



NO PLACE LIKE HOME: SEXUALITY, COMMUNITY, AND IDENTITY AMONG STREET-INVOLVED “QUEER AND QUESTIONING” YOUTH

SUZANNE DE CASTELL *Simon Fraser University*
JENNIFER JENSON *York University*

ABSTRACT. This paper reports on a short-term ethnographic participatory action research project that engaged urban Canadian, street-involved “queer and questioning” youth in a multi-media enabled inquiry into peer housing and support needs. The “Pridehouse Project” (<http://www.sfu.ca/pridehouse>) was initiated by, and accountable to, a community-based housing support group. These responsibilities raised central critical questions about education, epistemology, and ethics in identity-based, socially activist, research. The dual role of ethnography as both research and pedagogy is here illustrated, and the educational value of productive activity-based learning in non-formal settings, particularly for youth inhabiting the margins of mainstream social life, is argued for.

IL N'Y A RIEN COMME CHEZ SOI : SEXUALITÉ, COMMUNAUTÉ, ET IDENTITÉ CHEZ LES JEUNES « GAIS ET EN QUÊTE D'IDENTITÉ » DANS LA RUE

RÉSUMÉ. Cet essai décrit un projet de recherche action ethnographique participative à court terme qui a impliqué des jeunes « gais et en quête d'identité » canadiens urbains lors d'une enquête multimédia au sujet des logements d'entraide et des besoins de soutien. Le Pridehouse Project (<http://www.sfu.ca/pridehouse>) a été mis sur pied par un groupe d'entraide au logement fondé sur la communauté et ce projet est responsable devant ce groupe. Les responsabilités du projet ont soulevé des questions critiques et essentielles à propos de l'enseignement, de l'épistémologie et de l'éthique au sein de la recherche active sociale fondée sur l'identité. Le double rôle de l'ethnographie en tant que recherche et pédagogie est illustré ici, tout comme est discutée la valeur éducative de l'apprentissage productif articulé sur des activités dans un cadre informel, particulièrement pour les jeunes en marge de la vie sociale conventionnelle.

The Pridehouse Project was a short term, ethnographically based, peer-to-peer study to identify the conditions and assess the needs of street-involved “queer and questioning” youth. “Home” was the heart of this project, whose

primary purpose was to determine the kind of housing street-involved queer youth most wanted and needed. Their views about and experiences of sexuality, identity and community were intended to inform and enrich the project's assessment of needs and its substantive recommendations. So we asked our participants to talk about, draw, photograph, video, write about, and imagine "home": homes they had experienced, their present "home." and the kind of home they envisaged in which they might survive and thrive. Not primarily an academic study, its purpose was to establish a basis for fundraising to aid in the creation of designated housing for an overlooked and underserved population of street-involved lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT) youth who find themselves on the fringes of, or unable to fit in to, existing institutions and structures of support.

The study was solicited and sponsored by the Pride Care Society (a Vancouver-based society promoting dedicated housing for LGBT street kids), and supported by Human Resources Development Canada. Partners and collaborators in this study included: Save the Children Canada, a child-centred development agency whose aim is to assist, enable and empower children, families and communities; The McCreary Center Society, an organization focusing on research and action concerned with the health of BC youth; Status of Women Canada, whose mandate is to promote gender equity; and The Access to Media Education Society (AMES), a registered non-profit society dedicated to helping people cultivate individual, group and mass communications skills that will enable them to express themselves through the media arts.

Through these partner organizations, we sought to bring together academic researchers, university students and current and former street-involved youth with the explicit goal of developing housing specifically for LGBT marginalized youth. At the same time, we sought to advantage the street-based community we were working with as much as we possibly could, through training, through paying and feeding those involved in the project, through night-time excursions to give out food, hot drinks, and condoms and through a lengthy and often arduous process of "checking in" weekly as the project progressed. In the end, we have been left with the difficult task of attempting to "re-tell" this complex and much needed-to-be-heard story without reducing its inherent tensions, its inevitable betrayals, or its schisms through the most familiar scripts for reporting on "data" (Visweswaren, 1994). Instead, we ask our readers to read (and think) along with us as we thematically address what we felt to be the most important stories to tell and as we attempt to "make sense" of what we experienced, saw, heard, read, and observed.¹

This paper, then, addresses the Pridehouse Project as it relates to youth, cultural production, and media literacy in three main ways: first, we describe our methodology, to show how approaching this work as an ethnographic

study, and using multi-literate forms for recording and reporting, created convincing research “stories” that are rarely told and that deserve a careful hearing. Second, we show how school-based discourses and textual practices can not only be powerfully disenfranchising for a population already marginalized, but can also actively disregard other forms and functions of literate meaning-making that might better support productive and empowering self-understanding and agency. Third, we offer a comparative analysis of two specific kinds of discursive productions, school-like and “street-wise,” and suggest ways they differ functionally as “literate” practice. The paper concludes by arguing that with far too few formal educational opportunities or institutional support-structures for LGBT youth, there is great promise in the educational contributions of explicitly “activist” community organizations for the education of sexually marginalized youth who continue to be under-served by mainstream, purportedly inclusive and “public” schooling. In reporting on this project, we are guided by Shirley Heath’s vision of “ethnographer learning” (Heath, 1983, p. 327), by James Gee’s educational theory of primary and secondary discursive formations (Gee, 1989, p. 8; Gee, 2001, p. 719), by “queer theory” in education (Bryson & de Castell, 1993; Britzman, 1998; Hodges, 1998) and by arguments advanced for a pedagogy of “multiliteracies” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Mills, 2005, p. 73), which we both build appreciatively upon, but also critique and try to extend.

