

PORTRAITS OF STREET CORNER CULTURE

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**PORTRAITS OF STREET CORNER CULTURE**

**by**

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Education**

**Faculty of Graduate Studies  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
St. John's, Newfoundland  
March 1997**

*Dedicated to my father*

*George Martin*

*whose wisdom of the world  
love of people  
endless curiosity  
and commitment to community life  
has been a true inspiration.*

## Abstract

This study will closely examine youth culture primarily from a street corner site in downtown St. John's Newfoundland. The methods used will follow critical ethnographic traditions utilizing individual interviews, group discussions, informal observation, and participation in the group culture. These tools will be used to draw out the personal and collective stories of young people who congregate at this street corner site. The concept of street corner culture is used to place this study outside the context of any institution and within the milieu of youth. The investigation of youth culture occurs in their space and from their vantage point. The street corner here is a place away from family, school, work and the authority of adults who may shape the interaction of the group. Explored in this context are the dimensions of youth experience within the culture of the group. Extracted from the context are the self-representations of young people which depict their social world.

The portrait of youth culture developed through the study will identify existing gaps and potential bridges between youth experience, school cultures, and pedagogical practice. It is my hope that in capturing the "voices" of these young people they may contribute to knowledge about youth and fuel new directions in the process of educational change.

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## Chapter 1: Framework of the Study

Young people today are part of a world in vital need of restoration and repair. They are bombarded by warnings of impending environmental disaster, unprecedented economic hardship, scarce opportunities for even marginal employment, in situations of often unstable family and social life. From the mall food courts and variety store doorways, to the video arcades and fast food joints, young people act out their understandings of who and what they are in relation to others and the world.

It is precisely these young individuals who are struggling in our schools with teachers who are often inadequately prepared to cope with them (Doyle, 1993). High drop out rates, violent outbursts and chronic disinterest are cited by teachers as symptoms of this lost generation, while for many young people school is a place which structures learning in a way which they describe as meaningless and monotonous. Little connection is made to the context from which they come and the texture of their world (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985). Their opinions, stories, preferences, beliefs, values, sexuality, fears, inhibitions, and concerns are only marginally considered in the formulation and delivery of the education they receive.

As an educator in both formal and alternative educational settings I have had opportunities to work with youth labelled at-risk, disruptive, delayed, and learning disabled. In working with these young people and examining their opinions, thoughts, behaviours and interaction with others, I retooled my approach to teaching in order to help students succeed in what they may regard as an alien school environment. Many educators, however, express a deep frustration and even contempt for the teenage students in their classes, and display great

reluctance to change their approach in order to reach their young audience. The reasons often cited for this homeostasis are that teenagers need rigid structure in order to develop the social qualities of respect, responsibility, and obedience valued in our society. It is this gap between youth experience and values and our approach to education that has sparked this exploration of street corner culture.

### Literature Review

The concepts and notions explored in the literature such as culture, youth voice, context, experience and critical pedagogy will inform this critical ethnographic study.

### Culture

In examining the culture of any group one must first decide what culture is and how it may be expressed through both overt and subtle behaviour, language, symbols, shared meanings etc.. Culture is seen as the social relationships which exist in a group and how these are experienced and interpreted (Giroux, 1983). Jenks (1993a) views culture as "...patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour, acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values" (p. 36).

In the exploration and analysis of any cultural group it is vital to look for both the common meanings and also the evolution of new ways of expressing the culture. These two aspects represent the whole way of life of the group as well as the special processes of discovery and creative effort which occur within the group (Gray & McGuigan, 1993). It is important to ask

questions about both common purposes and deep personal meanings. According to Giroux (1983), any interrogation of culture must "...probe the invisible grid of context, inquire what unsaid propositions are assumed in the invisible and surprising external forms of cultural life" (p. 101). The context in which the culture exists becomes the framework from which to examine hidden meanings and observe cultural interaction.

