these students' cultural knowledge was afforded status in the ways in which it was actively sought and endorsed by the teacher and by other aboriginal students in the classroom. I would also describe several of the students as aboriginal "allies"; by allies I mean those who expressed considerable empathy and openly endorse the views and feelings expressed by aboriginal students. For example, Colleen, Madison, Chloe, Ethan and Connor were frequent allies who supported narratives or experiential tales shared by Tara, Luke and others.

The discourse of cultural empowerment and its manifestation as a tool for increasing cross cultural understanding as represented in the First Nations curriculum effectively positioned aboriginal youth as cultural agents, with the potential power to affect social and cultural change. Their racial and/or cultural positioning was used to afford them both personal and collective agency. Characterized as a member of a particular group, cultural practices or strategies such as story telling and oral forms of testimony were afforded social and political power. This agentic status was reinforced within the narratives shared by aboriginal students, one the one hand accessing a historical discourse of oppression while simultaneously situating aboriginal peoples in a position of cultural agency through a common cultural experience.

The power of a collective voice was a consistent discourse at this site, reiterated in the First Nations curriculum and discourses used by Maggee Starr, but also by students in their expressions of what should be done in the face of oppression or unfair treatment

by others. For example, during the teachers' strike, Ethan was only one of several students who expressed the view that collective membership and collective action could bring about change: "*Stay out on strike, they can't do anything if you all stick together*". Agency in this reading is a product of a discourse of social and political empowerment through shared or common beliefs and experiences.

Another artifact that has agentic significance in this classroom was a carved cedar box engraved with indigenous images of animals and spirits on four sides. This box contains a number of student produced artifacts: essays, poems, stories, collages or other representations of knowledge about aboriginal peoples, as well as some of the "texts" Maggee Starr herself has written to represent different aboriginal themes, such as essays on seasonal activities, forms of governance, the medicinal use of plants and other cultural topics. Keep on its own shelf, it is afforded almost a spiritual significance by Maggee; the hushed tones she uses when talking about this box illustrates its importance to her while also affording it special meaning for others. Its physical attributes evoke the memory of the aesthetics of aboriginal culture, both past and present. At the same time however, it signifies the important role that youth in this class play in the co-construction of knowledge about aboriginal peoples: former student's work is so highly valued that it is kept in a place of honour along with the "expert" knowledge created by the classroom teacher. Students are encouraged to read and respond to these various texts as a part of their curriculum, and are also encouraged to model their responses in similar ways to those done in the past. In this way the collaborative nature of work is emphasized, affording status to those who engage in such collaborative practices.

This social and educationally motivated recognition of collaborative practices reinforced a discourse of social or collective agency as a means of empowerment. The linking of cultural values with the practices of these Alt Ed youth invites an understanding of agency as existing through a solidarity in shared experiences, in much the same way as the aboriginal community is portrayed as having social and cultural power through their common beliefs and experiences. Yet at some level, this “story” of solidarity was indeed only a fiction, as the teacher’s strike demonstrated, and as did these youth’s own lived experiences of marginalization inside of the school culture. Were these expressions simply naive reiterations of the discourses of empowerment through concerted political effort, ones that echoed the educative achievement discourses of the school? Perhaps these narratives of potential agency and empowerment through collective action are better explained by de Castell’s (1993) concept of ventriloquating secondary discourses; that is, they were examples of ‘magical realism’ (de Castell & Jenson, 2006), fictional tales told in an attempt to bridge between their own lived experiences as subjugated and the person/context that other well intentioned adults believed they could be.

### **5.5.1 Teacher beliefs and practices as a source of agentic discourse**

Maggee Starr is an educator who espouses a belief in empowerment and political change through critical educational practices, a central feature of which is the inclusion of indigenous world-views. Her stance is profoundly political in that it demands a change in the status quo so that the oppressed can become catalysts for change. An activist in her own right, Maggee never hesitated to engage her students in discussions about issues of controversy or politics. In fact, political knowledge was afforded considerable value in



class discussions, as was evidenced during the teacher's strike that occurred during the middle of this study. Maggee's conversation often evoked the need for political action on the part of students and community members. For example, students were encouraged to contact their local MLA about the anticipated strike; letters to the editor were suggested as responses to the lack of progress on improving class size that the teacher-strikers had hoped to achieve. Students joined Maggee at protests and rallies during the teacher strike. As noted earlier, these formal political practices were also included as elements of political activism within the curriculum she developed with the local Dene peoples.

In this section of the chapter, I have sought to illustrate the dominance of particular discourses that may have performative force in how youth conceive of their own agency and the agency of others. In this next section, I return to discussions of other dominant discourses in the wider school setting, as these too have possible performative effects.

## **5.6 School Wide Discourses: Achievement**

One of the symbolic events that helps illustrate the achievement culture of Northern high school is the school assembly program. Twice in the eight months I was in the school, achievement assemblies were held that all students in the school were expected to attend. Of significance is the one scheduled in the fall, shortly after the school year had begun. This was a formal video and slide presentation that outlined the school's philosophy and expectations for students. All students from grades eight through twelve were mandated to attend. Given the size of the school, students were organized by grade groupings: the Alt kids were included in the grade eleven/twelve assembly.

The school principal Mrs. Headley played the lead role. Using a microphone and standing on the stage at the front of the theatre, while other members of the school staff stood behind her, her body and stance served as a symbolic reminder of her power and status as school leader. A large screen also dominated the stage, and on it, the first message is displayed, one that will be reiterated throughout the assembly: “An education maximizes a person’s options and life choices”. This is followed by the Principal’s comments that “*Some of you have a laissez faire attitude about the importance of education. If you have that attitude, it won’t serve you well. If you choose not to take advantage of your educational opportunities, then you are choosing a more difficult path*”.

This dialogue positions students into one of two categories outlined earlier: achieving and non-achieving; the personally agentic or non-agentic. The Alt students “read” this discussion through their bodies: throughout the assembly they guffaw, joke and whisper to one another. They slouch in their seats with their legs sprawling; several boys pull their caps over the eyes and pretend to sleep. Others cross their arms, roll their eyes, and then gaze up at the ceiling. Their body language illustrates they know the discussion is not about them: the non-achievers have already been verbally dismissed so they mark themselves physically in ways that illustrate their non-conforming status. In effect they make themselves “disappear” from this discursive space: they act as self-disciplining agents within this performative site.

Butler (1997) has argued that speech acts are rituals that performatively shape the subject. This event helps illustrate this point. These youth are made highly visible by their contrast with the dominant narratives of achievement: in fact, the gaze of the teachers in

the assembly marks them as the failures that others should “see”. The Alt Ed youth become signifiers of school failure in this discourse, exemplars of the ‘dead end’ afforded to non achievers.

In self defence, the Alt Ed youth at this assembly ‘write’ a counter-text, both physically and semiotically, one that says to those for whom they have been made a spectacle that they “don’t care”, that this pronouncement is meaningless to them.

This example shows how competing discourses are social resources brought into play by different interpretive communities. While the achievement discourse works to constrain all of the youth present in the assembly, linking educational achievement with future life success, at the same time, the Alt Ed youth’s discourse of education’s inconsequentiality enables them to assert power over their own lives. In this way, this event can be read as a practice of resistance: by acting to illustrate their non-conforming status in the moment that they are named by another, they may be asserting an agency afforded to them through their Alt Ed discourse that privileges their status as non-schooled knowers.

### **5.6.1 Achievement rallies**

Another regularly scheduled school wide event is what I am calling an “achievement rally”. These events were organized to “recognize” the top achievers in the school. In this case, all students are brought to the gym and sit on bleachers surrounding the gym floor. While much of the event is organized around athletic prowess (such as recognition of teams who have performed well in local, regional and provincial tournaments) there is also a smaller segment of time devoted to high academic achievement: students who have been put on the honour roll are also brought out onto the

gym floor. The other area of achievement recognized is school attendance, and a prize draw of an I-Pod® is offered for students who have not missed any school. The event is organized like a pep rally: there is loud music playing, there are student cheerleaders on the floor of the gym who lead the audience in chants and cheers, and others who “perform” based on their skills as basketball and soccer players, wrestlers and dancers. It is a “spectacle” that celebrates students who are high achieving in the categories that count: school attendance, grades, and athletic prowess.

The spectacle reinforces the discourses of personal achievement through competition: it serves to incite others to its call with public recognition as its reward. This spectacle carefully links success with reward and recognition: you are socially and educationally powerful (agentic) when you are successful. By contrast then, if you are not publicly recognized, then you are immobilized and can act only as a spectator to empowered others. Pinned among hundreds of bodies squeezed onto these wooden bleachers, I am struck by the visual image that captures this immobile student population who spectate rather than act. Always citizen-voyeurs, they see but are not seen.

### **5.6.2 Policing (disciplining) bodies: the discourse of control**

There are many school policies that also serve to restrict student activities in a number of ways. Two of the more hated regimes include the closure of the smoking pit and the introduction of hall passes for moving through the halls between classes. The youth in the Alt class are by majority smokers. About seventy five percent of them smoke, and strongly resent the decision by the school principal to end the long practice of allowing students to smoke in a small area across from the school parking lot.

Discussions about the “unfairness” of the policy were commonplace, as was their

defiance of it. New smoking locations were found each day, and this knowledge is passed from student to student as they leave between classes to have a cigarette. When surveillance is noted, new locations are scouted and then youth informed. All of this subterfuge becomes rather commonplace in the class, just part of the everyday struggle these youth accept as part of their daily school regime. The complexity of this network of communication should not be underestimated; these youth used a variety of signals and gave information in much abbreviated forms as they pass one another in the hallways or in class.

Hall passes were also seen as highly restrictive forms of control. Interestingly, both the teacher and the students defied this rule as frequently as they could; there is a non verbal complicity I noticed on a number of occasions, where student and teacher gazes meet, and both move into the hallway without the pass. Sometimes there is a celebratory moment (a slow smile, a small laugh or self satisfied hand rubbing) when the youth or teacher returned without sanction from the school appointed monitors (as well as the school principal who also regularly patrols the hallways). By not directly verbalizing the teacher's involvement in these breeches of rule, there was a sense of camaraderie implied without being spoken, but acted upon to share the culture of resistance between youth and teacher.

### **5.6.3 Controlling non-conforming bodies: disciplinary regimes as zero tolerance**

Schools have many policies and procedures for dealing with students who are found to be non-conforming. In this next section of this chapter, I describe one incident that helps illustrate the level of control that this school used in disciplining both the student and teacher bodies at Northern High School.

One district wide policy that was receiving considerable attention during the time I was at Northern High school was that of a “zero tolerance” for students who brought drugs into the school. One of the ways in which this policy was being enforced at this school was periodic and unscheduled searches of students when they entered the building or at their lockers. Students were not just randomly selected; student surveillance was a regular part of the Vice Principals’ (three) work at this school. As students entered the building, they are “surveilled” and watched for “signs” of drug use (most often smell, particularly for marijuana). Students were also categorized by membership categories such as those already labelled “trouble makers”: Alt students are prime targets for this surveillance based on their non-conforming status. The form of surveillance was meant to be unobtrusive: a causal glance, a nodding head, a brief comment, all designed to appear as casual greetings rather than observation. Over time however, the youth I worked with made clear that all knew the real purpose of the activity and the surveillance. In fact, they remarked often on their way into the classroom in the morning that they had been subjected to suspicious observation or questioning: sometimes they expressing anger, (*“fuckin’ a-hole”*); other times simple acceptance (*“Saw you gettin’ frisked today”*, followed by a nod or a shrug), a sign that seemed to convey acceptance of their status as assumed trouble makers. During the course of this study, two Alt students were expelled; many more were subjected to searches and intense questioning before they could proceed to class.

Nathan, one of the Alt class’s less verbal youth, became a victim of this surveillance technique. A very large and muscular young man, Nathan sported the typical hip hop style: large plaid jacket, baggy shirt and low riding baggy jeans, scull cap,

running shoes, and headphones from a MP3 player. Similar to the mainstream hip-hop culture, Nathan lived in this northern urban communities “urban ghetto”, a very poor neighbourhood that bordered the school.

Nathan was stopped by one of the school vice principals as he arrived for school. Apparently he had a pipe in his pocket, typical of those who smoke marijuana. He was taken into the school office and sent home within an hour. A call came into the classroom to inform Maggee Starr, who was visibly upset by the news.

Over the course of the next week the complete story unfolded. Nathan was faced with expulsion from school, based on the school district’s zero tolerance policy. His mother, distraught, approached Maggee Starr to ask if she would write a letter of support for Nathan, asking Maggee to describe Nathan’s efforts in class and his desire to complete school and graduate. Maggee agreed to do this.

However, the school principal became aware of this letter, and as a result, demanded that Maggee withdraw it. When Maggee refused, she was threatened with disciplinary action, with the possible consequences of having an unpaid suspension from her teaching job imposed upon her. Reluctantly, after consultation with her union, Maggee informed the mother that she herself would be subject to discipline if the letter was introduced as evidence at the school board hearing about Nathan’s transgression. The mother said she would not jeopardize Maggee’s employment by using the letter. Nathan was expelled, and according to his mother, there was no effort to find any kind of Alternative placements for Nathan so he could complete school<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Nathan did not return to Northern High, although later communication with Maggee Starr indicated he was accepted as a student in another Alternate school setting in the school district.

The moral outrage this story evoked for me was considerable: the way in which the school deliberately sought to punish this youth seemed excessive, but it was the contradictory nature of the messages: from “school as the great equalizer” to “school as a reward only for the good” that made the anger feel like it was choking me. I realized over time that my strong reaction was at least in part because of my own orientation to school as opportunity, hope, and success. Like many other teachers, the discourse of education as the way in which the disenfranchised can be ‘saved’ has been a foundational view that I have accepted without question. I also visualized Nathan as a ‘student body’, a body that would be marked by failure during this disciplinary hearing, designed to humiliate and discipline.

It was only later that I learned that Nathan had resisted such interpellation. In fact, in a final meeting with the school principal, school vice principals, counsellor, and teacher, Nathan chose to sit alone, at the end of the table, facing all of the powerful authorities present. His physical positioning asserted his power; in fact, Maggee Starr got up from her seat to join him, and was followed by the school counsellor and eventually, all others in the room.

This incident also offered two important personal insights. The first is that this incident highlighted my own foundational beliefs about agency that have privileged conceptions of talk as the means through which power and control can be asserted. As this example illustrates, a gaze and physical positioning are equally as powerful examples of how agency is materially represented in practices. The second insight was how I myself was interpellated through schooled discourses of authority and discipline: my



assumption was that Nathan, as a youth, would be positioned by this discourse as powerless.

In describing this “critical incident” at Northern High, I initially constructed it to conform to my beliefs about the power of a culture of surveillance and discipline at Northern High School. Instead, it triggered a self-reflexive examination of my own discursive positioning and how I had privileged a conception of agency caught up within the binary of power/disempowerment. Rather than reading this as an event of Nathan being silenced through authority/power, it could instead be read as a discursive space for deconstructing naturalized assumptions that structured my own representations of agency. This example reinforces the necessity for a post structural stance that challenges assumptions and looks for ways to actively deconstruct the always discursively produced nature of our understandings and representations.

#### **5.6.4 Disciplining others?**

I was initially surprised when I did not hear the other youth in Magee’s class rail against the unfairness of the punishment meted against Nathan, a well-liked member of their Alt class. However, this was not the only occasion where I observed students expressing little concern over a pat down or locker search: it had happened to Caden earlier in the semester. Even though I had tried to prompt a discussion about whether these youth believed such procedures were fair or just, there had been no taking up of my offer to discuss the matter as a group. Could this be illustrative of the performative effects of an ongoing subjugative regime?

The severity and unforgiving qualities of the punishment is an important element of the school expulsion event described here. Following Foucault (1977) the punishment is directed at others, the potentially guilty.

These obstacle-signs that are gradually engraved in the representation of the condemned man [and] must therefore circulate rapidly and widely; they must be accepted and redistributed by all; they must shape the discourse that each individual has with others and by which crime is forbidden to all by all—the true coin that is substituted in people’s mind for the false profits of crime (p.108).

Such repetition is in part signified within the ritual of punishment itself, in this case, the school district hearing. The ritual “must speak, repeat the crime, recall the law, show the need for punishment and justify its degree... [it] must be distributed so that everyone may learn their significations” (p. 111). The zero tolerance policy fits this description; the value of this expulsion is the effect it creates in others, as is suggested by the silence of the rest of the youth in the Alt class.

However, Maggee Starr also sought to disrupt the symbolic and performative force of the punishment ritual, to introduce a competing rational discourse based in educational need. This counter discourse or resistant practice could be characterized as an attempt to disrupt or resignify the discourse of absolute power and authority asserted through the hierarchy of schooling. Maggee Starr’s actions and even the silences of these youth can be considered different ways in which agency was being exercised. Indeed, Maggee’s decision to share this story with me was itself a politically motivated act. And, the youths’ decisions to remain silent about Nathan’s expulsion could also be viewed as a political act; perhaps a signal of denying oppression rather than being subjugated by it. It might also be read as a response to a perceived power differential between the youth and this researcher: a confessional tale of powerlessness might undermine discourses of

practical knowledge and autonomous beliefs about agency. As Grossberg (1992) noted, how individuals struggle to make meaning or extend control over their lives may not be actions we recognize (p. 114).

“Reading” the silences of these youth and discerning a truth that relies on a unified or shared subject position is not the goal of this discussion; instead it seeks to illustrate the complexity of subject positions, discourses, and practices of power and/or agency. Whatever it’s cultural or social significance, this silence afforded a discursive space in which to consider the productive nature of power and agency (Ellsworth, 1992; Fine, 1993; Jones, 2004; Mayo, 2004).

## **5.7 Alternative Readings: The Alt Sub Culture As Resistant**

One reading of the Alt sub culture is certainly that of resistance. In this interpretation, the practices of being “Alt” are a means of going against the grain, (Bannerji, 1995; Cochrane-Smith, 2001; hooks, 1994; Ng, 1993) resisting the dominant regime and creating a discursive space in which another world view can be explored and articulated. Alt students, as Brandy’s initial comments illustrated, situate themselves as in the world of the real, the pragmatic and the ordinary of day-to-day living. This discursive positioning offers students a means of explicitly naming and performing their agency in their everyday lives. The rest of the school population in this view is characterized as out of touch, existing in an illusionary future oriented world, rather than in the “real world” where day to day tactics are seen as the stuff of survival and grit.

There are indicators as well that the meaning of Alt has been resignified, at least in some quarters, as “cool”. The students in this class enjoy their status as Alt, and see it as affording them educational experiences on their own terms. This means that coming to

school late, socializing in class, engaging in often taboo topic discussions and debates, eating in class, and directing your own learning through self study rather than teacher directive are seen as positives and examples of personal and social power within the disciplinary regime of schooling.

And Alt students are not the only ones who afford themselves status within the subculture. On a regular basis, mainstream students drop by and ask to stay for a while.

One dialogue is recorded below:

Connor: "Mind if I show for a bit?"

Maggee: "What class are you in?"

Connor: "History".

Maggee: "So he knows you are here?"

Connor: "He let me out early".

An affirmative nod, and Connor joins the group. He engages in conversations with a number of other Alt youth who make space for him at their table.

As the social capital of the Alt sub culture is realized through exchanges such as these, the discourse of non-conformity is modified and shaped. In performing within this modified discourse, the subject positions of the Alt Ed student and the conforming or schooled subject is also altered or shaped; this discourse enacts a view of social power and it also re-signifies where social power lies.

Maggee and I discuss the Alt sub culture on many occasions during this study. It becomes clear that Maggee works to find ways of growing what she calls a "community" beyond those who are typically considered "Alt". As she stated, "*Alt used to be the class for dummies, but that's changed; it's now a place where people want to come. When students like Jenny and Tara [who are advanced placement students] come in and want to be a part of our conversations, this has altered the community.*" Maggee creates

boundaries of safety and an inclusive classroom environment that has the effect of opening both “regular” and “Alt” students to one another’s experiences. She works to break down the social and educational barriers that have been created in this disciplinary school culture that affords some students greater recognition and power than others. She sees herself very much as an advocate for students and more of a counsellor and facilitator than a teacher. Maggee’s goal is to provide a discursive space of empowerment for youth who are typically disempowered within the school setting.

By resignifying the term “Alt” the youth and their teacher have created a field of social power within the school setting that affords these youth agency; effectively they are engaged in practicing a form of sociopolitical agency. Its deliberative work in resistance to the dominant discourse affords this work its political significance, as well as its significance as a form of citizenship education virtually unrecognizable as such however, from the standpoint of the formal curriculum for this area.

## **5.8 Considering Agency At Northern High**

Butler’s (1990; 1993) conceptions of subjectivity, performativity and agency were described at some length in an earlier chapter of this study. However, it is useful to reiterate two key theoretical components: that the subject is socially and culturally constructed through embodied “doing” and that the subject is a product of such embodied performance. Processes of citationality or iterability are “not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject” (1993, p. 95). This statement also refutes the modern conception of an *a priori* agentive self. Instead Butler posits that “the doer is variably constructed in and through the deed” (1990, p. 142).

Power is a central feature of the analysis included in this chapter. Narratives that repeatedly situated power within the hierarchy of schooled practices and discourses were cited as forces of iterability that shape youth subjects, in this case, the Alt Ed youth. One can read into this narrative account the processes of power that serve to subjugate; for example, the disciplinary policies and practices as well as discourses of educational achievement served as examples of interpellation and demands for reiterability of social norms.

As Butler also observed however, practices of exclusion have performative force (1993, p. 188). So an Alt Ed class that physically positions youth subjects apart from the other students serves as a boundary between subjects; this also reiterates difference and informs beliefs about deviance. The binaries of “good/bad” or “performers/non performers” consistently present in the educational discourses of schooling helps inform these boundaries and is reminiscent of Foucault’s (1980) “medico-administrative” power that defines some populations as “abnormal”. School, in this reading, serves a therapeutic role in seeking to have the deviant population conform: “Their deficits and disorders are identified... and then a regime of care, surveillance and therapy is prescribed by a team of professionals” (Carlson, 2005, p. 38).

### **5.8.1 Other practices of exclusion: time and space as signifiers of agency**

Agency and power are constructed both temporally and physically within space of the school. In terms of time, agency is an “earned” commodity that is a product linked to the social norms of a schooled society. As you adhere to these social codes, including discourses of achievement and the power afforded to those with knowledge, you earn your agency, including an ability to choose for yourself. The discourses of achievement

over time are marked in the language of the school: youth “become” adults, are “prepared” for adult life, need to earn rights to agency by “completing” schooling and “choosing” educative paths for “prosperous futures”. These linguistic signs could be described as markers that create a signifying chain, constructing agency along a linear trajectory from the ‘powerless’ youth to ‘powerful’ adult. Knowledge is power, and power can only be achieved over time as youth are given increasingly higher levels of access to knowledge. This conception of agency as socially and culturally linked to achievement and discourses of educational success over time, has the effect of performatively shaping youth identities and beliefs about when and if they will become capable of agentive action.

Physical boundaries can also be tools that structure or organize discourses: the school building itself and the disciplinary regimes within it have been described in this chapter, and serve as examples of how space was bounded to limit, permit or evoke agency. For example, hallway surveillance was a strategy that physically limited the ability of youth bodies to move through the school space, as was the signage in the school office that located your social power by which “line” you were to stand in when visiting the school office. Your agency was signified by how your body was managed and ordered.

### **5.8.2 Only subjugated bodies?**

Such readings however, situate the Alt youth of this study as consistently subjugated and dominated rather than as subjects who have a capacity to act or perform within alternative discourses, or illustrate how discourses can be refused or resignified. The exploration of alternative subject positions and the constitutive force that might be

afforded to alternative discourses were used throughout this chapter as post structural textual practices to challenge such a single reading. For example, the ways in which the Alt Ed youth in the school assembly re-wrote themselves in a counter-text, both physically and semiotically in order to reject the discourse that would otherwise dismiss them as powerless.

In this chapter, I have described a number of events and cultural practices that illustrate the many different ways in which these youth practice and understand agency. For example, some responses rely on accessing the discourses of success and achievement that were summarized above. Agency was ascribed to individuals who were able to “get through” in order to become employed and buy a truck. Agency was also ascribed to those who had practical knowledge and could act upon the world, such as was the case afforded to practical knowledge in mechanics, cafeteria class, or “bush” knowledge for survival. Agency could also be illustrated by standing up for yourself (doing what you need to do) as well as standing in solidarity with others, as was discussed in how cultural agency was envisioned for aboriginal peoples or for teachers during the strike (sharing in cultural or group forms of empowered action). Agency was sometimes asserted in different ways for girls and boys, as gender afforded opportunities for money and leisure among boys while for girls agency was constrained by social convention. Public actions such as letter writing or protesting/striking were afforded status as examples of political agency. Defying hierarchical authority and disrupting disciplinary regimes illustrated resistance as agency, such as Nathan’s story where his physical location in space asserted agency that resisted authoritative others despite their organizational power. Agency was also demonstrated in practices: walking in a hallway



and sharing a smile and wink illustrated resistance to surveillance; an authoritative gaze, a physical stance and silence were also examined as illustrations of power.

### **5.8.3 Agency as action**

What the examples in this chapter have highlighted is the multiple ways in which agency can be conceived of and practiced. As such, it illustrates the ways in which agency is a product of activity and action, a performance, always situated within particular social and cultural locations. This is consistent with Wertsch's (1998) model of mediated action, where cultural tools are implicated in how subjects act upon the world. In this school site, we saw evidence of youth consistently taking action in ways that afforded them power and agency in many different locations: their bodily performances during the achievement assembly; the winks, nods, and coded messages that were shared in hallways in order to re-locate the smoke pit to avoid surveillance; and the silence used by the Alt Ed youth who refused to engage with me in a discussion of Nathan's powerlessness because it would re-iterate their own subjugation, act as examples of how the construction and practices of agency are always a product of a particular time and location. Acting from particular subject positions, social locations, and responding to particular cultural models, agency is afforded in the moment when we take "up the tools where they lie, where the taking up is enabled by the tool lying there" (Davies, 1997, p. 6). As multiply located subjects, we access and invent ways to struggle against domination, in ways that will not merely recreate it, but may confound or alter it (p. 8). This potential offers a model for reconceiving of the civic subject and citizenship education.

## CHAPTER 6: THEATRE AS THEORY: BRING IT TO LIFE

### 6.1 Scene One: The Platform<sup>9</sup>

Approaching the outside of the downtown social agency office where the Street Spirits Theatre group meets causes one to wonder if its safe to be in this part of town, particularly in the evening hours. It's not particularly well lit, and its façade doesn't inspire confidence: its dark shingled exterior has no welcoming light. A glassed door about 500 meters from the corner is the only sign that you can actually enter the space. And huddled around the door are three or four youth, smoking, talking loudly, sometimes swearing and sometimes laughing. They stand together in close proximity, shoulders and bodies nearly touching one another, almost circling the small stoop. To get in, one must get past this youth sentry. I feel a bit intimidated and not a little anxious, but I know based on an earlier visit to view a Street Spirits Theatre film production that the actual space used for rehearsals is in this building. So cross the threshold I must. I approach the door, and notice first the smell of cigarettes; next someone spitting on the sidewalk. Several are dressed in what might be called the adolescent uniform: hooded sweat shirts, jeans, ball caps, tee shirts. Some sport piercings, others wildly coloured hair. One carries a small perfect pink purse; another, a bright semi sheer scarf wrapped around her body like a skirt, contrasting with the male style jacket pants and cap that complete the look. I

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<sup>9</sup> **Platform** is a term used in improv theatre that means the who, where and what of a scene. A solid platform is a foundation on which to build a good scene. *A glossary of Improv Terms*. Accessed on June 20, 2006 at <http://www.improvcomedy.org/glossary.html>

say “hi” and they move aside to let me go in the door; theirs are not exactly welcoming stares but no one tries to stop me.

I know I feel and look out of place here; I’m already nervous about what why I’m here, my role as a researcher, and wondering about their willingness to work with me. But I’ve talked at some length with Andrew, their artistic director, and his conversations about the purposes of Street Spirits Theatre has me hooked: I’ve got to learn more about this place and his approach to working with youth on issues of social justice through theatrical production. I’ve seen one of their videos: a film about teen pregnancy, and watched them put on a short interactive play at the Children’s festival in the park several weeks before. I am intrigued by what they do, and believe it offers a lens through which I might explore how issues of social justice have relevance for these and other young people. There’s too much at stake to be frightened off by their cool stares and (to me) odd clothes.

Once inside, I see Andrew, talking earnestly with someone, who looks like another Street Spirits Theatre member. There is another woman too, and she’s holding a baby, feeding it from a bottle. The room is quite large, with a black stage at one side, some old sofas and chairs scattered in one corner, and chairs stacked against another. There looks to be a kitchen and the remnants of a coffee bar; a couple of “café” tables complete this impression. The ceilings are very high, painted black, and are covered with vents, pipes and fans. It’s quite dark, the lighting seems better in some spots than others. It’s best over the open floor area; the floor is covered with patterned tiles, interspersed with a few pillars. A washroom door is evident in a small corridor; there is also a swinging door that looks like it leads into another area.

Gradually, young people enter the space. Some are talking, others rush in wildly, laughing and jumping. Some come in quietly, almost sullen, talking to few others before taking a seat on the group of sofas close to the stage. There's a wide range of emotions apparent, and many checking in with one another, obviously friends. The volume of noise grows as more enter, each taking a place in the sofa area.

I try and catch Andrew's eye, but he's still talking, so I walk into the area where several are seated. I see chairs on the side, so grab one to sit on rather than choose a seat that puts me in close physical proximity to these young people. I don't want anyone to be offended or angry with me taking a particular spot that might belong to others: a chair seems a safer bet.

No one pays too much attention to me; everyone carries on with their conversations, some leaving again to hang out around the door. I wonder about the baby; I wonder about when we will start. Andrew said rehearsals were from 6:00-8:30 pm, but it was well after 6:00 pm but no formal start yet. I wait and watch. Around 6:15 Andrew says loudly "Circle up!" This signal seems to have people move more purposefully towards the sofa area; not everyone is here yet, I still see several pushing each other outside on the stoop, others are standing around the open space; Andrew sits down, leans forward, his arms on his knees and waits.

Someone says "hello" to me as she sits down, and smiles. She looks like an interesting young woman: dressed in a remarkable mix of vintage and contemporary youth clothing and accessories, she's got a real style thing going on. Her hair is a mix of old and new colour; she carries a skull and crossbones bag over her arm; she has a dog collar around her neck and a very short skirt with wildly coloured tights. But she seems

very open, smiling and happy to see others. She makes jokes, laughs and talks to everyone in a very welcoming manner. It's clear everyone likes her too. She is the first to welcome me here, and I'm grateful for her acknowledgement.

Andrew speaks again: "Who has a circle item?" A young guy jumps up and says "I do". He removes the hat he is wearing, and begins to talk. He tells a story about how he has made the hat at home, stitching pieces together from some canvas and an old army surplus bag. He carefully explains how he embroidered "fuck war" on its band and how this is a powerful message for him. As he talks, everyone in the circle is listening; at one point there is finger snapping, I'm really not sure why. When he stops talking, he puts the hat in the centre of the circle. I watch and wait to see what comes next: finally, another boy rises and slowly goes into the middle of the circle and picks up the hat. He takes it back to his place, and begins to talk. "It's been a really boring week. I've got nothing to do but some school work and then I watch TV." He's slumped over in the corner of his sofa space, looking down at the hat, and not at any of us. Everyone is listening intently; no one else speaks as he shares his story. When he's done, he passes the hat to the person on his left. Now a new story begins.

As I watch this process unfold, I realize that soon it will be my turn, and I'll need to say something about who I am, and why I'm here. I rehearse a few possible responses as I watch the hat move from person to person around the circle. Some conversations are short, others longer; one person takes the hat and simply passes it on. Eventually it gets to me and I introduce myself, and tell them I am a teacher and researcher at the local university and I'm here to learn more about Street Spirits Theatre. This seems relatively safe, in the short term. I know I'll be asked to say more later, as Andrew and I have

discussed, but now doesn't seem to be the right time to raise the issues of research ethics, participation and the goal of my research work. The hat moves on as I pass it to my left, and I listen to the other speakers. The woman who is holding the baby talks about her daughter; eventually Andrew talks about his own work week, and upcoming Street Spirits Theatre events. More finger snapping during this conversation. Ah, finger snapping is the same as applause... I get it.

There are about ten people here overall, a range of ages and different backgrounds apparent. There's one young girl who looks about fourteen, others look older, closer to 18, even 20 or more. The young man with the hat seems to be perhaps the oldest in the group, maybe 22 or 23. He reminds me of a hippy, curly long hair, a goatee and Birkenstock sandals. He's got that mellow, "what's shakin'?" laid back attitude; at least, that is what his body seems to say. He leans back in his chair, legs extended and ankles crossed, arms behind his head, or leaning forward, hands on his knees, eyes carefully fixed on the speaker, and nodding his head sagely. Before the evening is over, I'll know his name: Evan.

Eventually Andrew asks me to talk with everyone about the research I want to do; he nods his head and looks around at everyone as I speak. He also reviews the primary condition for my inclusion: "I've told Cathy that she can't just sit and watch us, she needs to get involved. That's a requirement here, no watching, you have to engage". Lots of head nodding, and "yeah's" spoken. I acknowledge my willingness to be an "active" participant, but also my lack of experience in any sort of theatre. This doesn't seem to bother them, one says "you'll figure it out". I do some self talk at this point and try and relax. I show them the forms I have for them to fill out; more nodding and a general

consensus that I can stay: not spoken, implied as a result of Andrew's endorsement and my agreement to join with them in the work.

"OK, a quick break and then we'll start". Andrew rises as does everyone else; several rush out the door, others simply begin to talk again. I watch as about four head out the door. Looks like these are the smokers. Evan comes to sit beside me and begins to ask me a few questions, and I discuss with him at some length my approaches to the research, including interviews and observation notes. He volunteers to be interviewed, and fills in my form. For the remainder of the break and throughout the remainder of the evening I engage these young people in a conversation about the research I'll do, and ask them to sign consent forms. Most are quite willing, some seem indifferent. The paper isn't important to several of them "Do I have to fill this in? I think its OK, so why the paper?" Explaining the ethical rules of the university doesn't seem to engender any understanding, only shaking heads, but compliance. You can tell they think it's silly or unnecessary, but I doggedly continue.

Finally, Andrew moves to the open area of the room, and begins a signal: he claps twice, clap clap, and then hits his thighs. He repeats these actions: clap, clap, and then hitting his thighs, in a pattern. As he begins to do this, more young people join him, and join in with the existing rhythm. People begin to form a circle, and eventually everyone arrives. Andrew stops, and then the group stops, looking at him expectantly. He states: "Let's start with energy ball". Andrew explains the game, and then begins to pass the imaginary ball to another person; as each receives it through pantomimed action they then passes it on to another, by directly looking at them and then physically thrusting their hands/arms towards the other in a throwing motion. Eventually this process gets

faster, and the imagined ball moves more rapidly around the circle. The ball is eventually passed to me, and I awkwardly pass it to another person.

I can't believe how awkward I am in this activity; I seem to throw rather than catch, for one thing, and it's as if I am moving in slow motion, I can't imitate a catch easily and have to jerkily repeat my motions. I feel (and I'm sure look) like a clumsy dork.

The second exercise is called "love and hate". In this game each person must go into the middle of the circle and act out or "show their passion" about a topic, that is, either to "love it" or "hate it". The topics are awarded to each person by the actor just on their right. Each goes in turn around the circle. The first one floors me: "Tell why you love Dan's great ass". Evan gets this one, and does a great job of describing Dan's ass: he describes in considerable detail why he "loves" it. He's a very capable improvisational actor: he is able to describe both expected and unexpected features of someone's ass, and tell us how it is both useful and beautiful. He uses his voice and body to good effect: his body really "tells" the story as he plays out the possibilities. "Yes!" as well as loud laughter accompany his performance, and he gets a round of applause as he finishes. Fun, yes, but, oh boy, this will be wild, I don't think I'll do too well with such a sexually charged topics! Luckily for me, when my turn comes I'm asked to describe why I love pickles! This goes fairly well... I do use some expression, particularly when I say "I lllloooovvvveeee pickles!" I describe the crunch, the taste, the sour juice dripping down my throat, the mixtures one can make also with pickle juice, pickle with other tastes (tuna and peanut butter). I don't go on for too long, but I feel I do well enough and step back, and get a few encouraging comments when I do. Survived the first big one!