We began this study with the understanding that among Canadian street-involved youth at risk of illness, homelessness, violence, and suicide are children and youth whose sexuality, whether self-asserted as “queer” or so assigned by others, renders them more likely than their peers to “fall through the cracks” of existing service provision (Chand & Thompson, 1997; CS/RESORS, 2001, p. 9; Fitzgerald, 1995). Such youth are far more likely than their peers to experience bullying and violence at school and to “drop out” of school prematurely (Stover, 1992, p. 5; Nichols, 1999, p. 511), to suffer bodily and sexual violence, to be alienated from family members, to be “kicked out” of their family homes and to migrate to street-based survival (Tharinger & Wells, 2000, p. 162; Rew et al., 2005, p. 36). Being queer has never been much of a status symbol, and for most of us, there are real dangers associated with making it public that one’s sexuality diverges from the mainstream (de Castell & Bryson, 1998b). Our research team, therefore, consisted of an initial group of 12 (two left during the initial week’s training), all of whom self-identified as “queer or questioning.” Half of the team were university graduate students, and half community-based “experiential” youth knowledgeable about street survival. Two of the university-based graduate student research team, moreover, had themselves considerable acquaintance with and knowledge of street-based cultures.

We used peer-researchers and a participatory action-research process. A preliminary literature survey and document analysis (policy, founding docu-

ments of service agencies, service provision guidelines, etc.) was followed by peer-facilitated focus groups, interviews, ethnographic observation, and video-documentary research and production. In addition, a weekly late-night delivery of hot food and snacks to youth on or working the streets provided valuable opportunities both to support as well as to hear from those within the target population, likely to be at greatest risk of violence, homelessness, illness and addictions. Being the group least likely to seek mainstream supports and services, they are, therefore, youth whose voices and perspectives are least likely to be heard.

Over a five month period, a range of ways of looking at and for information on LGBT youth living on the streets of Vancouver was employed in order to capture as wide and varied a data set as possible, and to try to determine which research approaches were most productive and appropriate. Methods included all of the following: individual and group interviews, observations, photographs, survey data, documentary analysis, reviews of research literature, focus groups, art-based activities, video and audio recordings. The questions we used to guide fieldwork were collaboratively revisited and redefined several times in the early stages of the fieldwork, before final approval by the research team as a whole (see <http://www.pridehouse.org> for more details).

Ethnography as pedagogy

Shirley Heath's research in linguistic anthropology has described and demonstrated how training people in ethnographic research methods involves actually equipping them with powerful "higher order" literacy skills at the same time as it puts literacy to work for them in a way that is clearly "functional" (see Heath, 1983, Chapter 9). To look at ethnography solely as a research method for generating knowledge about social life, however, is to miss what *else* Heath's work makes available to educators: a view of ethnography, not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself insofar as it instantiates a powerful pedagogy for the development and mobilization of literate competences.

In the Pridehouse Project, we built upon this understanding of ethnography as pedagogy in providing research training to a diverse team of youth, all of whom self-identified as "queer or questioning." As this was a federally funded community-based program which required – as integral to the project – a training and "capacity-building" component, both street-based and university-based youth spent a full week in a workshop to develop the research skills they would employ in the field. This team then worked together over ten weeks in a research apprenticeship (led by two senior university-based graduate student researchers) in ethnographic research methods, supported by weekly "team-building" meetings where that week's fieldwork was discussed, new skills were workshopped, discussions about problems and priorities took place, and the next week's work was mapped out. It was at these weekly

meetings that a survey was developed, ethnographic video work was viewed, and routine administrative issues were covered. This was the one time each week when the entire team assembled to work together. The remainder of the time, the team of eight researcher-trainees (both street and university-based) worked (for pay), normally in pairs, making increasingly challenging site observations and recording these in field notes and images, conducting interviews and focus groups, designing, then administering a semi-structured questionnaire, and conducting video-based research. It's important to understand that these research-trainees were themselves producing the research: they were not being "taught about" research, but learning through DOING research. Their job – and they were paid – was not to "tell their own stories," although of course some of this happened, but primarily to find effective and ethical ways to discover and to "tell" the stories of their near-peers: sexual minority youth "at risk" of homelessness.

In the course of learning and then applying their developing research skills in the field, all team members wrote extensive field notes and analytical notes, devised interview and survey questions, transcribed interviews, logged videos, created storyboards, composed and recorded music for the video's soundtrack, and kept notes and records on everything from locations, to consent forms, to activity logs to expense sheets. For the community-based youth in particular, the levels and kinds of reading, writing and representation they did as researchers likely far exceeded anything done since leaving school, perhaps even during it.