### Youth Culture

The street corner has been co-opted by many young people as the terrain of freedom of movement and expression. It is within this context that youth culture is created, produced, and disseminated. The street corner site then becomes an essential context to study in understanding youth culture (Lamont & Fournier, 1992). Interaction which occurs in this environment is significant in that it reveals an unedited version of youth voice. According to Willis (1990), "...young people are all the time expressing or attempting to express something about their actual potential or cultural significance" (p. 206). The texture of youth culture is demonstrated in the "...multitude of ways in which young people use, humanize, decorate and invest with meanings their common and immediate life spaces and social practices" (Willis, 1990, p. 207). This is the realm of the living common culture. It is the "ordinary in the extraordinary" aspects of daily life in which the critical fragments of youth culture may be found.

Youth cultures are often on the fringe of the dominant culture and exist within the realm of popular culture. Young people are both consumers and producers of popular forms of cultural expression such as music, dance, and art. The content of this expression cannot be understood as prespecified, but is produced within youth culture to sustain the differences between what

constitutes the dominant culture and what does not (Giroux, 1992). An example of a youth subcultural group which expresses this cultural distinction between dominant and subordinate groups is punk culture. Giroux (1992), suggests that punk culture, "partly expresses social practices that contain the basis for interrogating and struggling to overthrow all those forms of human behaviour in which difference becomes the basis for subjecting human beings to forms of degradation, enslavement, and exploitation" (p. 191). The boundaries between high and popular culture are socially constructed through the artistic expressions, behaviours, and values of these and other subcultural groups (Lamont & Fournier, 1992). The contexts and texture of popular culture should then be seen as legitimate aspects of the everyday lives of young people and be analysed as a primary force in shaping their values and beliefs (Giroux, 1991).

Recent technological advances and social changes in our society are reflected in the evolution of youth culture. Freire (1981) believes that, "our advanced technological society is rapidly making objects of most of us and subtly programming us into conformity to the logic of its system" (p. 14). In this age of social transition and rapid technological development, young people often resist the logic transmitted by society, withdraw from it, yet are moulded by it. Concepts arising out of the literature such as resistance, cultural capital, and hegemony map out some of the ways young people both react to and are acted upon by the wider society. These are powerful conceptual tools to help us understand youth culture. Therefore, in studying youth culture we should attempt to articulate not only the experiences and practices that are distinctive to this group, but also examine how these represent both passive or oppressive and transformative relationships with others and within other environments (Giroux, 1981).

### Hegemony

Young people are commonly believed to be lacking discipline and therefore needing to be controlled. According to Apple (1982), attempts to control may be expressed as hegemonic pressure to orchestrate the wills of subordinates into harmony with the established order of power. The power of hegemony is subtle, it persuades, coaxes, rewards, chastises, but never coerces. It organizes consent and allows a limited social space for acceptable alternatives (Apple, 1982). In societal efforts to control young people, hegemonic processes may be at work. This should be considered in studying the group and individual behaviour of young people both on the street corner and across other contexts.

### Resistance

Resistance among young people is often a resolve not to be diminished in the face of oppression. In the experience of McLaren (1993), youth resistance is "a fight against the erasure of their street corner gestures and rhythms; it is to ritually construct a transitional world that can erase the past...to forge new self-presentation of greater potency" (p. 168). Resistance in the classroom separates the offender from the corporate identity as a student, and links them with their marginalized cultural group (McLaren, 1993). On the street corner resistance may surface as a reaction to outside interference, threats to group identity, or break down in group cohesion.

### Cultural and Subcultural Capital

Cultural capital is a measure of the value placed on the cultural background of an individual (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This value is interpreted by those who interact with the



individual and affects how they are regarded and therefore treated by others. Differences in the possession of cultural capital appear to have a significant impact on an individual's success (Apple, 1982). In late twentieth century America, the cultural capital of corporations has replaced many of the human forms of cultural capital (Giroux, 1994). As young people eat, buy, and wear the logos of large corporations, these symbols become cultural representations of importance within the group. Youth cultures express and build their culture around corporate symbols and give them social value (Giroux, 1994). An illusion of power seems to be created by young people on the street who wear these appropriated cultural symbols, especially when they are first introduced. It appears that as they infiltrate the community and are appropriated by different subcultures, they are thrown off in a show of resistance to conformity and new symbols or styles take their place. Nike, Coke, Labatts, Converse, and many other corporate giants are very much a part, however diverse and transient, of the fabric of youth cultures.