In the next game, Andrew asks us to “shake hands with someone across the circle from you, they are your new partner”. Then we do a game called “hypnosis”, where one partner is the lead and the other puts his/her face about ten centimetres from their hand, and follows the hand of their partner, moving up, down, sideways, around the room. Surprisingly, I find it harder to follow the person’s hand than I think it will be; I often anticipate directions that don’t materialize and I get out of sync quite easily.

As the evening progresses, we play a series of theatre games. While not realizing it at the time, I will eventually learn that the games we played that night were the “beginner” games often done in workshop format with others who join this theatre group from time to time. Some call them “trust” games, and they are designed to build confidence among new members that they can engage in these activities safely and without worry about personal performance. As the weeks and months go by, I’ll be more and more challenged to try new games and techniques, but for tonight, while new and different, it seems relatively easy and safe. I’ve been anxious, but I begin to relax. So far I haven’t managed to make a complete fool of myself and that is my biggest concern at this point.

After four or five games, Andrew says “OK, rehearsal”. Tonight’s play is for a performance scheduled in two weeks for a local bank employee workshop and conference. Street Spirits Theatre has been asked to put on a play about workplace harassment.

As the actors wait for instructions from Andrew, I immediately go to my chair and find my pink notebook. I have a bright pink covered notebook, and lots of paper; I keep my forms in it as well as the notes I take. I watch as they begin the process of

exploring harassment. Rather than beginning with a conversation, Andrew asks for a volunteer to “sculpt” an image, using the bodies of others in the group, into an image that represents harassment. As one image is sculpted, new players are asked to come into the image, in order to add new features to further develop the initial representation. There is no talk, this is a silent process of observation and representation of someone’s ideas related to harassment. Each actor is carefully watching, thinking, and adding parts as they experience moments of connection to the scene evolving before them. After the image is complete, Andrew asks questions about the image; single words are added first by those within the image scene, and eventually a story seems to emerge from these words and questions. Finally, the actors in the image are asked to improvise a story that will come from their frozen image: “bring it to life!” Andrew directs, and the actors begin to add flesh to the frozen form they have started with as they enact their ideas with the others from the frozen image. A simple scene emerges: a new employee is trying to stock shelves, and a manager gets too close and makes a suggestive comment that paralyzes the young worker.

With a single scene in place, the rest of the play develops by considering scenes that might exist prior to or after this one. Individual characters are constructed from “back stories”, that is stories which offer a context for the performers to describe and enact their character’s state of mind and possible responses. These ideas are not developed through talk as much as they are developed by studying and using the emotions and feelings represented in the actors bodies. Andrew isolates an image made by one actor’s body in a scene and asks the question “What were you thinking?” or “Why is that important to you?” or “How do you feel?” As each young actor names a

motivation or a feeling, Andrew uses this to develop next steps in the story line. Once a new direction emerges, or new characters are added, the young actors are given the instructions to improvise between themselves based on one or two core ideas. The dialogue and storyline emerge from this improvising process, some scenes easily enacted, others more awkward, and need revision and re-enactment to try other alternatives. However, within thirty minutes a short play with four scenes has already emerged.

“OK, Circle up!” Andrew says loudly, and that signals the end of tonight’s rehearsal. We join together again on the sofa’s and chairs; another object is added to the centre of the circle, and we go around the circle one last time. This circle seems to evoke lots of comments about the play design process; how good people feel about a role, or how well someone’s idea worked out in the play as it stands now; others share ideas about possible directions that the play might take next; still others re-address personal issues: Jane, who did not speak in the earlier circle, seems more animated, shares information about school and home, neither of which are going very well. Yet she goes on to express appreciation for the fun times she’s afforded here at Street Spirits Theatre, and says “I can’t wait until we do this again next week”.

It’s not all fun and light however: Jessie shares why she’s been away for a while, she’s been in rehab for the last few weeks. A little later, an older woman comes into the theatre space, and asking where Jessie is. I wonder how Jessie feels about this kind of physical surveillance, as if she can’t even be trusted to come to theatre rehearsal. Then there is Brooke, someone who is openly struggling with her meth addiction: she’s clean for tonight, that’s one of Street Spirits Theatre’s rules, but she’s talking about partying tonight, and that might mean engaging in some pretty risky behaviour. I feel really

worried for her, but frankly don't have a clue what I could or should say. And Logan, who's bouncing around the room: is he engaged in what the kids call tweaking?

The evening ends as Andrew offers rides home to many of the young people who come from a range of locations in the city: Jane's family lives an hour out of town; she needs a ride to her sister's place where she stays over night on Thursdays so she can be a part of Street Spirits Theatre. The door is closed, the key turns, and the space becomes dark again as everyone scatters off into the late evening coolness. My first visit at Street Spirits Theatre ends, as I rush home to translate my experiences into the ongoing journal I will keep over the next ten months.

## 6.2 Scene Two: Setup<sup>10</sup>

**Cathy:** Well, everyone, what do you think?

**Andrew:** "Well, it's a nice intro Cathy, but I'm not sure you've captured the sense of purpose that brings many of these young people here to work in theatre. The focus on Actorvism... you know, our interest in social action and helping groups in the community explore social problems or issues that matter to them doesn't come through in your opening. The play you are talking about isn't necessarily some of our best work: what about Sergei? That's a really powerful play that deals with issues that are really important to many of our actors, like bullying, and racism, and peer pressure. Maybe that's a better play to focus on. I think we want people to see how our work really can make a difference for the people who view them.

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<sup>10</sup> Setup is another improv term that explains the scene to the audience before a play starts. It gives background information. *A glossary of Improv terms*. Accessed on June 20, 2006 at <http://www.improvcomedy.org/glossary.html>

**Evan:** Sergei, yeah, that is a great play. Remember when we figured out how we would perform it? As if Sergei was in the audience?

**Jackson:** Yeah, Luca and I came up with that idea. It was an important way of illustrating how we couldn't take on the voice of Sergei, we couldn't *be* him because we didn't know his experience. I mean, we decided a long time ago that we couldn't do plays that weren't based in our own experiences. Like, what did we know about landmines? How could we construct a play that was based on something we had really no experience with? So making a play where he was there, watching us, and stopping the action from time to time to directly address him in the audience—well, that meant we could put him into our world, and explore his experience through what we did know. Yeah, it really worked. Remember when we did that play at the Theatre of the Oppressed conference in Omaha, Nebraska? We blew them away...

**Evan:** Yeah, it was great. Remember how mad that guy got about our intervention methods? That we allowed people to take on any role they wanted, not just the oppressor? And we allowed that one person to add the teacher role? He was so high and mighty, telling us that we couldn't alter the technique, "real" Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners had to do it in exactly the same way that Boal had. And then remember what Boal said? That it wasn't a form of theatre that should remain static, and changing how it could be used to explore issues of oppression was actually something he supported. Telling that guy that... man, that was a great moment. I mean, we were telling all of those people, those researchers and whoever else was there, that how we did it, and how we chose to take make forum theatre work for our community was important and worthwhile.

**Sasha:** OK you guys, get over yourselves. You are supposed to be commenting on Cathy's description of Street Spirits Theatre. It sounded to me like a pretty good description of how it feels to get started; I mean, I remember how it felt to get started here. I didn't know anybody, and there was a group of you who were all close and stuff and it was hard to break in. I know Andrew said that it's about actorvism, and yeah, it is. But it's also about getting to know yourself, to figure out your own power and to find your own voice. Like, we can put our voices into the plays, and we can help other people find a space for their voice too.

**Emily:** I did like how you told about the games. Yeah, they are a lot of fun. Can we play cat and mouse tonight? That's a lot of fun too. And hey, was I the kid with the pink purse you were talkin' about? That's funny...

**Cathy:** So what's important that I missed?

**Lane:** Well, maybe more about the image work. That's really powerful for me because we are really becoming connected with our bodies and spirits. It's just too easy most of the time to use words, to talk about what we could do, but when we have to rely on our bodies to tell our story, well, that's difficult, but it gets to the heart of things: know what I mean? You connect emotionally and spiritually, so it's deeper than talk.

**Leslie:** I'd have to agree with that. The image work is such a powerful place to find the moment that really matters, and then you can develop a play around it. Lots of people really have trouble with image work though.

**Andrew:** That's why we spend so much time doing games that force us out of speech mode: silent games, blind games, trust games, mirror games. Getting comfortable in your body and trusting that it will tell you what you need to know is something a lot of people

have forgotten. When we workshop with people or community groups, we always save image work and image sculpting until after people get more comfortable, because it is harder. We know how to read people's faces pretty well, but we don't always realize how much we convey through the body. Learning to read your own body and the meta-messages conveyed through others actions is important work. It really helps us to identify where the power is, and how oppression often works on bodies.

**Cathy:** Yeah, I remember that from a workshop we did last summer; Andrew, you talked about how we convey certain messages with our body, and you asked us to explore some personal stances, and asked us the question "What emotions do you connect with this stance?" That was powerful for me, I really connected more consciously with how my body tells me what to feel. But the second part of the process was important too: how others interpreted our bodies and the stances we took. People read you differently than you read yourself. So how we know our body is not necessarily how someone else reads your body.

**Logan:** Yeah, that's a good point. Remember my role in that harassment play? My back story said that my touching Monica wasn't sexual, just friendly. But she didn't read it that way, and we had to figure out how to convey that message differently. That was hard man... but I like being the bad guy!

**Lane:** Hey, you've made my point I think. That's why image work, and getting in touch with your feelings is such an important part of the Street Spirits Theatre process. I mean, that's why I'm here. I feel we can really make a difference with this work, we can help people identify what's really important to them and help them work through it using the theatre process.

**Lenny:** OK, that's important I agree, but we also need to have a safe place to share what we think, to tell it like it is, to really connect with our own place in this community by talking through our issues. That's what I try and do in circle: connect with people, get in touch with my own feelings and talk about how things are going for me. I've been living on the streets since I was fourteen; in and out of rehab, sometimes working, lots of times not; trying to connect with aboriginal kids now that seem just like me. We're angry... and hurtin'. Sometimes I need to be able to talk about how I've been held back by others or by myself: all of you need to hear this, and recognize it in yourself too. Street Spirits Theatre is really a touch stone for me: I need to come back from time to time, get strong again through the process, and really get the courage to begin again. All my relations.

**Sasha:** Lenny brings up a good point. Some of us really need Street Spirits Theatre to be a place where we can safely work through some of our issues. I mean, we've all got problems, some of us big ones! Like, I'm trying to figure out how to go back to school and raise a kid; its hard you know. I mean I love Charity, and most of the time I feel like I can handle things, I've got a job and so I have money to keep us going, but sometimes I wonder if I'll get stuck and end up in a place where I can't make the choices I want. But I don't want to be a victim... I hate it when people put me in that place with their words: they assume that because I'm young, I'm poor and I have a baby that I can't be powerful or in charge of myself. Remember the International women's day performance? I didn't want to go there, I hate that place! All those people, they think they are making a difference up there. But all they do is label: they look at me and I know they see me as a victim: they need me to be a victim! They disempower me, they take away my strength. I



can't be in that space with them. I had to speak up and say what had to be said to them.

And I'm telling you now, I won't do it again. I hate them.

**Leslie:** Yeah, that day was tough, we really had to struggle through that performance. We used monologues that time, because we needed to speak our own truths.

**Cathy:** But the more we rehearsed, the more it seemed just like that, a rehearsal, an act, not a legitimate or real space. Did anyone else feel like that? I know that's how I felt.

**Sasha:** Well, the first time we talked about it at Street Spirits Theatre, it wasn't really a rehearsal or a play; it was just us talking openly with one another. I mean, I had to talk, I felt like I was going to explode with my feelings about having to do that performance at the University. And those feelings were raw, intense, and personal. I couldn't do that in front of a group of strangers, so it had to change, it couldn't be what it had been at first. I mean, even though we deal with really important issues at Street Spirits Theatre, and put them together on stage in a way that gets people to struggle with that issue themselves, doesn't mean we have to put ourselves into the show. I couldn't put myself into that show.

**Cathy:** Evan, Sasha's comments remind me of something you said when we talked about the forum theatre process: about the difference between yourself and the person you are becoming on stage, and how you engage between these roles. Can you describe that for me again?

**Evan:** Well, one of the things I've noticed is that you can convey a character's intention if that intention is in your head. You've got to have the back story there, something you know about that person; it can be a secret, or it can be something about them, like that

they really love someone, even though they are acting like an asshole. As long as it is in your head, and you have that thought in there, you'll portray it.

**Cathy:** When you say that I almost get the impression that you are really connected to that imagined person in some way. But where does that connection come from?

**Evan:** Well, I guess that connection comes from the story you've created, one where you want to make it real for people by portraying people as they actually are. I mean, all actions make sense, as long as you understand what context they're being viewed from. Like take for example, racism. If we are doing something on racism, we don't want to make it about something like skinheads or some other extreme group. 'Cause that would require some sort of extreme, serious action. Where racism can be addressed is like my grandfather, who thinks its OK to make native jokes. So I make my character like my grandfather: a nice guy, someone you really like, but he's a bit of a racist prick. Now, how can I act on that? How can I change how he responds? That's a good Street Spirits Theatre play that people can really get into, because it's their life, and they can connect to a character like that.

**Cathy:** In my research notes, I came across an idea I wrote about this topic, about how our performances come from ourselves, who we are, what we think. I wrote, "We are led to particular performances because of our experiences". Maybe we have an affinity for certain performance pieces because of our experiences, and how we've been drawn into particular issues as a part of our lives. Which is, I think, different than Sasha's comment that we can't become ourselves in performance, because that isn't always safe. Maybe we play within ourselves a bit, taking on different parts of our identity? The things we really want to understand?

**Dan:** yeah, I think you do bring some of yourself into a role: for example, when I played Cripple Billy, my disability helped me understand how he felt as a character. This guy didn't want to be defined by his disability, and that's something I want too. To be seen beyond my disability. And in the play he has an argument with his friend and the friend just kinda treats him like he's helpless or stupid, really patting him on the head instead of getting into the fight with him. When we played that scene, in that moment, it made me really angry and I brought that anger into the play. That is some of the ways you can play a role best, when you can identify with the character's feelings. But you always try to find some similarity to your own life and build on that.

**Rusty:** Yeah, you do bring your personal experience into it. You bring your own information and your own story in, so that... it starts off being about you, and you'll say "Cool, that's my life story on stage" so you pay attention. But as you go along, and other issues come up, suddenly you start to realize, "So that's how it is for them". So by the time you come out of it, you know how it feels to be like that gay kid, it really gets you going with the whole empathy thing. When you come into a group like Street Spirits Theatre, where someone actually knows about things like drugs and racism and prostitution—you feed off each other's stories, and dialogue is started, and simply being exposed to the dialogue is a huge step, a huge step. And you start to think, hey maybe these issues are more complicated than I thought.

**Evan:** But its not just us that this work is about; its about working with groups in the community and help them identify and work on issues that are important to them. Sometimes we do go into communities and do a performance that really does raises personal and painful issues for people. It can really hurt, a lot. But we give them the

opportunity to try out solutions. And if I can take myself to that dark place and be OK in the end, and share that with the audience and allow them to go into that dark place in a safe environment, against this big bad wolf, then... I think that is very powerful. And not only does it empower me, it empowers people in the audience.

**Danielle:** Yeah, those are great moments. And sometimes people really get into it. They come up on stage to try out their solutions, and you can see the tears in their eyes, its real for them. It's a moment that they are living with you. And even though it's painful, well, it really feels like you've accomplished something in the end.

**Evan:** Yeah, there is remarkable power to it, you feel they are talking to you from their heart. But it doesn't necessarily always happen on stage; sometimes it happens later, after the show, or maybe the next day, or even a year later someone will come up to me and say "I was at that play you did about alcoholism. And it really made a difference for me" and then they tell you their story. And I mean, that's powerful for me too. Like, I feel like I did something that made a difference for someone.

**Andrew:** But let's be clear about how forum theatre works. It isn't about telling people, "OK, drugs are bad, here's a play we've made for you to watch and realize that". It's about being invited into a community and working with them on a problem they've identified. The last thing anyone needs is someone telling them what to do; the forum or social actorvism theatre process works because it doesn't say "Hey, there is something wrong with you and we're going to show you how to fix it", instead, we are asking them to define the problems in their community, what they see and hear. What they think is wrong, or what they think are problems. And then we put that out to the community, in the form of a short performance and say, "Is this what is wrong?" and "How are you

going to change it? How are you going to fix this”.. And uh... then the audience becomes involved and... collaborates with the actors to find solutions to the problems in the play. Spect-actors, that’s what Boal calls them.

**Cathy:** Yeah, in my notes from our interview, we discussed how this resembles what Eco (1988) calls an “open text”, one that can be read in many different ways.

**Andrew:** The audience fills in the blanks, ‘cause the audience sees the message and creates the reality themselves, they become part of the creative process of the work. It really demands that they act, instead of sitting in the dark, being quiet, and not speaking at all like in a traditional theatre performance. There is a tension created that sets up an expectation that they should get up an act. That’s really the meta-message of forum theatre: we shine a light on the process of community action without actually speaking that text.

**Lane:** Cool, shining a light on community action. That really is what we do. I like that metaphor. It really speaks to me. It is what brought me to work here at Street Spirits Theatre.

**Shona:** But I think it’s important that we focus on what we care about too. I mean, like, there are lots of problems and issues we care about, and we want to make a statement, and really show people that they need to work on a problem that they really don’t see.

**Lane:** Yeah, that’s why I wanted us to do something for “buy nothing day”. That’s an important global issue that we’ve really got to get people thinking about. Like sweat shops where kids are forced to make stuff, for like, no money at all, and we just buy the stuff here as if its clean and doesn’t really hurt people. We need to send a message to all

of these corporate people that we won't buy their dirty goods: we can make a difference if we work together.

**Shona:** Remember that other play we did, in workshop last summer? The play we did on the lesbian girls at school? How the other kids targeted her as soon as they knew she was a lesbian? Kids at school are really cruel like that; they don't think twice about saying whatever comes into their mind to try and get someone to be like them. Sasha, you and Emily really got that part down pat: it was scary how real that felt when you did that cell phone scene calling a friend and deliberately spreading lies and stories about that poor kid. And when Jane confronted you, and you took her down too, well, that was like how it really happens at school. No one does anything, they just say "oh yeah, some kids disagreeing in the hallway, nothing to do here", and just walk by. No wonder that poor kid was so scared to come out with her girlfriend.

**Sasha:** Yeah, I was a real bitch, and Emily was just kinda like my groupie, hangin' on my words, and getting a high off my ugliness. So was Evan, he was my "bitch".

**ALL:** laughing.

**Sasha:** But that kind of ugliness is pretty common at school: I mean, I was a victim of it all the time. Don't look different or be different, don't stand up for yourself or anyone else, or you'll be cut out of the popular scene. They'll sneer at you, they'll shun you, they'll point fingers and whisper at you... and they'll destroy you with their stories if they can. I mean it is so painful, I couldn't be in that place, I had to leave.

**Emily:** There is huge pressure to fit in at school, and it's hard to stand up and say no to that kind of behaviour. Remember that character in Sergei? The kid who finally stands up and tells them, "You know what? He killed himself on the weekend" and really blames

those other actors for picking on him, and bullying him because he's different? I mean, that was an extreme ending, but it was a powerful one too.

**Monica:** But it wasn't just Evan and Colin, the bullies in the play who were the bad guys. The audience interventions were really good, 'cause they showed how the goodie girl could have done something too. And the teacher... she was really no help. It's not enough to try and be friendly with the bullied kid, or send someone to the office when they get caught. There's more that has to be done. And we gave them a chance to try out different solutions.

**Andrew:** Your examples are good, 'cause that's something else we need to make clear. There are some fundamental differences between what Street Spirits Theatre does and what Boal does in forum theatre. I mean, you have to change it; it's an evolving process. Everyone in TO has to find their own song. It's like jazz, everyone has their own riff. My interest, likely 'cause I'm a social worker, is in social change, not political change. Boal's work is political, he's been fighting an oppressive state. We're interested in causing social change, not necessarily fighting against an oppressive force. Not that we don't talk about oppression; we do, but we see the possibility in changing the oppressor in a way that Boal's work doesn't allow. That's why we let individuals in a play's intervention take on lots of different roles, including that of the oppressor: we even explore the oppressor's back story, humanize him or her, and try and show the complexity of oppression and how it operates in people's lives. We explore interpersonal issues in a much bigger way than Boal does. We'll explore issues like how people treat each other, the effects of poverty, alcoholism, drug abuse, or unemployment. So we use different tools for change than Boal does.

**Logan:** Yeah, being the bad guy, the oppressor, that's what I was talking about earlier.

**Emily:** Yeah, I remember the first time we allowed someone to introduce a new character. We were in Little Rock<sup>11</sup>, doing this play on alcoholism. We were in the middle of this scene where the parents had left their kids at home alone while they went out to drink. They come home drunk, and when one of the kids asks for something to eat, the father hits her. And this little kid, what was she? Maybe seven? Yells out "Stop!" So Andrew stops the play and says, "Tell us what you want to do". And this little kid comes up on the stage and says "I wanna be the Grandma". And Andrew says, "Well, there is no Grandma in the play. You can be one of the other characters on the stage." And she shakes her head and says, "There would be a Grandma". So Andrew says, "OK, go ahead". So this little kid gets up there, and has us replay the scene until the parents come through the door. And she takes the two kids in the play by the hand, and says to them, "OK, you kids are going to stay with your Auntie for a while." And they leave the stage, and then she turns to the two parents and says "You sit there, and you sit there. Now, your kids are gone and they aren't coming back until you smarten up". Now the audience is all clapping and hooting, 'cause that's just the right solution. Everyone in the audience could see how that intervention would really work.

**Andrew:** Yeah, really culturally appropriate.

**Emily:** And she was just such a little kid! Mostly people don't credit kids with being able to come up with solutions. I experience that all the time, people don't think I know things or can do things 'cause I'm only fourteen. But when people see us on stage, and see how we have the courage to work with them, to help them try and work through some

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<sup>11</sup> A pseudonym



problems, well, I think it changes what they think about us kids. Especially us kids at Street Spirits Theatre.

**Andrew:** It was a really strong message, and it came from a seven year old. And so after that, you can create a character if you think that there is someone that needs to be there that's not in the play. Like I say, it's a growing process. And you look at it in terms not of technique driving something; but "what is it we want to do here?" And fundamentally it is the shows: that's the key to Street Spirits Theatre. The effect it has on the actors, and the effect it has on the audience. If you look at the effect it has on the audience, what we want is for the audience to recognize the situation, to recognize that it is important, and we want the audience to say, OK, we have a responsibility to try and change this. Street Spirits Theatre, while an important process of the youth involved, just wouldn't work if it wasn't making a difference for the communities its working with. And our process makes sure that we explore issues that are important to them, and they get to reframe those issues as problems in their environment, not problems in themselves.

**Cathy:** So tell me about some of the other issues you've explored in Street Spirits Theatre.

**Rusty:** well, one that I really remember was about this girl named Brandy, who had an autistic sister, and how her disability affected her ability to get help at school. Wow, I'd never even thought about how hard it was for that kid, or for her sister and family until we did that play. That was a tough one too, in terms of interventions. Like sometimes people just want "magic" to happen.

**Andrew:** No 'magic' on stage: it has to be real. Things that can really be played out, where characters don't just become "good" because people want them to change their

ways. That's not real life, that's 'magic'. And the Joker calls it when it's 'magic', and won't allow those solutions to stand on their own.

**Sasha:** So remember the time that know-it-all-woman came up on stage, and she said, "Well, I know how to stop that guy from hitting you." And she goes up on stage, and she stands there and lectures him, and uses all the right words like "You can't control me" and "I won't put up with that, I deserve to be given respect", and finally, "I won't take that from you. I'm leaving". And then he hits her: not for real of course, he just fakes it by hitting his fist into his hand, not her face. But she suddenly just looks stunned. I mean, completely stunned. And you know in that moment, she FINALLY gets it. She realizes that sometimes people don't have choices, that decisions are harder than just standing up and saying the easy lines.

**Cathy:** So in the example you describe Sasha, it's obvious that that play made a difference for that woman. Or at least, we can assume so, based on her reaction to how her well intentioned intervention went on stage.

**Sasha:** Yeah, I think some of our best plays are the ones we do for the so called "social worker" set. I mean, a lot of times when we are working in a community, we are really preaching to the converted: do you know what I mean? They are already committed to the issue, like doing something about alcohol or drug abuse among kids. So sometimes its better if we do a play for a group like social workers or the police, they really need to see that their messages aren't always just so easy to implement, that life is really a lot harsher for people than they know. A big part of the process for them is getting a dialogue going. It really riles them up. One person says something that some don't agree with, and then there are ten more people who think differently, and then it becomes easier to express

your own ideas. If you can get a good dialogue going after a performance, then it really works well. Remember that time in Burnaby, with the police? They talked for over an hour, and in the end, they really did change their approach to outreach with street youth by hiring some of them to do the outreach, give out blankets, hot chocolate and stuff.

**Teresa:** One of the things this conversation is missing is the importance of the joking role. I mean, the Joker is the person who can really help the audience see the problems by asking questions like “Is this OK?” “Who is the real oppressor here?” so that the audience really becomes a part of the play process. If the audience just sits there and watches, then its too easy, it doesn’t get them thinking for themselves.

**Leslie:** Yeah, and sometimes we have to do an intervention, those of us who are in the audience, so we can show people how easy it is to get up and do something about the problem.

**Shona:** But we can’t make it really easy for them either; like if I’m the bitchy sister I’m not going to change just because my audience member Mom says, “OK Kayla, be nice to your sister now”. In fact, all I’ll do is get my sister again as soon as my mom leaves the room.

**Monica:** That’s sometimes why the back story is so important; like the play we just did, where the daughter was molested by her new “Dad”, but we don’t tell this directly to the audience, it comes out during the interventions. It makes the story really complicated, which is the real way life is sometimes.

**Cathy:** Any other issues?

**Jackson:** Well, I remember plays about child abuse, and one on AIDS, what its doing to people in the north basically. And we did one on suicide too, and that was also about

aboriginal people: Lenny was in that one, right Lenny? From my point of view it was a kind of political education. As a young person, I guess you could say it helped me develop a kind of cultural literacy, things I needed to know about my community. It was an education really, but not an education in a didactic sense. It was an involved education, and we did bring our stories and our experiences and we shared them. And it was a pretty powerful, profound way to be educated, and I really don't have enough good to say about it.

**Cathy:** Well, I want to thank all of you for adding to my scripted conversation<sup>12</sup>. I think your stories about Street Spirits Theatre are the ones that will really inform people who read this script. Thanks for allowing me to work with you, and use your voices in this way.

### **6.3 Scene Three: Explore And Heighten<sup>13</sup>**

I'm really excited about going to Spurring<sup>14</sup> this weekend. This will be my first road trip with the theatre group: its part of a multi-community tour of six small northern communities that Street Spirits Theatre has been contracted to visit over the fall as a part of a research project commissioned by the Northern Women's Wellness Information Centre (NWWIC). The goal of the project is to engage northern women in discussions about their own health and community health issues; it is a part of a longer term planning strategy that will give NWWIC information to assist it in identifying a need for particular

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<sup>12</sup> This 'scripted conversation' was written to represent the conversations and interviews I had with the youth at Street Spirits. I wrote a first draft and brought it to Street Spirits. After we performed it together, the youth gave me feedback about how to modify and change the script in order to better represent them and their ideas. I re-wrote it to include all of their suggestions and ideas.

<sup>13</sup> Explore and heighten: another improv term that involves taking an idea and see where it leads, exploring its natural consequences while simultaneously raising the stakes. *A Glossary of Improv terms*. Accessed on June 20, 2006 at: <http://www.glossarist.com/jump.asp?ID=20274>

<sup>14</sup> Spurring is a pseudonym for a small northern community

health services in more remote parts of the north. This is the fourth city that Youth Action theatre has visited so far, and so the young people on this trip are pretty familiar with the routine that's been established. I'm told we'll start by canvassing women in a variety of locations in the community and conduct short interviews on health issues or concerns that are important to them. There is a short list of questions that have been developed to try and prompt a discussion, and we will also have a flyer to distribute about the workshop and theatre performance for Saturday. We have a full day theatre workshop scheduled for interested women on Saturday: it's been advertised in the community on the radio for several days so we are hoping we'll get a good turnout. Pat, the local public health nurse has also been promoting the event with the women who come into the local clinic; she's had a poster up for the last couple of weeks.

As I near the community, I see many large moonscape style clear cuts near the side of the highway. They always look like such a scar on the landscape: rooted trees and piles of branches are scattered across in some places, but generally you only notice the huge loss of greenness from the roadway back for a considerable distance. Having flown over this area in the past, I know how they are spaced apart, huge patches of nothing patterned across vistas of green trees. As we get closer to Spurring, I start to see road signage indicating lodging, food, and "Home of the world's biggest man made lake". The entry to the town is marked by a giant logging vehicle, with a sign "Welcome to Spurring" on its side, and the story of how the vehicle was used to "remove all of the trees to create the space for Spurring".

We arrive early on Friday morning. We scout out several good locations for finding local women to interview: we go to the drug store, the fitness store, the recreation

centre, and the mall. Like most smaller northern communities, the town is spread along both sides of a strip of regional highway. It has two motels, several gas stations, a strip mall with a Fields store, drug store, dollar store, Fitness and grocery store; a recreation centre with a pool and rink; two old apartment buildings; a trailer court; a bank, and three local restaurants (but not a fast food place in sight). There is a large elementary school and a high school just off the main road. It turns out these schools will be one of the best sites for meeting and interviewing women as teachers are out on strike this week and more than half of those on picket duty today are women.

Despite being interested in participating with the other youth theatre members as they interview women in the community, Andrew and I agree that it's best I not go along because of ethics concerns. My issue is that I cannot interview any women without formal ethical approval; his concern is that if I formalize the process to that extent, many women may decide the process is too complex or perhaps too high risk in terms of identification and will decide not to participate in the interviews. So we agree I'll hear about the issues raised when they are reported back to the full group during the workshop development phase. In the meantime, I have a chance to talk with Pat the local health nurse who has been part of the organization of this workshop. She expresses real interest in the work of the Street Spirits Theatre, and so Andrew fills her in on the work they do, and how the afternoon is likely to proceed.

At lunch, Shona, Dan, Evan, Jane and Brooke come back from their community interviews. After we eat a sandwich and chat over coffee, Andrew brings us together into a circle. He initiates the conversation by asking each of the youth to summarize the health issues that were raised by the women they interviewed. Jan, the health nurse joins us too

and she becomes part of the discussion we hold. As the conversation moves around the circle we hear a number of issues: the scheduled closing of the women's pap test mobile program; the lack of anonymity for those seeking counselling because of its location in the mall; reduced access to the mobile breast exam and mammography van; driving for ninety minutes to get to a large northern community centre to see a doctor; the rapid turn around of doctors; the age of the doctors (very much younger than the majority of the women in the community); winter weather and driving long distances; lack of psychiatric services; lack of services in two small aboriginal communities in the area; single mother's who need to access regional health services and have to take a full day off work without pay to come into the city; low paying jobs for women who are pretty much in the service industry (only "men" work at the local sawmill) and the difficulty of having enough money to meet the nutrition needs of their families; and lack of affordable recreation programs for poor families. Jan, the local health nurse nods frequently during the discussion, and adds details for us about a number of the problems and issues that have been identified. We spend considerable time talking about the reduced level of mobile services that means more and more travel to the large town 150 kilometres away, and the "revolving door" of young, largely immigrant doctors who come into the community. The closure of the pap test program seems to be a big concern: it was initially introduced because of the lower rates of women seeking pap tests in more remote communities and higher levels of cervical cancer; however, due to budget cuts is being eliminated. Jan believes that this will lead to another spike in cervical cancer rates in this region of the province. Despite the fact that many of these issues don't have direct

applicability to young Street Spirits Theatre actors, they seem very interested as they ask many questions and offer comments throughout the discussion.

At one point, Andrew initiates a conversation about who are most affected by these changes in services or access to health services: he is concerned that the most disadvantaged women's voices have been largely absent from this conversation so far, particularly those of aboriginal women. Jan, the local health nurse agrees that it is a problem, but has not been able to establish good contacts with aboriginal women in the two reserves that sit about 100 kilometres north and west of Spurring. It is eventually agreed that Street Spirits Theatre will ask NWWIC for additional funding to go to at least one remote reserve for a discussion with women there.

We then begin the workshop process: after completing a series of warm up's including energy ball and hypnosis, as well as some blind walking games, we begin the process of play creation. Andrew asks us to first break into two groups, and for each member of the group to take a turn at creating frozen images that represents a health issue we've discussed. Even though I've always struggled with frozen image work, I jump in and agree to go first. There are four in our group: Dan, Shayla, Mary and me. As frozen images are about body stance and not voices, I either have to physically shape the body with my hands, or show how I want someone to stand so they can imitate it. I begin by moving Brooke into what I feel is an authoritative stance: I show her crossed arms, and how her head needs to be tilted in a slightly downward direction. Her feet are spread apart in a balanced stance: I make my own face into a caricature of worry, with a furrowed brow and pursed lips, and she mimics my expression. Satisfied, I next move both Dan and Jane to stand slightly beyond the scene, so they appear as onlookers rather



than participants. I move their heads so that they are tipped slightly to the left and right respectively, giving them a kind of open inquiring stance. I put their hands and legs in a more relaxed pose, arms at the side, with hands joined loosely in a clasp, one leg slightly in front of the other. I want them to be observers of the scene between Danielle and Brooke, observers who seem interested, but somehow more objective and distanced than the other character (Brooke) in the authoritative stance. Finally I ask Danielle to kneel on the ground and have her tip her face so she is looking up at Brooke, the authoritative figure. I move Danielle's arms so they are close in front of her body, but with her fingers splayed open, and the palms of her hands are facing each other. I step back and think, is this it? No, I go back and then I turn her face so it is looking not at the authority figure, but the two observers. I want her face blank and indicate this with my own: I want her face to reveal nothing, while communicating need with her hands to the authority figure.

I'm trying to capture the surveillance concerns raised in the conversations we had yesterday. In small communities there is often almost a claustrophobic sense brought on by the watchfulness and interest always taken in everyone's lives, even when they don't want to be observed. So I want to illustrate Danielle as conflicted between wanting help and wanting to be unobserved or unnoticed.

After the image is completed, the other group joins us and they walk around the frozen image, viewing it from all sides and angles. Then Andrew asks, "What is this image about?" As the other actors walk around the image I hear them call out different words and phrases: "Power"; "Danielle wants help"; "They are watching". "These are her parents". "She's angry." "Brooke's in control." "Danielle can't get what she needs." "Dan and Jane are ignoring her." "Danielle is desperate and afraid."

Andrew summarizes: “It seems to be a scene about power, and there is some sort of an authority who is watching over the community”. I’m not sure what to say at this point: do I say “No, you’ve got it wrong, its partly about authority and power, but it’s also about being conflicted, in at least two different spaces and needing to communicate them both”. But I don’t have time to do more than wonder before Andrew says, “Next image”, and we move on to the other groups image, repeating this process of image making and interpretation.

In the past when I’ve done frozen image work with the Street Spirits Theatre youth I’ve felt disempowered by the lack of language: it has been difficult for me to let go of the capacity to tell rather than show. Language (spoken and written) is easy for me, I have a vocabulary that is easily assessable, with a strong knowledge of its grammar. But in frozen image work I must consciously access a different grammar: the grammar of movement, facial expression, body stance and pose. I think of my own body as I sculpt these bodies: how would my body feel in this moment? When I stretch my arms out how is the feeling different than when I keep my arms by my side and instead stretch out my hands? In the silence from the stream/torrent of words I can almost hear my body talk me through these feelings. When it “feels right” I stop sculpting, and step back to “read” my image: is it conveying the depth of feeling I want? It’s a strange process of moving from my own embodied feelings and then inscribing these feeling on another by reversing the process: using their bodies to create feeling. As I am doing so I wonder, “Can Brooke feel what I am feeling? If I shape her body in particular ways, does it evoke the same emotional memories as mine? Can she know me through this image?” I’m not certain if I

want that to be true, because it is always easier for me to hide my feelings in my body than it is to express them either physically or verbally.