In the next section, we describe some of the interesting and complexly powerful discourses that emerged from the production of this range of multiliterate research texts by the university-based and street-based researchers, their subjects and themselves *as* subjects. We believe that their accounting, and our (re)telling here, demonstrates a labyrinthine and necessarily problematic orientation to our (the researchers') own presumptions about sexual identity, both in its naming and in action.²

Literacy, schooling and "meaning making"

The kinds of reading, writing and representation, as well as their functions for, and uses by, our street-based participants, were markedly different from those of their school-based counterparts, in both form and content. The focal point of the research project, the central question posed to street-involved youth, was about the kind of "home" they would most want. The project provided media tools and training to represent the information and ideas novice researchers were gathering in ways that moved beyond traditional academic literacies – which for many disenfranchised persons have worked less *for* than *against* them. Far from prohibiting discussion of LGBT lives³ this study centrally positioned sexually marginalized youth as social subjects entitled to housing and support equivalent to that of their mainstream peers.

Helpful to elucidate the educational significance of this repositioning⁴ is James Gee's discussion of the importance of perspective-taking and identity in the acquisition of powerful secondary discourses, that is, dominant "discourses of power" (Delpit, 1995), acquired in contact with social institutions beyond the family, in schools, churches, and state institutions, in this case primarily social service, health and welfare organizations, harnessed to critical analyses of "legitimate peripheral participation" enabled by queer theory. The "participation" of queer students in the "public" school (within which, however, such students are not legitimately a part of its "public") (Ibanez-Carrasco & Meiners, 2004; Jenson, 2004), requires them to assume a position of illegitimacy, invisibility, non-existence, as a condition of their always only apparent "participation" in the linguistic and material practices of teaching and learning that circulate there (Van de Ven, 1994). This fractured and fracturing kind of seeming-participation Hodges (1998) characterizes as an "agonized compromise," "when a person is engaged in doing and yet is withdrawing from an identification with the practice."⁵ The "identificatory possibilities" (Britzman, 1998; Hodges, 1998) thereby afforded to queer students in schools (along with other "mainstream" heteronormative institutions) effectively relegates sexual minority students to the status on non-participants: they DIS-identify (Hodges, 1998) with the community of practice accomplished within the normative context of the classroom, nominally "participating" in material practices which, however, disqualify queers as legitimate subjects, subjects for whom, therefore, no subjectively significant "meaning" can be made from these activities of learning. When queer students' identificatory possibilities are as NON-existent beings or, to borrow Britzman's terms, as "lost subjects," what forms of "meaning" can be expected to be made through literate schooling?

How might youth in such agonized subject positions be afforded means of learning which might actually engage them with "discourses of power" in such a way as to permit real and usable connections with their own identities and their own lives? Using "ethnography as pedagogy" appeared to us an extremely effective way to provide these marginalized youth access to and opportunities with and within a powerful secondary discourse, that of community-based activist research. High-status academic discourses of research share the transformative efficacy of hegemonic "languages of power" (Delpit, 1997, p. 6) insofar as they ("counter-hegemonically") name, challenge and contest these dominant discourses. So explicitly *activist* ethnographic research purposes harnessed to ethnographic practices could supply a well-elaborated secondary discourse which, while being "public" in character, would not be ideologically "colonized" and constrained in the ways mainstream school, church and state discourses are.

In this section, we show how participants differently mobilized languages of power around three thematic nodes: future, identity and "home." Our discus-

sion offers one possible interpretive lens for viewing the discursive cultural practices of these marginalized youth, and we suggest that the ways they talk about, indeed, theorize, or as Paulo Freire put it, “read their world,” are best construed as engagements in and with “literate” practice/s. A tendency to overlook the ways in which literacy is put to work in articulating an intelligible world for oneself, perhaps encouraged by formal schooling’s attention to the (measurable) surface features of literate competence, encourages a correlative neglect of the *analytical* affordances of literate competence in making “critical consciousness” possible. The “meanings” that are made and made up in the re-citation of normatively sanctioned accounts are in this way far less deeply scrutinized than are the surface features of their narration; we would urge, however, that the ability or inability to “read” and to “write” the real conditions of one’s own life, to “have an analysis” which works on and within one’s own lived conditions, is integral to any form of literacy worth educational attention. Put another way, we are arguing for a notion of “multiliteracies” which is attentive to and inclusive of not just more and “other” literate practices like reading a webpage, making a film, or writing a blog, but is equally attentive to those communicative practices which we can deploy in relation to institutional structures of power, and in our everyday lived experiences, for example, in the theorization of one’s own sexuality, community and identity.

Activist communities offer potential sites for a reworking of the hegemonic discourses of the state. The Pridehouse Project thus gave participants access to an authoritative secondary discourse – “research” – a social language and a semiotic domain, which took up and directly contested the dominant discourses of school, church and state. These “official discourses,” which most typically consign sexual minority youth to marginalized and disenfranchised positions from which no roads to success can be described or imagined, are therefore not much use for pursuing these students’ goals in practical or achievable ways.⁶ Identity is a fundamental element of any discourse (Gee, 2003), but the dominant discourses of school, church and state largely deny speaking positions to LGBT-identified youth, whose consequent work of denial acts to erode self-awareness and self-understanding. Lipkin (1999), for example, contends that “homosexual youth are deterred from self-awareness by the twin ogres of denial and admonishment.” Whereas most of the concern about the impacts of heteronormativity on youth has been over affective and behavioural harms and dangers such as low self esteem, self-destructiveness and alienation (e.g., Nichols, 1999), there are socio-cognitive implications with which education ought even more seriously to contend. In the absence of opportunities within a public discourse which legitimates their identities as speaking positions from which productive and fulfilling social futures can be named, imagined and pursued, we saw youth construct out of the therapeutic and pathologizing discourses appropriated and misappropriated from

schools, churches and social service organizations, a fantastical imaginary for charting their course to a successful social future. This is not to say that they *necessarily* “mistook” what their futures might realistically entail, but more that thinking about and theorizing about a “future” was highly problematic for this population, from the standpoint of their lived realities. Consider these two examples: PJ and Janice.