Also important in the study of youth and culture is the notion of subcultural capital. Thornton (1995) distinguishes subcultural capital as being not as class-bound as cultural capital, it rather fuels rebellion against or escape from the trappings of parental class (Thornton, 1995). Both cultural and subcultural capital are important forces at work within the "life-worlds" of youth.

### Youth Context and Experience

The context and social experience of youth in the 90s shapes their view of and attitude towards schooling, family life, peers, and the future. The contemporary context in which young people build understandings and opinions about the world has been affected by the loss of

credence they give to defined values and inherited bases for social meaning, membership and security (Willis, 1990). This widespread crisis of cultural values may diminish a crucial foundation for the creation and sustenance of individual and group identities (Willis, 1990). For a good proportion of young people there is, "no longer a sense of a 'whole culture' with allocated places and shared, universal value systems" (Willis, 1990, p. 210). The loss of ready values and models of duty and meaning may create situations of unsettled passage into adulthood.

Symptomatic of this loss of security in tradition is the rather aimless behaviour exhibited by youth gangs or groups. Willis (1990) believes that, through this aimlessness, young people are struggling desperately to attain heightened awareness, insight, and control over their lives. Control becomes a vital feature and is enhanced by remaining mysterious to those outside their cultural group. The giving up of anonymity through making their private and lived voices the object of public scrutiny is of grave concern to many young people (Giroux & Simon, 1989). According to Hebdige (1988), youth subcultures are always both a demand to be seen and a refusal to be watched and understood, they are "hiding in the light" (p. 91).

### Youth Experience and Schooling

As they enter school culture young people "carry their life experiences as an accumulation of collective memories which provide them with a sense of familiarity, identity, and practical knowledge" (Giroux, 1991, p. 129). The student's experience of school becomes intertwined with their lives at home and on the street. As young people move through the various social contexts of school, family, and peers they must make adaptations especially when the contexts are governed by different values and norms. According to Phelan, Davidson & Cao

(1991) little study has been done on these multiple worlds of young people and how they interact.

The recognition of youth experience as relevant to the learning process is gaining prominence in education literature. Even though youth experience may be somewhat “raw, limited in scope, and unfruitful”, it makes up the distinctive voice of the individual and must be critically engaged so that they can remake or move beyond it (Giroux, 1992, p. 34). The complex histories and stories which give meaning to the lives of students, are never innocent, therefore they must be recognized for both their contradictions as well as for their possibilities. (Giroux, 1991).

There is ample evidence that while the actions of pupils, collectively and individually, impinge on the formal school structure this role has remained largely unrecognized and unexamined (Angus, 1986). If the educational system is going to give student experience a central place in school curriculum, classroom practices, and teaching, educators will have to redefine how and what knowledge and experience is valued. “For many students school culture has little to do with either their histories or their interests...it becomes something to be endured and from which to escape” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985, p. 148).

Denial of the value and significance of student experience within schooling leads to student alienation and withdrawal. Students tend to resist any process within school culture which disempowers them. “Unequal, disabling education is symbolic violence against them, which they answer with their own skills of resistance - silence, disruption, non-performance, absence, vandalism etc..” (Shor, 1986, p. 183). Accompanying this resistance to meaningless schooling is student withdrawal into the youth culture. Here they invest all the subjective energies denied in the classroom (Shor, 1986).

For most young people it is essential that teachers and administrators are at least sympathetic to their lived cultural forms such as popular music and street corner codes (McLaren, 1993). It is important then, for teachers to integrate into their pedagogies an understanding of how identification with youth culture outside the classroom, impinges on a student's identity and future vision. Popular culture is one medium through which this understanding may be reached. Popular cultural forms should be analyzed as a primary force in shaping student values and beliefs and become a serious object of study in the official curriculum. Through the acceptance of popular culture as the forum for student voice, teachers can help students explore the ideologies, cultural codes, and social practices that repress alternative understandings of their own society, culture, and world (Giroux, 1991). According to Barnes (1992), inclusion of youth experience and culture in schooling is vital as it is deeply implicated in the complex and delicate project of learning.