### **6.3.1 My research journal: reflections on today**

When the other actors circle my image I wonder “Do you read these bodies the way I read them?” Later I wonder if they see my feelings or their own? Do we read all body images through our own bodies first, and filter them through our own physical memories? These seem like important questions to explore in the context of trying to work through how accessing embodied forms of knowing really enhance the self reflexive process I’m really becoming away of. It seems to me that we often discuss “experience” but I haven’t necessarily located that experience in my body, but rather, as an abstract function of memory. Now I’m really focused on how our bodies are inscribed with particular trajectories, movements, habits and memories: how feelings and meanings are bypassed, accessed or shaped as our bodies travel through current, past and future spaces is a largely unconscious process, but one that becomes at least somewhat more accessible in the deliberate attention to its physical articulation.

It feels as if there is a new space in which to sort through these ideas, created by thinking about and accessing the knowledge implicitly carried in the body. I’m struggling to put words to this experience: I’m calling it a new space because it feels like something has been added, a space in which to explore my understandings of myself and my relationship to the women’s health issues that we’ve started working on here in Spurring. It is as if the reflexive space as been enlarged because the mode of expression (bodily gesture) used in theatrical work has a porous quality, one that allows for the body’s residual histories to be more easily accessed through the image production process, while

also creating a space for open interpretation and multiple readings by others. There is such an assumed transparency in the use of spoken language, one that doesn't usually invite a questioning or discussion of statements when they are made. In the body image work, there seems to be a greater possibility for reading in many ways, and the possibility of one "truth" or "correct" reading is less apparent.

Perhaps an ability to be more thoughtfully reflective begins in this space of self, the body, and the dialogic movement between this body and others, between enactment and thought, using a less familiar language. I wonder if it is not unfamiliarity with the mode and how to read and interpret its grammar that seems to make it a more powerful space from which to both see and experience meanings. Is the sense making process slower because of this lack of familiarity or is it just more deliberative because of the efforts I am making to try and capture these moments in text?

My research journal explored other questions that arose from this first day in Spurring. Here's another: "Why is power a central feature of my image? Why are the themes of disempowerment and judgment by others so central to this image for me?" I have tried to work through this question a bit, and I wonder if about the resonance between what I've heard today from Pat and the reports from the other women in this community and my own struggles with similar health matters. But its about more than health, it is about my own baggage about my body, my body image overall, and a deep seated fear of revealing my body to others, even health professionals. This is an issue of power too. The issue of power was hinted at in the conversations today, couched around the discussion of young (male) doctors, the revolving door effect of small communities (as soon as another option in a bigger town becomes available, the doctors leave) and the

impacts this has had on the middle aged and older women who continue to live in this remote location. I read this, not just in words, but on faces, particularly Pat's. I also felt their concern in my own body, recognizing the struggle with similar feelings, remembering how anxious I was when I was unable to find a woman doctor when I arrived in the north. The women who live here have limited choices, unless they are willing to travel back and forth to the bigger urban centre, almost two hours away. I felt as if I was in a place to understand and empathize with their spoken and unspoken dialogue about their health care, and that places me in a position to play an important role in the play we develop tomorrow. What I hope to explore in tomorrow's play creation and production process is: does this space/place/identity afford the possibility for a deeper connection with the audience during performance? And if that connection is established, how might it be a catalyst for action on the part of others? Even though I'm a bit nervous about having a major role in a play (it will be my first time) I will volunteer to be in it. This will be an important learning experience for me.

#### **6.4 Day Two: Theatre Creation**

We start out by reviewing some of the issues we talked about and some of the ideas that evolve out of the image work we did yesterday. A story line starts to emerge: a single mother who works two jobs and has two adolescent kids; one girl and one boy. The mother holds two jobs because that's all the work she can get: one job is working nights at a gas station, the other working days at the drug store. The teenaged girl and the mother will both have different health issues to try and explore the range of issues that were raised by the interviews with the local women.

It isn't long before I am asked to be a mother in this play: seems like the right role, particularly given my age compared to the other Street Spirits Theatre actors. Danielle will play my sexually active daughter who turns out to be pregnant, and Dan will play my son. Evan will play the doctor; Shona his assistant.

Pat asks that the issue of the older woman who is avoiding a pap test with the new doctor be included: this makes me realize that this role will have me playing out parts of my own story, as I too haven't had a pap test in about five years. What I wasn't as sure about was the degree to which the health issues in the play would come to be about me: particularly about the importance of regular personal health care including mammographies and pap tests. We spend most of the morning in rehearsal. We start with the scene about scheduling a pap test: I play the mother who is called by the clinic to schedule an exam, which I try to avoid.

The play development is quite a fluid process and needs a bit of explanation. The forum theatre process used by Andrew, the Artistic director of the Youth Theatre company is an interesting combination of self directed action, improvization and dramaturgical direction. We don't use anything much in the way of props, and we don't use costumes at all. We usually have only a few chairs to simulate a room, although sometimes we have Andrew (the theatre director and Joker) narrate an opening to a scene by saying "It's a day later" or give other information that the audience needs to be aware of. So it is unlike "traditional" theatre performance in a number of ways.

The process of play development is a combination of actor initiation and dramaturgical direction. Andrew observes as the actors initiate and play out a scene, and then gets involved in discussions with the actors at the end of a scene. Usually, he gives

feedback on what works, what doesn't work, what could be added, or what needs to be highlighted. Sometimes we'll replay part of a scene, or add elements he suggests to see how they work. Or, if we seem to get stuck in the improvisation process, Andrew will stop the on stage action and we'll engage in a discussion about what might/could/should happen next. It's a very flexible and fluid process: dialogue and actions are developed as the process unfolds. When a line or an action really works, someone says, "Ok, let's keep that" and then keep moving towards the development of new scenes, usually a process of moving to "before" scenes and "after scenes" once the initial scene has been played out and formalized into a fairly well rehearsed form. Other actors who may be observing the play development process also become a part of the process by adding comments or ideas as the scenes unfold.

In the context of this opening scene in the play, I set up the play with my own improvisation, enacting how I believe this woman would respond to a call at home to set up an overdue medical appointment. I start out in pantomime, portraying the "busy mom" drinking coffee while getting ready for work. I add realism by yelling at my off stage children to get out of bed. When the phone rings, I grab it, and try and use a harassed tone of voice, and then when I'm asked to make an appointment for a pap test (by an off stage voice). Now my tone changes into some more neutral so as not to reveal "real" feelings. I begin with a series of excuses: too busy, working everyday; driving kids everywhere. Andrew, as the caller, attempts persuasion through discussions of the importance of these tests from a health perspective.

As the scene unfolds I simply become the character: I know about making excuses and avoidance issues. But conveying the distress that this conversation causes me

becomes a matter of bodily performance. I use my face: I grimace while still talking politely, creating the contradiction that a viewer could see/read. I use my lots of different physical elements: I run my fingers through my hair, lean forward, hunch my body, and deliberately move my feet back and forth, shifting from side to side. There is both a conscious and unconscious element to my actions: on the one hand, I know the need to convey the anxiety of the moment, but on the other hand, it is as if my body automatically knows how to convey this. However, I'm also thinking in my head "How else can I show my anxiety?" or "What were the points that Pat made when we talked about this yesterday? How can I convey that message?". I'm also simply remembering/accessing my own history, and enacting that previously known story in a way that feels completely natural to me. It is almost like performing through a form of double consciousness, a deliberate travelling between the locations of the actor/other (a process of distancing) and then becoming completely engaged in the familiar and personal (a process of self exploration) where I access my own experiences as a woman who fears/resists a particularly invasive form of health intervention.

It is clear to me that the nature of this weekend's work, this play, is providing a level of meaningfulness and personal connectedness that has made my participation take on a new quality; somehow, this process seems so much richer and more engaging for me in a way that the other plays and performances have not. It isn't that I haven't connected with other issues explored in a particular play: for example, the play about the lesbian girls was very powerful for me as a teacher, particularly because I have always believed in inclusive teaching practices. Yet in this play, where I am so personally connected to the issues, things *feel* quite different. The dialogue feels natural, an outgrowth of my own



experiences, almost as if the words were already spoken before I voiced them on stage. For example, the moment when I find out my stage-daughter is pregnant, I move naturally into the role of mother and caregiver and articulate through my dialogue and actions on stage how it is necessary to now put my “daughter’s” health needs ahead of my own.

#### **6.4.1 More journal reflections**

One part of me realized the therapeutic qualities of this play development and performance process; it seems to me that I’m working through some long forgotten issues tied to former experiences with my own health. I am surprised by the vividness of the images that seem to appear in my head, and how the emotions attached to these memories become accessible as I envision them. These images (my body flattened on the red naugahyde table, the white paper sheet with the lines carefully folded, my painted toes like beacons framed against the yellow wall) come into my head as I perform the dialogue and play out the subsequent actions necessary for allowing this story to collaboratively unfold. It is an intensely personal experience. At the same time however, it seems possible to remain impersonal: even though I know I am playing out my story, no one else knows this. They can’t see my back story, I haven’t shared it, nor will I. What is vividly playing out in my own mind becomes the context in which I perform and inform this play’s story.

Now I wonder if this is how it is for the other actors in the Street Spirits Theatre company. Do they engage in a similar process of self exploration and memory work when they connect with a theme in a play? The Street Spirits Theatre group has dealt with lots of important social and family issues over the years, and during the months that I’ve

been with them. And now knowing many of them on a more personal basis, I know a number of them have had a rough go: Brooke's meth addiction is still a concern for her; Jessie's stories hind at previous sexual abuse, now she struggles with her own and her mother's addictions; Barb has struggled with coming out to her family; Lane's had experiences with homelessness and violence; Dan has a physical and reading disability that have really made it hard for him to find a place in any local school; and Sasha's ongoing struggle as the single mother of a toddler. These are the real circumstances of these young peoples' lives, and it seems to me, based on my own experiences this weekend that they too must act through their own memories and feelings as they attempt to bring a level of realism and connectedness to their roles and performances in forum theatre. I can't help but marvel at their strength in doing so. Logan's story of meeting with an audience member whose son was going through a similar drug issue comes to mind. Logan, himself still struggling with meth addiction, described how they talked for an hour and cried together too. These youth have such courage and character, and are so willing to share what they know with their audience in a way that can make them powerful in their roles but still vulnerable to the judgment of others. This work is hard; I don't think I'd understood that as well as I do now.

## **6.5 The Performance**

Despite several run throughs late this afternoon, I'm a bit nervous when we arrive at the community hall at 6:30, with our performance scheduled to begin at 7:00 pm. At 6:45, there are only three people there, and this seems disappointing. However, by just before 7:00 we have twenty women in the audience! This is a great turn out, and I'm pleased to see that there are some older women here who have been chatting with Pat for

the last few minutes. No one takes the front row I notice, but as the room fills up, a few are forced into these seats. It's a full house! I'm really hoping these women will see my performance as reflective of their situation and will want to participate in the intervention process. I'll certainly give it my best shot.

As usual, Andrew begins the evening by explaining a bit about Street Spirits Theatre, and its roots in Boal's forum theatre. He uses the terms oppression, power and social action in his introduction: he talks about the types of performances we do, as well as the other health plays we've done in several other northern communities. He also explains the concept of "actorvism" and how the audience will get to be actors too, through the process of intervention. At this moment, you can see people looking at one another, or at the floor. It is often like this during the introduction: many people become uncomfortable when they think they will be asked to come up on stage. Their body language and eye movement in particular speaks loudly of their discomfort. Finally, he talks about the process we've engaged in over the last two days, interviewing women, and developing a play that tries to put these issues into a play that will give everyone the opportunity to problem solve.

Next, Pat gets up and talks about the NWWIC project briefly and how they are using the play process as a way of collecting information for their organization so they can better support the health needs of northern women. This receives a good reception: lots of head nodding.

"May we have the play please", says Andrew. We begin our performance. In typical forum theatre style, we run through all five scenes of the play, signalling a move from one scene to another by walking over the chairs on the side that we sit on

when we are not acting in a scene. Sometimes we re-arrange the chairs; in the second to last scene we set up the chairs as if we are all seated in a car. I sit in the driver's seat, pretending to peer into the snowstorm as I drive from Spurring to the northern urban centre. My posture evokes laughter among the audience: I am surprised by that, but quickly get back into role and try and show the intensity of emotion on my face as if I am really trying to drive through white out weather conditions. This scene is an important one, as we show the car skidding off the road after being passed by a fast moving chip truck, and how my stage-daughter is hurt in this accident. Those of us who live in the north know this reality of travel as there are regular accidents along the secondary arteries that make up the northern highway system. This performance captures well the dilemma and risk families face when deciding it's necessary to travel to the city.

After we've completed all five scenes, Andrew tells the audience that we are "going to replay the scenes now, and what I want you to do is to raise your hand and say Stop! when you feel that something isn't right with this play, when you'd like something different to happen. Can we have the first scene again please?" And so we start once again, with the scene of the mother being called at home, and basically making excuses for not going in for an appointment. Before long, we hear "stop!" and someone suggests something that can/should be done differently. Andrews says to the woman, "Please join us on stage", and while she appears reluctant, she does come up. In this scene she adds in a character: in this case it is a friend of the mother, and she encourages me to take my own health more seriously, even offers to come along for the appointment. At the end of the intervention, there is lots of applause. Andrew asks "Did you get what you wanted?"

The woman from the audience says “Yes: she decided to set up an appointment, and that’s what I wanted”. Andrew nods his head, and then asks for the play to resume.

We do this for about forty minutes: overall, there are more than a dozen interventions, a strong level of involvement from the audience that doesn’t always happen. For me, this number of interventions is in part a factor of the nature of the play itself, because it is connecting with the real life experiences of the women in Spurring, and they want to engage in thinking through how they can resolve some of these issues. The concern with available services is an important one; several women express their anger with the decision by the northern health authority to cancel the travelling pap test program. Pat, the local health nurse, becomes involved in the play, and this helps provide an opportunity for the women to explore what they might be able to do in response to this decision. However, mostly the play is about the two women: my role as mother, and my stage-daughter’s pregnancy. In the final scene, we have three women from the audience up on stage, helping me and the daughter work through our grief and anger. I watch as a grandmother joins us on stage, and see the tears in her eyes when she engages in a conversation with Danielle, my stage-daughter. Several women in the audience are crying too. Later, after the play, we find out this woman was very close to a young woman who committed suicide over a pregnancy.

The end of the evening doesn’t really come for some time, as the audience members hang out with the actors and we talk more about what they saw and experienced in tonight’s play. But it didn’t stop there; the conversation grew as a variety of health issues were identified, and how they hoped for improved access to these services in their own home community. Pat began taking notes when the conversation turned to actions

that might be possible about the mobile van. Tonight's play has been video taped and several women suggest that this can be used as a vehicle to persuade the regional health board members to change their minds.

I was really pleased when Andrew told me I'd done a good job tonight; he said that I'd put the right amount of "edge" into my performance and that it had really helped to create a strong emotional connection with the audience. We did a final de-briefing as actors in a small circle before we left Spurring for the drive home. We talked through moments that had really worked, and how we'd felt being a part of this play. Despite the late hour, I don't feel drained or tired, only thrilled to have been a part of the work that might be a catalyst for changing the lives of the women we met tonight. It was hard to put into words just exactly how rich and powerful the experience seemed in that moment. I could still feel the energy buzz that had been created through the interactive theatre process and its subsequent dialogue, and a strong sense of hope that something would be done to improve the situation for the women of Spurring.

## 6.6 Scene Four: After Piece<sup>15</sup>

As the above pages have illustrated, in this chapter I have used a variety of narrative and conversational forms as a means of exploring and elucidating for the reader the work of the youth actors in Street Spirits Theatre and its artistic director. The

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<sup>15</sup> **After Piece:** An after piece is a brief one act play staged after the main performance has concluded. It originated as a comic antidote to the main play in England in the early 18th century. While this section of the chapter is not meant as comic relief, it can be characterized as an add on to the main performance of the work of this chapter, providing additional information for the reader in a substantially different form. Taken from: *David's Glossary of Theatre Terms* at [http://www.dramatic.com.au/glossary/glossarya\\_d.htm](http://www.dramatic.com.au/glossary/glossarya_d.htm) Accessed on June 20, 2006.

postmodern turn in qualitative research has demanded many new approaches to the research process and its representations in texts: in particular, the critical, interpretive, linguistic, feminist and rhetorical turns in social theory have problematized research claims of authenticity and representation in research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 17) and have shifted toward narrative and literary forms (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 182). As researchers we are reminded that “messy texts” (Marcuse, 1994) are texts that “seek to break the binary between science and literature” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 184) and expand the forms that researchers may use to represent our own understandings and the understandings of research participants.

Using vocabulary and practices drawn from theatrical production has seemed a useful way of bridging between the ethnographic and autobiographical elements of research and representation. Each of this chapter’s three “scenes” is headed by a title drawn from improvisational theatre: this first scene explores the contextual location, providing a physical site and an introduction into the culture of the Street Spirits Theatre company. The story narrated in the opening of this chapter is drawn from the research journal I kept throughout this study. It mixes observations of the physical and personal spaces occupied during my ten months of immersion into the culture of Street Spirits Theatre. It operates on at least two levels: one of the ethnographic observer (Baszanger & Dodier, 1997; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Van Maanen, 1995) who tries to carefully document the processes and practices of those who are participants in the study, and at the same time, explores the personal impact this work has had on the researcher as a co-participant (Bloom, 1998; Ellis, 1999; Graham, 1991). This reflective/reflexive tension is represented throughout the journal entries I kept over the course of this

research study, and the examples included in the first scene called “The Platform” offers a snapshot into the experiences that shaped my representations of the actors and their productions during the course of this study.

The second scene offers a way of representing the voices of the youth participants, both current and past, engaged in an imagined dialogue with me and the Street Spirits Theatre director, Andrew. Just as Andrew helped the young people involved in Street Spirits Theatre discern and locate parts of the “back story” which inform the decisions and actions of characters and actors, this scene serves as a “back story” that follows the initial narrative and will, I hope, inform readers of the orientations or perspectives which situate the beliefs and understandings of the players involved in Street Spirits Theatre. The technique I use is one of invented conversation; I construct an imagined narrative between all of us as co-participants in this research study as a means of illustrating some of the key findings of my long term immersion in this research site. As Donmoyer and Donmoyer (1998) argue, this form of presentational theatre has a different purpose than its more realist counterpart, the former’s purpose being to encourage audience members to use their own imaginations and become active participants in the processes of making of meaning. For the purposes of this chapter, the conversation does, I hope, offer a method that enhances a capacity for interpreting and making sense of the research findings, which is its subject. This second scene drew largely on interviews conducted over the course of the study, although some dialogue was created based on similar conversations held with me over the course of the study.

I created this scene in a conversational style for two reasons: one was the regular use of “circle” as a tool for ongoing communication and discussion at Street Spirits



Theatre. All Street Spirits Theatre nights begin and end with a “circle” where the youth participants regularly shared their ideas, thoughts, personal stories, and dialogues about our productions or production processes. In this way the conversational dialogue felt like a method that respected the culture of the group. The second reason for its choice was that it also afforded a means of sharing my “research findings” with the group of actors in a way that was accessible. We (me and a group of Street Spirits Theatre participants) performed this conversational dialogue as a reader’s theatre style script during one evening at Street Spirits Theatre just to see how it worked (theatrically) and to test it against how true or representative it felt to the Street Spirits Theatre members. I was amazed at the intense interest each actor had in its content, and I had to add in new parts for those youth not originally included in the dialogue [“How come I’m not in it? Why don’t you write about the time when I . . .”] as well as making some corrections to take into account the need for “accuracy” of some facts [“It was in Ohio, not Idaho”; “That game is called Hypnosis, not Mirror”]. By request, the script has been placed on the Street Spirits Theatre’s website for the interest of readers.

The third scene is largely autoethnographic in that it explores in detail one theatre workshop and production process that I participated in during the latter part of the research study in a smaller, more remote northern community. Drawing upon autoethnographic writing methods (Bloom, 1998; Ellis, 1999) that encourage researchers to draw upon subjective experiences and reflect on the multiple, fragmented and conflicting identities that are part of being a socially and culturally constructed actor, this scene will, I hope, provide a glimpse into my own knowledge construction and understandings of how the theatrical process itself permits insights into the processes of

personal sense making and civic subject formation. Graham (1991) surveys the work of autobiographical writing in educational research and the move toward self narrative forms. Drawing upon Bruner's (1987) use of the term self narrative, this research practice "takes part at every turn in the dialectical interplay between the construction of subjectivity as a project undertaken both collectively and socially, even as it explores and gives voice to those sedimented layers of individual consciousnesses that may have been buried or silenced under pressure from the dominant discourse and modes of representation in a culture" (p. 144).

The to-ing and fro-ing of the dialectic process is evidenced throughout the writing in this chapter, moving from introspection to retrospection and back again in a recursive ongoing effort to make sense of how the theatrical process enabled internal and external change. At times I wrote from a very personal space, attempting to illustrate how the process of forum theatre draws upon the personal, and how an actor can consciously draw on these experiences in constructing a dialectic space for possible social action. The sedimented nature of experiences is explored in the moments where the play creation process interacts with my own histories, including strong feelings of powerlessness. I also use this writing to explore the dialectical relationships between actor and actor; actor and director; actor and audience: I give examples of the many moments in which sense making becomes a process of collective and/or shared exploration.

The dialectic between actor and audience is of particular concern in my writings, and I explore the ways in which the distance between actor and audience is bridged through the forum theatre process. First, this is accomplished through the active engagement of the audience members who intervene directly in the play, but it is also

linked to how the forum theatre process relies on the audience's beliefs and understandings as a source in the process of the play's actual narrative through the initial interviews and discussions. In particular, I try and illustrate how this knowledge can become a critical component of the actor's performance decisions, and when supplemented by his/her own knowledge and experience becomes a social (perhaps even political) location for enacting and constructing shared understandings.

The notion of the dialectic is also present in the process of writing itself: this writing is at the same time an *expression* of my already constituted self, while simultaneously "on the outside as a way of going to work on the self through the production and consumption of a text" (Graham, 1991, p. 145). My hope is that in the process of writing/reading and re-writing/re-reading of this work I can engage in generative change to my own sense of self as political agent and the possibly of praxis afforded through forum theatre as both a participatory research methodology and a process of engaging in new forms of social action. In doing so it provides some evidence to situate my own thinking about how such processes might also be shared by others, particular youth, the subjects of this study.

## **6.7 Theatrical Performance And Political Empowerment: From Theatre To Life**

Denzin (2003) has argued that "performance based human disciplines can contribute to radical social change, to economic justice, to a cultural politics... and the principles of a radical democracy to all aspects of society" (p. 3). He also suggests that the active construction of meaning through performances that break with the mainstream and remake new or altered ways of seeing and being in the world is central to the

sociopolitical act (p. 4). It is this notion of performance as sociopolitical action that I want to unpack more completely in the context of my work with the youth at Street Spirits Theatre.

The process of political empowerment is an important outcome of the Street Spirits Theatre process. Much in the same ways that Boal (1985) envisioned the revolutionary potential of social action theatre for the oppressed peoples of Brazil (“theatre as a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it”, p. 122), forum theatre is described by its advocates, including members of this youth theatre company, as a process through which individuals or groups can be inspired to effect social and political change (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz, 1993). Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is a world wide movement, spawning organizations, annual conferences and publications designed to share practitioner knowledge and experience, with the goal of using the forum theatre techniques as a tool to fight oppression and for creating greater equity among those who find themselves victims of oppression. This model of social or political change places an emphasis how performance opens up the possibility for creating a discursive and performative space in which injustice can be identified and interrogated.

It is important to emphasize the social and political location of forum theatre: forum theatre, as it has evolved in a North American context, is engaged in exploring the local experiences of a community rather than portrayals of political or social forces at a structural level that serve to oppress (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz, 1993). Its emphasis is on providing the opportunity for individuals or local communities to explore how they might act in a particular social setting or location that is familiar and recognizable. This focus on the local brings into play how oppression and injustice are contextualized in the

everyday, and the possibility that individual or community actions can have an important role in challenging or altering outcomes. Andrew, Street Spirits Theatre's artistic director, makes this point clearly in his interview, represented in the text of this chapter. In fact, the motto for the Street Spirits Theatre group is "Changing the world, one performance at a time".

In this study, I have explored how cultural tools serve as mediational means through which meaning is constructed and subjectivities are constituted. I have argued, consistent with sociocultural theorists that it is the activity process, that is, the active doing or engagement in action, which serves as the means through which such learning and sense making takes place. Wertsch's (1995) theory of mediated action makes clear that cultural tools are an essential feature of such work. This theory of mediated action seeks to construct human sense making as simultaneously a produce of agency and activity: in other words, action is the product of an irreducible tension between cultural tool and agent (p. 38). Instead of reducing the notions of change to outcomes afforded by critical thought processes followed by action (a linear or serial approach), it conceives of change as socially and culturally constitutive (a parallel and interactive approach).

### **6.7.1 Pedagogies of production**

The actors and the text of the play act as cultural tools through which members of the audience can become increasingly engaged in a process of active involvement. In constructing this characterization, the audience is offered the metaphor of "rehearsal" for possible change, the opportunity to explore a variety of solutions or roles that can be taken onto the stage, and once attempted, discussed or debriefed in a safe environment. Audience members can either direct particular actors to try alternative solutions or go on

stage themselves to play out other roles or options. The remaining youth actors improvise around the audience member's intervention, essentially serving as supporting props to sustain the action initiated by the audience member. There is often a dialogue among audience members as this plays out on stage, and together, these experiences explore dialogically the problem or issue of concern. In this way, a call to action is first imagined, then played or replayed, physically and verbally, creating a form of embodied dialogism based in processes of production.

de Castell and Jenson (2004) argue that the production process is the precursor to conscious expressions of meaning making and “challenges [the] presumptions of the priority of the critical in educational development...locating production as essential to educational work, and critical thinking as epiphenomenal to that”. In the case of Street Spirits theatre, a very similar process is experienced: an audience member gets up on stage with an idea in his/her head, and attempts to put it into action. Around him/her other players respond, often in unexpected (to the interveners) and not always in positive ways. As a result, self rehearsed talk becomes displaced by the demand to engage in a fully situated response. This allows a move beyond enactments of socially approved discourses (for example, “just say no” mantras) that result in neat and magical solutions; instead it requires an engaged response that demands a response that will address the materiality of the lived experience, a moment where “just saying no” can't and won't work. In debriefing after such performances, the critically significant work begins as well-intentioned agents are forced to examine their own institutionalized responses and realize the ways in which their rehearsed lines fail: it is here where the real learning starts.

### **6.7.2 Affordance for agency through mediational means**

Moving from a focus on the agent as a purposeful social actor, enabled to bring about social change in his/her life, community or society as a central tenet of citizenship education described in Chapter Two, to action (how different cultural tools might enable new or altered understandings) illustrates greater possibilities or affordances (Gibson, 1986) for agency. From the perspective of sociopolitical change then, the use of new or modified cultural tools offers the promise of new affordances for empowerment or change. As Wertsch (1995) argued, “the introduction of new mediational means creates... an imbalance that sets off changes in other elements such as the agent and changes in mediated action in general. Indeed, in some cases an entirely new form of mediated action appears” (p. 43).

In the case of this chapter, the forum theatre process is an example of a cultural tool one that serves as a mediational device to enable important personal and social change. For example, the story Emily tells about the eight year old aboriginal child who is able to identify and rehearse a solution to the problem of drinking parents is recited as an example of community empowerment. Rusty’s description of how such processes opened her eyes to different views about oppression and who is oppressed in society is another example of the transformational power of the forum theatre process. Sasha’s story about how the police altered their methods of interaction with street youth as a result of a Youth action Theatre play also illustrates how the power of transformation can move from the personal to the community level. My own descriptions of how the use of improvisational techniques in a particular personal and social context allowed me to better conceive of how actions precede critical thinking, was a break through moment in my learning process during this study. The affordances of this cultural tool seem

particularly powerful from the perspective of becoming more socio-politically engaged and concerned with processes of social change.

An important corollary however is understand that in its use and application, cultural tools can both enable *and* constrain. This is to say that cultural tools have particular trajectories of use, conventional patterns of practice and histories that are embedded within its conventional and non conventional uses that may well constrain the actions of a social actor or human subject. So “even if a new cultural tool frees us from some earlier limitation of perspective, it introduces new ones of its own” (p. 39). This is an important point: while this chapter argues that as a new cultural tool forum theatre opens up to participants and audience members to forms of social action not considered in the critical thinking models practiced in many school classrooms, at the same time it constrains how oppression and social action are characterized. One such constraint might be the way in which the forum theatre model naturalizes a belief in the power of the individual to affect change in the microcosm of family, school or other local location. This approach to individuals initiating social change may constrain the types of solutions actors or audience members consider in their response to the individualistically focused social problems developed on stage.

Another possible constraint that forum theatre operates under is that of assuming the generative power of performance *for others*. It does so by assuming that the nature of rehearsal is in effect a parallel process to participation in the actual event. Certainly, the production techniques used by forum theatre operate to blur the boundaries between actors and audience members through participatory methods and suggests a hybrid form of performance. While not a replication of the “real” neither is exclusively a passive



process of transmission and reception. Indeed, post structuralism offers a differing theorization of theatricality (Murray, 2000), one that highlight issues of representation and mimetic forms of performance as moments in which the “real” can be experienced and understood. “Reality and realism depends on the frame, window or perspective of its mise-en-scène... What is theorized...remains contingent on... the means with which it is represented as well as on the context of its reception” (p. 7). In the next section of this chapter, I turn to literary theory to discuss how the context of theatrical performance, including the relationship between audiences and texts is centrally implicated in theorizations about theatricality’s potential as a productive pedagogy that constitutively shapes sociopolitical identities and practices of agency.

### **6.7.3 Audiences as readers of writerly texts**

The emphasis on cultural tools as mediational means (Wertsch, 1998) that afford changes in the self has been a focus of much of the discussion so far in this analysis. In conceiving of Street Spirits Theatre as a process of activity, it has emphasized the process of production and how this results in personal sense making. Yet forum theatre is a cultural tool that is conceived of as a practice that also changes or transforms others. Indeed, this principle of empowerment and political change has been central to Theatre of the Oppressed and other forms of popular theatre. It is bound up in beliefs about what the product can accomplish through its message or content *transmission*. In other words, the audience is addressed through the texts of its production; the traces of meaning are laced throughout its modes and methods of production.

The material product of the play can be conceived of as a “text”. In Barthes (1970) words “the text is experienced only in the activity of production” (p. 157). Such a

definition emphasizes the relationship between author and reader (producer and interpreter) in the communication process and that it is always a deferred process. That is, the “work” or the production process is significantly different than the “text” it produces, as reading is always an act that results in “infinite deferments of the signified” (p. 158). Barthes (1970) argued that as a deferred action reading is therefore inferior to the process of writing or production because it invites a passive deciphering (reading the codes of others) rather than an active construction/production of meaning.

To counter the deferred status of reading, Barthes (1970) constructs the “writerly” text, where the reader becomes more active and must work to construct meanings because the traditional or conventional modes of textual representation are eschewed. For Barthes (1970) then, writerly reading “is not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing,” but rather a “form of work” (p.10).

Forum theatre offers a very similar framework to these conceptions of writerly texts that it allows for interventions by audience members into the open narrative frame afforded by the play’s text. In doing so, it bridges between the readerly and the writerly, creating a space in which more authentic or new forms of mediated action can take place. It is in these new spaces that altered identities can be explored and social and political actions considered, both constitutive practices that construct and shape the sociopolitical self.

The work of this chapter has sought to illustrate how theatrical performance can be similarly theorized. The forum theatre genre becomes a cultural tool through which self knowledge is constructed, simultaneously constituting new or altered identities and agentive practices while always located within the social context of the particular

performance. At the same time, the forum theatre process acts as an open work that can also afford opportunities for authentic forms of production among its audience members. In other words, forum theatre performance is a mediational tool that permits a kind of embodied dialogism. Processes of self reflection which follow this embodied production process can then be evidence of the intentionality or desire of the individual to enact change or alter their or others social circumstances. In other words, it becomes a process of “authentic, agentic production” (de Castell & Jenson, 2002).

The discussion of how forum theatre acts as a dialogic and mediated process of identity construction and social enactment also illuminates how Butler (1990, 1993, 1995) understands performativity, distinguishing it from the belief that one can easily “put on” or perform our identities, a view that privileges a logocentric self that can actively engage in processes of self reconstruction. Indeed, I hope my earlier discussions of my own struggle to understand how performing shaped my own subjectivities problematizes any simplistic view of self reflective and shaping processes.

#### **6.7.4 Civic/sociopolitical identity work outside of school locations**

Schools are not the only sites for learning: a number of scholars have argued that schools themselves inhibit or limit performances of youth through a variety of means (Jenson, 2004; McLaren, 1989/1994; Sanders, 2004) largely as a result of the ways in which institutional contexts codify, normalize and reproduce social norms. Evidence of the cultural and social norms of schooling was confirmed throughout Chapter Four in the descriptions of the discourses and practices at Northern High. In the context of civic identity development and social action, such normative conceptions may evoke only limited understandings of agency and social action. Critical and deconstructive scholars

argue there is a need for an environment or space where differences are explored and the non redemptive narratives and the lived actualities of those most frequently marginalized are central features (de Castell & Bryson, 1997, p. 2-5). Schools—their structures, discourses and practices—are the antithesis of such possibilities.

The Street Spirits Theatre group offered an alternative location to the other school sites that this study explored. As such, it offered the possibility for exploring the lived experiences of its participants and the possibility for challenging particular forms of agency and social action. As a community based program it offered an alternative setting in which sociopolitical identity work and conceptions of agency and social action could be explored without being limited to the normative conceptions of mainstream citizenship or democratic educational discourses.

This chapter has sought to explore, through a sociocultural lens the ways in which youth identities and agency can be conceptualized as a product of activity, using a particular cultural tool, forum theatre. In considering theatre as theory, it has provocatively explored the recursive relationship between subjectivities, social and historical contexts, social practices and discourses as they are implicated in the uses of forum theatre as a cultural tool that has performative effects.

## CHAPTER 7: SCHOOLED AGENTS

In this chapter, I explore the leadership program offered at J. S. Secondary school<sup>16</sup> (JSS) the third and final site of this study. As noted in chapter one, this site was selected for several reasons; first, because it illustrated an alternative approach to the more typical practice of developing youth civic understandings through the social studies curriculum, and instead focused on civic education was modelled in the tradition of service learning (Billig, 2000; Blank, Johnson, & Shah, 2003; Niemi, Hepburn & Chapman, 2000; Perry & Katula, 2001; Yates & Youniss, 1998; Saltmarsh, 2005), an approach requiring students to participate in both school and community based service. Secondly, Jeff Sugar, the teacher, had designed and implemented this unique approach to civic learning over a period of eight years and as such offered a wealth of experience in supporting and promoting civic agency among youth. The third reason for its choice was that it offered an alternative demographic: located in a middle class neighbourhood, the school also contrasted with the working class community of Northern High school and the largely street involved youth at Youth Action theatre.

Throughout this dissertation questions have focused on how agency is a product of activity. As a socially constituted model of agency, this approach considers how cultural tools operate in a field of activity, and suggests that affordances of cultural tools are important matters of concern to educators interested in promoting civic agency. At

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<sup>16</sup> A pseudonym

this research site, how these theories might be used to inform the pedagogy and practice of service learning as a means of developing civic agency is the focus of discussion. In the case of J. S. High school, the student leadership program relied on D/discourses of service as a cultural tool through which youth agency was conceptualized, imagined, and practiced. This chapter is devoted to tracing how these discourses were enacted and the extent to which the youth participating at this research site were either enabled or constrained by its effects in order to consider how service learning as a productive practice may afford greater potential for civic agency.

The chapter is divided into two parts; the first offers a close look at the culture of J. S. High school and the student leadership program in particular. This context will provide evidence of the persistence of D/discourses of service in this school setting and consider how such D/discourses position youth as moral agents for change. Further, I discuss how moral service becomes a commodity that signifies a particular form of schooled agency, necessary for success in civic life. The second part of the chapter explores the ways in which the youth at this site use the D/discourses of service while also tracing potentially competing discourses and how these shape beliefs of agency. At the end of the chapter, I reflect on the processes of analysis used for this chapter, and comment on its implications for this study.