Interviewer: Where do you see yourself a year from now?

PJ: Where do I see myself being in one year? Well hopefully holding a manager position in retail maybe Le Chateau or Aldo, because I have, cause... you know... come on, *if you're going to apply at a place you need to wear what they're selling, and I just finally got a whole new Aldo outfit except the shoes*, but that's ok, I hope to be holding a manager position...

Janice: I am actually planning... I have had no luck out here getting work so within the next year I am planning on hitchhiking to either Banff or the Okanagan and getting a job out there. I am going to find one. *I am determined I am going to work my butt off and do what ever I have to do and, you know, and I am going to get a tattoo with my first paycheck in celebration* as in I did it, this is myself, I accomplished it. I am half way through grade 11, I would like to finish that and start my grade 12, I want to have my own place I want to get back into the community and give back to the community yah, but I hope to be off the streets.

What we have read in the above examples is our own misguided question born out of a kind of institutional obligation to “help” in some future setting. But the lived realities of these (and other) street-based youth we spoke to, made their responses seem unreal, inauthentic, and – from the standpoint of their daily lives – remote and scarcely imaginable. We argue that in relation to their futures, these youth are ventriloquating secondary discourses (Marker, 2003, p. 373; de Castell, 1993) characterized by a kind of “magical realism.” For example, PJ’s partly correct, partly fantastic construction, that “first you get the clothes (and shoes) and then you get the job as manager of Aldo [a shoe store]” offers up “insider knowledge” in a savvy patter about the importance of branding for retail sales staff, harnessed awkwardly to an obviously flawed causal account of how to get a managerial position, but all driven by the understanding that what is expected of him is to “get a real job.” In Janice’s edgier, redemptive narrative, moving to Banff (a mountain resort in Alberta, Canada) will transcend all of her obstacles to getting a job, including transcending her daily routine of panhandling and “hanging out” on the street. In a year, Janice and PJ story themselves as both performatively and bodily altered. Their narratives of transformation culminate for them in being marked bodily, publicly, affording visible testimony to their legitimation as productive workers.

The transcriptions above illustrate youth struggling to construct an identity from a position that is so far outside of the normalized, institutionalized

discourses they have encountered through social services and/or school that they are left ventriloquating projections of astonishing naiveté, whose pre-requisite conditions are connected to their lived actualities in only the most remote and metaphorical of terms. Janice and PJ are discursively unable to construct trajectories that seem plausible in the “real world” – the “real world” seems to be a romanticized, inaccessible imaginary which both very much know to be outside the conditions of lived actuality they themselves had earlier narrated.⁷

Given this conceptual gap between symbolic self-representation and material lived experience, it is worth asking what kind of a problem this is, and for whom. Is this an educational lack, a problem to be remediated by more or better learning about school subjects, or career preparation and job searches and life skills? By therapy? Counseling? If the youth in this study report that their school lives have been at best a “don’t ask don’t tell” proposition, and at worst a violent and demeaning process of victimization, what *could* school-based learning of the kinds currently available to them do to help young people like these articulate realistic and viable trajectories for moving from their present conditions of economic and social disenfranchisement, into a satisfying, self-supporting life? When and how will public schools work to create legitimating connections for these youth between their material conditions, their “lived actualities” and the “narratives of redemption” (de Castell, 1993) invited and sometimes required in exchange for social and educational services? What kinds of accounts do we require and what do we prohibit in school-based considerations of students’ “social futures”? Does it matter *more* in public school classrooms that we get children to tell the right kinds of stories (see, relatedly, Michaels, 1986), than that these stories actually map in any intelligible way for them onto the lives they are in fact living? And if schools have thus far been unable to seriously entertain the existence let alone the worth of non-normative sexual identifications and practices, how can we expect children in these “unintelligible” positions and locations to make sense of lived conditions they experience but are prohibited from bringing into public discourse?⁸ Compelling public school participation by these youth might look from a socio-cognitive standpoint more like enforced under-development than education, impeding rather than assisting then in better understanding, and acting in and on, their lived conditions and real prospects.

Getting smart/er

How do we understand the process of discursive construction or, indeed, of interpellation, that casts one as a sexual being as the precondition of becoming a subject of sexuality, one whose subject-status initiates agency into the chain of subjection? (Butler, 1999, p. 19)

Gay political theory has emphasized that there is no automatic connection between homosexual desire and individual identity. (Watney, 2002, p. 21)

Sexual orientation is sometimes just a practice, not a key part of an identity. (“Speedy”)

When not constrained by the normative demands of “careers and futures” discourses, by contrast, and specifically in their considerations about sexuality and identity – topics prohibited from school-based communicative practices – we found informants engaging in a much more nuanced, better-developed and immeasurably more sophisticated theoretical discourse. In relation to themselves and their peer community, in relation to their lived actualities, to their daily experiences, they (discursively) positioned *economics* squarely at the heart of youth exploitation in general and “queer” sexual identity in particular.⁹ Put another way, on the subject of themselves, in relation to their everyday lived experience, not the “normalizing” good news story that they were asked to imagine and recite, we heard a very different “story.” Here, among the main findings of this research, was the basis of its own deconstruction: what began as a study of (essentialized) identity and community (LGBT “queer and questioning” youth) gradually became a study of the economics and politics of sexual exchange involving minors.