### Design of the Study

#### Rationale

This critical ethnographic study explored contemporary youth culture at a specific street corner site. An ethnographic approach allowed me to access the beliefs, value systems, perceptions etc. of young people in a way that produced "thick description" of youth culture (Gertz cited in Anderson, 1989). The multiple layers of data collected by using methods such as personal interviews, focus groups, field observations, personal reflections, and informal dialogue with youth provided this type of cultural description (Harvey, 1990). A critical approach to

ethnography incorporates these personal fragments into the wider social, cultural, and political context of the school setting (Harvey, 1990). To assist in developing tools for this study I have completed a review of relevant literature on culture, contemporary youth context and experience, schooling, and pedagogy. These readings establish a foundation for the study and point to other contexts and forces which may shape the study group.

### Data Collection Methods

The primary study site is the War Memorial in downtown St. John's, Newfoundland. This street corner site is a popular hangout spot for young people during the summer months. At this site the following methods of data collection were carried out:

#### 1) Individual interviews

Informal and open ended interviews were undertaken with consenting young people at the street corner site. These discussions probed general areas such as; backgrounds, interests, values/beliefs, spirituality, skills, aspirations, sexuality, local and global concerns etc.. Notes of these sessions were made at the time of or shortly following the session, or they were audio-taped and transcribed later. Further topics for discussion originated from comments made by study participants during the interview.

Disposable cameras were given to interested young people with very liberal instructions to capture their interpretations of youth culture on film. Each photograph was titled and described by the photographers in audio-taped interviews. This method proved to enrich the interview process by providing lift-off points for in-depth discussion and openings for spontaneous and creative insights into the culture of the community. (See sample of photographs in Appendix A)

## 2) Focus groups

Small groups of young people volunteered to meet together at the study site or other location to discuss a topic in which they expressed interest such as, "What role do friends play in your life?". Questions for subsequent focus groups emerged from the previous discussion or from field observations. These focus group meetings were audio-taped and transcribed later.

## 3) Participant Observation

The group was observed daily at the street corner site from late June until late August 1995. All observations were recorded in the form of field notes as they occurred. Descriptions of activity, group interaction, language, dress, symbols, body language, and emerging trends and changes over time were recorded in detail. Also, a daily journal was kept detailing my own involvements with the study group including actions and personal reflections on the study. Over the course of the study I became more of a participant than an observer of the cultural life of young people at the site. Reflections in my daily journal became more frequent than field note observations as my participation within the group increased.

## 4) Personal Expressions

Individual expressions of study group members in the form of journal writing, poetry, art work, and music were collected to add depth to the description of individuals. This dimension provides additional texture to the analysis of group behaviour and interaction as well.

## 5) Participation Beyond the Site

Part of daily participation in the culture required movement with young people beyond the study site. Visits to bars, pool halls, restaurants, parks and beaches extended observations and interactions into a wider social context.

### Study Group

The study focused entirely on the group of young people who frequent the War Memorial site. Approximately sixty individuals formed the group under observation at the site (will be called youth community), half of which were involved in interviews, informal chats, participated in focus groups (will be called study participants). Access to this group was gained by establishing contacts prior to study with individuals who are regular visitors to the site. Visits were made to groups such as Youth for Social Justice (youth activist group), Choices for Youth (program for “at-risk” youth), and Brother T.I. Murphy Centre (alternative school) to explain the intention of the study and to establish contacts within the youth community prior to commencement of the study. These key contacts or informants assisted in my transition into the community, making establishing a rapport and gaining acceptance within the youth community easier. Participants in these sessions were provided with written information and they signed a consent form for involvement in the study. (see sample consent form Appendix B)

Each of the study participants was given an arbitrary fictitious name for use in the thesis report to protect their anonymity. If the name of the individual was not known at the time of the study, any quotations or comments referred to in the thesis report are marked (unknown). Permission was given by participants to include photographs taken by members of the study group, and original works such as poetry and songs were also submitted by the authors for inclusion in the study. Excerpts from field notes and journal entries are used to provide vivid description of events and behaviours.