## **7.1 Methodology Of This Chapter**

One of the primary concerns of the post structuralist researcher is the crisis of representation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2001), a view that problematizes truth claims often attributed to research texts and challenges the authoritative stance of ethnography and ethnographic representations. In chapter three, I discuss how ‘new’ ethnography (Saukko,

2003) uses a range of alternative or experimental textual practices as a way of acknowledging the assertion that truth can be discerned or represented in research texts. Drawing upon Fox's (1995) claim that intertextuality as a research method can "contribute [to] a re-reading of the relationships between the social, the writer and the reader, between researchers and researched, students and teachers, theorists and practitioners" (p. 1) this chapter draws upon multiple texts and discourses to illustrate the irreducibility or undecidability of texts (Orr, 2003) and how meaning making is a constant

*Remembrance Day service: November 10, 2005. Field notes.*

The honour guard, a group of young men and women dressed in uniforms enter the gym from the back, carrying the maple leaf flag. As they come in they parade past the wall mural that says, "J. P. Secondary: proudly Canadian". Ghostly (all white) stylized figures of boys and girls are portrayed standing next to the Canadian flag. Dozens of hand written signatures appear below. Oh Canada is sung by the school choir at the front of the room. There are two leadership students who act as MC's, one is running the sound system, and another comes onto the stage to play "taps". A Mr. Hack comes to the microphone: a local mill owner, he tells his story about living through the German invasion and the liberation of his town by Canadians in the later part of World War II. He doesn't use a microphone: what is amazing is that while I am seated in the last row on the far side of the gym, I can clearly hear his voice and his story of Blitzkrieg and rescue in Holland. There are more than 800 students in the room, sitting on metal chairs, and still there is silence, absolute stillness. "My first memory, I am three years old, the skies were red as far as you could see. I will never forget the sound; the sound of 300 air bombers flying over head...that sound will never leave you. I remember the winter of 1944; we had no food, no fuel for the fire. We gathered what we could find in the rail yard, before dawn so we wouldn't be seen. But then I remember our liberation, April 13, 1945. I'll always remember that day. The Germans were blowing up a bridge right across from my house. I remember looking through the grate in the door, with a pillow over my ears... finally the noise stopped when the Canadians arrived... This story is about more than war, it's about dreams. The dream that always stayed with me was I wanted to go to Canada. I had about \$25.00 when I got to Prince George, and I started working at the local mill. Before long I was designing the letter head for the company I dreamed would someday own. Eventually I did work my way up and became the owner myself. How? By setting a goal, being persistent, and sticking to it. My messages, in closing, as you stand tomorrow, on the 11th day the 11th hour, remember our heroes, they made the difference, and when we stand in silence, we honour them."

process of deferral from one set of signifiers to another (Barthes, 1967). This is accomplished by drawing upon both formal and informal texts that shape and inform the discourses of student leadership at J. S. Secondary school, and citing them directly in this chapter. In doing so, readers are invited to see how a range of D/discourses and practices in a variety of modes (both textual and visual) act to reiterate preferred ideological readings, and consider how these become naturalized in the everyday language, utterances, practices and activities of social actors. Some of these texts come directly from my research notes, some from student references to popular culture, and others from the authoritative texts (Bakhtin, 1981) frequently accessed by teachers in schools.

## **7.2 Student Leadership At J. S. High School**

I visited JSS weekly for a period of approximately seven months, between May 2005 and May, 2006. I also attended several weekend long leadership training retreats so I could become familiar with the structure of the school course and its curricular content. I worked with a small group of youth, who initially self identified during their grade 11 leadership course as willing to participate in this research study, and followed their progress through their grade 12 leadership course, conducted a series of interviews and focus groups, ending my observations in May, 2006. I also met with the program sponsor and curriculum designer of this course, Jeff Sugar, regularly over the course of the study, as well as completing a formal interview. Jeff provided me with a number of program documents, including copies of the original course of study, its current syllabus and copies of books he used for instructional purposes. These all became sources of data for this chapter.



The student leadership course at J. S. High is a locally approved course and a grade 12 elective, although the service component of the course can be used to fulfil the Career and personal planning hours prescribed for high school by the Ministry of Education. As Jeff described in his interview, the primary purpose of the student leadership program was to orient students to what he believed were the primary

OTTAWA (CP) – A lone, unemployed Canadian donned a Maple Leaf-red sweater Tuesday and stood guard under a blistering midday sun by the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier near the National War Memorial. Authorities haven't decided yet how they'll improve security after the memorial was desecrated on Canada Day, but Don Dawson wasn't going to wait for them to make up their minds. He draped a vintage Canadian Legion flag - a British ensign with a green maple leaf imposed in the centre - over his shoulder and stood rigidly at attention. "I got up this morning and I asked myself what I could do about this, and I decided to come here out of respect for all the soldiers who died fighting for the freedom of Canada," said Dawson, who spent the whole day at the site. Three young men were photographed urinating on the memorial on Canada Day. Police were looking for the three on Tuesday and asked them to come forward. The ensuing outcry has spurred public officials to consider new security measures for the site even though police say similar incidents around the capital are virtually unheard of.<sup>17</sup>

components of civic agency: *ethical practice* and *service to others*. In making his case for this approach to leadership, he described how he had built this program around particular curricular and non curricular resources that used a developmental approach to building ethical skills for leadership among adolescents in high school. The emphasis on service to others was described as the central feature that enabled students to *practice* these skills, rather than approaches that sought to directly 'teach' students on how to become leaders. Jeff's philosophy was centered in 'doing' as a necessary component of effective learning. In this way, Jeff's student leadership course differed from those in other school

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<sup>17</sup> Man stands guard at war memorial, by Celeste McKenzie. Retrieved on July 12, 2006 from <http://cnews.canoe.ca/CNEWS/Canada/2006/07/03/1666201-cp.html>

jurisdictions, in that it engaged in activities design to practice what it meant to be an ethically centered person. While not explicitly describing the student leadership program as an exercise in developing moral values, clearly an emphasis on how to create a “good” civic agent was foundational to the program’s design.

### **7.3 The Social And Cultural Context Of J. S. High School**

J. S. High school is in a suburban, middle class neighbourhood. Built in the 1960’s the school enjoys a very relatively stable population of students. Housing in the area is largely single family detached homes, although there are three large townhouse complexes that contain a mix of rental or individual owned units. There are relatively few businesses in the area surrounding the school: a senior’s housing complex, a gas station and another elementary school are within easy walking distance. The closest shopping is a mini mall about ten blocks away: as a result, most students stay in the building or on the grounds during lunch hour.

The school is a large cinderblock and brick single level building. The main corridors are all lined with lockers. Several “pods” of rooms extend from the main corridor: these hallways are quite narrow and when classes move at break time, it is difficult to move easily through these spaces. One of the more interesting features of this school is the entry hallway: like many schools, the entry offers a space in which to visually profile the school. J. S. S. is “Home of the Trojans”: like their historical namesake, the image is of a large armoured male, with a fringed helmet and a large sword. The letter “T” is painted to resemble a large sword with a jewelled handle and metal scabbard. The gym doors are near the entrance, and similar signage is placed around the walls. The school “store” is also at the entrance area; here students purchase

food and beverages at lunch hour. There is no cafeteria, and students mostly sit on the floor of the hallway to eat their lunches or talk. However, the entrance area contains one other important feature: three long picnic style tables with attached benches. Whenever you enter the school, you can expect to see up to twenty young people sitting at these tables, some working on schoolwork or reading, although the vast majority of them are engaged in chatter or listening to I Pods or MP3 players.

This school is predominantly Caucasian, although there are a small number of students of Indo Canadian or Asian descent. This contrasts quite sharply with the multicultural mix that was apparent at Northern High. In particular, the lack of aboriginal students, given the overall population of aboriginal peoples in the community is quite remarkable.

**Student leadership retreat: (research notes)**

**Displayed on screen:** "Be the change you want to be in the world-- Gandhi".

**Jeff:** "What does that mean?" **Students:** "Take responsibility." "Act like you'd want to be treated." "Change starts with us".

**Jeff:** "Right. So let me tell you this story. I was driving down the highway towards Vancouver, and I stopped when I saw this woman and her car at the side of the road. She needed a lift to the next town, so she could get her car towed and repaired. So I gave her a lift: it was quite a bit out of my way, but I wanted to help her out. When she tried to pay me, I said "No, just help out someone else in the future." 'Cause it's about doing the right thing for the right reason. Making a difference: it doesn't take much to make a difference."

**Students:** *It's like that movie, Pay it forward". Or that song, "Chain of love" by Clay Walker.*

**Jeff:** "Right."

The leadership class I spent time with was located in one of three school portables at the back of the building. This portable is dedicated to the leadership program, and only leadership classes are offered here, twice weekly over the 45 minute lunch hour (one for

the Grade 11 class and another for the Grade 12 class). This is what the school calls an “X” block; that is, it is a credit class scheduled outside of the regular timetable.

The leadership program at this school is in its eighth year, the brainchild of its current sponsor, Jeff Sugar. A student counsellor and formerly a social studies teacher as well as a teacher of students with disabilities, Jeff initially modelled the leadership program and curriculum for JSS using a Washington state curriculum for middle school students interested in leadership. The leadership course also drew upon goals expressed in the Social Studies 11 curriculum, including civic responsibility that were included in units of instruction that focus on “politics and law”, as well as social responsibility standards that referenced participatory views of citizenship (BC Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 5). It took several years of lobbying at the district level to convince the school board to proceed with Jeff’s leadership program.

Since its initial start up, Jeff has altered the program in a number of ways, relying now more heavily on Sean Covey’s (1998) book *The 7 habits of highly effective teens* as a core curriculum resource, supplemented by the Washington State student leadership program. Covey’s book puts a particular focus on personal attributes of moral character and the kind of ethical standards that individuals need to adopt and put into practice in order to be “good” persons. This emphasis on becoming “good” citizens and “good” people was evidenced throughout the research study, although primarily during the student leadership retreat. Students were also required to use a day planner that was commercially available through the Franklin Covey Company; it reiterates the key messages of the Covey (1998) text.

**Habit one: be Proactive. If I plan to learn, I must learn to plan.**

Habit one says "I am the force. I am the captain of my life. I can choose my attitude. I'm responsible for my own happiness or unhappiness. I am in the driver's seat of my destiny, not just a passenger".

Each day you and I have about 100 chances to choose whether to be proactive or reactive. In any given day, the weather is bad, your sister steals your blouse, your friend talks behind your back, or you flunk a test.

So what are you doing to do about it? Do you fly off at the mouth? Let it ruin your day? Or do you just let it go? Laugh about it. The choice is yours (The 7 Habits Companion, Premier Agendas, 2005, p. 2). *Used with permission.*

When students begin the program, they are required to attend a fall orientation and a weekend long leadership seminar. Following this, the students meet weekly, in order to select service projects, develop plans for implementing their service activity and receive updates on upcoming projects or reports on those successfully concluded. The youth in this class were divided into leadership teams as many of the projects involved a need for multiple volunteers; teams then met throughout the school year as needed for planning purposes. Many of these activities took the students outside of the school during the school day as well as on weekends and evenings. Typically, students were involved in at least two projects at a time, with a requirement to report on their activities formally at least once each school reporting period, as Jeff Sugar was responsible for assigning a grade to their work in this class.

**Inside out:** We crawl before we walk. We learn arithmetic before algebra. We must fix ourselves before we can fix others. If you want to make a change in your life, the place to begin is with yourself, not with your parents, or your boyfriend, or your professor... This is what this book is all about. Changing from the inside out, starting with the man or woman in the mirror. This chapter... and the ones that follow [Chapters 2 and 3] deal with you and your character, or the private victory. The next four chapters.... Deal with *relationships*, or the public victory (Covey, 1998, p. 33-34, italics in original). *Used with permission.*

### **7.3.1 Students in service to others**

Jeff's goal, as he stated it, is to "develop a strong sense of ethics and create a sense of community so these kids will be ready for real life". He also ascribes to the principle of role modelling, expressing a belief that adolescents cannot only provide good models for other kids, but can be experts and facilitators of action in their own right. This philosophy illustrated one of the foundational practices of the program, as students are expected to become leaders who work with a local elementary school. Their job is to facilitate 'junior leadership' training seminars for upper level elementary students, assist them in coordinating and planning their own calendar of events, and celebrating their achievements at the end of the school year by organizing a "fun day" of non-competitive events such as water races and food eating contests.

The elementary school student retreat is one of the largest service events and requires significant planning on the part of all of the students and Jeff Sugar. Jeff provides a basic outline of the weekend events, including a range of collaborative and cooperative games or group activities that fit within themes, all contained within a handbook provided for each youth leadership group. Two predominant themes were evidenced in the activities planned for the junior leadership retreat: the first is "talking across difference" and the second, "the power for making a difference is in you". An example of an activity designed to meet the first objective was called "the gingerbread cookie". Student leaders from J. S. High led groups of elementary students in an activity where they are asked to cut apart a paper gingerbread man and label the pieces with words that "keep people apart" (such as name calling, cliques and groups, ability, and skin colour). Once this was completed, they lead a discussion about how to overcome differences. Elementary students came up with a variety of words such as "being friends"

“reaching out to others”, “inviting others to play”, and “talking things over” as ways of overcoming these differences, and then the elementary students were invited to use real band-aids with these words written on them to re-construct the gingerbread man into a whole person again. The youth leaders were encouraged to use the language of “bridging differences” in the written explanations that accompany this activity.

An example of the second theme was an activity called “Making a plan for success”. The student leaders were asked to facilitate a conversation among the elementary students about what they cared about and how they could be of help to others. The elementary students were encouraged to come up with ideas that were doable and something they themselves could complete. During this junior retreat, all elementary students developed a year long plan that included ideas such as fund raising dances, adopting an endangered animal, collecting Christmas shoe boxes for overseas children, visiting seniors at the local seniors’ home, and collecting food for the food bank, among others.

The JSS student leaders were also given the responsibility to keep in regular contact with their school and the school’s teacher sponsor after the retreat. This meant that throughout the school year, the student leadership students visited their assigned elementary schools and also organized events such as Jump rope for Heart, family

Principles rule the human world... They apply equally to everyone, rich or poor, king or peasant, male or female. They can't be bought or sold. If you live by them, you will excel. If you break them, you will fail. It's that simple. Here are a few examples: Honesty is a principle. Service is a principle. Love is a principle. Hard work is a principle. Respect, gratitude, moderation, fairness, integrity, loyalty, and responsibility are principles. There are dozens and dozens. Just as a compass always points to true north, your heart will recognize true principles... It takes faith to live by principles, especially when you see people close to you get ahead in life by lying, cheating, indulging, manipulating, and serving only themselves. What you don't see, however, is that breaking principles always catches up to them in the end (Covey, 1997, p. 24-25). *Used with permission.*

dances, bake sales, or other elementary student projects identified as part of their year long plan. The JSS students were also responsible for reporting their activities to Jeff Sugar as a part of the evaluation system he used to assign grades for this course.

### **7.3.2 Other service projects**

As Jeff's program has been in place for several years, he has developed relationships with a number of local service agencies or non profits that request assistance with their regularly scheduled charitable events. Jeff emphasized that he sees himself as a facilitator, bringing together these not-for-profit agencies and the leadership students so that each can benefit from working with the other. As a result, most of the service projects that the leadership students choose are those which are posted by Jeff on a bulletin board in the classroom. For the past several years, this has involved organizing Jump Rope for Heart events at multiple elementary schools and community locations, acting as youth leaders and facilitators of leadership conferences for elementary students, a penny drive for different causes (most recently the Tsunami And Hurricane Katrina relief), organizing the school wide Terry Fox Run, teaching a series of anti-bullying workshops, running a daily breakfast club (free food and coffee for those who drop by), organizing school dances and Spirit days (events designed to create and maintain "school spirit) and organizing and leading the school's annual Remembrance Day ceremony. There were some student initiated projects, such as a fund raiser designed to help a J. S. High student who had been recently diagnosed with a serious illness and faced huge transportation costs travelling back and forth to Vancouver for treatment, however, these were limited in number.



As this was a credit course, students were expected to complete a minimum number of service projects over the course of the year: projects were divided into three categories on the basis of how many hours need to be devoted to the service. A minimum of fifty hours are required, although many students go well beyond this minimum.

### 7.3.3 Ethical practice

Jeff described how his work has always been centered in a belief that *“kids really can make a difference in the world”*. More recently he has been inspired by Craig

**Field notes:**

Jeff sets up his slide projector and begins by reviewing the “Grade 12 leadership philosophy”.

*“I can’t use the Covey book, there are copyright issues,” he says. “But I base my presentation on his work, and I call it ‘The seven paradigms of highly effective leadership students’. They are: be proactive; seek to understand others; be a team player; be inclusive with everyone and value all ideas; you can make a difference; define your goals and mission, create your own destination; and taking care of yourself. These are the things you need to do as a leadership student: education won’t get you the whole way in life; you need to have a social conscience too.”*

Kielburger’s philosophy of volunteerism, service to others and social involvement as the key to making a difference on a local and a global scale. Jeff describes how Kielburger’s (2004) book *From me to we*, has become an important resource for framing his approach to the leadership course. In particular, he is placing greater emphasis on what adolescents’ can do on a global scale. *“I’ve been passing it around to a bunch of my leadership students; they are getting a lot out of it too. We’ll be using these ideas and some of the organizations that are in this book will be part of our agenda for the student leadership conference in May. It’s also a book that talks about how we can do good things for others, like the Random acts of Kindness we do in leadership class”*.

**Field notes:** *"I want to tell you a story about this really neat little kid. They call her the Ladybug girl, but her real name is Hannah Taylor. She's just ten years old, but she's done some remarkable things for the homeless in Canada. I was at a conference and heard her speak, she told this amazing story: when she was five years old she saw an old guy eating out of a garbage can, and she said, "Mommy, why is that man eating out of a garbage can?" Her Mom told her about homelessness, but this kid just kept asking saying, "but if everyone shared, wouldn't homelessness go away?" And she just wouldn't give up. So she started raising money for homeless people, first in little jars she made herself, and decorated with ladybugs, and put on counters all over town. But the amazing thing was the way her idea caught on, and now she's a part of a national foundation that builds shelters all across Canada. That story shows how kids really can make a difference." (Jeff Sugar, story to students at leadership training retreat)*

'Random acts of kindness' is one of the strategies that the student leadership students designated as a priority service activity during the school year. This followed a presentation by Jeff about the purposes and importance of random acts of kindness as an ethical practice. Drawing particularly on the Covey text and a series of narratives, Jeff made clear that this was an important means of developing practices of ethical leadership.

'Random acts of kindness' can be done by students working collectively to acknowledge some person or groups of persons, or it can be an individual activity, taking place at any point of the school year, either inside or outside of the school. Throughout the school year, examples were often shared with the entire class, as Jeff highlighted these activities in his weekly meetings.

Jeff emphasized at the retreat and throughout the school year, that anonymity was important: the purpose is to do something kind without any anticipated reward, only for the sense of self-satisfaction knowing you have done something to make a small difference in the life of someone else. During the retreat, some examples shared included inviting a younger student to attend a school event with you, or leaving flowers or a card that acknowledged the service of someone in the school who usually went unrecognized.

Jeff also detailed previously completed service projects during his interview. For example, he described a partnership between his previous years' leadership class and Hope International; the students raised \$5000.00 towards the building of a school in Africa. Another project was fund raising for a well in a small village in southern Africa. He also highlighted other local projects, including support for the Salvation Army soup

#### Chain of love

He was driving home one evening,  
in his beat up Pontiac.  
When an old lady flagged him down;  
Her Mercedes had a flat.  
He could see that she was frightened,  
Standing out there in the snow.  
'Till he said "I'm here to help you ma'am,  
By the way, my name's Joe."

She said, "I'm from St. Louis",  
And I'm only passing through,  
I must've seen a hundred cars go by,  
This is awful nice of you."

When he changed the tire, and closed her trunk,  
And was about to drive away,  
She said, "How much do I owe you?"  
Here's what he had to say:

You don't owe me a thing,  
I've been there too.  
And someone once helped me out,  
Just the way I'm helping you.  
If you really wanna pay me back,  
Here's what you do:  
Don't let the chain of love end with you.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Lyrics accessed on July 29, 2006 at  
[http://www.uppercutmusic.com/artist\\_c/clay\\_walker\\_lyrics/the\\_chain\\_of\\_love\\_lyrics.html](http://www.uppercutmusic.com/artist_c/clay_walker_lyrics/the_chain_of_love_lyrics.html)

bus. In previous years students have worked at the bus, or collected food donations for its use. Another project Jeff described was one that involved working with kids from an inner city school in an after school basketball program.

In these cases, Jeff used the word “legacy” to describe this work: he put it this way: *“When these kids go to their reunion, they’ll be able to remember this lasting legacy of their achievement in high school”*. As this quote suggests, recognition is an important feature of ethical service; I will return to the importance of recognition and its link to service shortly.

#### **7.3.4 Other signifiers of ethical practice**

In earlier parts of this dissertation, I have discussed how visual D/discourses have performative effects. At this research site, visual D/discourses of the merit of service and ethical practice were also evident. For example, the walls of the portable classroom were covered with posters designed to echo the discourses of moral and ethical behaviour.

Some of these included:

- Stand up for what is right, even if you are standing alone
- The three D’s to succeed: desire, discipline, dedication No one is useless in the world that lightens the burden of another
- Let the choices you make today be the choices you can live with tomorrow
- Leadership is... the patience to listen, the courage to speak, the discipline to follow, the wisdom to lead
- The hand of friendship has no colour
- You are the authors of your own life story

Film was also used as a resource to illustrate “ethical leadership”: for example, during the student leadership retreat, the film “Coach Carter” was shown. The central theme of this film, which featured a black coach and largely black students in a poor

school neighbourhood, was about how the coach convinced a group of highly skilled basketball players and their family members to put school success ahead of athletic

**Coach Ken Carter:** [to the people in attendance at the board hearing] “You really need to consider the message you're sending these boys by ending the lockout. It's the same message that we as a culture send to our professional athletes; and that is that they are above the law. If these boys cannot honour the simple rules of a basketball contract, how long do you think it will be before they're out there breaking the law? I played ball here at Richmond High 30 years ago. It was the same thing then; some of my team mates went to prison, some of them even ended up dead. If you vote to end the lockout, you won't have to terminate me; I'll quit.”

From the film, *Coach Carter*. Accessed on July 29, 2006 at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0393162/quotes>

success. The moral message seemed to suggest that sticking to your principles and beliefs regardless of the consequences was of greater value than any shorter term recognition or success.

### **7.3.5 Other visual signifiers: nationalism and service**

Whenever these leadership students leave their school, they are expected to wear a tee shirt that has been designed for them: a part of the initial year start up fees, students were given a long sleeved white tee shirt, with the words “leadership” spelled down each arm, and a large stylized Canadian flag on the back, followed by the phrase “A proud Canadian”. One reading of this visual narrative might suggest that the tee shirt carries the message of loyalty and service, linking the practices of service with the nationalistic discourse of what it means to be a Canadian. At this site, the Canadian flag acted as a signifier that brought together discourses of nationalism, service, altruism and agency. The flag was used in the public space of the school (on the gym wall) as well as on the bodies of individual students and teachers (as in the case of the tee shirts designed for students to wear).

These visual signifiers reinforce or cue particular discourses in local ways, a process that Wertsch (1998) describes as the “microdynamics of appropriation” (p. 175-175). This process of appropriating or taking up these D/discourses are not necessarily overt or even intentional, but rather represent how some cultural tools mediate action “almost in spite of the agents’ conscious reflection and volition...in ways the agent neither envisions nor desires” (ibid). In this way the D/discourses continually re-cite and “deeply figure” (ibid) the ways in which subjects respond. In the example above, the D/discourse of service becomes linked with the discourses of nationalism, each serving to reinforce the construction of an active *morally motivated* agent. One reiterates or repeats the other in its use, illustrating its potential performative effect.

#### **7.4 Discourses Of Service In Personal Narratives**

Another central component of the student leadership program is the desire to create ethically centered persons, so that each individual student becomes committed to the service of others in order to be “good” civic agents. Ethical leadership was a term used throughout Jeff’s leadership discussions: in class, and during the training retreats; in reciting personal anecdotes about himself, about current and former students; or in describing the activities of well-known world leaders, he focused on how individuals can be exemplars of ethical leadership.

For example, during the leadership retreat Jeff had the students do a personal visioning exercise while he told the story of Victor Frankel, a holocaust survivor. Jeff vividly described the hardships of being arrested by the Nazis, forced into cattle cars, standing for hours on end, arriving at the concentration camp, being forced to undress and walk through snowy fields, and finally separated from wife and family, never to be seen

again. Jeff asked the students “*How would you respond?*” Several express the idea of being devastated, of giving up, or going crazy.

Jeff continued the story by saying, “*Victor Frankel responded by saying there are some things they can’t take from me. They can’t take away my ability to be proactive, to have meaning in my life. And he went on to be a very great scientist and physician, who wrote many books.*” Jeff quotes briefly from a book (written by Frankel) he holds in his hand: “*Meaning must be found and cannot be given*”.

This story is one of many Jeff told over the course of this study. His narratives were not always about historical figures, he also drew upon his own experiences to illustrate through narrative form how ethical leaders behave. For example, during the leadership retreat Jeff told a story about the actions of a particular leadership student that made a difference in the life of another student. Jeff told how this male leadership student, who in passing through the school’s basketball courts had observed a group of kids trying to shoot baskets. This student, according to Jeff, took the time to help one of the smaller boys learn how to make a shot. During the interchange between the older and younger youth, the older youth had told some stories, joked around, and eventually invited the young student to come along to a school hockey event that was planned for the next day.

Jeff described this as a “random act of kindness”, a spontaneous act that emerged from the conversation between the younger and older student, something that did not cost money, “*only your time*”. Jeff however, went on to describe the consequences of this initially random act: the boy had gone home to his family and talked non-stop about the plan to go to the hockey game with this older student. The parents, who later reported this

story to the school principal, described how this single event had acted as a catalyst to transforming their son's experiences in the school. As a slightly built grade eight boy, he had been experiencing a very difficult start up period at the high school, largely as a result of being ignored and excluded by others. Now, because of this encounter, the boy had developed "*lots of self confidence, and came to school with a positive attitude*". The final segment of Jeff's story is a description of a chance meeting between the young boy's mother and the older leadership student. The mother, recognizing the leadership student, tells the story of how he changed the life of her son. Jeff describes how "her eyes were shining with tears" when she repeated the story to him.

As these examples illustrate, seeking to inspire others through narratives of self sacrifice, courage and selflessness were a regular part of the dialogues Jeff initiated with the leadership students. The telling of moral tales is always done with purpose: and while the pedagogical purpose of the story might seem, on its surface, simply a reiteration of the D/discourses of service, a telling designed to explicitly model for the student leadership class the importance of moral activity, it also illustrates another central feature of service: that is, its *value to others*. The significance or value of the moral gift is measured when one can "see" and "understand" how the initial act was received, used or understood. In other words, to be moral one must be *seen to be moral*.

In addition, and perhaps less apparent, is the way in which the moral narrative addresses not only those who perform the moral act, but also in the way it addresses who is worthy or deserving of support. Moral value then becomes dependent upon who receives the moral favour: deserving 'others' are necessary for the value to be realized. This means that the concept of *desert* is as important as the altruistic character of the



moral actor. So, in the example given above, the younger boy who is lonely and ostracized is deemed a worthy subject for moral effort and as a result, provides recognition to the individual who engaged in the moral practice. However, without viewing its consumption, the moral worth of the activity could not be realized.

#### **7.4.1 Using moral capital: value for virtue**

However, moral capital, such as was earned by the leadership student described in the narrative above, can also be used for another more self-interested purpose, in that it serves as *evidence* of moral behaviour, behaviours that have value for both employment and post secondary purposes. Students understood this well, as on many occasions over the course of this study, Jeff reiterated how “good” some particular activity would look on a student’s resume, particularly if he was having trouble recruiting students for the task. For example, one activity that the leadership class were asked to do each year was a series of anti-bullying workshops, run by senior leadership students for students in grade 8. In recruiting the grade 12 leadership class to participate in this activity, Jeff would invoke the narrative of scholarship and money for post secondary education. “*You know, this would be great on your resume. I remember when Jody did this a few years ago, and the School District was so impressed, they asked her to make a manual for other schools. She got loads of scholarship money too*”. Jeff also frequently mentioned how he would “*write a good letter for you, if you want to apply for a scholarship, people know about this program, it’s got a good reputation*”.

Illustrating how moral acts rely on having productive and consumptive worth is a D/discourse that is highly compatible with the consumer culture of contemporary living. Indeed, it mimics the value attributed to the “good worker citizen” who contributes to

society based on his/her economic productivity. This morally consumptive model of virtue helps solidify the link between education, schooling and the economy, very similar to the “retooled” discourses of the new work order and “post” or “new” capitalism<sup>19</sup> proposed by Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996, p. 60). One could argue that the value for virtue D/discourse is a type of “post” morality discourse as is represented in this excerpt, one that situates value in virtue.

## **7.5 Spreading The Word: Schooled Moral Agents In Action**

At the end of May 2006, I also attended the regional student leadership conference that was planned and facilitated by the grade 12 leadership class. In total about twenty students played roles as facilitators, team leaders, spokespersons, troubleshooters, and on site logistics management. The conference was called “Reaching beyond: the sequel”: this conference title was represented on the shirts that both leadership students and youth participants wore throughout the conference. Its logo was a stylized cartoon that showed a person standing on top of a globe, reaching towards the stars and the moon above. The Canadian flag was located on the arm sleeve, and the title of the conference and the sub title “2006 Student leadership Seminar” was printed below. This logo also appeared on student materials that were distributed throughout the conference event. Again, the repeated use of the Canadian flag reiterates particular messages and could be described as a type of brand extension (Cortese, 1999, p. 4) where

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<sup>19</sup> Gee, Hull & Lankshear (1996) describe new capitalism as “based on the design, production and marketing of ‘high quality’ goods and services for now saturated markets. In the developed work today, economic survival is contingent on selling newer and ever more perfect(ed) customized (individualized) goods and services to niche markets—that is to groups of people who come to define and change their identities by the sorts of goods and services they consume” (p. 26). This will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter.

the altruism of the conference is extended to the discourse of Canadians as an altruistic nation.

At the conference there were youth from several school districts from across northern British Columbia; most schools had between ten and fifteen students in attendance who were enrolled in either grade ten or eleven (secondary schools) or grades six and seven (elementary schools). The goal was to give these students an opportunity to engage in leadership training exercises and introduce them to a series of national or international non-profit organizations that engaged in social, health, environmental or economic development work. Each student leadership team was given the task of identifying and researching the work of these different agencies in order to present them

*We've had a lot of successes in this program. We've fundraised and helped build a school in South Africa—we partnered with Hope International. Also a well for two villages: these are the legacies these kids have left, something they can really talk about at their reunion. Dances come and go but this will last forever, a community will have clean water because of you and your effort. The projects can be local too, like working at the soup bus, or doing something for the kids at Disadvantaged Elementary School<sup>20</sup>, like an after school basketball program.*  
Jeff Sugar, interview notes

to the visiting students during this conference. These organizations included some well known organizations such as UNICEF, Free the Children, World Vision, the World Wildlife federation, the One ton challenge (global warming), Canfor (Canadian foundation for AIDS research), Oxfam Canada, Make Poverty History, and AIDS foundation of South Africa. Students from around the region were divided into multi-schooled groups to explore how these organizations could be supported with youth led school and community based activities.

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<sup>20</sup> A pseudonym for a local elementary school; 95% of its students are aboriginal and 75% live below the poverty line.

Each of the group leaders were using an action planning model that was drawn from the book called *Take action!* by Mark and Craig Keilburger, and adapted for the purposes of this conference by Jeff Sugar and several grade 12 leadership students from his class. As Jeff discussed with the teacher chaperones and sponsors after the youth had exited the theatre “*We hope your kids will want to contribute to making a difference either through the organization they are being exposed to here, or another organization in their own community*”. Other planned activities included team building exercises (for example, making a bridge out of paper and seeing how many times the team members could go under it) as well as activities designed to stress the processes of inclusion and diversity (such as developing a webbed map of groups or “cliques” in each school and considering how activities could be developed that had a broader appeal to more diverse groups of students).

The event had approximately one hundred youth participants and was held in an auditorium on a post secondary campus. At conference registration, each youth participant was provided with a package that included a number of corporate “gifts” (such as pens, notebooks, glow sticks etc). A group of three leadership students who played together in a local band called “The Gorgeous Georges” started the event off: they performed the song “One” by U-2 as well as the Beatles song “Come together”. The bandleader, Ruth, explained that the songs had been selected on the basis of how their lyrics related to the youth leadership conference themes. After an enthusiastic reception by the youth present, the leadership youth teams were brought to the front, and the remaining youth divided into groups for the remainder of their day. The second day began with the showing of video segments from the Live Aid conference: each of the

youth groups reported out on their work from the previous day, sharing the ideas they had developed as well as potential actions and activities that they would take back to their home schools to develop into youth service plans. These plans included school based activities designed to build “school spirit” and increase student involvement in the school; some made reference to things like dances, video parties and spirit days. The second part of each plan developed a voluntary service theme: either involvement in a local, regional, national or international philanthropic enterprise. Their reports were written using a yearlong calendar so that activities were planned related to each theme

Too late	One life
Tonight	With each other
To drag the past out into the light	Sisters
We're one, but we're not the same	Brothers
We get to	One life
Carry each other	but we're not the same.
Carry each other	
One...	We get to
	Carry each other
Have you come here for forgiveness	Carry each other
Have you come to raise the dead	One life...
Have you come here to play Jesus	One <sup>21</sup>
To the lepers in your head...	
One love	
One blood	
One life	
You got to do what you should	

over the course of the school year. Students commented on each other’s plans, shared ideas, and spoke enthusiastically to the possible actions and activities they believed could be implemented over the next school year. A motivational speaker finished off the morning before the youth left the city and headed back to his or her own schools.

<sup>21</sup> U-2 lyrics accessed on July 2, 2006 at: <http://www.macphisto.net/u2lyrics/One.html>

## 7.6 Schooled Agents: Performative And Authority

To this point, I have examined the practices and pedagogy of Jeff Sugar through the lens of service as a cultural tool that serves to reiterate particular beliefs and understandings about what it means to be a morally schooled agent. As Holland, Lachicrotte Jr., Skinner and Cain (1998) argued, cultural tools “evoke the worlds to which they are relevant, and position individuals with respect to those worlds” (p. 63). Service is understood as a means of producing cultural and social ‘goods’ while simultaneously shaping youth’s actions in order to produce a morally motivated agent. These goods are realized in two ways: as moral agents, youth are urged to become ‘good’ civic agents, motivated by service to others. The other ‘good’ is realized through the value attributed to moral service: value for virtue is reinforced in the telling and retelling of moral narratives that recognize the moral achievement of good human subjects and who earn social and economic benefits as a result of their actions. The effect of these discourses produces what I will call a commodified citizen, that is, a citizen that is deontologically motivated through practices of moral recognition.

### **Focus group notes: Thursday, October 6**

J: So did you hear the announcement about the scholarship?

C: No, how come I didn't get called down to the office?

A: Well, you're not an Indian are you? [Long pause].

T: I guess it's a category you're not included in.

N: Yeah, I was thinking that too, but you can't really say it out loud can you?

However, recognition of moral worth is also carefully bound up with Jeff Sugar's status as an authority in the school. It is Jeff's status as an *authority* that gives the discourses of service and moral action their importance and centrality in the student leadership program; as such he mediates; he is, as Luke, de Castell and Luke (1983) “an

arbiter of... validity and rhetorical force” and who provides students with a “running metatextual commentary with which to process the text... This teacher interpretation of what is to be learned from the text[s] helps define for the student what must be acquired as text knowledge” (p. 118).

Jeff’s authority was constituted in several ways; one arises from his role as teacher, in keeping with the bureaucratic hierarchy historically present in schools. His power to award status to students on the basis of their performance in his class, particularly in assisting them with future post secondary goals is another role that affords him status and authority. Authority also flowed from his status as a ‘cool’ teacher: students at J. S. High, particularly in the leadership program, spoke very highly about Jeff Sugar. In large part, students address this status by talking about the ways in which he includes students in decision-making, treating them as adults who are capable of making their own choices.