On this topic, youth were more than eloquent, articulate and insightful about how and why the project’s presumptions about sexuality and identity were naïve, ill informed, confused, and flawed. We came to understand too, through our questionnaires, observations, casual conversations and formal interviews with “queer” street-involved youth, both that and how sexuality is a right with a price tag (Rubin & Butler, 1994). Said a chilled, exhausted but very high (and seemingly heterosexual) young man shivering in a blanket at the food van around 3 am, “We’re *all* queer out here; we’re queer for money.”

That economics and sexual identities and activities are even more tightly bound together for street-involved young women was noted repeatedly in both interviews and field-based observations. A university-based researcher wrote of this connection between sexual identity and economic activity in her field notes: “They [women] are prostituted and have sex with men... they have so many other things to deal with it’s unlikely they really get to pay any attention to their sexuality.” Another noted, “A couple of women asked me what does ‘out’ mean? The fact that *even the language around being gay or lesbian is foreign* to them only further indicates that there is no room for it on the streets.” This is a sexual economy in which we found not a single mention of women as purchasers of sexual services from youth, and in which many young men who in fact identify as heterosexual routinely provide sexual services to gay men. It is an economy driven by male purchasing power (Jeffreys, 2004), where there is little payoff in, and less room for, explicit lesbian identification: “You have to keep it [being a lesbian] more secret,” one informant explained, “you’re in survival mode all the time when you’re on the street, so you’re not gonna do anything that will get your ass

kicked or get your ass killed. It's not something you talk about, it's not something I even thought a lot about, except with my street sister, cause all I was thinking about was using and keeping my ass alive."

Sexual identity, then, especially for women, was something that was most typically deferred, and in many cases not connected to personal desires and wants, but driven by a clear need to avoid danger and stay alive. Responding to a team meeting discussion over why we were finding so few lesbians among street-involved youth, a community-based researcher's field notes recorded: "I have yet to meet one [woman] who considered herself lesbian or bisexual while still on the street, yet I've met several who have come out after exiting street life." Another community-based researcher (male) tried to explain, "I feel that her [a friend] being a queer female ...working in the trade... is much different than being a queer male... It's just the pressure of having to be this stereotypical woman is too much for her. Gay men don't have that kind of pressure being put on them."

Many informants simply refused identity ascriptions altogether: for instance, one young man told us "I don't believe in labels because they are very degrading, how is anybody different from anybody else? They are all humans, all made up of the same matter...everybody deserves love." Identity "labels" for these youth meant trouble, exclusion, danger and, said another "I wouldn't wish a gay life on anybody." One young man, who survived by hustling in gay bars, was far indeed from ascribing that identity to himself: "The label I put on myself is I'm a people person. I like boys and girls. But the label society puts on me is that I'm bisexual. And the label everybody else puts on me is that I'm a bisexual drug addict."

"Home"

If "home" means anything beyond an address, a physical structure in which to live, if "home" refers to a place where one finds support, security, happiness, few of these youth had much experience of it. From our participants' interviews, drawings, photographs, videos, narratives, and the hopes and dreams they voiced, we learned that one of the most significant places that "queer" identity worked against their safety and survival was at "home." We learned that the places of greatest safety and support for "straight" youth turned out to be, for sexually marginalized youth, the places of greatest danger. For these youth, there really is "no place like home" in terms of their experiences of violence. Sources of violence for both males and females, but more so in all cases for females,¹⁰ were parents (68% of women had experienced violence from their parents), relationships (62%) and school (58%). Nor was there much to hope for safety from law enforcement officers: violence at the hands of the police reportedly exceeded, for both males and females, their experiences of violence at the hands of Johns. One young woman told

us “I had my legs run over by their [police] bikes after I had fallen asleep on the sidewalk.”

Any hopes that solidarity between queer adults and youth might provide some measure of protection from so hostile a world were dashed as one after another informant told stories of being inducted by adults into excessive drug and alcohol consumption as vulnerable youth sought out gay bars “where we could go, and be gay, and safe.” Both in these decidedly *un*protective bars and clubs within the adult gay community, and more disturbingly, within gay community services and programs for LGBT youth, reports of predation by adults were common. Some youth even stated that they now avoided such “supportive environments” because they meant dealing with sexually predatory staff members. So even in these “community” contexts, as much was risked as gained by assenting to LGBT identification.

Complicating this study’s central concepts of sexuality and identity destabilized, in turn, assumptions about what safe and secure housing for this group of youth might look like. One young woman told us, “Most of the people I lived in group homes with were *homophobic* ...I’d have to listen to them make all these gay jokes, and *I just wouldn’t say anything*... *I’d have been the butt of every joke*.” And yet when asked about housing specifically for queer youth, we heard responses like, “I think it would be better to have a queer positive place rather than just for queer because *you don’t want to single people out because that’s what people are doing to us*, you know.” We learned from our informants about the perilously fine line between the dangers of affirming a queer identity, and the anxieties of enforced concealment, and we learned as well that it is naïve to presume any strong “basis of unity” between and among the diverse “community” of LGBT youth, for whom levels and kinds of drug use were often as important in determining what they considered safe and secure housing, as sexuality or sexual practice. Entrenched differences in gender privilege between men and women, moreover, and, especially for those transgendered youth whose sexual identity was *most* hazardously inflected by race (Pinar, 2003, p. 273), made our initial project appear unintelligible and certainly under-theorized.