### Data Analysis

Some basic analysis and categorization of data occurred during the study period (June-August). Transcribed notes, field notes, and journal entries were loosely categorized for easy access under headings such as quotations, personal interviews, observations etc. These were reviewed on an ongoing basis and coded using descriptive headings or key words used by study participants themselves. This maximized my ability to include even obscure communications in a manner that utilized youth voice in the selection of meaningful categories.

In the later phase of the analysis, after completion of the study period, the descriptions of youth culture were linked to the current literature on school culture and critical pedagogy. This placed the youth culture under study into a socio-historically specific milieu (Harvey, 1990). Practical suggestions to confront current educational problems were then drawn from the links between youth and school culture.

### Chapter Summary

The intention of the study is to draw a rich portrait of youth culture within downtown St. John's using the voices and representations of young people. Insights gained from the young people themselves are used to identify gaps and then construct potential bridges between youth and school cultures. It is my hope that these bridges can make relationships and learning partnerships with young people more meaningful and considerate.



## Chapter 2: Shifting of Relationships

Human communities typically consist of networks upon networks of people associating with one another. The youth community in downtown St. John's is no exception. It forms an intricate web of social groups which intersect and diverge at moments in the course of their dynamic evolution. These groups over time create an extensive portfolio of their struggles, investments, and commitments that is passed down and retooled by members through interaction within and across social borders. Defined subcultures then emerge complete with distinct identities and criteria for membership. Young people's movements within and between these subcultural groups marks the complex journey towards clarifying values, shaping beliefs, plotting future directions, and building self concept. Examination of the shifting of relationships within street corner life must undergird any attempts at connecting youth experience with desire, motivation, and attitude within school cultures.

### Community Description

The War Memorial is a central meeting place for young people in downtown St. John's. It borders the sidewalk and main thoroughfare of Duckworth Street on one side and affords an open view to the harbour on the other. A large monument is centrally located on the street side surrounded by a cement platform area. The platform is walled with iron railings and has two benches of cement built into adjacent sides. Steps lead down on the harbour side to landscaped gardens and shady sloping land which embraces the War Memorial itself.

Young people begin to come down when the weather warms up in late April or May and

stay through to September or October. The activity falls off sharply when many of the young people return to school. The War Memorial (will be called the site or upper site) is used for socializing, playing hacky sack, skateboarding, and smoking cigarettes, or marijuana. During the summer months, it is probably the most active congregation site for young people in the downtown area (especially in fair weather). From my informal observations the young people seem to form a relatively peaceful community with small pockets of interaction and activity occurring simultaneously around the site.

Young people flow into and out of the site, staying for a few minutes to several hours at a stretch. Groups and individuals float around within the site to different locations over the course of the day. There is no set allocation of space or territory for activity or socializing, or for any particular group. There is, however, a common trend which will be discussed later. The site starts to come to life at around 2:00 p.m. and reaches a peak at between 9:00-11:00 p.m.. At peak times 30 or more young people congregate around the War Memorial. Morning hours at the site seem to be when tourists visit to take pictures of the monument or older residents and business people in the downtown sit and have coffee.

The following entry into my daily journal may etch a feeling of the living space of this community.

It's a blue sky day...sizzle eggs on the pavement. The lower site is busy with tourists who seem to be invading the space of the skater dudes. Robust women with toddlers don't seem to interest them. They flip up their boards and hike it down Water Street. Clearly they see this as an invasion of their territory, but they aren't going to scrap for it today. Their usual approach is to be as loud and obnoxious as possible until the intruders

resistance wears thin and they strut away muttering about "those damn teenagers".

Young people will, as they always do, arrive gradually asking, "have you seen so-and-so" or "what are ya at, how's the stuff you're writing going, have you found out much yet". These are all familiar queries. I've stopped anticipating a regular ebb or flow, a structured pattern of existence here. Some days are quiet then suddenly a cluster of teens with hacky sack ooze onto the scene and the War Memorial becomes a playground, meeting place, coffee shop.