Jeff draws upon his authority in his efforts to persuade and influence the civic orientation and moral actions of the youth in the student leadership program. In this way Jeff’s narratives and discourses achieve authoritative status. As Bakhtin (1981/1994) discussed, authoritative D/discourses are those D/discourses granted legitimacy through their association through authoritative means. Such D/discourses are “indissolubly fused with its authority- political power, an institution, a person” (p. 78). As such the D/discourses of service and their moral value are afforded greater status and are taken up and circulated in the utterances and practices of the youth at J. S. High. The extent to which these discourses of morality, ethical leadership, and agency enable and constrain the youth at J. S. High is the subject of the next section of this chapter.

## **7.7 Taking Up Discourses Of Ethical Leadership And Service**

In the next part of this chapter, I draw upon my observations, the interviews completed and focus group discussions with the youth in J. S. High's leadership class to consider how these youth take up the discourses of service and moral value that were described in the first part of this chapter. My analysis draws upon Wertsch's (1998) discussion of how narratives as cultural tools mediate processes of appropriation and recitation in dialogic action. As noted earlier in this dissertation, cultural tools are the means through which agents use social resources in activity. This analysis will draw attention to the interplay between discourse, agent, and social and cultural location to consider how youth subjects at this site are constituted as agentive civic actors.

My first step was to code the interview transcripts to highlight narratives that drew upon the discourses of service and value for virtue, and then consider how the utterances might be considered as appropriating, altering, or modifying these discourses. I was also interested in tracing how the concept of leadership was evoked in the expression of these discourses. Several narrative themes emerged from this coding, including: leadership as a commodity; the production of virtue; and ethical practices as moral measures for service. Examples of each are included as illustrative of general themes across interview and observation transcripts.

Again, following Wertsch (1998) I looked for evidence of how a youth's language or patterns of speech might illustrate the persistence of the D/discourses of service and value for virtue by considering the micro dynamics of appropriation: how particular signifiers were read as indicators of particular discourses was also considered, as well as how the youth utterances or narratives might illustrate some break from or



acknowledgement of competing discourses. Finally, I consider the potential context and subject position of the youth subjects, and how this might illustrate the complexity of how discourses are taken up by different subjects. Illuminating the tensions between normative (or dominant) and counter discourses also illustrates how D/discourses, while resources for human action, cannot be causally linked with particular conceptions or understandings, but are rather a product of a complex and recursive cycle of social construction between social actors and social and cultural contexts.

## **7.8 The Value Of Leadership: Leadership As Commodity**

Many of the youth interviewed expressed a view that taking this leadership class was an important step for them in their quest to be accepted into post secondary education in either College or University. Ruth's comments were typically when she described the reasons why many students take leadership 12:

*“Most kids are here for their resumes, they want to make themselves look good so they can get into university or get scholarships. Me, I was recruited by Mr. Sugar after he heard my band play. [I thought] it would be an interesting class... [And] it would look good on my applications, which is sort of a shallow reason to go, but I figured there was lots I could learn and it would be an interesting experience.”*

Chloe made a similar point:

*“Well, for one, if you are trying to apply for different jobs they notice that on your resume and they know you have learned different communication skills and leadership skills. Like, something I learned in leadership was working together and different organizing skills and stuff.”*

And Abby discussed how it “*looks good on your transcripts and stuff*”.

The other general category of reasons for taking the course that students expressed were related to future employment or life experiences: for example, Aaron suggested that “*leadership is applicable to everyday situations no matter what field you*

*are in. Like, take chemistry—there are topics that are not applicable to everything, but leadership, no matter what you are doing, it's relevant"*. Ashley mentioned how it would assist her in her goal of becoming a teacher, and both Sophia and May mentioned skills for organizing events in later life.

The links between the leadership class and preparation for adult life were themes discerned in Jeff Sugar's comments. For Jeff Sugar, leadership is an ethical activity defined by service for deserving others. These discourses provide tools for students who are looking for ways of realizing their value as ethical leaders, and provides the cultural capital necessary for entry into traditional pathways of advancement through post secondary education and then into the workforce.

However, there may well be another Discourse in play, what Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) describe as the "new work order". The new work order refers to the rapid growth of world markets and increased global competition that demands new forms of capitalism, emphasizing the production of highly customized knowledge based products and services. One of the central ways that the new work order differs from traditional capitalism and its emphasis on profitability is in how it envisions workers as "leaders" or agents who can "change the world" (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996, p. 31); in other words, this discourse of work draws upon the subjectivities and interests of its workforce of moral agents. This Discourse endows *value* on the work being done, giving it greater cultural status in contrast to capitalism's traditional emphasis on profitability.

One could argue that the emphasis on values rather than knowledge as a part of the new work order is a D/discourse that has been constructed or created as an ideological tool that seeks to re-signify the Discourse of work and success, despite its real intention

of deskilling workers. Alternatively, one could attribute to this Discourse a repeated claim that situates moral worth in educative success. Its apparent consistency with and inclusion of parallel features of the educational success narrative allow it to be easily taken up by the youth at J. S. High, including Aaron. In this case, the second Discourse simply re-iterates and re-constitutes beliefs about success through schooling. Rather than a counter narrative, it is simply an echo of earlier historical Discourses about education, success and moral worth.

## **7.9 The Production Of Virtue**

The other value attributed to being involved in the leadership class is that of value for virtue, or how one's ethical behaviour and values can be measured and used for personal reward. These views encompassed both the personal and the social or cultural realm. Mia's comments help situate how these competing benefits are characterized:

*“You go and plan a dance for elementary kids, right? And you go over there and sit there and watch the little kids dance. You don't get much of a reward for the product of your work; they have a good time but for you, well, its cool, whatever, right? But when you work really hard to produce something at your own school and you for once get to see the direct results of your product but you also get to enjoy in the conclusion or reward, or whatever it is, is even better”.*

In these comments note how Mia separates the values that are accrued personally versus a benefit that flows to others. While activities which benefit others are worth doing and there is an opportunity to “view” the results of their enjoyment, it is when the work “product” is also one that flows to its producer that the greatest benefit is felt. In this example, material rewards are discussed as a benefit of acting/being a leader, that is, the individual with the capacity to act or engage with others. One has agency in both

cases, but the importance of the actions is hierarchically determined by an assessment of the product (that is, its lasting value) and its capacity for accruing reward or gratification.

In this way, one might posit that the value of leadership is strongly linked to the production and consumption of a material product, much in the same way that the new work order discourse blurs the distinctions between leadership in work and in one's personal life, including leisure activities, on a continuous plane of production and consumption. As the commodified citizenship discussed earlier in this chapter, one's agency is tied to the value that can accrue to the agent based on its use.

Other youth, such as Emily, discuss the notion of legacy as an effort to

*“try and make a difference... in schools and stuff like that. Even just talking to them [younger students] about experiences that we have had in here [the leadership class], its like, let's go out and show people what we can do and hope that it makes an impact. Even talking to them about the experiences we've had here, what we have been able to help people it, its just way too cool. And making a difference... it is wicked to have that experience, to be able to actually do that. A lot more people would do that if they knew that they could”.*

In this case, the value that accrues through leadership activities is linked to the public expression of its effect; not unlike my earlier discussion, moral virtue has value when it is seen and understood by others as a moral practice. This happens when the object of the moral activity is judged as deserving. The moral gift to the other is produced in its public expression, in its recognition of “making a difference” for deserving others. While Emily draws attention to the “experience” as being “wicked”, her reference to “*A lot more people who do that if they knew that they could*” might rather be a way of expressing that moral action is always a retrospective activity, dependent upon who views or sees its effect.

Jaz similarly measured legacy: a small action becomes of greater value because of

its recognition by others. Jaz told this story during his interview as an example of how one should engage in “random acts of kindness”. He began his story by drawing first on the discourse of caring about others:

*“Yeah, like Mr. Sugar always says, little things make a difference. You don’t really realize it ‘til something like that happens personally. How could something like wrestling with someone have such a huge impact on a kid? I guess he wasn’t enjoying high school so far and he was really shy and stuff. His mom came up to me, she had tears in her eyes, and she said, thanks for playing with my son. And Mr. Sugar said to me, you did something good. And I said, what are you talking about? I was just being a goofball wrestling with these kids, but she [the mom] said thank you to me, and I felt pretty good about myself. To me it seemed like nothing but to that kid it meant something.”*

The question of legacy and recognition seem to be intimately inter-related in this series of comments. To say that one has left a legacy is to say that the activity produces an outcome that is worthy of public acknowledgement, and one that echoes or re-cites previous forms of recognition. A legacy also implies some sort of remembrance in the public realm, where others recognize the significance of the contribution repeatedly over time. In this way, the question of re-citability is an important one to address. In Butler’s (1997) words, “a performative provisionally succeeds... not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech [or practice], but only because the action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the *repetition* or *citation* of a prior and authoritative set of practices (p. 51, italics in original). In this example, it is the repetition of the narrative that evokes its authority.

## **7.10 Conflicting D/discourses Of Leadership**

Most students’ conversations and narratives of leadership fit the social norms established in the discourse of the leadership class. However, Ruth proved to be an exception to this: she openly expressed the view that

*“I don’t know what leadership is about at all. It was sort of explained that it was working in the community and doing certain projects and stuff, in the school and with other schools. But I sort of had the notion that a leader would be like... It is kind of complicated. I still don’t really know, ‘cause it varies. There are people that can be leaders or have really good leadership qualities but don’t exactly go to the forefront. So I really think that a good leader is sort of like that. .. But most of the people in leadership that are the “real leaders” are just complete go getters that are kind of ruthless.”*

In this discussion, Ruth seems to be attempting to resolve the differences between the narratives about leadership she has been told (ethical or moral service) and what she observes (ruthless go-getters). In describing some of her peers as “ruthless” Ruth seems to be suggesting that some students act in ways that are inconsistent with the service discourse of leadership. Her language implies a binary or conflict between the two narratives, one’s goal that of altruism and the other of personal benefit.

Yet despite this conflict, Ruth looks for a way of resolving this tension by focusing on the attributes of character. In the second part of her explanation, she recounts the model that is consistent with the ethical leader model espoused in class (*There are people that can be leaders or have really good leadership qualities but don’t exactly go to the forefront*). She then goes on to describe the attributes of the others in her class who do not fit (*complete go-getters that are kind of ruthless*). By changing the characteristics of the students in the class, she can bracket the inconsistency (Wertsch, 1998, p. 103) and still maintain constancy with the narrative of ethical service.

### **7.11 Ethical Practices: Talking Across Differences**

As noted earlier in this text, the youth in the leadership class were encouraged to engage in ethical practices where they could “talk across differences” and through their efforts at listening and including others, differences between people would be overcome.

Students practiced this approach in their own semester planning, by first brainstorming lists of groups of students in the school (such as skaters, jocks, geeks, musicians etc) and then devising a year long activity plan that had events that would include all of these different interests. This is similar to the exercise described earlier that the leadership youth did with the children who participated in the elementary school leadership retreat. However, how did that practice play out in the understandings of the students? Were the D/discourses of inclusion/difference ones that resonated with the youth at J. S. High?

Anna describes the practice this way:

*“We want everyone to feel equal in our school. We want everyone to feel welcome... All the cliques that we have at our school, our whole idea is to try and get everyone involved with Sprit weeks and have Pyjama days, stuff like that. Figure it all out—how everyone can be included in our yearbooks for once. We want everybody to feel involved so I think it is definitely leadership. [later in the interview]. Yeah—try to get everyone into the same idea, see if others are into it”.*

Abby also referenced how the leadership class makes efforts to treat everyone the same:

*“I can’t think of a lot of examples [of people being treated unfairly] in our school, ‘cause honestly, our school is really good for trying to hardest to make every one feel equal”.*

Ashley too, describes how inclusivity is the way to overcome unfair treatment:

*“You see bums on the street, their not treated the same as the higher class people, and I guess that is always the way society has been, but if you are still, like. [pause]. Bums aren’t that scary, working down at the Keg you see lots of them, they always hangout in the back alley and whatever... like if you say hi to them they are usually pretty nice so... just be kind to everybody.”*

All three of these young women describe actions consistent with the talking across difference discourse; two appear to be talking about sub cultural group differences in the school, Ashley describes how this D/discourse might operate across class.

Jaz's narratives about his own past and present experiences with injustice provides an interesting way of examining how the practice of talking across differences might be characterized differently. Jaz was one of about thirty students at the school who were of Indo Canadian descent. During his interview, he shared a story about his own experiences with discrimination.

*"In elementary school, I was part of a choir for five or six years, and the choir teacher, I don't know, she was pretty evil... She always made me feel like I didn't belong there. I was probably the only ethnic person in that whole choir, probably the only non-Christian person in the choir. But I liked singing and I liked music so I was going to pursue that, and she always made me feel like I didn't belong there, that I was different, that there was something wrong with me maybe?"*

*I know from an early age, I had an understanding of racism. There was this one time in grade two, I wanted to go on the tire swing and this kid said, "No Pakkies allowed". I didn't know what she meant, and I went home to ask my Mom. So my mom came in and talked to my teacher and I kinda understood. When I was a kid I was kinda naïve... I thought—whatever--- we're all the same? But from there I started seeing black and white. As a kid, but not so much anymore 'cause I don't stand for it at all anymore.*

*{Do you confront people with it?} Oh yeah, if someone does something that I don't think... maybe they are trying to imply something, I will definitely take that head on, I am not scared to stand up to that kind of stuff. It's weird, you think that there would be more of it as you are older? But I think there is a lot less as I become older. I can't even remember the last incident. I can't even think of any serious incidents... in high school, in bullying or anything. That's what I like about this school."*

Jazz's experiences seem to run counter to the discourse of "talking across differences". Indeed, his representation of confronting others who act in racist ways seems to suggest that he had experiences that ran counter to the claim that people can (and do) come to understand one another through talk. This could then be characterized as a counter or resistant narrative, one that inserts an alternative way of characterizing how inclusion can be achieved.



However, the second part of his narrative might indicate that he is trying to reconcile the conflict between his own earlier experiences and the discourse of talking across difference, by suggesting things have changed over time. While he “used to” experience racist talk and had to take action on his own in order to achieve fair treatment, now “*it is a lot less as I become older. I can’t even remember the last incident*”. Finally, the phrase, “*That’s what I like about this school*” tightly aligns the narrative of inclusion through dialogue to the discourse of his teacher, Jeff Sugar. In this way, his story of racism becomes consistent with the authoritative discourses of talking across difference reiterated in the student leadership program.

## **7.12 Critical Commentators: Affordances Of Counter Narratives**

There were two examples in the interviews completed with the youth participants at JSS that fit with what Wertsch (1995) described as critical commentators; that is, individuals who generated counter texts that displace the dominant discourses. In earlier chapters I explored the ways in which some cultural tools have affordances with a potential for transformational possibility. In this chapter, the emphasis has been on the constraining features of the narrative form and its effects on the views and beliefs of youth at this research site. However, as a cultural tool, narratives can be mediational means through which action is realized. In the following discussion, the ways in which counter narratives might afford possibilities to resignify or resist dominant D/discourses is explored.

Mia described herself as a bit of a “radical”, someone who recognized issues of inequality and unfairness and had something to say about them. This was evident in the ways in which she responded to interview questions: while Mia clearly echoed the

discourse of service and working together to make the school and community a better place, she also illustrated a more complex understanding of moral standards. For example, she described in one part of her interview how “junkies” are stereotyped:

*Junkies or chokeholds or whatever, they are so stereotyped, and its like, “OH, junkies are so DISGUSTING, [louder voice] and they live on the street, and they have bugs and stuff! And this guy, he’s a Wall Street business man “I am proper, I am suburbia” [deepened tone] or whatever, I snort cocaine. People would be, like, you are not a junkie. Well--- news flash! He is. Maybe he’s tapping into his kid’s college fund to support his coke habit.*

She also noted the contradictions in people stated beliefs and what they do, effectively recognizing the value for virtue discourse described earlier in this chapter:

*“There is this band I like, and they have a t-shirt that says, not one can be free while others are oppressed. Then they sold out to a major label. Now that really amused me.”*

There were few students among the youth at J. S. High who acknowledged any level of discrimination or unfair treatment among the students at JSS. In fact, most went out of their way to suggest otherwise; Sophia’s comments were typical, in which she stated that while discrimination against persons on the basis of their race (Aboriginal or South Asian) happened in other schools, it “doesn’t happen at JSS”. And, as detailed earlier in this chapter, Jaz, a South Asian student who shared stories of racism when he was in elementary school argued that discriminatory practices were not a part of the current J. H. High school culture.

Yet Mia’s stories illustrated she understood how social markers were the primary means of recognition for leadership students. She told me:

*If you were to put all of our grade 12 class into the gym or whatever, and you were to say, “hey, pick out the twenty leaderships students, I guarantee they would be able to pick out the twenty leadership students. Just on image and the way people carry themselves or look at where they want to be... {If you were in that group would they pick you as a leadership student?} No. {Why is that?} I*

*don't know. I don't know.[Pause]. I think it's kinda funny, I remember when I was in Calgary. I like black okay, I wear a lot of black. Most of my clothes are black. I was in Calgary with my cousin and my cousin is the same age as me, and she is even more "out" than me, with the way she dresses than I am. I am wearing a green shirt today—she would never do that. She is black, black, black on black. Silver studs, black on black. [Pause].*

*We were walking down the street and this lady with her little kid, she pulled the kid a little closer. We laughed about this for an hour. We thought it was so funny. My cousin had bright red hair at the time, fire engine red, and we were in black. And this lady pulled her kids closer...*

*What's your issue? Me and my cousin, my cousin is going to university and she has plans to go into counselling. And I am not a bad kid or whatever, and this woman is like... they are wearing black and they are going to hurt my baby or whatever. So I am looked at sometimes as not a leadership student because of who I hang out with, right. They are not leadership students, and she is with them, so she can't be a leadership student either, brush them off to the side.*

Following Wertsch (1998) one could argue that Mia is engaged in a critical analysis of the ethical leadership D/discourses that were dominant in this class. Her narratives descriptively paint contrasting stories of conformity and non conformity, and how the discourse of leadership, while talking about inclusivity, is basically constructed on the basis of normative convention. The leadership students are recognizable because of how they are “read” as middle class, confident, successful. The butch and Goth like leadership student is afforded no similar reading, despite potential commitment to the same goals, morals or ideals. Instead, she is labelled as dangerous and morally perverse.

Yet almost like a hybrid being, Mia is able to pass in both groups: as a member of the leadership class, she frequently takes on tasks in the school and community in the same ways as other students do, and described her fondness for the work with smaller children in particular. On the other hand, she participated in a different sub cultural group, and realized how this status afforded her a quite different status and social

location. Her narrative, while drawing on the ethical leadership D/discourses in part, she also counters it with a critical viewing of its limitations.

Ruth also attempts to evoke a counter narrative to the ethical leadership discourse of the student leadership class. Unlike other students in the class, she does not credit the leadership program with developing an individual's capacity for bringing about change or making a difference. Instead, she referenced her own experiences as a means through which policy change was initiated at the school level.

Just prior to the beginning of my research visit at J. S. High, Ruth was featured on the front page of the local newspaper as a student who was protesting a current policy at the school that prohibited students from sitting on the grassy area in front of the school building. In this case, all students were expected to remain inside the school if they had a "spare" or "study" block: no one was permitted to sit outside on the grass to read or study. After breaking the rule and continuing to defy it by remaining outdoors during her study block, Ruth was suspended. When this was reported in the local regional newspaper and suddenly subject to public scrutiny, the school principal was forced to change his stance and modify the policy so it allowed students to sit on the grass, provided they were engaged in study.

The narrative surrounding this incident was a powerful one for the leadership students at JSS. During one of my first focus groups, other youth participants confirmed Ruth's interpretation of events, and stated their belief that the policy change only occurred because the school was "forced" to change its way of dealing with the students.

As a matter of civic agency, how youth were able to influence school policy was an important topic of interest to this group of students and became a central theme of

several focus group discussions. After discussing how Ruth had forced change through a public airing of the matter, the youth who participated in the focus group discussed other areas needing policy change: in particular, the practice of allowing the over enrolment of students in particular senior courses.

What was particularly interesting about these youth's responses was that despite their articulation of the discourse of "leaders as change agents", these students had little apparent influence on the policy decisions at the school level. During the focus group the students described the ways in which they had attempted to "influence" the decision of the school principal through direct consultation and reasoned discussion: they outlined several of the options they had developed to the problem of over enrolment, including consideration of who needed the course for graduation, or alternatively, balancing the numbers between grade 11 and grade 12 students in an effort to achieve fairness. Despite several formal meetings the policy of "all are accepted, and if you don't like it, drop out" remained in effect, much to the frustration of the students involved.

Yet despite this obvious evidence of their lack of influence or political agency, the discourse of leadership students effecting change and leading initiatives at the school level remained a dominant view. It was only Ruth who made references to how resistant practices can be a tool for seeking and demanding policy change. As this was a non-conforming discourse, the majority of the students' actions seem to suggest that they saw Ruth's practice of resistance as effective, but dangerous. One could argue that the discourse of compliance arose from the authoritative status of the D/discourses represented in their leadership class, and that the students were self disciplining, complying with norms in order to maintain their status as the "good" leadership students.

Clearly however, active resistance of the school's rules fell outside the realm of acceptable forms of civic agency.

In this section of the chapter, I have discussed how two youth, Ruth and Mia used counter narratives as a means of producing an alternative or competing discourse. Yet Wertsch's (1998) observation about the persistence of narratives in the student subjects of his own work suggests that "no matter how much or how little the subjects seemed to accept and agree with this narrative tool, they all used it in one way or another... These subjects conveyed that they were resisting the... [dominant] narrative, yet in the end they still employed it. In fact, no student even attempted to employ another narrative tool in an extended way" (p. 108).

The point here is the persistence of the D/discourse: it echoes not only within its own social and cultural location, but intertextually, back and forth across time and between other social and cultural locations, always dependent upon the foundation of the dominant narrative to make its case. That D/discourses are persistent and repeated in many local ways and are invoked even in the effort to resist them, suggests that practices of counter narration may not be as potentially transforming. In effect, the narrative reproduces existing configurations and actions in its very effort to alter. Narratives then, have serious limits to their potential for knowledge production.

### **7.13 Cautionary Notes**

A recent publication by Soep (2006) draws attention to the ways in which the inclusion of youth voices and the provision of extended examples of reported speech has become a well used research practice that seeks to enrich the ways that perspectives or conceptions of youth can be represented, acknowledged and valued.

This has been a feature of this text as well: the inclusion of youth voices lends authenticity and richness to the discussion and analysis undertaken. However, what Soep (2006) highlights is the ways in which these representations may fail to consider how youth may weave varied voices into their utterances (p. 4). “Crowded speech” is the term she uses to explore the complexity of voices that may be present in a single utterance. She also suggests that many texts, as they are spoken, are nothing more than rehearsals or ways of trying on different ways of thinking about or representing ideas: evaluating them, if you will, in their expression.

This is an important consideration that may well be represented in the utterances of the youth in this chapter. In Mia’s reported speech, for example, she begins her comments about how people “recognize” leadership students with the phrases, “I don’t know, I don’t know.” This is then followed by an expression of some ideas, which are, in their verbatim form, then interpreted in my comments which follow. Following Soep’s (2006) lead, perhaps Mia is merely “trying on” other voices; it may be her own, her cousin’s, or even that of a research participant trying to provide “rich” answers to a researcher who is interested in how youth think about leadership and service. Which of these voices is really Mia’s? As Soep (2006) reports in her own work: “The answer, it seems, is all and none of the above, or perhaps some combination of these varied voices, whose implications are revealed in part through the effects of this kind of moment on the continued production” (p. 6). This orientation towards considering utterances as a crowded conversation is a useful one for the post modern scholar who seeks to represent the ambiguity, fluidity and

fragmented nature of language, discourse and identities and offers a useful caution to how recorded speech needs to be problematized.

## **7.14 Post Script**

After writing and reviewing this chapter, previously unnoticed features of its analysis need to be acknowledged: while other chapters focus on the mediational means through which civic agency was expressed, encouraged or accomplished, in this chapter, I investigate and report on the content of the student leadership course and its verbal representations by the teacher Jeff Sugar. Indeed, earlier chapters made clear how the potential for civic agency was realized or restricted by detailing the relationships between agent and object, social, cultural and historical contexts in action. How might the different approach taken in this chapter be explained given its inconsistency with the purposes of this study?

Perhaps the performative effects of texts explain this—that is, the ways in which texts authorize and become authorized in their use (Luke, de Castell & Luke, 1983). As teachers, educators, and researchers we have become stupefied by the text: we tend to see as ‘transparent’, the media we work with most frequently, the written text, the one we are most familiar and comfortable with, is one we naturally credit in their assertions of truths. In our work as scholars we rely on the truths represented in the work we read and consider; we expect our students to embrace these truths as authorized versions of knowledge; we write in ways that verify our own truths and cite and re-cite others who do similarly. We are constituted by texts and their authority.

Teachers too, are constituted by their own practice: indeed, our practices are the embodied, utterance-rich performances of our own beliefs about processes, purposes and



ends of education. Our discourses become the authoritative texts from which we work within and act upon the world. As such, we grant authority to ourselves as agents who transform others in and through words, affording legitimacy to practices of teaching to bring into effect “the good”---as we ourselves see it.

In this chapter, my subject positions are important contexts to consider. As teacher and researcher whose own authority and expertise is constituted in and through educative texts and utterances, my approach to the ways in which service learning as an approach to civic education might be understood at this site was blind to the mediational implications of curricular texts and teacher utterances as the institutionally legitimated ‘voices’ of authority. Instead of grappling with the ways teacher utterances and course texts work in coordinated ways as affordances (and constraints), I read “through” texts and utterances to their literal significations, naturalizing what I now more clearly see as textually and linguistically accomplished practices of knowledge-representation. These practices are no less tool-mediated than the other mediational forms I have been able to discern and interrogate at other points in this study. What I missed was how this teacher-driven approach to ‘service learning’ powerfully exhorted students less towards a student driven appreciation of and engagement with service to others, than to the teacher-prescribed goal of becoming morally ‘good’, encompassing service as an instrumental and entrepreneurial version of ‘virtue’, likely to payoff for grades, recognition, personal pride and self satisfaction.

Service learning has the potential to be more than this, but not without significant re-thinking and remediation, particularly in leaving teacher authority open to an

alternative view of student agency. Despite this observation and analysis being a product of hindsight, it seems to be no less evident.

## CHAPTER 8: PICTURING AGENCY

In the previous three chapters, I described in considerable detail the three research sites investigated during this study and introduced the youth who were participants in each. By describing the social and cultural context of each location and providing examples of the interactions between these youth within these environments I have attempted to illustrate the rich and dynamic nature of each site, and how various D/discourses and practices were in play during the period of this study, in particular considering how these shaped the ways in which participating youth were enabled or constrained as sociopolitical agents.

As noted earlier in this dissertation, culture is a product of signs; linguistic and visual forms are produced and interpreted or read by human agents. However, some argue that much scholarship and theory places too large an emphasis on linguistic sign systems, and as a result, fails to adequately considering the role that other modes of communication play in everyday life, as well as the ways in which these modes interact with and among subjects and objects (Bolter, 2000). In other words, multiple sign systems mediate and constitute our experiences, and as a result, shape our activities and actions as social agents. It is therefore important that as educational scholars, we take into account the many modes through which cultural tools mediate our experiences, including the visual. In earlier chapters, I considered how both D/discourses and embodied movement mediated action and agency. In this chapter, I look to how visual sign systems,

in particular, image, also acts as a cultural tool that mediates, shapes and constitutes activity and agency.

In theorizing about how images operate as signs, images are understood as products of social interpretation and production. When someone “reads” an image, they are in fact producing a text, constructing meaning from “what has already been read, seen, done, lived, assuming many different, and possibly contradictory roles as a text is read”. In this way, the reader is “no longer the *consumer* but the *producer* of the text” (Barthes, 1970, italics added). Such conceptions of visual sign systems mean that the process of reading an image is “rich and complex and cannot be described simply in terms of ‘seeing’ what is ‘there’; the visual field is organized for us and by us according to codes and conventions that give us an orientation, that allow for recognition as well as for active intervention in terms of meaning” (Peim, 2005, p. 73). These codes or conventions have a multiplicity of meanings: as Barthes (1976) famously noted, images are polysemic, always open to multiple interpretations.

The same can be said for the processes of image production: in the practice of selection and composition, that is, in the production of a visual text, its author engages in acts of interpretation and sense making. In both viewing and producing image then, the reader is an active producer of knowledge, always mediated by the modal forms of the signs they use. This is a central theoretical premise that informs this chapter.

In attempting to bring these theoretical considerations into the research design of this study, I made two different research decisions: one was to use image as a means of evoking a conversation with youth about forms of agency and social action. This was achieved by using a series of photos during interviews to probe for understandings and

beliefs about agency. The first part of this chapter reports on the results of the youth interviews I completed at all three research sites, focusing primarily on the comments elicited when using an image data set designed to generate a dialogue about questions of agency and how youth conceived of and interpreted the relationship between agency, social action, and change. How image mediated their understandings of agency is a primary feature of analysis.

The second was to engage the participating youth at northern High in a productive practice using digital means, as a way of illustrating how agency might be enhanced using a technological cultural tool, in this case, digital cameras. Both the productive practice of photography and the representational means, the photo essay, become points of discussion and analysis.

In applying the notion of readers as active producers of texts, the analysis in this chapter will consider how social, cultural, and historical contexts that are implicated in how agency is understood and practiced. In other words, this chapter traces how the youth research participants *interpreted* issues of agency as well as how their actions and daily practices might be characterized as *enactments* of their agency.

In order to meet the second focus on production, participating youth at Northern High were asked to use digital cameras to create a photo essay that focused on an issue of social significance to them. The second part of the chapter will detail the photo essay project completed and produced with the youth at Northern High and consider how the production of a photo essay might offer insights into how a specific cultural tool, in this case, the digital camera, could afford opportunities for purposeful mediated action. The decision to introduce a cultural tool at this site is consistent with the overall goal of the

study, providing a third alternative means through which to consider how cultural tools might enhance civic agency.

This project builds on the work of de Castell, Bryson and Jenson (2002) who have theorized about productive pedagogies and how technology operates as a “power tool” (¶ 38) for enabling authentic and agentic action. In other words, this approach to productive action may illustrate a practice that engages subjects in authentic activities and serves as a means of enhancing social agency.

Narrative analysis is featured in both parts of this chapter. The first half focuses on how particular narrative motifs were discerned through a process of tacking back and forth between the interview texts and consideration of research codes generated during analysis. In the second half of the chapter, I use a metaphoric lens, that of play, to consider in particular how the affective affordances (Gee, 1999) of technology are a central feature of productive practices. The metaphor of play serves to emphasize the activity or actions undertaken as a part of the photo essay project. The interplay between people, what they do, the tools they use, the communities of which they are part, their patterns of activity and social rules or narratives accessed are all resources that are implicated in how human agents and the objects of their action come together (Roth et al, 2004).

## **8.1 Part I: Photo Elicitation In Interviews**

Tracing or mapping the responses that members of a particular youth audience use when responding to particular visual texts offers a way of enriching and “thickening” the description employed by ethnographers in educational inquiry, while also providing a means through which to explore how D/discourses have performative effects. In the

following first part of this chapter, I illustrate how I used everyday visual texts from the media, in this case, popular magazines, as a resource for eliciting the ways in which these youth describe their own readings of social change agents and issues of power, and how they have been positioned by and respond to D/discourses represented in the visual texts provided.

Using photos or images in an interview can be an important prompt to discussion (Canal, 2004), but should not be considered a transparent methodology that allows for a simple reading or interpretation of images. Rather, photo elicitation needs to be understood as a construction of the researcher, both through the selection of the images that will be viewed as well as through the contextual frame created as particular questions are posed to research participants.

My goal, following Alasuutari (1999), is to ensure that my research analysis attends to the ways in which multiple modes of production and discourses converge and are simultaneously in play, and to find ways to represent these complexities in the research text. The research text which follows attempts to represent these multiply layered social contexts. After providing details of the interviews through verbatim transcripts, I attempt to tease apart what discourses or subject positions may be in play and how these could be interpreted or characterized. This is followed by a section in which I make some tentative observations about youth conceptions of agency and in particular, how particular narrative motifs were evident in these youth's conversations about social change agents and how these discourses may help illustrate the performativity of visual discourses.

## **8.2 The Interviews**

The interviews were completed over a period of two months, near the end of the research study. In total twenty five youth interviews were completed and included participants from all three research sites. Several participants chose not to participate in the image viewing questions, so the total number of interviews in this category was reduced to twenty, although representation from all three research sites was maintained. Of these twenty participants, seven were male and the remaining female.

The interviews lasted between 60 and 80 minutes in length; each was taped and transcribed for review and analysis. Each interview began with several questions that were designed to focus on the specific contexts of each research site. At Northern High students were asked to share ideas about their photo essay project, including their progress to date and its general theme or content. The Street Spirits youth were asked to describe the length of their involvement with Street Spirits Theatre Company and to share a story about a particularly memorable performance. At J. S. High, the participating youth were asked questions about the nature of the student leadership program at their school and the reasons why they had chosen to enrol in the student leadership class.

All of the participating youth were then presented with the same set of 24 images to consider: they were asked to sort the images after considering the question “Which of these individuals do you think are the kind of people who might be able to bring about social change?” After selecting the images they believed were representative of people who fell in this group, I then asked each youth to pick three or four examples and tell me more about how they came to this conclusion: what elements or components of the image



in particular prompted these views? Each youth then described in some detail how they interpreted the agents and their actions as represented in each photo.

Each image was numbered and as each youth began to respond, I would verbally add the number of the image, so once transcribed, I would be able to successfully match each image with its matching comments. Not all youth responded to all images, most selected three or four images to discuss, each guided by their own beliefs about whether or not the individual or individuals represented in the images would fit within the category of “persons who could bring about change”. A data table that summarizes the names and numbers of each of the images is provided in the Appendix.

### **8.2.1 Open and inferential coding**

After transcribing the interviews, I sorted the comments into categories based on each image’s numerical assignment. Next, I re-read all of the statements for each image, coding each by looking for key words, ideas, or concepts that could be initially identified. In particular, I was guided by my research questions about how these youth characterized their own and others agency; that is, what did they express as their own beliefs about practices or characteristics of agency? After looking at the key words or idea segments I had highlighted, I considered how these could be grouped into superordinate categories, common groups or themes. Some of these categories included topics such as: limitations/affordances of agency based on age, race and gender; attitudinal or personal characteristics of active agents; the types of actions of agents; motivations attributed to agent desire for social action; and finally issues of power and authority. These categories were then used in reviewing and re-assessing the data again to determine to what extent broader analytical themes might arise. Following Coffey and Atkinson (1996), this

approach to data analysis emphasizes “*think[ing] with* and not remain[ing] anchored in the data (notes, transcripts, etc.) alone” (p. 49, italics added). This goal can be realized through axial or inferential coding (p. 50). Through this dialectical process I created categories that grouped youths’ responses based on their implicit beliefs about agency as represented in particular D/discourses and narrative forms. Identifying what features of the visual text were implicated in the construction of these narratives of agency was also implicit in this analysis.

### **8.3 Identifying Youth Responses**

Readers should note that I chose not to differentiate the youth responses based on their school or non school site; my concern was that in doing so, generalizations and comparisons on the basis of social location, ethnicity or race might have resulted, undermining my goal of representing the multiplicity of views among these youth. In cases where the youth’s race or gender came into play through their narratives, then racial origin is noted and considered.

#### **8.3.1 How comments were selected**

Including all comments made by the youth during these interviews would have required a significantly larger space than this chapter affords, so comments were selected to illustrate the range of ideas and expressions of these youth at all three sites. In each section of the discussion at least one youth from each site is quoted, unless there were no discussions of that image among the youth at one research site. The accounts here are verbatim; I have attempted to limit any insertions within the original texts as a way of enhancing authenticity. I begin by including comments made about the most frequently

referenced images, which included number 2 (the white male business executive), number 11 (an aboriginal woman in traditional dress) and number 19 (a group of male home builders). The selected comments drew on both representational comments as well as comments that might illustrate significantly different conceptions or ideas.