Consider this marked difference, though, in analytical and expressive competence across discursive domains: that of “futures,” about which youth seemed painfully and dangerously naïve, and that of “sexualities,” (including “identity” and “community”) about which they demonstrated analyses far more sophisticated than our own.

What we think we are seeing here are some consequences of a species of enforced infantilism which happens when people are prohibited from talking and thinking from their own lived conditions, as queer youth are in schools, most homes, churches, community centres, even foster homes and shelters. By contrast, we found that when youth are engaged as knowledgeable, thought-

ful, and above all, legitimate social actors with a contribution to make to their own and their peers' well-being, as they were in the Pridehouse Project, their creativity, resourcefulness and similar indications of considerable talent, intelligence, ability and understanding come very clearly into play.

We draw from field-based observations and reports, exemplified in the foregoing, a new respect for the educational contributions, actual, but especially *potential*, of community-based activist organizations in general, and participatory ethnographic research in particular, for remediating a social disadvantage which the public school system continues to uphold in relation to sexual minority youth (Lipkin, 1999, p. 5). However, *unlike* families, schools, churches, the police, and social welfare services, many progressive community organizations will recognize, accept and even embrace the conditions and identities which marginalized youth occupy, and offer a respectful theorization of their experience which locates them as ethical and rational beings, instead of superimposing upon their ill-fitting lives such dominant discourses as those of "careers" and "futures," de-forming their discursive and analytical opportunities, and co-producing thereby the kind of incoherent jibberish PJ and Janice ventriloquated – or else an outright refusal of these constructs, as exemplified by one young informant, who said, "Where do I see myself being a year from today? Dead, I hope."

Discourses of power – of "self-realization" and "careers," of education and lifestyles and "planning for one's future" – are superimposed on, but too often discontinuous with, the identities, positions and conditions of these and many other marginalized youth. The largely unrecognized and greatly under-appreciated challenge that progressive organizations stand ready to meet, and that the public school has declared "out of bounds," is how to devise and mobilize discourses that map intelligibly on to the discourses and practices which "make sense" for youth like these, and offer pragmatic discourses and conceptual "bridges" between their lived actualities and possible futures towards which they might intelligently and realistically work. The mystifying stories we invite and encourage students to tell, first in classrooms and then in "lifeskills" programs, about what they hope to do and how they will "get there," provide marginalized youth such as those in our study with little more than a tissue of lies to paper over the widening gaps between themselves and their "mainstream" peers, and support intellectual regression more than the educational knowledge in whose name they are enacted. Where schools and teachers are unwilling or unable to hear and to take seriously the actualities of some students' lives, without imposing additional punitive consequences for making such discourses "public," what can schools seriously purport to offer them in terms of preparation for "social futures"?

Why multiliteracies?

Multimodal re-conceptualizations of literacy and its practices are particularly important, we believe, for populations with whom conventional text-based literacy has been used largely to discipline and punish, through schools, family services, the courts and child welfare systems. In this project, therefore, we looked to other forms of literacy to create a bridge between the kinds of representation youth saw to be meaningful and useful to them, and those more conventional, text-based literacies. Community-based, peer-to-peer, activist-oriented ethnographic video work¹¹ became for us, the primary means for developing powerfully functional literate competence, as did inviting our subjects (through trial and error, at times) to make sense of and read their world/s in ways in which they may have been unable to before.

With youth for whom formal mainstream schooling had been a hostile and exclusionary environment, we hoped community-based activist work which engaged non-traditional forms of literate practice could assist participants to think and act from the concrete particularities of their own personal and immediate circumstances, to theorize those conditions in a powerful and legitimate secondary discourse, and to find or to devise practical means of engaging with and rising above them – something that school should offer them but does not. For this reason, we both embrace, but also *contest* the “multiliteracies” framework as it has been this far conceptualized.

Working with this population of sexually marginalized street involved youth helped us to see very clearly the difficulties of enacting a multiliteracies pedagogy which makes insufficiently elaborated distinctions between and among forms and functions of its multiple literate practices. Invoking “multiplicity” implies an *additive* approach to literacy. To be sure, it is no longer enough to simply write about the many print-based and school-based forms of literacy, as computer and communication-based media continue to drive a demand for emergent literacies across multiple media of representation, reflection and expression. But the trouble we encountered with this conceptual expansion of “literacy” is that it allows forms to remain singular – “visual literacy,” “technology literacy,” “internet literacy” – under the umbrella of multiplicity, and, more importantly for us, it represents as symmetrical, elements which function quite differently for differently positioned subjects under unequally structured, asymmetrical relations of access, legitimacy and control.

An additive perspective on literacy is in serious danger of overlooking the fact that positionality, the material conditions of legitimized location and voice within any given discourse, produces a hierarchical structuring within and across a field of alternative media which a “multiliteracies pedagogy” risks representing as simply a variety – of which, presumably, the greater the number, the better.