After the three most commented upon images are discussed, analysis of the dominant narrative themes or discourses are briefly considered, including how the visual text appeared to prompt particular understandings. The remaining sections are then grouped thematically to illustrate how the data represents six narrative motifs: beliefs about advocacy, victim/villains, resistance, self determination and egalitarianism. All verbatim comments use pseudonyms. Pauses are indicated in a number of ways including:

...	A pause of less than two seconds.
[pause]	A pause of at least five seconds.
-- (dash)	A momentary gap in speech
{ }	These brackets include researcher prompts

## **8.4 Most frequently identified images**

### **8.4.1 White male**

In total thirteen of the interviewed subjects commented on image number two. Rachel's comments were typical in her characterization of why this image represented someone who could initiate change. She said:

This guy, number two. He looks like a guy from law and order. I love that show. ...He looks like a lawyer. Usually lawyers are the ones that do it [cause change]. Its all about the money, some of them are rich. 'Cause normally lawyers have a lot more influence in the community and are like, in higher up places, they've got the money to throw around. Here, I'll give you this, and you'll give me information-- and do a little favour for me".



**Figure 1: A white male, in a business suit, carrying papers (Image 2). Photo by Fred Chantrand, CP. Used with permission**

In these comments we see the first characterization of power, authority and wealth as linked with a capacity for agency; this theme was common and will be repeated throughout this chapter's discussion. This characterization was also prompted by particular styles of dress or other social objects, as the following comments from Chloe illustrate:

“He is carrying documents or something, probably working on something. He is wearing a suit so he is probably some kind of business man. It seems like when people have more authority and power, well power in general, people listen to them more. Then maybe you have more influence”.

With another variation on the same theme, May stated that

“He is going to an office meeting, maybe he is going to “seal the deal”? He looks like he is in rush and he is thinking really hard about what he is doing, or what is going to happen. [pause]. He looks like he has authority. He is wearing a suit. He is old, so he probably has been doing this for a while. Maybe he has status, and he is going to meet with his clients, and he will know what to do. He is pretty concentrated, looks like he does this everyday, nothing new to him. Pretty worn down, but still thinking”.

Interestingly, one set of comments linked the agent and the outcomes of his/her work synonymously. Sasha did not describe the individual, but drew upon the nature of the subject, as the former Prime Minister of Canada, as someone who signified government activity (or lack thereof).

“Well, I have a bit of an issue with this one too. The government is not very helpful with social issues. It is not necessarily doing its job, to take care of everyone in Canada. That is where all of our social structures come from so I like to think that the people in the government have a great caring for social issues and they are working on it... I think government is our greatest tool for creating change because it created larger change than one person can do”.

In this example, the field of action in which the agent works was highlighted and the iconic nature of the agent as a symbol of power triggered a discourse of dissatisfaction with government. The question of power over others, and perhaps by implication, a degree of helplessness and lack of agency on the part of less powerful others, could be a reading taken from these utterances. However, another conception of agency is introduced in her reference to systemic rather than individual levels of change. In this case, power is attributed not to the individual, but to the formal structures through which the agent(s) can act.

Aaron’s comments spoke to another theme that was apparent throughout the interviews: the affordances of age in the practice social agents. He said:

“I think older people in general have a lot more experience, so I tend to find them more of a leader figure. He’s very distinguished looking, and intelligent, and I don’t know if that’s the same guy or not, but he looks like the Prime Minister or something”.

Later in the interview, he returns to the theme of acting in a “distinguished way”, and how having a “bit of intrigue” will help ensure that people would be “willing to work

with someone and listen to someone when they are positive and their leadership—it's a passion thing". In this example, the iconic figure of the political leader triggered a discourse about charisma, leadership and followership. Agency is an outcome of powerful, experienced and older figures that access power in formal roles that situate the change agent as a product of social and political power over others.

In contrast, Leslie's comments suggest that all agents are self empowered and enabled to make change. In response to image two she stated,

"No matter where you are, or who you are, you can make a change in the world. The politician here, he is going to make a real change in the world but anyone can make a change. Whether you decide what kind of change you want to make and how motivated you are to make it. But as long as you make a decision that you want the world to be different, you can act in ways that you will."

For Leslie, the individual agent is empowered on the basis of his/her motivation, potentially, perhaps, one's own self interest. This is a competing perspective to Sasha's notion of group or systemic forms of power. However, Leslie's comments also open an interesting discourse or narrative about motivation for change: what inspires or triggers a "call to action?" Is one "called to action" through a desire to achieve universal levels of care and inclusion, as Sasha's remarks might be interpreted to suggest, or is one motivated, as Leslie suggested, through one's own self interest and desire? Or, is agency simply one's duty, when a position of authority is taken on as a part of one's adult obligations to others, as some of the other youth comments might suggest? Competing discourses are clearly in evidence in the variety of these youth's utterances.

Another important observation that should be made at this point is how a chain of signification is created, originating from what might appear to be a relatively simple visual prompt that positions the reader to "read" particular social or cultural norms (for

example, assuming that lawyers are important political figures in society) but is made significantly more complex by consideration of the question frame itself, and the subject positions of each reader. The question frame, in this case, a prompt to name agents and consider their capacity for action, triggered negotiated and potentially diverse readings about what it means socially and culturally to be “agentive” or to “take action”. In other words, a broad range of possible discourses were opened, and as the above youth comments served to illustrate, resulted in multiple interpretations and readings of the agent, his/her purposes and motivations, and the results or outcomes of such agentive actions. Additionally, each subject is situated within his/her own repertoire of discourses, essential components of their social languages and reflective of their own interpretive communities. In the examples above, Sasha’s own state of near homelessness and poverty are important subjectivities that she brought into play when she described how government is required to “serve” all Canadians equally; Rachel’s discourses of television law, often creating narratives of victim and villain, are equally in evidence as she characterizes agency as motivated by greed among elite lawyers. Finally Aaron’s focus on how the individual leads illustrates how the discourses of leadership from his school program has shaped the ways in which he interprets the image.

#### **8.4.2 Second most frequently identified image: aboriginal woman**

This image shows an aboriginal woman who is standing on a crest; there is a desert like scene in the background, although some indigenous housing is evident. She is dressed in a long robe and has a crest on her chest. Ten youth commented on this image. Jaz’s comments are illustrative of many students’ responses, drawing attention to the cultural markers in the image as well as her physical stance.



**Figure 2: Aboriginal woman (Image 11). Photo by K. Kuehn, used with permission.**

“This one was—just ‘cause of the way she’s standing and the look on her face. She looks ready to go to me. I don’t know if it is just about how she is standing so straight and the look on her face. {What do you think she is going to do?} Maybe something to do with her band or her tribe? Leading them in some kind of movement, I’m not sure. Maybe some kind of protest, to keep their land, I am not sure. It’s her posture. How she is straight up and how she has her head up?”

Ruth’s comments were also about culture, but it appears that this image triggered for her a more generalized discussion about the status of aboriginal peoples and represents in her comments a number of competing historical and contemporary discourses about aboriginal peoples in British Columbia.

“I figured she just represents cultural change, ‘cause she still seems to be practicing many of the customs of her culture. Like being native and [pause] ‘cause most native people now seem, not meant to be derogatory but, not many of them seem to have much passion about the past. Or about the bright culture that they did have before they were corrupted by white people and killing everyone, so she seems to really be proudly displaying her heritage. Mostly it’s her clothing.



The Tepees in the background, it was probably just staged for the photo but still... I don't know what this is though. It must be for some sort of ceremony... a shield; she wants to go to battle. It's a neat picture."

Mia's comments also reference culture, and culture becomes a motivation for action in her comments.

"I don't know, there is some sort of look on her face, she is like really proud of her culture, usually people who are emphatically proud of their culture are usually really out spoken about it, and especially because it is obvious she is a Native Canadian. I am assuming culture. She almost looks like an activist for her... the way it looks [pause]. {How did you determine she was an activist?} Her face. She is very, very regal, she looks proud, very proud. I don't know that this is but she is folder her arm around it and she is very stately and stuff so... yeah, it is important to her. Very important to her."

The theme of resistance seems to come out in the following comments from Jade and Madison illustrate:

Jade: She is standing up straight and... she looks proud of who she is or whatever. {How do you know?} Just her facial expression and what she is holding. She's not being afraid of who you are.

Madison: This person looks like she is standing up for her country. She is on a hill and like, you can see her people back here. And then she is just up here, and I don't know what that is exactly, a pole or something. But she is just standing there being who she is. She is not changing anyone, she is just herself and she is standing up for who she is and who her people are. For the people and what they need to do.

Both of these youth's comments seem to be prompted by the stance of the woman in the image, but this is simultaneously linked to the cultural artifacts present in the image. Interestingly, the large pole by her side seems to evoke a number of comments, including Mia's above. It seems to help reinforce the notion of the woman's strength (its long upward reach at her side) while also being suggestive of a link between this woman (the agent) and the pole (an object). While there are no explicit references to how this woman might use the pole, it may be that these readings are considering the cultural

object as an important tool to her capacity for agency. So rather than simply stressing the personal characteristics of the agent, the agent's tools are also linked to descriptions of action. Connor's comments also evoke images of acting on one's beliefs and principles.

This picture kind of says a lot, she is holding onto her flag, like, this is our land and stuff, they just want their land and their rights and stuff, and pretty much, that's what they believe in. They just want to be left alone, pretty much. {Can this person cause change?} Yeah, I think so, 'cause she is standing there, like standing for her beliefs, like standing, and no one is going to move her or nothing. She seems pretty confident. Her reserve and Tee-Pee are in back of her and she is standing in front of a bunch of people and saying, like, this is our land or something, we are not going away, kind of thing.

Connor's comments are highly consistent with the discourse of rights and in particular, the rights of aboriginal peoples. This discourse of rights is linked to cultural rights, and that the way to achieve these rights is through strong resistance. This narrative is consistent with the discussions and representations of aboriginal rights that are central to the First Nations 12 course in which he is enrolled. Several icons seem important triggers for his description, including what he describes as a "flag", as well as how the landscape is characterized as a "reserve".

Chris's comments while brief, raise a new point of consideration in terms of the motivation for agency. He also formally introduces the notion of change through public engagement.

"Cause she is ah, a native person. She could bring about social change to stop racism towards native people. {How could she do that?} By speaking up and out to the public. Letting it be known that there is racism.

Taken as a group, several important conceptions about agency seem to be represented in these statements. First, that social action is strongly linked to desire: that is, engagement in the process of social change is evoked on the basis of some morally or

ethically grounded reasoning-- in this case, the dialogue evocates in favour of human rights, equality, fairness and so on. One might be able to argue that these comments reveal another assumption about social change and agency: that the responsibility for achieving equity or fairness falls to those who are victims of the social system as it stands. In other words, it is not the responsibility or duty of those who already enjoy these rights to engage in activities that will bring about equality for others. I will return to these observations at a later point in this chapter.

The second important observation is the link between the agent and object, and how the two are necessary to social action. Knappett (2002) makes a similar point when he posits that ideas, behaviour and artifacts are co-dependent and that agency is a distributed dynamic. An inherent feature of agency is its networked qualities in a field of action (p. 100). He goes on to argue that “agency comes to be distributed across a network, inhering in the associations and relationships *between* entities, rather than *in the entities themselves*” (ibid, italics added).

This conception of distributed agency was also reinforced in earlier comments, for example, Sasha’s conception of government as a systemic means of change. In this conception, agency arises not just through the direct action of agents, but also as a result of systems bringing into force the desires of agents. In other words, the policies and practices themselves are explicitly linked to how agency is realized. Agency is mediated through these cultural tools.

#### **8.4.3 Third most frequently identified image: a group of male builders**

In total eight youth responded to this image of a group of men engaged in some sort of wood framing activity. Several are wearing straw hats, while others are in hard



**Figure 3: Amish builders (Image 19). Photo from Istock International. Used with permission.**

hats; many hold tools in their hands. The narrative action in this image seemed to link social activity with agency. Connor's comment was typical of a number:

Okay, I definitely think they are trying to make a change here 'cause they are building a house or something. That's building things for the community.

Several noticed a particular icon in the photo, the presence of straw hats. Sasha and Mia's comments linked this social activity with a particular community: the Amish.

Sasha: These people, with the exception of that guy there, make me think that they are Amish or some sort of religious commune. I don't know if that is the right words, but where they are just really working together to take care of the community. I think that is a good thing, not necessarily religious based, but it is really a community coming together to take care of all of the members.

Mia: "Well, my Dad works in construction, he just tells me stories about how much effort it takes to build things. I know that this is a barn raising, an Amish barn raising, and it takes a huge amount of team work to do that because they build it up, and it is a big, big effort... Lots of people have to help out and stuff and they... So these people are like, hey, how about my neighbour? We are going to build this barn for everyone.

Both of these comments evoke a view of agency as being motivated through the care of the community at large; that there should be cooperative and collaborative activity that benefits the group rather than simply individuals. This could be characterized as collective or group agency.

Another discourse evoked in this discussion of the builders seemed to be about a desire to serve or help others, a philanthropical style of agency.

Anna: I think they want to make a difference because they are building houses, maybe it is Habitat for Humanity or something. They look like they are from the same community, like the way they are dressed, and that they want to make a difference in the community and help other families or something like that. Looks like they can make a difference because they are already building a house.

Jessica: They're building a house. They could be building it for someone who needs it. {So who needs this house?} Someone with not a lot of money.

Rachel: Construction works, this looks like it was really back in the old days. {Why do you think that?} The hat, I don't think anyone wears hats like that anymore. They are building a house or a hall. {How is that about change?} Well, if you are building an actual house, it brings about change for the family, it brings more hope because they didn't have a hope before.

Abbey: I didn't know what they were building, but they could be building those houses for people who don't have houses. So giving people a chance at something they wouldn't usually have. So I think that would be something that would help them change. {later in the interview}. I would consider this [house building] something I would volunteer for. I don't think people should be sad, this gives people a chance where some people don't have the greatest houses, and I think we are really lucky to have the houses we have, and kids take them for granted.

Abbey's comment, that this image could be about "helping *them* change" is particularly interesting. Such a comment highlights the way in which the linguistic node establishes a distance between the youth's subject position, capacity for self care and independence versus those "others" who are assumed not capable of helping themselves,

but dependent upon the assistance of a powerful others. These differences seem to be a result of material wealth, for the most part, with references to those “without money”.

The self/other dialogue is continued in Leslie’s comments about her own involvement in a housing project as a volunteer.

“Well, this one kinda reminds me of when I went to Mexico a couple of years ago during high school spring break, and went and built houses for people both times we went to Mexico for a week. We built houses for these poor, poor people, and they were just the happiest people you have met. The kids they would be running all around and they would fall and scrape themselves and get up again, and running and laughing. It reminds me of those kids playing soccer. Both trips to Mexico we went to Disney land on the way home. That was quite a culture shock... The happiest place on earth and it was like whining kids. [pause]. Really unhappy kids, spoiled and selfish and they have it all and yet nothing is good enough. Then you compare it to these kids with their half deflated soccer ball between 30 of them. And they are happy.”

Clearly, Leslie has experience in enacting her own beliefs about assisting others who are less fortunate. Leslie also paints a significant contrast between privileged and less privileged others. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) describe this as contrastive rhetoric, a narrative tool designed to legitimize the actions or values of the speaker through comparative means. In this short narrative, comparisons are made between grateful and happy versus whining and greedy children. A villain/victim narrative emerges from such comparative techniques, while simultaneously rewarding its narrator with being on the “right” side, with the right values.

## **8.5 Narrative Motifs Arising From Interview Analysis**

As noted earlier in this chapter, the data from these interviews were subjected to axial coding. In the process of reviewing and re-reading these interviews and in considering the different codes and how these might illustrate dimensions or categories of agency, the data suggested different *accounts* of why human agents acted in particular

ways in particular settings. While the initial response to the research question elicited descriptions attributing agency on the basis of particular features or characteristics of the social actor, the next phase of the interview responses seemed to move into descriptions or accounts of motivation or obligation for action and/or social change. Initially I was prompted by Sefcovic and Condit's (2001) work that examined how advocacy narratives were rhetorically constructed in historical texts; in the case of the interview data collected for this study, I noted how the victim/ villain motif was also evident in my interview transcripts. From this beginning point however, my analysis of the narrative transcripts traced six different narrative motifs: advocacy narratives, narratives of victims and villains, egalitarianism, self-determination, as well as resistance and contestation narratives. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss each of these narrative accounts, giving examples from the interview texts to support these claims.

### **8.5.1 Advocacy narrative**

One of the primary narrative motifs is that of advocacy. I'll explore the components of the advocacy narrative through the discussion of four examples from Chloe, Madison, Abby and Connor.

Chloe (in response to Image 14 a group of Indian women, a black and white photo). "Looks like they are really upset, sort of, maybe they are not being treated right, or they are in poverty—or something and they want that to be changed. {Will they take action?} Well, I am sure they will try to, it might not work. No one might listen to them. There is so much poverty and people are trying to do what they can --they just don't really know where to start because it is so bad. To me, it looks like a big cycle, there is already so much poverty and you don't know where to start, if you start with their education or their health or food or water or shelter, they have nothing like what is the first thing... I don't know. It is so hard to bring everyone to where we are, it almost seems like it will never happen. I wish I could do whatever I could to help them out but I can't do anything 'cause they don't have anything, they are helpless."

Abby: (discussing image 14, Indian women) You always hear on the news that you have to help people who have to do that to make a living. [pause] So people, maybe not so much like in the picture, but [the people who can change things] help the people who are in the picture.

Madison (discussing image 9, an Indigenous woman in long dress): “This one looks like she has food all around her and she is the person who sells it. {Can she bring about change?} She kinda looks like someone who needs to be cared for too, I don’t know, she looks like she needs help. So she is like helping people too. She is not wearing like perfect clothing or you know? It almost looks like she is trying to sell the stuff to get... or she worked hard to make the stuff, to sell it.”

Connor: (discussing image 14, Indian women) “no more violence on women... It is important because women in other countries get treated with disrespect, like how women got treated back in the olden days, like they had to do everything, they got no voting rights and all that, so they are trying to fight for their rights.”

Narratives of advocacy, as conceived of in this set of discussions, is about a motivation or desire to “help” others, largely situated in a discourse that places the powerful and advanced western societies as needing to advocate on behalf of helpless others. In these examples, we hear about how some need to be “cared for”, how the poor can cope with their lives if they are given “purpose”, and references to less developed (and by implication, inferior) social systems. It might be described as a ‘remedial’ discourse, in that it suggests a need for others to become more like their North American counterparts. Connor’s discussion of women who are not equal in “other countries” may draw upon a historical discourse that construct women in exotic locations as more primitive or less progressive state of rights status. Abbey’s utterances are the strongest reminders of who has power to act: those who live in impoverished parts of the world rely on an assumed able and agentive subject whose duty it is to act in service of others. Madison struggles between two competing discourses: on the one hand she reads the image as someone needing help, yet she also wants to attribute the values of care to this



woman, depicted in a way that evokes her as a caregiver and food provider, a social change agent in her own right.

In these examples there are signifiers that mark the otherness of the photo images. For example the indigenous seller is back grounded by a local warehouse and bags of local produce that have labels which are not written in English. The use of black and white photography into two of these images may also help to evoke a historical narrative that situates past and present, primitive and modern. Power and powerlessness are framed in this advocacy narrative, as well as a metanarrative of cultural progress towards a North American ideal. Lutz and Collins (1993) characterize this Discourse as classical humanism (p. 165), where progress stands in for agency. “Good” human subjects are then agents who can assist others on the road to equality, human rights and a better life, understood as universally what others should aspire to reach. This advocacy narrative resonates with the D/discourse of service described in Chapter 6.

### **8.5.2 Resistant narratives**

Still other youth suggested that agency arises from resistance against such systems of domination, and that adversity itself is a motivation for agency. This I describe as narratives of resistance and are illustrated in the following examples.

Sasha (comments on image 21, indigenous child in war scene).

This is obvious, that this little man or young man is upset. He is upset with what he is seeing, and it looks like a soldier maybe... The graffiti in the background, and that he wants to do something about it. I think that it is one thing to have worldly knowledge but to have that perspective, to be the marginalized group—to have that anger is a very powerful force for people to get involved with social change and to try and fix things for future generations. {Later in the same interview} A lot of people have told me lately that I am in a marginalized group, and in some respects that’s true because I am definitely in the low income bracket and I am a single mom and I don’t have a lot of backup. But that is definitely not

a problem for me, I mean it might one day become an issue but as of right now, it is good to be alive and things will be good. I make people laugh.

Mia (responding to image 14, Indian women).

Women are being silenced, and they don't have any rights in their country, and actually most of the pictures you have here are talking about rights. I think that rights for people are very important. I think that all people are equal. I really, really hate oppression, I really think oppression is wrong, oppression of any kind is wrong. And to me, this is a very neat statement, 'cause especially where they are from you can tell that they are Arabic or something, where they are from they would probably get in trouble for this, they could even get killed for this. And they are saying we care about this enough that we don't care if you are going to kill us or whatever, we having something we are saying. I think that is really cool. That is really cool.

Ruth (commenting on image 15, indigenous child).

The kid looks really young and poor. And they are the people that fuel the revolutions in countries. Like poverty will really influence someone like that, so he is generally the type of person to be used in a revolution, same as in Cuba or in the attempts of Bolivia or the Congo, all over the world. People like him fuel the revolution. He looks really happy though. The colours are just vivid, it is really pretty. I don't know quite why I put it in the pile. Probably because he is just so young. {If you are young, do you have capacity for change?} Well, I think that the younger you are the more potential you have for it because the older you get the more you are influenced by other things, the more you become disenchanted.

Luke (commenting on image 14 Indian women and 11 Native leader).

Young people, of course they want to make change. These people look like they are upset about something and once you get upset about something, you realize what you don't like about it and then you change it. This is a native woman and she would like to make a change, possibility, bring some of that old lifestyle to the youth. Which would be good [pause], we need a little of that. {A little later in the interview} I don't know, this woman here [points to aboriginal woman] you put yourself on a plateau or whatever you call it so that people can hear where you are coming from, even if it is down here [points to small settlement in the distance of the image] or up here [points to woman again], you still have to take a stand so that you can hopefully express yourself. That's the way I see it. Taking a stand you know like what the teachers did, take a stand. {Have you ever taken a stand?} No, not that I recall. Nothing big. {Later in the interview} Grade nine. I got kicked out of school. This kid wrote on my locker fucking Indian and I wish they were all dead or something... So I beat him up. I got kicked out of school for it. So yeah, when that kid wrote that on my locker. {That is pretty harsh}. I thought that it was a good reason to kick his ass. So I did. I don't regret it. That is probably why I got kicked out, I wouldn't apologize. I don't regret that, and I don't have to regret that.

In these narratives we can hear the passion that these young adults feel for issues related to oppression, poverty, and racism. In each case, the individual youth is someone who has had experiences in fighting for something they believe in. In Sasha's case, she has consistently refused to accept a label of marginalized from the social service agencies she has worked with, and continues to fight hard for her independence. As a 20 year old mother of an infant child living in substandard housing, she challenges all who attempt to place her in a position of powerlessness. Ruth was described in Chapter 6, a youth who took on existing school policies and brought about change. Luke, the aboriginal student who claims not to have "taken a stand", illustrates how he will indeed fight for himself and for his identity as an aboriginal person, no matter what the consequences. Finally, Mia has experienced the shunning that comes from people in the community who won't accept pierced, bleached and butch girls, and flavours her comments about how individuals should "stand up" or "take a stand" in the face of discrimination or stereotyping.

In the case of each of the comments included here, the notion of resistance seems to have been triggered by identification with or differentiation from some features of the image or an imagined story behind the image's façade. A number of different images seem to have triggered these personal narratives, however, rather than perceiving the disempowered person in the image as helpless, a counter narrative of self empowerment was triggered in its place. These examples help illustrate the importance of considering subject position as well as discourses within particular interpretative communities as being important caveats to any single reading of an image, despite what might be considered its dominant or normatively constructed meanings.

A limitation of the resistant narrative however, is that it similarly relies on the construction of powerlessness in order to evoke its opposite. In other words, it serves to reify the conception of powerlessness in its repetition of the victim narrative, despite attempting to alter its outcome through the tactic of resistance. This is reminiscent of Wertsch's (1998) discussion about the persistence of D/discourses because of the many local ways in which the discourse is drawn upon and recited. Similarly Butler (1997) argued that "The act of recognition becomes an act of constitution; the address animates the subject into existence" (p. 23-25). The image recites and positions victim and advocate in binary opposition.

Finally, these utterances are also illustrative of the claim that agency is socially constructed; that is, our experiences play an important role in the beliefs we hold about agency. While other youth at various times expressed concern with their lack of agency (often expressing a belief that age was a limitation) clearly that view is not held by all; these latter stories help illustrate the strong link between issues of oppression and privilege as D/discourses which influence conceptions of agency and a willingness to take social action.

### **8.5.3 Counter narratives**

Two youth articulated what I am describing as counter narratives. These narratives are stories which re-signify the dominant representation or discourses triggered by the conventions used in the image. The following two examples illustrate this narrative motif.

Lane: (responding to Image 9, indigenous woman). She is just... I know a lot of mine have cultural things here, but its active [culture]. She looks like someone

who would be willing to share her story. She definitely looks like someone who is traditional and can share her stories... Also farming or producing food to feed her family, a hard worker and I guess she would be active in her community by sharing tradition and well being. [later in same interview] Yeah, she is someone who is keeping traditions alive. I find most of my inspiration is from people who have had a hard life and they have an active way of spreading joy. Even though they are coming from a hard background sometimes, they are often quite active and working hard, and spreading joy anyways. This one [pointing to image 13] is about more stories...His stories and his knowledge, he is coming out of the dark, his face is coming into the light, it shows there might be some action coming out of the light. Whether it is just for himself or for sharing his stories of people, that will help [other] people then move on to create action.

Lane's interpretation of the indigenous peoples in these images situates each as having authority and power rather than the powerless status that some earlier readings of these subject positions implied. In the case of image 9, the indigenous woman is viewed as an empowering agent, someone with cultural knowledge that has value, not only in her own use of it, but also as a means through which others can also become empowered agents. In her discussion of the older male of colour, she uses the technical elements of the light and shadow in the image to reinforce the narrative of moving to action through cultural knowledge. She does not ignore the hardship that seems apparent, she reads their poverty as part of their social and cultural condition, but she does not read these elements as primarily conditions which create disempowerment. Lane's interpretation fails to call upon the discourse of power/disempowered at any level, and instead re-signifies the agent as powerful in his/her own right.

Ruth: (referring to image 15). This kid looks really young and poor. And they are the people that fuel the revolutions in countries: like poverty will really influence someone like that, so he is generally the type of person to be used in a revolution, same as in Cuba or in the attempts of Bolivia or the Congo, all over the world. People's like, lives, fuel the revolution. He looks really happy though. It is a pretty picture, the colours are just vivid... He is really young, maybe that's why I put him in this pile. {How does this impact a capacity for change?} Well, I think that the younger you are the more potential you have for it [social change] because the older you get, the more influenced you are by other things... the more

you might be disenchanted. At this point he is so capable of being influenced by so much, as opposed to someone who gets older and is focused on—like... certain things. Whereas the world is pretty much his oyster 'cause he's so young.

Ruth is also constructing a counter narrative, one that fails to name this child as either helpless or in need of care on the basis of his status as a child. Instead she constructs this child (who in the image appears to be about twelve years old) as a revolutionary force, an agent who is central to revolutionary change. She also provides an interesting rationale for how younger people have a capacity for change that is shut down by the habits and practices of older adults. Again, this narrative fails to evoke the dominant discourses of youth as undeveloped subjects or lacking the capacity for reasoning in order to be effective change agents.

In these examples, what I call the narrative motif of “contestation” seemed to be in play; that is, the locally empowered actor is an individual who enacts his/her beliefs in what they do in their daily lives. While this kind of social change does not seem to fit within the category of public action through formal structures or positions of power, it provides a context in which the notion of social action and power is reconceptualized as ongoing change as a part of everyday experiences. In these cases, the individuals represented in the image seemed to be engaged in tactical (context specific) rather than strategic (systemic) efforts of change.

Butler (2000) suggested that “action on the limit” – that is practices which neither accept or refuse a social norm but rather opens the norm to new forms of intelligibility, is one way in which a subject can produce new possibilities for agency (p. 33-35). Subjects who fail to acknowledge foundational claims or openly test the limits of particular discourses by re-write texts are engaged in a narrative motif of contestation and serve as

examples of Butler's (2000) "new" subject. In this case, the "new" subject is engaged in alternative practices of agency and change, ones that challenge the cultural and political norms of formal authority, power, and structural change processes.

#### 8.5.4 Egalitarian narratives

Another narrative motif that was detected in the analysis of these youth descriptions of agency was that of the egalitarian agent, that is, an agent who is empowered to act as an agent on the basis of their subject position as Canadian. These images evoked multicultural discourses, a primary narrative of the inclusive nation state and communitarian views of what it means to be a citizen (Mata, 2000, p. 191-192).

Jaz (speaking about image one, two Asian men): When I see this picture I think of this as being his grandfather or his dad. And maybe the first generation of Canadian, who had a lot of hardships. And I don't know if you have ever seen that commercial on TV, you know, the Canadian heritage commercials? Where they go into the mine, and then comes out, and he is telling his grandchildren how he was supposed to die. And there are ten dead Chinese men for every foot of railroad on that track. So I kind of think of that. Like, he has faced a lot of hardships and he looks like he might be in a good place in life by the way he is dressed now. The way he looks, on his face too. Maybe he [points to other younger Asian man] feels obligated because his grandfather gave up so much for them to be where they are. I know I feel that personally. {Do you?} Yes, how my parents have worked hard here, I feel like I have to work just as hard. And they didn't have a chance to go to school like I did either.

Mia: (speaking about image seven, Asian girl in front of maple leaf): It's the Canadian flag thing, behind her. She looks...it is actually a combination, she has the Canadian flag and she is obviously of Chinese or at least Asian descent, her parents or her are immigrants to Canada—and she is very proud to be a Canadian. She looks very proud to be Canadian. People who come to Canada, they have obviously shown a big interest in being apart of a free country and they have taken the time and the effort and the money, and they are very poor. But they are like... we are going to make a better life for ourselves, 'cause Canada rocks. And that's her.

Connor: (speaking about image 7, Asian girl in front of maple leaf): This person looks like a person who can make a change. She looks like she is a Canadian, like,

in the background. So like, maybe she wasn't born in Canada, so she had to change countries to make a change or whatever. So yeah, this one.

Abby: (speaking about image 7, Asian girl in front of a maple leaf flag): Well, I notice she is some sort of oriental and she is in Canada, and so maybe she is not from Canada but she is trying to change what she came from. Or come here, 'cause lots of people think that Canada is better.

In each of these examples, we can hear how these particular youth characterize the Asian peoples represented in these images as immigrants to Canada. Jaz, himself the child of immigrant parents, evokes both the past and present in his narratives about historical and contemporary issues related to immigration, a linear construction that traces the Discourse of progress and social change over time. While the nature of Canada as a state that practices inclusivity and pluralism, that is, the egalitarian multicultural state is not directly mentioned, it is implied by the linking of success with cultural others and their acceptance of dominant social and value norms, as represented in their dress as well as symbolic attributes tied to the state (the flag in particular).

The egalitarian discourse is also maintained by what is left unspoken or unsaid in these interviews: despite the cultural and racial diversity represented in the images, in only two interviews was race or gender openly discussed. This silence could be construed as an indicator of the naturalized D/discourse of 'sameness' among all human subjects: that equality, fairness and inclusion are functions of individual effort, will, or desire, rather than a function of social and cultural exclusion, basically the humanist discourse described earlier. The egalitarian citizen is a subject who strives to overcome differences by engaging in normative practices. Yet the play of difference (in the symbols which help signify their foreignness) helps to visibly highlight the normative sameness



communicated through other visual signs, such as economic prosperity, Christianity, and nationalism.

Comments from non-immigrant youth also reinforce the cultural assimilation narrative with comments such as “she’s willing to work hard so she can immigrate to Canada”, “there is lots of cultural acceptance in Canada” and “she is now part of a free country, not very poor, life’s better in Canada”, each phrases that evoke the discourse of immigrant success and reiterates the humanist progress Discourse.

### **8.5.5 Narratives of self determination**

The final category of narratives I describe as self determination: these utterances stressed how personal attributes were implicated in matters of agency or social change. This narrative portrays agency as a product of attributes or membership within a particular group.

May: He looks like he is pondering a very important thought.

Jade: They are older, they know lots about everything, and they want to teach their people or something.

Madison: Being smart is an important part about doing change. She has all the knowledge on her that she could use.

Chris: She could stop racism towards native people. By speaking up and out in public.

Luke: Money, money can influence a lot of things. They are acknowledged a little more ‘cause they have money over someone who has no money.

Colleen: Its about independence and responsibility, I am being independent, I am being responsible.

Laurel: Being helpful and very friendly.

Aaron: She’s got a very positive looking outlook.

Aaron: He's got a very intense look on his face. He just looks strong and powerful.

Anna: Attitude, you've got to have a good attitude to want to do stuff.

Chloe: Like, being organized. You've got to know about the steps to take, and a few people will follow you and then it turns out to hopefully be a huge thing.

Lane: ...strong and dignified, she looks really confident, she had a very strong confidence air amongst everything that is going on. She is very dignified.

Sasha: he is very involved, and obviously cares about something... He is willing to sacrifice and give stuff up. Look how little his baby is?

Hailey: She's got lots of confidence, and she doesn't put up with any crap from anybody. She is very distinguished, she knows her manners.

Ruth: You really have to get to know yourself. And reading really does help you to do that... be able to have lots of information, and it really changes your perspective too.

Tyler: respect, she really respects people.

Jaz: That the person is optimistic and they would try for change. [later in the interview]. Determined and hard working. You have to work hard. Kinda like a role model. Or a person for these kids to look to for guidance and that can help bring about change

Abby: They are trying to change people's lives by some sort of inspiration.

Mia: They all have a kind of passion, around his ability to take a stand.

These statements all focus on how individuals can be characterized as agentive on the basis of their personal attributes and beliefs. Not dissimilar to the narrative motif of egalitarianism, this category attributes social action to all human subjects, but also suggests that there is an *ideal representative subject* who is best equipped to achieve social change.

This reading of the imagined representative subject is based upon Leavy's (2000) work in representative characters, which she suggested are characters that serve as symbolic icons for "the political culture and condition of our times... The representative character operates as a site on which... political culture is written and exchanged. Consequently, the representative character... [operates as] a shared story" (p. 1). The youth interviewed read through the visual prompts and named attributes of that they believed were central to agents who achieved change.

A predominant theme was attributes of power and authority. Another theme was the notion of the reasoned, knowledgeable subject; this attribute was the most frequently repeated throughout the interview transcripts and also reinforced power and agency as flowing as a product of reasoned exchange. And, as was proposed earlier, naming the powerful also helps solidify its binary opposite, the less than powerful, less skilled and less experienced other, a discourse that served to position the youth in this study as outside of the ideal representative figure, or social change agent. The play of difference is an rhetorical device that acts to re-produce the non agentic actor who fails to meet the standards of what is the ideal human agentic subject.

## **8.6 Summarizing Part One**

In summary, the analysis used in this part of the chapter helps illustrate how a group of photo images served as social texts which enabled and constrained discourses of agency for the youth subject. In the main, the discourses described here illustrate how texts address (Ellsworth, 1990) position and regulate subjects (Smith, 1999) in their everyday lives. One of the key findings is the way in which the detected narrative motifs, self determination, advocacy, victim/villain, and egalitarianism enable a reiteration of

dominate social norms. Each reinforced, through the play of difference, the disparity between the powerful agentive adult and 'others' as powerless, unless aided by public agents. As was also noted, the presence of these binaries helped cement the difference between young/old, unskilled/skilled, knowledgeable/ unknowledgeable, self empowered/unempowered others, most often positioning the youth reader as the non agentive subject. These D/discourses had the effect of regulating the youth as well as racially or culturally marked others.

As noted earlier in this dissertation, Wertsch (1998) offers an analytically useful framework for interrogating the persistence of dominant metanarratives or discourses in shaping beliefs. He argues that the cultural tool (in this case the narrative form) evokes its constraining force, not through some constant, pervasive means but rather it arises when it is cued or induced in certain local ways, through what he describes as the 'microdynamics of appropriation' (p. 175-176). Such a reading of how the narrative shapes or informs the performance of the subject needs to allow not only for the ways in which the agent behaves or describes his/her action, but also consideration of how the cultural tool (in this case, the narrative motif) mediates the action "almost in spite of the agents' conscious reflection and volition...in ways the agent neither envisions nor desires" (ibid). The ways in which the narrative form continuously and persistently recites the discourse "deeply figures" (ibid) the ways in which we respond and act.

Yet there is evidence of other counter discourses, or as I have named them, contestation narratives, among some of these youth. In these instances, the youth subjects are drawing upon alternative discourses as they read the image. For example, Lane reads power into the life of an indigenous woman represented in one image: in particular, she

attributes power to the cultural practice of story telling. When she says “She looks like someone who would be willing to share her story” and “I guess she would be active in her community by sharing tradition and well being” she is highlighting how culture empowers, rather than drawing upon D/discourses that cite her difference from Western norms. She also, however makes references to engagement in food production and hard work, illustrating the persistence of the Discourses of progress and humanism, described earlier. However, we need to consider the order of discourses in play in this short expression of ideas: I argue that Lane’s discourse of empowerment is the primary or central discourse which situates her response, and while she may draw upon the normative discourse of ‘other’ as different and outside of western norms, this is done to in a way designed to reinforce her initial reading of an empowered cultural agent.

This example cannot be used to make a claim that one counter narrative replaces the other, however, what this short dialogue might illustrate is the ways in which the persistent narrative can be displaced “around the edges”, and may illustrate the subtle and gradual ways in which narratives can change over time. I believe that this also supports Butler’s (2000) argument that subjects who fail to acknowledge foundational claims or openly test the limits of particular discourses by re-writing texts are engaged in liminal practices that have the effect of altering or modifying dominant narratives, a practice of socio-political or civic agency.

## **8.7 Part II: Playing And Performing**

The photo essay project was initiated with the Alt Ed youth at Northern High in the last two months of my study: it involved providing interested youth with digital

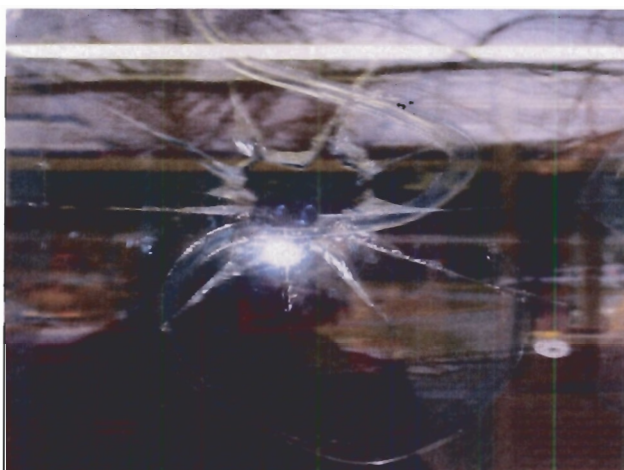
cameras they could use as a means of exploring matters of “social concern” to them. The goal was to create a story or narrative that could be used to represent their thinking or beliefs about a social concern of their choosing; then, in the final classes before the research study ended, share these stories with the other youth.

The photo essay is essentially a narrative: it is a sequentially organized series of photographs that tell a story. This format gave a structure to the goal of having participating youth reflect on their own beliefs and understandings about social change while providing an open-ended enough task that a broad range of concerns could be explored.

The photo essay project was initiated only at Northern High. The other two sites, J. S. Secondary and Street Spirits Theatre Company both used particular cultural tools to promote civic action in their programs; at Northern High, I wanted to provide a similar foundation for considering how agency was understood among these youth: the digital camera and photo essay project provided a means of observing and tracing the ways in which productive activity might enhance civic agency. In particular, I wondered how this productive process using this digital tool might *re-mediate* classroom knowledge production and transformation. Additionally, I hoped that an examination of the photos themselves, accompanied by the verbal explanation provided by the involved youth, might provide a rich source of evidence through which to better understand how youth conceived of and represented their own social values and understandings, including a desire for enacting social change. Finally, this project would trace the affective affordances (Kress, 2003) of the camera; that is, how the alternative mode of the visual, might open up the possibilities for new ways of interpretation and sense making, resulting

in personal sense making and potentially, transformational change. In sum, how might the introduction of a “new” cultural tool, which afforded a different mode of expression from those typically afforded for school-based student work, provide the potential space or opportunity for “free[ing] us from some earlier limitation of perspective” (Wertsch, 1998, p. 29).

While the digital camera was the primary technological tool for this image based investigation, computer software was also used to view and edit the photos. The majority of students used Power Point® as a presentational format, although some students chose to mount their photos directly on poster board. All added some sort of text to their photo essay; some were as simple as a title, others involved text labels or the insertion of



**Figure 4: Broken glass and reflection. Photo taken by research participant “Rachel”.**

commercially produced graphics; several youth supplemented their own photo images with others found on the internet. One youth added a musical score he had written and family photos to supplement his photo essay. These choices and decisions, when woven into a structure or format for representing their understandings, created multimedia stories that made connections between their own histories and experiences, geographical

and/or social locations, beliefs, feelings and actions. Finally, when presenting these stories to their peers, the youth supplemented these images with spoken texts to explain their intentions and ideas. This illustrates the complexity of knowledge production by affording a look at how different modes—technological, visual, gestural, linguistic—interact with one another during production.

## **8.8 The Metaphor Of Play**

What follows in the next sections of this chapter are a series of observations about how the photo essay project “played out” over the course of the study. I use the metaphor of play as a framework for this analysis as it illustrates the affective affordances of the technology, a question that this research study sought to consider. The metaphor of “play” evokes the image of a flexible, sometimes delightful, always dynamic space, one that may contract or expand, depending upon particular social or cultural contexts.

### **8.8.1 Playing with the camera: notes from my research journal**

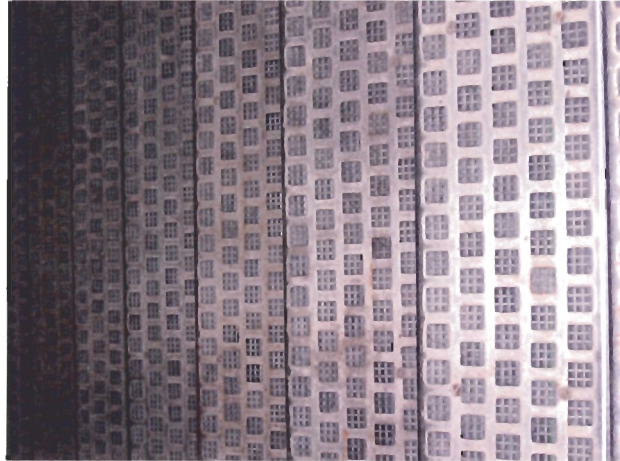
It was a lot of fun, at least in the beginning: I liked how it felt to be relaxed and working collaboratively with the kids on something that really seemed to engage them. The day I brought the cameras into class there was quite a buzz: lots of talk, kids coming up to check it out, ask questions, saying things like “cool”, “this will be great!” and “When can we start?”

I’d already shown the class two different sets of overhead slides: one was designed to illustrate how images could convey nuanced meanings. In the process of looking at these images, we talked about the techniques used to convey understandings



through visual texts: we'd looked for how the photographer had used things like space, height, angle, light and colour to explore issues of power or how reproducing the familiar made us think in particular ways. I'd recruited a young poet/photographer, Jackson, to come in to talk with these students about camera basics (how to turn it on, adjust the zoom, use the reviewing pane etc) as well as talk about his experiences as a photographer and his current work, a photo exhibit that was being hosted at a local book store. Jackson was particularly attuned to the context of Northern High as he had been a student there five years earlier. This camera orientation session went extremely well—there was lots of interaction between Jackson and the Alt Ed youth who seemed interested in his story and how he'd begun his career as a photographer and writer.

The rest of the morning we spent taking photos in the classroom, trying out close ups, long shots, as well as using the camera settings to add more light, reduce it, and see what kind of effects we could produce. Later in the day we moved out into the hallways of the school: the kids worked in pairs and went everywhere in the school and out on the school grounds taking pictures. There was lots of excited talking, laughter, and racing from place to place when a new idea hit them. "Let's try this!" "Come on, let's go there!" Everyone shared photos with one another admiring each others' techniques or their silliness. We used a lot of batteries: I had to run out at lunch to buy more. In the later part of the afternoon we went into the computer lab for the first time and started looking at our pictures. There was a lot more sharing and talk, lots of moving back and forth from workstations as everyone shared their best/funniest/rudest/most interesting pictures. There was lots of trial and error as we learned how to hook the cameras into the right computer ports, how to open and then how to save the images into personal files.



**Figure 5: School stairs. Photo by research participant “Sean”**

Most of the students had some knowledge of computer use. I kept moving around the room, helping those who seemed to have difficulty: I was interested in the fact that at least four of the students in this class didn't seem to have much computer savvy. Weren't kids supposed to be “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001)? Sean was great about helping out: he patiently showed several students how to save and then open files so they could view their photos in more detail.

### **8.8.2 Playing with the software**

I wanted to give the Alt Ed youth a chance to “fool around” with the photo software that was loaded on the school's computers. I didn't really know how to use it myself, but I was confident that if we all just played around with it for a bit, we could figure out how we might alter/change/modify photos using the digital tools that the software provided. Relying on the expertise of the students was how I had managed to

“teach” technology at my last elementary school teaching assignment, so I was confident that such an approach would work here as well.

Over the course of the photo essay project, this approach worked well. I helped where I could, but relied on Sean, Bobbie, and Jade to teach me and the others about the possibilities that the software allowed. Over the several weeks of this project, Sean taught some students how they could import images from files or the internet, and integrate them into existing images, creating hybrid photos of imagined locations, events and participants. Bobbie showed several others how they could make a power point slide show using their photos, as well as how to add text and other icons to the slides. Some youth simply experimented on their own: Jade added a few animated characters to her photos, downloading them from the internet. Chloe really got into colour and expressions of feelings: she reproduced the same three images of her sister using different colour themes in order to explore how feelings were conveyed with particular representations. She became an expert in helping others apply the colour editing features of the software. Tyler learned how to save pictures from the internet after watching Jade work on her photo essay: after watching her do it a few times, he quickly took to surfing the web and added about six images to what was originally an air pollution narrative of Big Town and created a more global discussion of pollution. Tyler didn't have a computer at home, and much of what we did in the lab was completely new to him. But he learned quickly from his peers and was soon talking about how he might take a computer class in another semester.

We had a few disasters: saving the photos on the school's server proved to be harder than we had originally thought. Some students couldn't remember their passwords

and photo files somehow “disappeared”. By the end of week one in the lab however, these problems had been sorted out as technical ‘apprentices’ and ‘experts’ worked together to problem solve. The students worked in the lab frequently, often asking if they could go to the lab to work on their photos throughout the day, when they took a break from their other work. Some days when I came into the classroom, I was completely unneeded and fell again into the role of observer and cheerleader, encouraging their experimentation and admiring their results.

### **8.8.3 Playing to the camera**

There were two general categories that most of the first sets of pictures fell into: one was of school objects (such as exit signs, art on the wall, coke machines, room shots etc) and the second, portraits. By a large margin the portrait category dominated. These pictures could be posed or spontaneous, but were generally pictures of friends found in the hallways during the photo sessions. In the second week of the project, the youth took cameras home with them, and these too fell into the category of portraiture, mostly of friends, but some of family as well. Quite often, a pattern of action could be detected from the photos produced and saved. For example, Zoe’s pictures focused on her friends in the school: all of these were taken in the school’s lobby, just outside the school office where the administrative and counselling offices were housed. Her two friends were either sprawled on the furniture or posed standing close together and gazing directly into the camera. In two pictures they are smiling directly at the photographer; in another they have on fixed stares, a look that suggests a mask, hiding their feelings. In another photo the group of friends appears defiant, with hoods of their sweatshirts over their heads and

the one finger salute centered in the photo frame. The last shot is interesting, as Zoe exchanges places with one of the two friends and enters the photo on its right side, becoming a subject of the photo. Her raised eyebrows and rolled eyes seem to communicate some level of disapproval, while the other friend remains defiantly posed behind her. For students in this school, the location of these photos would be clearly recognizable, as the entrance door or office door were visible in the background. The camera was a means of expressing defiance, they could “say” with the camera what would be forbidden in speech, made all the more powerful by its location near the school office.

Luke’s photos were a study in the relationship between himself, his best friend and roommate Cody and their mutual love of music. His photos all had a guitar inserted in some way, either as an important object on its own (standing in the corner of his room, leaning against a wall) or as a part of the photo’s design, with someone playing it (or pretending to play it). The theme of defiance was also in play in some shots: a shot taken against the backdrop of an obvious school location (lockers), Luke posed with eyes narrowed and hands engaged in two simultaneous activities: with an extended middle finger on the left side of the picture and set to play a cord on the guitar on his right. The tipped camera angle and his narrowed eyes imply that he is “high”; his dress as a “gangsta” and defiant gesturing all contribute to a kind of self portrait as a drug involved, tough and defiant sort of guy.

A number of students attempted self portraits, some taken with the camera at arms length, facing the self; close ups of faces and their direct gaze into the camera characterized this type. Other examples included photos that had been taken by others, either family or

friends, and showed the Alt student engaged in some activity that signified the self in some way or another.



**Figure 6: Sky- “HI”. Photo by research participant “Rachel”.**

Photos of school objects were also evident in these photo experiences: an exit sign, a study of patterns on the stairs in the building, and a detailed, up close look at the contents of a trash can were all subjects of individual photos. An interesting example included one close up of the word “SKY” stencilled on one of the school’s cinder block walls, a Chinese character next to it; there were a series of these words and symbols in the upper hallway of the school. Done in close up, what becomes obvious is the word “HI” scratched into the black paint between the symbol and its written form. The black ink and white background wall creates almost an ironic scheme in contrasting the solid opaque wall with the ephemeral implications of sky-high. Another photo that was striking included one taken of a jagged hole (something had clearly gone through the window) in the glass near the entrance to the school. The refraction of light, the rough edges of the broken glass and the reflection of the school entrance as a backdrop served to tell a story

in image that garnered many comments from other Alt youth. The photos were an amazing mix of studies in texture, design, each a creative effort to bring together the material and the social world of the school in interesting and unusual ways. The camera afforded a creative possibility that hadn't, at least until that time, seemed as evident to me as most of our time had been in the formal classroom setting.



**Figure 7: School behind fence. Photo by research participant “Hailey”.**

What these initial experiences with the camera illustrate is how all representation is relational and that practices always comes from somewhere, from a specific social, cultural or historical position or location. In documenting how these youth engaged in locating themselves in relation to others and objects in their environment, their patterns of technology use became something important to attend to; it informed my thinking about how youth make use of and engage with technologies, and how this may afford new understandings about the affordances technology offers in agentive production.

#### 8.8.4 Playing to teacher/researcher

The period of exploration with the cameras ended after two weeks, when I asked the students to use the cameras to document a story or create a series of pictures that might tell a story about an issue of social concern. After reminding them of the discussions and focus groups we had participated in throughout the late spring and fall, they were invited to “create”, using photo images, some sort of visual representation that might express their concerns, feelings, beliefs or ideas about a similar topic. To help illustrate the range of possible topics they might explore, I began by referring back to our earlier discussions; in particular, the focus groups I had facilitated throughout the fall and during which time they had identified issues of social concern to them. I made a chart that summarized the key points they had made over the last several months. Topics included family violence, aboriginal youth as police targets, drug and alcohol abuse, gay and lesbian issues, pollution and air quality, the smoking pit policy, missing aboriginal women, the teachers strike and class size, sexualization of youth, and teen pregnancy. I encouraged each of them to identify an issue of concern to them, either one of the ones we had discussed or any other that interested them. I also provided them with a story board graphic organizer that suggested some questions to consider in their approach to the photo essay, including identification of themes, a title, and locations that they might want to visit.

There was definitely confusion among some: “What do you want us to do?” “I don’t know what to take pictures of”, while others began immediately discussing their ideas and began negotiating for how long they could take the cameras out of the school in order to complete this task.



After some negotiation, Maggee Starr and I were able to convince school officials that these youth could take the cameras home to continue their photo projects. We did this for several days and evenings over the course of three weeks. This was followed by a field study to a number of other community locations. The involved youth designed an itinerary of locations they wanted to visit and I took several days driving them around the community and into some of the surrounding rural areas so they could complete their photo essays. Once all of the photos had been taken, we worked in the computer lab for several additional weeks, selecting images, developing power point slides, or editing their photos in order to create their stories. By this time all of the students were well equipped to manage their own photo files, and I helped troubleshoot when necessary. The final stage was the presentation of these photo essays to their classmates; these presentations were taped and photographed as a record of the event.

#### **8.8.5 Wor(l)d play: geographical markers, image, identity and agency**

As has been noted previously, cultural tools are examples of socially rich artifacts that have local histories and established patterns of use. As such, photography opened a wide field of potential activity. Earlier in this chapter I explored the question of identification with (or against) particular subjects as being one way in which agency might be traced in discourse. During the course of this project, and during the field activities in particular, I became aware of how particular geographic locations acted as signifiers of times and events that had social or personal significance and triggered memories of former activity and action. As we travelled in the community and beyond, different youth would draw attention to particular sites and then tell its story. The links

between location and identity were brought into sharp focus: for example, Colleen's desire to take photos of herself and others at the old tree fort behind her house served as a powerful emotive connection between her past and present. At first, it was just fun, with Colleen, Chris, Tyler, and Rachel climbing up its heights, and taking pictures from multiple locations, views from the top and the bottom. Yet its significance as an identity marker was brought into play for all of us when Colleen included an image of herself in the tree fort as a point from which to narrate her story, contrasting childhood to young adulthood, past and present, innocence and corruption.

Driving past the clay banks was a trigger for Chris's narratives about risk taking, dirt bike riding and sand surfing. Later, he would photograph a trophy he earned during a dirt bike race, a signifier of success and personal achievement. In Hailey's photo essay, we were shown image of mountains bathed in red coloured light; this image triggered memories of a "coming of age" trip to the desert, her first trip away from home. In Kyle's photo essay, his repeated use of the local pulp mill as a signifier for air pollution triggered multiple stories about his own struggles with asthma and his desire to see the city enact new bylaws about where industrial plants could be built.

Throughout the photo essay production process, the visit to particular geographic locations triggered an almost continuous series of memories, resulting in a near constant stream of stories and story telling. On numerous occasions I was nearly overwhelmed by the cacophony of words and sound that seemed to fill the vehicle we travelled in; excited chatter, exclamations, stories, words tumbling, competing and scrambling in the rush to name themselves. The language, activities and social performance of each youth helped



**Figure 8: Backyard tree fort. Photo by research participant “Madison”.**

graphically illustrate how the processes of meaning making are inextricably linked to material objects, and how the dialectic between object and subject is the space in which meaning is constantly created and played out within a sociocultural context that is pregnant with historical, cultural and institutional meanings.

Two other examples of how similar images can serve as signifiers of alternative social meanings are represented in the different ways in which Zoe and Jade used images from the same physical location to illustrate very different narratives. Both Zoe and Jade took pictures in a local cemetery and used them in their photo essays. Zoe spent considerable time at the cemetery looking for a particular grave: only later did we learn that it was her father’s. During time later spent in the computer lab, Zoe matter-of-factly described how she came only to know of her father as a result of his death—she had not known him while growing up. The image of his gravestone became a centerpiece among the seven images she mounted on her unnamed poster board narrative. One way that the inclusion of this photo could be read is that it provided a material artifact that anchored

her identity between past and present. In this way, the image might serve as an important signifier of self knowledge and understanding. Jade, on the other hand, took photos of several highly decorated gravestones, covered with flowers, as well as a photo of a hearse travelling through the cemetery. Later, in the lab, she put these images together in a series, adding an image of two children covering their eyes (found on the internet) to create a message about the dangers of teenage drinking. Its message re-produced the normative discourse of the consequences of binge drinking: keep drinking and die. One image links death to self discovery; the other 'moral panic' with death.



**Figure 9: The hearse. Photo by research participant “Jade”.**

#### **8.8.6 <Inter>play: Agency in a field of action**

As the above descriptions of how the photo essay production process played out illustrates, there are multiple social forces, actors, spaces, objects and contexts that are always in play, illustrating the ways in which all act to mediate activity and action.

Objects, actors, and contexts are all evocative in that they reproduce our social histories,

including our past as agents of change. These former actions are always evoked in new actions; they might better be described as persistent traces of agency, informing and echoing any new activity undertaken.

Unpacking an agentic act means considering not only what specific context or social location is implicated but how past actions “seed” new actions. This interplay between subject, object, context, history, and practice suggests the conception of agency is networked or distributed across multiple fields of action. Knappett (2002) makes this argument in suggesting that agency always plays out in a “field of action” and is “distributed” across networks, associations, and relationships *between* entities, rather than in the entities themselves (p. 100). That is, agency is a relational practice, one that resides in the tension between agent and object, culture and event, each acting to mediate the subject’s actions.

#### **8.8.7 Playing the self: Performances of identity and agency in the photo essay**

*“A photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask” (Sontag, 1977 as cited by Berger, 1980, p50).*

In the final section of this chapter, I want to briefly examine the photographic artifacts created by participants as they also provided evidence or traces of how agency may be detected among the youth at this research site. Near the end of this research study, the participating youth were asked to “show and tell about” their photo essays in their final form to their classmates. Similar to the earlier image interviews, I taped and transcribed the presentations. I also made copies of all of their presentations and saved them to disk. In the case of students who prepared posters, I took photographs during their presentations.

In an analysis of these narratives, I chose to foreground the *purpose* or *function* of the narrative (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) rather than its structural elements. An important feature of this analysis was to consider how meaning could be discerned from a combination of linguistic and visual readings. Many times the comments made by a youth presenter simply supplemented the image, as if the author depended on the image to “speak” to the audience without explanation, and yet at other times multiple texts were used to access different or similar discourses. Throughout the following examples, I attempt to trace how different modes of expression, including the visual, the auditory and textual create a multimodal, multi- layered text for expression.

## 8.9 Two Basic Narrative Functions

After analyzing the narrative presentations, I determined that the narrative functions could be summarized into two categories: the first were autobiographical and the second were moral tales. The following table summarizes all of the photo essays completed and the function each served.

**Table 1: List of photo essay projects, including format**

Student Name	Title	Number Of photos	Format	Function of the narrative
Colleen	Memories	13	Power point	Autobiographical: Memories of growing up, family life, trouble with drugs, getting back into school; succeeding in the future
Chris	The field trip	13	Power point	Autobiographical: Narration of locations in the community that were important to him, past and present.
Bobbie	What is love?	13	Power point	Autobiographical/moral: Images of his family and his volunteer work in a Christian Street Mission.

Tyler	World pollution	15	Power point	Moral: Images of air pollution in the community and some from other parts of the world
Luke and Connor	untitled	6	poster	Autobiographical: Images of themselves in the “hood” and their home
Ethan	The Truth	7	poster	Moral: Images of downtown: both his own work site and other shots that evidenced social problems (alcohol and drug abuse) in the downtown core
Madison	The good, the Bad and the ugly	12	poster	Moral: Images of her own animals at home and abused animals from around the world
Zoe	Untitled	7	poster	Autobiographical: Images of herself and her friends with symbolic photos inserted to illustrate exclusion, powerlessness and resistance
Hailey	Random thoughts	15	Power point	Autobiographical: Images from home, school (the Alt Ed class) and community; images were used as narrative triggers of a series of concepts and ideas
Chloe	Looks can be deceiving	4	poster	Autobiographical: One photograph of a young girl, reproduced in multiple colours and tones as a way of exploring emotions
Jade	There’s other Things to do Than drink	17	Power point	Moral: Images of a late night binge drinking, followed by images of family members and community locations as alternatives to excessive drinking
Laurel	Friendship	16	Poster	Autobiographical: Collection of photos of friends in school and in the neighbourhood
Sean	My pics	11	Website	Autobiographical: Photos of himself, his girlfriend and objects in the community

## 8.10 General Features Of The Narrative Form

The moral narrative is a socially and culturally mediated story; that is, its purpose is to provide reference to some normative conventions that are deemed appropriate models of how human subjects should behave or act (Tappan, 1991). Language (D/discourses) serve as a mediational tool through which particular social norms and

values come to signify or represent certain meanings and practices that are morally “right” or “wrong”. Moral claims, in this study, appear to be a central feature that the participating youth brought to their understandings of agency and action.

The second form of narrative detected in this group of photo essays is the autobiographical narrative. The meaning of an autobiographical narrative is self evident: it is about the individual’s experiences, life story, or a chronicle of some set of life events. In terms of agency, the autobiographical narrative can be understood as illustrating the traces or dispositions that are self attributed to the capacity for action. This style of narrative illustrates how the process of identity construction is centrally linked to an understanding of the self as a sociopolitical change agent.

### **8.10.1 Moral narratives**

In considering how the youth in this project projected a moral voice or stance in their presentation was a function of at least two different rhetorical techniques. The first was a result of the interplay between the image and spoken text, where one mode of text begins the narrative and the second supplements it. In this section I provide three examples that illustrate how the moral voice is created through a number of discursive texts. For example, Tyler’s narrative about pollution relied on images and a supplementary voiced text to support the image to create a story about the wrongs of pollution.

Tyler: The title is world pollution [points to text on screen]. I decided to call it that because we live in Mill Town<sup>22</sup> and it’s the third worst place in Canada for air pollution. And that’s just the smog, from in the bowl. That’s sick. I gotta live in that everyday for six hours a day. I think that’s pretty sick.

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<sup>22</sup> A pseudonym of a Northern BC community



Image 2: And that's the end of my street. The Big Town pulp mill.

Image 3: That's across the river at the other pulp mill.

Image 4: [picture of dead, bloated pig, in discoloured water].

{Other student voices: Yuk! Yeww! Where did you get THAT picture?}

Image 5: That's Big Town in the morning, that's like the exhaust, every single day.

In this example, Tyler uses his narrative voice to first situate and then supplement his story. Note how he sets up the narrative by talking about the level of pollution in Mill Town, using the discourse from a recent newspaper report as a “fact” that supports his initial claim.

The use of the word “sick” is interesting; while it has colloquial meaning (that's bad, or that's awful) it is a word that also could be read simultaneously as a signifier for poor health. In fact, Tyler suffers from severe asthma. This is a context implicitly understood in this narrative, as Tyler's classmates became aware of his illness during earlier discussions in a focus group.

After establishing Mill Town's poor air quality by reference to an authoritative source, Tyler uses the next set of images to reinforce this message. In image two and three he simply allows the visual impact of the mill's emissions pouring from the stacks to factually represent the reality of how bad the pollution really is. By the fourth image, Tyler has no need to talk: the image names the destructive properties of pollution. Its graphic representations solidify the villain-like qualities of the polluter. In image five he returns to the use of supplementary language, adding authenticity by detailing more about when the photo was taken. His genre or speech style is reminiscent of the investigative reporter, his tone is clipped, his voice matter of fact, as if he knows that these images speak the truth for him.

In the remainder of the photo essay, Tyler continues to display photos he took from different vantage points in Mill Town, each illustrating the air pollution persistently present. In the final two images of his essay, Tyler displays photos he found on the internet, showing two examples of significant pollution (an oil spill and a harbour filled with garbage). His moral tale is now complete, having structured the truth in image, spoken genre and text. The moral message seems apparent to his audience, when in the seconds following its conclusion, one student states: “This could be what will happen here in Big Town”.

A moral discourse was also produced using contrastive rhetoric, this time through visual means. In Jade’s photo essay, the moral narrative was also rhetorically constructed using a documentary style. However in this case the moral “voice” was constructed by the simultaneous projection of two images in the same frame rather than in spoken words. Jades’ photo essay was a study of aboriginal youth drinking on the streets of Big Town. Her photo essay contained a total of 17 images that began with a title “There’s other things to do than drink”. Other than its title, no language or other texts are used, its entire narrative takes visual form.

Jade, a soft spoken aboriginal student, was not present in class on the day that photo essays were shared. Jade was frequently absent. Her poor attendance had caused required her on more than one occasion to have to visit the counselling office. However, another student in the class loaded her power point presentation into the projector so it could be viewed. This reduced the amount of verbal narration that was used in the essay, although the viewing audience commented on its features as they watched. What follows then is a description of her essay from the perspective of myself as audience member.

Jade’s photo essay began with a series of images of youth drinking late at night, on street corners, in dark alleys, and shows scenes of fighting and violence between youth. Along with the title, the initial images help create a documentary like quality, revealing the truth about the pictured youth. The images are all shot at night, and so are very dark, but both girls and boys faces and profiles are evidenced. The moral voice comes into play early, and as noted above, is created visually rather than orally. Jade accomplished this by selecting a series of small iconic images, usually cartoons like characters or small graphics taken from a range of websites, and inserting (overlying) the secondary image into the corner of each photo. For example in image three, a group of young people is pictured standing in the shadows, with one swigging liquor out of a large bottle; the rest seemingly wait their turn. The iconic image in the corner of that same image is a small graphic of two white champagne glasses, accompanied by stars and streamers, designed to evoke a happy celebration. The contrast between the light and



**Figure 10: Night time drinking. Photo by research participant, “Jade”.**

dark of the primary and secondary images, as well as the contrasting social norms of celebratory drinking with the hidden, night time drinking in the photo, act as a rhetorical binary, almost an ironic juxtaposing of competing beliefs about how alcohol should be used. The opening scene having been set, the images of Jade's photo essay now offer a series of alternatives to drinking, including time with family, going to the movies, and walking along a river trail. The final section of the essay is designed to structure the consequences of continued drinking. Jade includes images of a gravestone and a hearse driving through a cemetery, bringing her moral tale to its final conclusion. Again, the small iconic images she includes as a secondary image to the documentary like photos of the cemetery speak as a moral voice: included with the image of the hearse is a much smaller image of a small child, her eyes covered, as if she can no longer look at the hearse in front of them.

In this photo essay, one image mediates the other, each telling part of the story, evoking social and cultural conventions in an effort to construct a tale of caution and concern. Tappan (1991) argued that moral functioning is mediated by language represented in discourses of care and justice, and that the dialogism represented in self talk is the ways in which the moral voice is accessed. While Jade's essay did not involve linguistic utterances, it created a similar dialogic effect in the way in which the photo images are juxtaposed, one within the other, and can be read singly and then again in tandem.

Jade discussed her photo essay with me on a day when she returned to school. She talked at length about her own involvement with the Band leaders in her home community, and her mother's work in supporting aboriginal peoples' health. Her

presentation, she hoped, would be of use to the leaders in her community, a catalyst to spark discussion about how to make more recreational opportunities available to aboriginal youth. Her obvious passion for this topic was evident throughout the interview—I couldn't help but observe that this project exemplified Jade's considerable skills and abilities, yet the school was threatening her with expulsion due to her lack of progress in the courses she was taking.

### 8.10.2 Autobiographical narratives

A number of the other photo essays fell into the second category, autobiographical accounts. Colleen's photo essay is entitled "memories". As the title Memories suggests, Colleen uses the photo essay as a way of exploring her past and present.

Colleen: This is called Memories. That's my name... XXXX {Image of her last name on a corporate product}

Colleen: There's a skull, that's my room. Well, that part of my room. The skull is at the top, in the white. {Points to white sheer fabric that is draped from ceiling in photo of her room in the projected image}.

Colleen: Those are all my pictures that my friends drew for me. I've been collecting them for about a year... It's just like, parties that I go to, and other places. [Where did that cup come from?] Remember at Keesha's party last year? And she bit it<sup>23</sup>? And I put it up there. {Question asked: Are these your memories?}

Colleen: Yeah, like every different picture has like a different person. Like the one at the bottom, that's from my friend Yannie in River City<sup>24</sup>. And that's from Katie, and then that was from Brian. That's my guitar. That's from Evan. That's from Allie, That's from me...yeah, there are more than that...on the other side of my room.

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<sup>23</sup> This is a reference to a drug overdose

<sup>24</sup> All names are pseudonyms

Colleen: And that used to be the Family Diner. And I used to go there every week with my parents and get fries and stuff. Those are good memories. But its different now, that was years ago, before I came to this school. Before... [stops and moves to next slide].

Colleen: This is the page on drugs that me and Jessica made. [Students start asking questions about the images on the screen]. That's probably heroin. Or it could be PCP or mescaline. I probably put it on there, because drugs are still a big part of my life... And this is some of the stuff I saw everyday.

Colleen: This is the tree house... it has three storeys. It's got steps too. There is Chris taking his picture at the top.

Colleen: "Trying to focus on school" [reads text in power point, image of Northern high]. And this is the college, and that's where I want to go.

Maggee Starr: And you'll make it Colleen.

Colleen's essay seems to trace both good and bad memories, a story that talks about both past and present, creating a series of contrasting events and locations that are central to her own story and exemplifying both past and current identities. At times it appeared to represent a nostalgic journey, with the interplay of symbols of childhood (the tree house and the diner) and current challenges (drug use and staying on track in school). The final image of the local college seems to draw the narrative forward into the future, imagining her continued actions leading to post secondary education and a more successful future. Maggee Starr, in her closing comments, brings the story to its successful conclusion.

The narrative makes a strong emotional impact, particularly when Colleen begins to explain the drug collage she has inserted into the photo essay. The other youth in the class are very quiet when the collage-style images of drugs and drug paraphernalia are put on the screen. However after this initial silence, when Colleen's bald statement ["this is the page on drugs that me and Jessica made"] is finished, and it appears she will stop



**Figure 11: Wall of donated art. Photo by research participant, “Colleen”.**

her narration, the other youth begin to ask numerous questions about these images. Colleen answers them with matter-a-fact tone, naming the drugs quite easily. Her concluding statements, “I guess I included this because drugs are still a big part of my life” and “and this is some of the stuff I saw”, are statements which acknowledge her drug addicted past, a narrative that many of the Alt Ed youth, and the teacher, Maggee Starr are particularly familiar with. However, the final statement uses the past tense, and in this way the addiction is characterized as in the past, and implies a new identity with more positive actions in the present. This is followed by images of an imagined future, where she will attend College. In this way the photo essay seems to establish that agency arises from a pattern of activity or action, moving forward on a trajectory into the future.

This illustrates Knappett’s (2002) contention that agency occurs across a “field of action” (Knappett, 2002); that is, agency can be considered as a series of events and the “product of the web of relations” (p. 100) between self, other(s), and object(s).

Chloe's photo essay illustrates a very different approach to the autobiographical story. Her essay was mounted on a poster board and consisted of a collection of four of the same images of the same young woman's face, a portrait-like close up; however, each photo varied from the other by its application of a different set of colour tones. Chloe had also included an image of another student in the class, Luke. This image was centered among the others in a circle on the poster board. Having experimented for considerable time with the image software in the computer lab, Chloe's project was one that explored the links between the inner and outer self, and how colour can be used to "read" moods, thoughts, and motivations. Each image was predominantly one colour, either pink, green, purple or blue. Chloe began her presentation:

Chloe: Looks can be deceiving. [pause]. {Tell us more about that}

Chloe: Someone can look happy, but they can be depressed on the inside. These are like showing the inside...

Chloe: yeah, the coloured pictures are supposed to show what she is feeling on the inside. {So are you blue?}

Chloe: It's not me. It's my sister! She is blue...

Chloe: And she is supposed to be psychotic and devious. For example. But these are her feelings on the inside. {I love it, tell us about the pink hair}

Chloe: It's just showing her personality, but with the colours of her. {And Luke's green?}

Chloe: It's supposed to be like, Luke's like... a rocker and stuff. And he is really different, you know, and psychedelic, and like... you know. [Lots of student discussion, agreement with this statement].

This presentation is interesting in its exploration of the links between the inner and outer self, and how identity can be "read" through different lenses. In this case, Chloe explored at some length the features of the editing software available in the lab. Having initially found a way of applying different colours and tones, she spent several weeks 'playing around' with colour and image. The sense making processes that Chloe brought to this exercise are only implied in her dialogue, however, it appears that she is focusing on



some of the ways in which individuals inner identities might be “read” through a colour lens, making what are usually private matters public. Her knowledge of particular social codes related to colour and identity are evidenced in her references to the colour blue; however, she goes on to link pink with deviousness and green with the psychedelic.