Resisting this more isolating approach, we saw the media and the practices employed by ourselves and our research team as instead “convergent.” Our model, that is, was finally not of “multiple” but of *converging* literacies: text, image, video, sound, drawings, pictures, questions, answers were woven powerfully and purposefully together, through multimodal production (videos, websites, interactive reporting): a convergence of literate competences across genres, forms and media, *mobilized for the practical purposes of improving the conditions of ones life*. Literacy so seen is far more and other than an “additive” affair.

This project, then, embraced media of representation, cognition and expression beyond those language-based forms privileged by the state and school apparatuses which have a chequered past for these youth, and privileged instead image capture, image editing, image production, visual narrative, video production, video editing and sound production and editing. Through their research training, video production training, and guided fieldwork, youth researchers engaged in sophisticated secondary discourses which gave them access to conceptualizations they were not hearing anywhere else and to identities which they had not been able to occupy anywhere else (e.g., queer expert).¹²

Had we not made other “literate” forms available for both collecting “data” and for reporting on the research, moreover, it is doubtful whether we would have seen the deeply complex theorizations about identity, sexuality and even research reporting which we have briefly described here. That community-based, street involved youth were both researchers and subjects, that they used a range of multiliterate methodologies for *both* data collection and, just as importantly, reporting on the research (video, sound, pictures, filed notes, interviews, questionnaires) inverted the usual hierarchy between researcher and researched and put powerfully in their own hands, the right, and even obligation to tell a story of their *own*, one which is best viewed, rather than described (see video on <http://www.pridehouse.org>).

Our analysis of the project and the descriptions of street-life we’ve articulated thus far, present a complex, nuanced, and indeed, more “troubled” conception of sexual identity and street life than is to be found in other studies of this same population (Brennan, Huizinga, & Elliot, 1978, p. 131; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993, p. 136; Branigan & Caputo, 1993; Caputo et al, 1994a; CS/RESORS, 2001, p. 29). As demonstrated in a previous discussion of this project, interview-based findings may be significantly at odds with image-based responses (e.g. drawings), group discussions, and self-administered questionnaires (de Castell & Bryson, 1998b; de Castell & Jenson, 2004; Hill, 2001).

Meaning what?

In a period when the infrastructure of progressive organizations is being systematically dismantled through the eradication of core funding to activist, community-based groups (Casella, 2002, p. 357), and as hegemonic institutions continue to exclude and marginalize all youth outside the mainstream, it will be important for educators to look increasingly beyond the public school and to learn to identify, value, and actively support the unique educational contributions of community-based organizations in which youth are invited to play an active and productive role. These organizations can offer youth sidelined by the public school system, rich discursive and ideological resources capable of supporting them in finding their *own* way home.¹³ From this perspective it becomes clear that, just as ethnography is much more than a research method to generate knowledge about its subjects, activist community organizations can be more than service providers for the “clients” who receive their services.

And one important way that services might be “enhanced” is through programs which look something like this project: giving youth an opportunity to train and work with their near peers to develop their own critical accounts of their lives and their futures – to be able to do so *outside* the institutional “system” which has already pigeon-holed them, and to devise counter-narratives which are more and other than just “magical thinking.” The kind of production-based work we asked of youth resulted in critiques that would not have happened in the “abstract” had we asked them simply to tell us stories about their lives. But in their active construction and production of a video, of a questionnaire, of field notes, and so on, we saw engaged and insightful critique of the daily lives of street-involved queer youth made possible, we contend, by harnessing a multimodal study to a peer-based consultation and community-development project. The logical next step is to make possible a study of the *implementation* of peer-supported dedicated housing for queer youth. It becomes necessary first to create it.

What is “educational research”?

Philosopher of Education Richard S. Peters used to insist that, “If a process is not itself educational, the product cannot be an education.” The same argument can be advanced about educational research. A tolerably clear distinction, and possibly a very helpful one, can be drawn between “education research” and “educational research.” The former, education research, is research *about* education: its subject is education, and its job is to investigate theories concepts and practices of education; the latter, educational research, is research *in* education, its subject is educating, and its concern is how best to accomplish that.¹⁴ In being situated within education, research is related to education constitutively, not instrumentally, as means to its end.

To find and make educational opportunities within activist community work, including both research and development, orthodoxies about the importance of “critical thinking” as the keystone of a “progressive pedagogy” might need to be re-thought, as might critical capabilities located within, and *subordinated* to, functional social action, particularly in concrete activities of production.¹⁵ In the Pridehouse Project, and in others besides and beyond it, a “production pedagogy” challenges presumptions of the priority of the critical in educational development and inverts the usual order of things, locating production as foundational to educational activity, and critical thinking as built upon it (Kress, 2004). For the youth in this study, we contend, their active design, development and production of a promotional video to fundraise for designated housing helped them access and develop more powerful cognitive, social and political analyses than any amount of the kinds of essentially passive, logocentric ventriloquations of teacher-approved discourses which in most schools and classrooms today we misrecognize as “critical thinking,” and which in the end leaves everything as it is, however elegantly and “critically” it may be spoken or written about.¹⁶