Once again, it is the conventions of the image and the discourse that it evokes that appear to be central to the ways in which Chloe engages in this dialectic of sense making. For example, the portrait of the young woman is taken from above and her head is tilted to one side. This, along with her downcast eyes, implies an avoided gaze and incites a reading of coquettishness. The combination of image and existing social convention, including that of colour, create the characterization as “deviousness”. A similar process of a dialectic between the colour and the pose of the individual in the image can be applied to the photo of “psychedelic” Luke. With his guitar and half-opened eyes, Luke can be constructed as a rocker and a drug user, hence the term psychedelic.

What makes this example particularly interesting is the ways in which it maps the potential for transformative sense making using technological tools, and how these tools’ promise arises from its capacity for problematizing social conventions and understandings.

Bolter (2000) discusses that the processes of remediation are indeed, a “play” of signs; in this case, we see how Chloe makes transparent some of the ways in which meaning is constructed and shared, by ‘playing’ with the social conventions around colour, image and representation. In this case, not only is the representation of the self made strange, but the representational features of the mode are also made much more transparent so that social conventions of photographic reading are also problematized.

In making sense of Chloe's "play" with identity, image, colour and self, there is a glimpse into the potential that this technology affords for self-reflexive work, and how the digital mode, as posited by de Castell, Bryson and Jenson (2002) offers a means through which agentive knowledge production may be realized. These technological affordances are significant, permitting another 'look' at the self in this instance, but could just as easily be considered of the 'social' as well, illustrating its potential for civic investigations.

### **8.11 Playing The Coda**

When I began to plan and execute the photo essay project, I envisioned the production process as a means of making public knowledge: giving voice to otherwise marginalized perspectives and "seeing" this product as a sociopolitical outcome that could/might affect change to individual beliefs and understandings about his/her own political power and capacity for civic agency. This might have been a worthwhile goal, but lurking beneath was the transforming teacher, the emancipatory change agent, the "one" that would enlighten and liberate the otherwise oppressed other. All I had to do was to find a means through which "they" (the youth subjects) would learn how to "see" and once having seen the truth, they too would become dedicated to social and/or political activism.

Underlying this belief about empowerment lurks a particular conception of agency: that is, one in which the individual can knowingly position themselves within particular social worlds, and that their actions can inform and influence public life. In "seeing" the world in this informed and knowing way, the photographic "eye/I" becomes a metaphor for the politics of identity, a privileging of point-of-view politics, one that

essentially relies on a political actor to represent themselves and remediate the political sphere. In this reading, the camera becomes a tool that conforms to the liberal democratic discourse of inclusionary politics. Photography, as a particular method of political practice, captures images of the world “I/eye” want.

How might the productive process be otherwise imagined? Perhaps if we conceive of the camera as an enabling prosthesis: the metaphor of the prosthesis might more easily bridge between the nature-culture-technological components of agency within a field or network. The prosthesis becomes for its human host, an integral component of activity, not an extension of the self, but a part of the self, crossing the boundaries between machine (object) and body (subject). The prosthesis enables performance in ways that had been previously limited by the context of the human subject, affording opportunities and providing new or enhanced experiences through its operation.

During this project what I observed was how the camera and its related digital technologies (the camera, the software and computer assisted search/production techniques) for these youth seemed to afford a way of ‘seeing’ and making sense of their lives in ways that more traditional forms of knowledge sharing do not. I will return to this theme of how some cultural tools have significance in their potential for affording civic agency in the final chapter that follows.

## **CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION**

Although numerous aspects of this dissertation make what I believe to be thought-provoking and dynamic contributions to discourses of citizenship education and youth agency, in this chapter I will focus on four primary themes: researcher learning, changing understandings of agency, the possibilities of productive practices, and implications of this work for citizenship educators and scholars. Before doing so, however, I acknowledge that what follows reflects primarily my thoughts, my analyses, my interpretations, my impressions and therefore as such can only ever be partial and subjective, and while seeking to inform the field may also raise more questions than answers.

### **9.1 Playing At Research: Concluding Thoughts**

Ibáñez-Carrasco and Meiners (2004) write that desire is a central question to discussions of what it means to be a social and political activist, and that examining that desire is central to how we (as academics and researchers) approach making “knowledge public and [making] public knowledge”(p.2). I want to start my conclusion by addressing the questions of desire and how this informs the processes of making public knowledge as it played out in this research study.

This study began as a process situated in my own desire: a desire to search for the answer to the question posed repeatedly in public discourse: that youth were politically apathetic, uninterested in politics, uninvolved in political parties, and non-participants in

electoral politics. If I could just answer these questions—after all, isn't this what research is supposed to do? Provide answers to questions that trouble us? The results I knew would allow me to write myself as a researcher, while simultaneously allowing for the “redemption” of youth.

And then the study began.

No one, of course, told the youth that I worked with that my desire for rescuing them was needed, necessary or even wanted. In fact, many times they were completely indifferent to me and my desire to engage with them in research: sometimes they were simply baffled (“Why are you writing all this stuff down?”), confused (“But why did you write that? How can that be important?”), sometimes resistant (“No, I don't want to be researched, leave me out of this”) but often simply uninterested or indifferent (“I'm too busy this year with other stuff, and meeting with you will take too much time.”). In the early days I used to hypothesize about why it was that some youth seemed really interested and engaged with me right away about what I wanted to learn and how they could participate: however, over time, this became less of a concern as I realized that much of what I perceived as apathy or disinterest was likely little more than a learned face of resistance to adults (again) controlling and directing their lives.

It was also a reflection of how I was multiply positioned as “informant”. This had both positive and negative attributes. As the majority of the research participants I worked with were involved in school settings, the practices of schooling had taught many of them much about how to avoid detection, to avoid engagement in extra “work” or do what was “right” or “good” for them. For these youth my research was extra “work” and without formal school credit, and it certainly lacked the necessary link to their context

and personal situations as “student” subjects. In some cases I was characterized and treated as an adult “informant” that surveilled and reported to authoritative others, someone not to be trusted in the eventuality that I “informed” about their non-conforming activities. While I might be able to view their public lives in school, they resisted any effort to involve me in the personal parts of their daily lives.

Among adults I was welcomed as a partner, but also as a voice that might represent the good thing happening in their school, their classroom, their practice. Perhaps they saw how my research might redeem them and their programs, or might lead to public recognition of its value. In this way I could “shine a light” on exemplary practice and profile the great work that was being accomplished with a particular group of adolescents; or I could similarly illuminate the positive attributes and contributions of some adolescents so that the moral panic that has permeated public discourse about youth could be countered. In this context, my work was often interpreted as a way of “making pedagogy public”, particularly to the education community where the discourses of educational failure were viewed with a type of quiet desperation while also exhibiting a dogged determinism to show a different face.

It was my work at Street Spirits theatre that began my process of transformation; I was forced to re-consider my stance as informant and instead become participant. It was a hard place to inhabit, at least in the beginning. I felt very at risk, worried about how I might be perceived, that my performance would be subject to ridicule, that I would not *produce knowledge*. The youth here were insistent: I needed to immerse myself in the work of the play and the play of the work.

## **9.2 The Work Of The Play**

It was a gradual process of letting go, but the more I became immersed in the culture of Street Spirits as an actor and performer, the easier it became to let go of my beliefs about researchers and researching. In fact, I really started to have fun. I couldn't wait for the next week to roll around so I might "fool around" with these kids, play a few theatre games, start a new play, or rehearse one we'd already put together. The work of play creation wasn't easy: it was very challenging to try and find a way of representing the experiences of others in authentic ways. I always learned by watching the young actors I worked with. They had so many experiences as both actors and young adults to draw on, and they didn't seem to have my inhibitions about performance. I wrote religiously in my journal about what we were doing and what I was thinking. As I did so, I talked with many of them about what I'd been writing and thinking; the more I did this, the more I wanted to. Our conversations really helped me to see and consider perspectives I hadn't considered before, and how the "work of the play" might be conceptualized and understood. Because we performed together so regularly, it became natural to consider representing our collaborative work as a play: collaboratively writing and producing a script (Chapter Five) seemed a natural outgrowth of shared knowledge production and performance.

## **9.3 The Play Of The Work**

However, the work with the youth at Street Spirits also affected my work with the youth at Northern High. Among the first were the changes I made in the considering how these youth would create photo essays. Instead of framing the project like a "school work assignment" the process became much more open-ended and student led. Relationships

seemed to change as I situated myself as someone who would help them realize their ideas rather than someone who was directing the performance. The field trip organized by the youth at this site was a turning point: they became the knowledge brokers who guided the entire process. Between visits to this site, the youth who were a part of this project continued to work on their photo essays, motivated and interested in ways they hadn't been before. New experts emerged each time we worked in the lab; the play of the work was a central feature which seemed to keep us all excited as the photo essays were produced. In the processes of collaborative engagement we opened up the potential to produce new texts and new understandings of ourselves.

#### **9.4 Agency Realized**

In the work of the play, the play of the work, and in the production of new texts, we realized and enacted our agency. The process was not linear, the way I imagined it in the early stages of this study: agency is constituted by and constitutive of our experiences, histories, tools, relationships across time. It is a product of relations in a broad field of enabling and constraining forces, in particular through the social practices and discourses—cultural tools—we bring to bear on our activity. It is complex, not easily mapped, and always a product of mediation.

Rather than a study of the 'spectacular' in civic life, this study sought to look at the small habits, occasions, utterances and practices that might inform the complexity of social and civic life and how agency might be realized. This more modest discussion of practices and the particularity of activity in the everyday lives of youth afforded a look at the complexity and breadth of activity that is the stuff of sociopolitical or civic activity.



Indeed, if it did nothing else, it afforded a re-consideration of youth as disempowered or controlled agents. Who could doubt the potential of sociopolitical agents like Sasha who:

produces buttons to give out on the streets as a part of her work with the drug and alcohol treatment centre. She works predominantly with adolescents throughout the community to discuss drug addiction, in particular, methamphetamines (or meth). Her buttons are always in demand. Many of them are parodies or plays on words, but one sticks out for me: It is a small black button with a large stylized “golden arches” yellow “M”, repeating the signifying sign for “MacDonalds®”. The rest of the button reads “Meth: I’m hatin’ it”. It is a clever play on the current commercial tag line for MacDonald’s (I’m lovin’ it). More than this however, it positions her as a producer of a new text, one that ironically equates the addiction discourse to both drugs and fast foods, both potentially life threatening. Its irony is not lost on youth; it is a favourite button that has to be re-made regularly due to demand (research journal entry).

However, to end on a note that celebrates youth agency would contradict the lessons learned in this work: the stories and descriptions of the youth who participated in this study illustrate that agency is a continual struggle of enactment and re-enactment, identifying with and against particular discourses, practices and subjectivities. Their performances in the processes of signification are sometimes heart breaking, contradictory, self-defeating and naive, routine, rich, bereft and compelling. Their work and play can be messy, unpredictable and risky, although that risk is frequently an effect of their social location, and in some cases, the product of the normative practices of schooling, in particular the demands for social and educational conformity, as this study illustrated. At Northern High in particular, the Discourses of achievement and the use of authoritative forms of power created a social field which shaped and modified these youth’s enactments and performances. For example, at the formal assemblies organized by the school principal, the achievement Discourse worked to constrain all of the youth present in the assembly, linking educational achievement with future life success. At the

same time however, the Alt Ed youth's discourse of education's inconsequentiality enabled them to assert power in that space; through their bodies they enacted their counter discourses that privileged their status as non-schooled knowers.

Nathan's refusal to be addressed by the punishment ritual at this school and his re-scripting of power provides evidence of how agency is always a product of activity, always subject to the location and social and cultural context of the activity. It is also an example of how the 'taking up of the tool from where it lies' (Davies, 2000) is a central feature of how agency must be characterized as mediated through activity. In this case, Nathan's body became the tool through which his agency was realized. This was an important lesson of this work, situating agency in modes other than speech or linguistic expression. Nathan's story provides evidence of Butler's (1997) claim that agency can be expressed not only in speech but through the body. In Butler's (1997) words "the body is a blindspot of speech, that which acts in excess of what is said, but which also acts in and through what is said" (p. 11). In this case, Nathan took action on the limit, and in doing so "produces a new possibility for a subject, one who was supposed to be bound by the limit... a deformation and contestation of those very norms" (Butler, 2000, p. 33).

At J. S. High, the D/discourses of the participating youth provide evidence of the ways in which pedagogical practices and narratives played into and enabled particular conceptions of moral agency: the value for virtue D/discourse was embodied in the practices of service and reiterated in each enactment. Jeff Sugar acted to amplify this effect with his authorized and authorizing D/discourses that sought to remediate the lives of his students into morally 'good' agents.

Yet despite this, Mia, a self-acknowledged hybrid leadership/butch/Goth student, was able to access and play between the competing discourses and subject positions of leaders and non-leaders, illustrating her potential as a critical commentator (Wertsch, 1998). By exploring her subject positions, she reveals the contradictions of the moral discourses espoused by the leadership program goals, pedagogies and practices. As such she illustrates how practices of critique afford agency to human subjects.

In Chapter Seven I also considered Lane's narratives of cultural power, suggesting that the order of discourses may be a way of theorizing about how persistent narratives or Discourses become re-signified into altered readings of social agency. I believe this helps bolster Butler's (2000) claim that subjects who openly test the limits of particular discourses and re-mediate meanings are engaged liminal practices that are central to civic agency.

The persistence of dominant Discourses was an important theme; the youth utterances included and discussed throughout this dissertation illustrated, I believe how frequently particular narratives are cited and re-cited, acting to performatively shape the understandings of these youth about their own and others sense of agency and potential for action. Understanding how discourses shape and frame utterances and actions provides a necessary corollary to the emancipatory ideals often espoused by youth researchers, particularly approaches to civics that privilege voice and representation as sufficient practices for transforming youth into social change agents.

## **9.5 Revisiting My Original Research Questions**

The discussion of Lane's and Mia's activities that sought to critique or de-centre dominant discourses brings the discussion of agency back to one of primary questions

asked in this research. In examining the everyday lived experiences of a particular group of urban youth, I asked how might consideration of agency as a “political prerogative” (Butler, 1993, p. 46) in order to question “the condition of its possibility”? (p. 47).

In the examples described above, the conditions of political possibility, it seems to me, lives in practices on the limit, or at peripheries rather than centres. It exists in the ways in which activity has the potential to tactically address, in a particular moment, the constituting effects of particular practices and D/discourses. And despite the fact that these moments are nearly always reinscribed with normative intentions of dominant D/discourses, such activity can have politically generative potential, as the examples summarized above suggest.

### 9.5.1 Productive practices

The affordances that some cultural tools might offer, particularly their productive potential for civic agency, were an important theoretical framework that informed this study. In other words, what kinds of constitutive practices might afford opportunity for civic agency? This approach emphasized the *production* rather than the *reproduction* of knowledge. de Castell, Bryson and Jenson (2002) in particular argued that when an

educationally orientated invitation to play, to produce, and to diss-simulate expertise—in short, a program for the deployment of digital tools [is] used not for replication and reproduction, but for creation, for *authentic*, that is, *agentive production*”... provides an interesting example of a politically articulate intervention and strategy of representation where agency is evident in the active contestation of oppressive regimes of truth” (emphasis in original).

This study sought to use the lens of productive practices to consider three different activities—digital camera use, forum theatre, and service learning—and their potential as productive practices. While de Castell, Bryson and Jenson’s (2002) work

focused on particular forms of digital technology, in this study the use of productive practices was interpreted more broadly and also included other social technologies, specifically forum theatre and service learning.

How did the productive practices of photography, theatre, and service learning measure against the criteria developed by de Castell, Bryson and Jenson (2002) in supporting a goal of agentive activity or civic agency? My tentative observations suggest that there was considerable potential among all three, but each had greater or lesser degrees of success.

In my estimation, forum theatre was most successful in meeting these criteria. At Street Spirits Theatre Company, Boal's *Theatre of the oppressed* (1986) was used as a means for engaging street involved and other 'at risk' youth in exploring their own social and community-based concerns. Here social agency—what to do in response to the everyday problems of youth and others in the community—was actively explored through performance. At this site the cultural tool was the body: an embodied practice that had both material and personal affects.

Not only was it a holistic technology (Franklin, 1990) that afforded the potential for allowing youth to design and implement their own performances, but it also afforded a means through which to contest, question and alter dominant discourses, practices and beliefs, a feature that de Castell, Bryson, and Jenson (2002) describe as central to practices of authentic production and agency. And while there certainly was a degree of adult guidance and facilitation at this site, this was always a matter of co-construction as all youth were encouraged, in fact required, to participate and lead in all aspects of the production process. With few exceptions, the theatrical process permitted a way of

authentically representing the youth's own lived experiences, gave its participants credit as informed agents who had capacity for enacting change, and permitted ways of challenging the normative limitations placed on their own experiences. As a result, this became a group of highly skilled and enabled social actors who consistently engaged in questioning practices and issues of concern to themselves and others in the community.

In my own self-reflexive journey as an actor at Street Spirits theatre, I explore the affordances of performance. Some of the affordances I believe are central to its transformational potential are the ways in which the body's own movement allows access to embodied memories and truths: our bodies know this world in a different way than the voices we hear in our heads, and in coming to know our bodies we learn about ourselves. At the same time, theatrical work offers a relatively safe place in which alternative scenarios or stories can be rehearsed and evaluated. Learning how to be and become a social agent is difficult and complex work, and enacting trials of how one might work with and across differences between the self and other is a highly productive practice. As an alternative form of literacy, that is, a practice that shows a way of knowing the world, performance offers a distinct lens through which knowledge can be both produced and received.

There were of course, constraining features of this activity. For example, practices of characterization (taking on specific roles), formulaic approaches to conflict resolution, and the lack of spontaneity that resulted from the repetition of some performances meant that some of these productions became much more prescriptive than holistic (Franklin, 1990). The potential however, in nearly every performance was rich and powerful. And the ways in which these youth characterized their own sense of civic power was often

quite remarkable. Indeed, these youth had strong civic identities and expressed their own beliefs in their capacity to effect change.

At Northern High, the cultural tools were digital technologies, in particular digital cameras, which extended the field of agentive action to include a number of different social and cultural locations, providing the possibility for these youth to become active producers of knowledge.

This project was another example of a holistic technology (Franklin, 1990) in that it also afforded ways through which the youth themselves could engage in design and production from start to finish. In a number of ways, it also offered the potential for challenging dominant beliefs and understandings and active practices of contestation. Youth, with camera in hand, were enabled at various times, to take on the normative expectations, and contested the ways in which they were marginalized as non-performing and troubled youth. The tool was 'taken up' as a means of resisting the nearly continuous forms of disciplining technologies (Foucault, 1980) that existed at this site. Youth also become co-constructors of knowledge in the school computer lab, as expertise was shared and products were designed and then realized. In this sense the affordances of the cultural tool enabled authentic production.

The camera had particular affordances that allowed it to serve almost as a natural extension of the youth themselves. The camera permitted generative potential in that it allowed for an extension of the agent's ability to manipulate, name, invent and reinvent the world around them in very visible ways. For example, Colleen's insistence that we visit her house so we could take photos of her tree house, helped illustrate Minh-ha's (1991) observation that when we ask people to represent themselves we often get

something much deeper than simply the details of their daily lives. For Colleen the tree house seemed to serve as a representation of an earlier innocence, possibly representing a desire to return to a state of naivety and delight, a place from which imagining a more positive future might be possible. Chloe's representations with colour helped make strange social norms and easy readings of the self, making transparent how conventions of production and interpretation shape beliefs.

The digital camera was also a tool that had particular social and cultural patterns of use that make it familiar, and therefore a tool that could also be easily 'taken up'. One of these patterns of use was specific to the Alt Ed class: readers will recall the photo wall that served as an important visual signifier of the 'getting through' discourse. As such using the camera allowed a means of marking moments of achievement and recognition: as a result, the practice of photography can be said to have motivational affordances.

The camera as a cultural tool also had potential for invention and play, and it was able to "cultivate novelty, to nurture difference, and to inject complexity into questions in ways that prohibit easy readings or unproblematic interpretation" (de Castell, Bryson & Jenson, 2002, p. 7). This was evidenced in the description of our 'play' with the cameras over a period of weeks.

The photo essay itself afforded the potential to "tell a story" using visual means. More typically in school such requests rely on formal literacy practices, predominantly writing. Operating primarily as a visual mode of knowledge production and communication, using digital technologies afforded access to a different kind of literacy, one in which "reading the world" meant interpreting its *visual* grammar. As such it



offered a unique means of accessing the knowledge of these Alt Ed youth, for many of whom traditional literacies were difficult and daunting.

However, there were significant constraints that this visual photo essay form placed upon the generative potential of this cultural tool. The form of the project, the photo essay, was a pedagogical tool chosen by me to serve as an exemplar of how youth could enact or produce evidence of civic agency. In other words, I sought to remediate these youth's performances and utterances in ways that reflected my own desire for a more socially just and inclusive form of civic engagement. My pedagogical goals and utterances served as prescribed constraints on this project that resulted in the production of particular sorts of conceptions of civic agency. The framework I chose also echoed the re-productive qualities of many school assignments in that it was cast within an educative discourse of 'showing what you know': the final product a representation of endorsed forms of civic knowledge and action. As Luke, de Castell and Luke (1983) noted, the authority of texts comes not from its author, but as a function of social relations (p. 120). In this case, my authority flowed through my status as an adult, teacher and researcher, thereby mediating the production of knowledge among these youth. These are important insights which will, I hope, provide useful guidance for me in subsequent research work and inform subsequent efforts in working collaboratively with youth.

J. S. High, where service learning was the primary cultural tool for enabling civic agency, did not, for the most part, meet the criteria for enabling agentic production. Using Franklin's (1990) terminology, it was clearly a prescriptive technology or tool that had in mind particular forms of service and production that students neither led nor designed. This was a significant constraint of this pedagogical tool, and as such its

product served to reproduce rather than produce particular understandings. Another deficiency was that this model of service learning relied on naturalized D/discourses of charitable or altruistic work; the social 'good' of service remained largely un-critiqued, and these beliefs positioned human subjects as deserving and undeserving. Rather than problematizing the ways in which service rewards already socially enabled subjects, this process reiterated and continued to re-produce social barriers to agency among differently positioned others. In other words, service learning, at least as it was practiced in this site, re-constituted authoritative power as the only form of agency that mattered.

Perhaps most importantly was how Jeff Sugar mediated the D/discourses of service through his utterances and narratives. Drawing upon the systemic authority of teachers and of formal curricular texts as socially authorized (Bahktin, 1980; Luke, de Castell & Luke, 1983) Jeff continually reiterated and recirculated particular understandings of service and moral value. Curricular texts and linguistic utterances each acted to constitute the authority of the other: for example, when Jeff told the story of Victor Frankel, he held a text in his hand, which he then used to reinforce his authority as a knower and as an authorized source of knowledge. In effect, Jeff used the text "to objectify institutional rules, from which his authority, not incidentally, is also derived" (Luke, de Castell & Luke, 1983, p. 122).

Despite all of this however, there were clearly examples of youth who found ways to dispute, critique, and challenge some of the presumptions and authorized discourses that were foundational to the service learning program. Earlier references to the ways in which Ruth and Mia acted as critical commentators speaks to the potential that are afforded to liminal spaces, particular locations that work on the periphery rather than the

centre of D/discourses constitutive effects. It seems possible that if the authority of the texts and the teacher could be more systematically dismantled, and service reconceptualized around student led investigations, there could be significant potential in this cultural tool's productive possibilities.

### **9.5.2 Youth's conceptions of agency**

Chapter seven dealt with the ways in which the participating youth understood and characterized the work of agents and in particular how they accounted for the motivations of active change agents. Power was clearly a central feature of their views about agency; authoritative, personal and cultural power was highlighted as important. But what was also evident in these youth discussions was how agency is a product of desire: desire mediates the call to agency. As Leslie said, "as long as you make a decision that you *want* the world to be different, you can act in ways that you will." In considering the youth's interview transcripts through the lens of desire, I traced six different narrative motifs that categorized agency into forms of remediation, resistance and contestation, compliance with social and cultural norms, and attributional qualities. Each of these drew upon D/discourses had the effect of regulating or positioning youth as well as racially or culturally marked others.

Agency was characterized as a dynamic action among and between a range of human agents, within a complex context of social needs and rights. The use of rhetorical binaries in their explanations and descriptions drew attention to the play of difference, the disparity between the powerful agentive adult and 'others', and between young/old, unskilled/skilled, knowledgeable/unknowledgeable, self empowered/unempowered others, often positioning the youth reader as the non agentive subject.

However the role of objects, artifacts and tools were also implicated in their understandings of agency: from the rhetoric of the politician, the stories of the indigenous women and the hammer of the builders, agency was clearly a function of objects and actors in a dynamic tension within a field of activity. In other words agency is distributed across networks, between entities rather than within the entities themselves (Knappett, 2002).

## **9.6 Implications For Citizenship Educators**

This study is only suggestive of some initially interesting ideas and places to start thinking about how we might make schools or out of school places more productive locations for engaging with youth in questions of agency and action. At one level it suggests a need for attention to some very basic issues about the ways in which schools operate to limit the possibilities afforded for action and activity. In this study I found that working with one group of students was nearly impossible due to the ways in which the timetable structured their time in school. The possibilities afforded with classrooms like the one at J. S. High or the Street Spirits theatre company bring to the fore how much greater potential we have for activity when we move to cultural models of learning and practice based inquiry.

### **9.6.1 Formal and non formal learning environments**

Non-formal learning environments are those where programs and activities are organized outside of statutory education systems; in these settings, the participants come together to participate in non-compulsory educational activities (Sefton-Green, 2006). Arts or community-based organizations are typically those whose goal it is to create a

“youth civic sphere” (p. 3). As such Arts based organizations are often successful in creating a space in which positive learning and development can occur, the goal being the outcome of learning in practice (p. 14).

Fine, Weis, Centrie and Roberts (2000) have argued that there are two conceptual pillars necessary in particular, for urban spaces that create ‘recuperative’ spaces and ‘activist joints’ where explicitly political work can occur (p. 133). These include the possibility for transforming their own material conditions in transitory, enabling or mobilizing ways, and to permit new ways to “produce common sense and re-imagine social possibilities” (ibid). As such, these criteria reiterate the conditions de Castell, Bryson, and Jenson (2002) argue are necessary for authentic forms of production.

Street Spirits theatre is an example of such a non-formal, Arts based environment. Its artistic director, Andrew, is also less of a teacher and more of a facilitator. However, the same might be said for the features of the Northern High Alt Ed classroom: while it was contained within the school building, it might be characterized as a ‘non formal’ learning environment within a more formally structured one. Its teacher, Maggee Starr also operates as a facilitator for learning.

The strengths of these programs is that their structure and components have made it a place in which otherwise unsuccessful or non conforming students or youth have been able to demonstrate their capacity to engage in important social and cultural work. Both environments permitted the possible for learning in practice, that is, that learning is essentially seen as something highly integral to the interests, needs and concerns of its members. Learning is also seen as a process of co-construction; where both adult and youth are seen and considered as experts, knowledgeable, and essential to the

collaborative ways in which learning is accomplished. Both sites illustrate the kind of warm, safe, and caring environments that make risk taking possible. They also value the out-of-school knowledge that these youth bring to their participation in the program. The power/knowledge framework in these sites is one that configures knowledge sharing as central to their practice.

This kind of learning environment is an example of an alternative space in which cultural models of learning were given priority. This orientation to learning may well provide a more supportive environment for civic learning. Indeed, that seems to have been born out in this study. The capacity for work and play accomplished by the youth at these sites were examples of what can be accomplished when the learning context and learner subjectivities become central to the ways in which learning activities are planned and executed. As such, these non-formal learning environments provide the context in which allow for the reconceptualization that Sexias (2000) envisioned for social studies educators.

### **9.6.2 The potential of the new civics curriculum**

The introduction of a new curriculum at the high school level in civics education provides a potential opportunity for the re-development of approaches we take in schools to working on questions of civic or social agency. Teachers who are determined to create relevant spaces for creative inquiry in which youth might be afforded the potential for exploring, through their own subjectivities, what is important to them and the complexities and difficulties of living and participating in a richly diverse social world can take advantage of this curriculum's stated purpose and use it as a vehicle for change.

Continued investigation of how particular practices and activities provide affordances for exploring self and social understandings, particularly in arts based and technologically based activities seems to have significant promise. The idea of productive pedagogies explored in this study provides a fruitful area for additional inquiry. The use of the digital camera provided some initial insights into how technology might be introduced into classrooms where teachers and youth can engage as co-learners and potentially enable youth to become more self-reflexive in their approaches to questions of social justice, equity and moral worth. As a constitutive practice, it adds an important tool into the repertoire of the social justice educator.

### **9.6.3 The persistence of discourse**

Probably the most compelling work of this study has come from the analysis of the discourses of the young participants; in particular, how Discourses or metanarratives persist over time, and how they are repeated continuously in the discursive patterns of everyday utterances. This, in my view, is the most important area of work then for citizenship or social justice educators: how can we pedagogically consider the questions of persistence and performative effects in discourses? Eschewing the model of the transformative intellectual as teacher, we need to look for the ways in which we can trouble or irritate dialogue so that these persistent and often oppressing discourses can be revealed and countered. This is consistent with de Castell, Bryson and Jenson's (2002) notion of unpacking oppressive discourses as a condition which allows for productive and agentive activity. What might that look like in a classroom or non-formal educative site?

This work needs to centre on the deconstruction and questioning of dominant beliefs and in particular, the conversations that might seem just ordinary, but carry with

them the histories and contemporary traces of repressive discourses. This can be an important role for the teacher: to question and critique the simple solutions, the ease by which we assuage our consciences by thinking “I give to that cause” or saying “I’ve got a great current events program and my students are really talking about the issues of the day”. de Castell and Bryson (1997) call this a pedagogy that works from an “out of bounds” orientation, a commitment to speaking about the difficult, the impossible, the dangerous and the ugly, not unlike the story Jade told about youth drinking themselves into a stupor late at night on the anonymous urban streets of northern British Columbia.

In chapter seven I talked about Mia’s attempts to reconfigure the discourse of leadership, and her efforts at articulating how she was both included and excluded by its framework. What’s important about this conversation is that it engaged openly with competing ideas: encouraging such questioning and evaluative practices must become the central work of educators. This of course means providing the kinds of supportive classroom environments, communities of practice, if you will, that seek to dislodge assumptions.

It might be that such work is not possible in schools: certainly I saw the potential of the Alt Ed classroom as a place for this kind of work. As an already marginalized and out of bounds space it afforded a potential for using such practices that perhaps most mainstream classrooms does not. And with the current climate of schools, where communities and interest groups lobby schools to “stay out of controversial topics”, and the degree to which teachers fear the consequences of doing active social and political work (McGregor, 2002), perhaps I’ll have to reluctantly agree that out-of-school spaces provide a potential that schooled spaces cannot.



Teachers also need to engage in the messy work of unpacking their own discourses and embedded beliefs: deconstructing our own values and looking to find the ways in which our experiences have constructed our ways of viewing the world, particular the structures and practices of schooling, which persist in our own thinking and approaches to working with youth. Until teachers are prepared to do that, little will change in classrooms as models of transmission—both of civic knowledge and values—is an easier road than the difficult, scary and sometimes gut wrenching nature of an out-of-bounds pedagogy.

But the work can't end with teachers, rather it must become a practice we model and encourage our students to adopt. I am reminded of my time at Street Spirits, when one youth made an assumption about gay kids in a discussion about how to develop a play about homophobia. It wasn't Andrew, the director of the company who said anything, it was another member. Evan said:

You might be able to talk like that at your house or with your friends, but not here. Here, you'll be challenged when you make statements like that. All of us—we won't put up with that. We've struggled with what it means to be oppressed, and how to show that in our plays. We can't necessarily know someone else's pain, but we know our own. And we can't have you acting in a way that wrecks that.

The enactments and practices of agency detailed in this study, make it possible to consider how the civically informed subject might be reconceptualized as sociopolitical agent, always socially, culturally and historically located, always acting from somewhere, informed by his/her histories, experiences, social and cultural resources, within a field of action. In re-considering agency as a field of relations among social actors, objects, practices and discourses, then the work of educators and youth as co-constructors of

knowledge must be to focus on how our subjectivities, understandings and readings of the world are implicitly a part of our political and social actions, providing a site in which we might open up these complexities to broader consideration, allowing for the possibility of transformative change. This recursively dynamic process emphasizes the construction and re-construction of active social agents rather than agents as products of schooled and reproduced performances.

The implications of this work offer a significant challenge to the ways in which we currently conceptualize and practice approaches to political or civic education and sociopolitical learning. Our response, as educators and activists, it seems to me, needs to be more about exploring with youth the ways in which cultural tools, such as the digital technologies explored in this chapter, afford the potential for altering our pedagogical approaches to learning, sense making, identity construction and sociopolitical action. If our goal is to enable the production of active sociopolitical agents, then our efforts must look to the ways in which that can be facilitated through a deepened understanding of how tools and contexts are as central to activity as the human subject.

Leslie: “Change, real change, always has to come from within. Whether the person chooses to change or not, you can’t force that on anyone. It gives them a tool to see within themselves, to see what they need to change and to see outside of themselves at what is going on in their community that maybe... they can help change”.

## APPENDIX

Number	Description of image
1	An Asian business man, an angled gaze towards viewer while standing in front of photo of older Asian man
2	A white male, in a business suit, carrying papers, striding up a staircase
3	A young Asian girl, dressed in a school uniform, looking at viewer
4	A Tibetan monk, surrounded by other monks, engaged in conversation
5	A young hiker, moving across a wooded landscape
6	A white male, hugging a woman, with a baby clearly visible in his arms. He is wearing a white naval uniform; the baby has a white naval hat on his/her head. The male's gaze is towards something outside of the photo, but not at the viewer.
7	An Asian adolescent, arms crossed, standing in front of Canadian flag, gaze directed at viewer
8	An East Asian man, elderly, head and shoulder shot, gaze directed at viewer
9	A Latino woman in a long dress, sitting in front of produce and warehouse, gaze directed at viewer
10	A white male, riding a motor bike, wearing a helmet, tattoo on arm
11	An aboriginal woman, in traditional dress, standing on top of a ridge, gazing into the distance
12	A white male, wearing an all black suit and shirt, and sunglasses, gazing directly at viewer (black and white image)
13	An old man, partly standing in the shadow, mouth pinched, heavily wrinkled, an angled gaze toward viewer
14	A group of East Asian women, standing closely together, some in Saris, several with nose and ear piercing. One woman at the front has her hand over her heart. All eyes are gazing towards something not visible in photo
15	A Latino male child, wearing a colorful hat and ragged jeans with holes in the knees, squatted against a pink painted concrete wall, smiling directly toward the viewer
16	Two white young women, likely mid 20's, standing back to back, arms crossed. One is wearing a skirt and is largely dressed in red. The other is wearing shades of blue, in long pants. There is a concrete building in the background. They are smiling into the camera.

17	A black woman is standing in a room, dressed in a green shirt and sweater, wearing glasses. She is holding a book. She is surrounded by piles of books and floor to ceiling book shelves, all filled with books. She is smiling and looking directly at the audience.
18	A young adolescent male, seated, but leaning slightly forward. His sleeves are rolled up; a watch is visible. He is wearing a blue shirt and blue jeans. He is looking directly at the audience and smiling.
19	A group of men working on the frame of a house. Several are wearing what look like straw hats. It appears to be a construction site of some kind.
20	A middle aged woman is standing in front of a large reptilian fossil on a wall. She is smiling on an angle into the camera. She is wearing a dark green blouse.
21	There is a small boy running in front of a graffiti covered wall. His arms are stretched in front of him. The graffiti is of a green tank and a soldier in fatigues and carrying a machine gun.
22	A close up of a white male, with white hair, his head/shoulders are mostly visible as he is resting his chin in his hand. He is wearing a suit and tie. His gaze is focused on something outside of the image.
23	A white male religious leader, wearing a black robe and white collar. He has a beard and a moustache, mostly grey and white. He is gazing upward.
24	A black and white photo of a woman in a long dress and hat, typical of early 20 <sup>th</sup> century. She is marching beside a group of armed men, in uniforms and helmets. One is carrying an American flag. A number of the male marchers appear to be black. 19 <sup>th</sup> century. She is gazing in the direction of the march, however several of the soldiers are looking at her.
25	A man is parading on a sidewalk in a downtown area. He is carrying a sign over his shoulder which reads "its coming back". He is middle aged, has a beard and moustache. Others are walking past him, so one in the photo appears to be paying attention to him. He is gazing at something at a distance outside of the photo.

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