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NOTES

1. We depart here from an in depth description of the study in order to focus on the importance of multi-literate practices for the purpose of this paper. For a full account of this study, including a much more detailed overview of the project, see <http://www.pridehouse.org>.
2. For an alternative version of this “story,” see the Pridehouse video at <http://www.pridehouse.org>.
3. Given that there is no biological reproduction of LGBT children, observed Monique Wittig (personal communication): “The wonder is how we have survived at all, given that everything around us has conspired to render us non-existent.”
4. People have not had the same opportunity to learn unless they have had equivalent experiences not just with texts, but with embodied experiences in a given semiotic domain that allow them to situate meanings for words and phrases in that domain (Gee, 2003, p. 38).
5. As Hodges explains, “Non-participation constitutes an identificatory moment where a person is accommodating in participation and yet is experiencing an exclusion from any “normative,” or unproblematic identification with practice. Quite crucially, non-participation describes conflict in the space between activity and identification, where there is a moment of multiplicitous identifications, or, *identificatory possibilities*. This “space” emerges in the midst of participation as a conflict which engages both practice and the identificatory relations associated with the practice; a split between a person’s activities and their relations with participation, a rupture between what a person is actually doing, and how a person finds herself located in the ‘community’” (Hodges, 1998, p. 272).
6. Simon Watney provocatively named homophobia as the last bastion of legitimate, socially acceptable hatred: “overt racism and sexism are decreasingly culturally legitimate, whilst

profound homophobia remains endemic and goes largely unremarked by non-gays" (2002, p. 15). Whatever its relative ranking in a hierarchy of oppressions, *sexuality* is instructively similar to race, and different from economic status, in being "that which can never legitimately be bought out of." What this study tells more about are the many ways sexuality is trafficked.

7. Janice earlier in the interview recounts her "typical day" as waking up late, "panning" for meals and drugs, eating, panning again, hanging out and sleeping.
8. Exemplifying the physical effects of this institutionalized conceptual and communicative deformation, one young informant acknowledged that "I was terribly sexually abused by my grandfather and uncle... *But I didn't identify it as sexual abuse cuz I was gay...*"
9. The video online (<http://www.pridehouse.org>) makes especially clear contrasts between the sophisticated critical discourses on sexuality and identity participants have developed, and the naive and ungrounded ways they talk about those areas of life most closely aligned with mainstream conceptions of what constitutes "success" and "respectability."
10. This same gender difference in home-based violence was found in an earlier study (Webber, 1991, p. 91) which found that 80% of street-involved girls and 17% of boys suffered sexual abuse at home.
11. "Building a house for pride," made by the research team, is online at <http://www.pridehouse.org>.
12. Research team members, for example, were active in producing the study's main findings, and their own words and their contributions were explicitly acknowledged. They also researched, scripted, filmed and edited the project video.
13. As one project to return street youth to their families and communities found out, these ways might best come from youth themselves, many of whom left home because they were thrown out, abused at home, or harassed into leaving. That returning home is any kind of solution for youth is not an assumption we can reliably make, however ideologically appealing it might be.
14. See Lave and Wenger's (1991) discussion of learning *about* a subject and learning *within* it, and underpinning this Ryle's distinction between knowing "how" and "that," informs the position advanced here.
15. Explains Jim Gee of "producer-like" literacies: "writers (in the sense of people who can write texts that are recognisably part of a particular social practice) potentially make better readers (people who can understand texts from or about a given social practice). Note that by 'writers' here I do not mean people who can just write down words appropriate to a particular practice such as field biology. I mean people who can write a text that field biologists would recognize as an acceptable text within their family of social practices." (2003, p. 28)
16. And for those of us privileged to be onlookers in this process, this project has, as well something to offer: a less alienating, more respectful, transparent and intrinsically worthwhile approach to educational research and scholarship. One colleague, after reading the Pridehouse Report, emailed: "The idea of community support, research and advocacy being combined depending on the individual/community's need... makes social research way more personally comfortable for me than a lot of what I've found – it got me thinking in a different way about research – which may actually be a better fit...."

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SUZANNE DE CASTELL is a professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. She works principally in literacy, new media and educational technology studies as these are informed by critical deconstructive analyses of gender, sexualities and "social justice." She has published widely across these fields, and has been senior editor for books with Cambridge University Press (*Literacy, society and schooling*), Falmer Press (*Language, authority and criticism*), and SUNY Press (*Radical interventions*).

JENNIFER JENSON is an associate professor of technology and pedagogy in the Faculty of Education at York University. She specializes in gender/technology studies, media and cultural studies, has done extensive educational technology policy research and writing, including a book *Policy unplugged* with McGill-Queen's and has published widely in these fields. She is currently completing a 3-year study of girls' computer-game play, "Education, gender and gaming."

No place like home

SUZANNE DE CASTELL est professeure à la faculté des sciences de l'éducation de la Simon Fraser University. Elle se concentre principalement sur l'étude de la littératie, des nouveaux médias et des technologies éducatives étant donné que ces domaines reposent sur l'analyse critique déconstructive des genres, des sexualités et de la « justice sociale ». Elle a beaucoup publié dans ses domaines d'expertise et a dirigé la rédaction à la Cambridge University Press (*Literacy, society and schooling*), la Falmer Press (*Language, authority and criticism*) et la SUNY Press (*Radical interventions*).

JENNIFER JENSON est professeure agrégée en technologie et en pédagogie à la faculté des sciences de l'éducation de la York University. Elle se spécialise en études des genres/technologies, ainsi que des médias et des cultures. Elle a fait des recherches poussées et a beaucoup écrit dans ces domaines, dont le livre *Policy unplugged* paru à McGill-Queen's. Elle termine actuellement une étude de trois ans, intitulée « Education, gender and gaming », portant sur les habitudes de jeu sur ordinateur des filles.