Layers of gum splotches melted into the granular stone surface of this monument signal their passing. How many cigarettes have been smoked here, bought for 5 or 10 cents a pop, traded, bummed, begged?. How many joints lit and inhaled while watching the world pass, icebergs melt in the harbour or float away? If we could only pull away the stone and witness the imprints of so many young feet in the fleshy underside of this place. This is knowing, the transformation of the young into new beings. (Journal Entry: July 10/95)

#### Youth Culture

Culture can be imagined as a roadmap in an evolving journey of survival, or as a river bed that creates its own form and direction over time due to a variety of influences. (Saravia-Shore & Arvizu cited in Hollins, 1996, p. 8)

It is with this image of culture in mind that the shifting relationships within the youth community are explored and interpreted. The roadmap of youth culture guides us throughout the youth community as it evolves within the wider context of downtown St. John's.

### Atmosphere

Daily existence at the site is very low key, almost static. Here are excerpts from my field notes and daily journal reflecting on my interaction with a group of fourteen year olds, after several weeks hanging out together.

We talk about horoscopes and how broke everyone is right now. Summer says she's bored with the scene, she smokes another cigarette, Dawn bums yet another draw from the butt. They say they have no plans for the weekend...nothing going on as usual. Robin bums a smoke, sucks briefly and loudly in, then blows out hard puffing out her cheeks. The smoke billows around us without entering her lungs. Our conversation meanders beyond my recollection. This apathetic trio is getting to me. They invited me here and now I make trivial small talk and they act half interested. "Where should we go now? Coco's (local restaurant) maybe, we can use the phone there for free" (Dawn). They drift off...I walk home in a haze sticky from the ice cream and smelling like stale smoke. (Field Notes: July 27/95)

An atmosphere of lethargy and mindlessness. A yearning to be pleasantly absent in your existence within this place. A waiting for time to envelope you, to create a free charge, a boost into oblivion. Why are they waiting? What happened to yearning, seeking,

exploring? Where is the energy, initiative, and brashness of youth? I have never felt so hopeless about the future. (Journal Entry: July 30/95)

These excerpts provide only a glimpse of my feelings at some points during the study. The overwhelming static nature of life at the site, however, pervaded the entire period of study. Individuals had few commitments and didn't seem cognizant of the time except when a parent was picking them up. It is evident that the amount of time spent hanging out at the site is not the same across the subcultural groups. Freaks and Art Fags (see Subcultures) tend to have more outside involvements and less time to hangout at the site, and their gathering seems more purposeful. They are often actively discussing issues or planning events.

#### Patterns of Relationships

Within the youth community the age range is approximately 10 to 25+ years old. It was surprising to me that several individuals who are an entrenched part of the downtown youth community are well beyond their teens. These individuals work in the downtown, do odd jobs for cash, or play in local bands and continue to make this site a hangout and gathering place. Mostly they keep to themselves but are well known by the younger people at the site.

There are also a few older males between 20 to 25 years of age who continue to interact regularly with younger teens downtown. These men play an interesting role in the lives of the younger individuals. They often act as money lenders, sources for cigarettes, food, and places to crash, purchasers of booze and drugs, and have connections within the downtown area. Their constant presence rather than any guidance or wisdom they provide seems to be of significance to

the community. They add a sense of continuity in a very changeable community atmosphere.

Tom a self-described “big brother” within the teen culture, towers over the group of young teens he surrounds himself with. At 22 years old he spends his days travelling between the War Memorial and the local coffee spots. He used to work nights as a bouncer, but now appears to exist on odd jobs. This excerpt from my field notes characterizes Tom’s relationship within a younger teen group.

One hot afternoon as a group of teenage girls flaked out on the War Memorial lawn, Tom arrives. Immediately he is invited by Fran to sit close to her. She rubs his back and he lies back on her. He quickly becomes the centre of attention and the spark in the conversation, joking about things and lightheartedly teasing the girls in a brotherly sort of way. He offers a cigarette to one of the girls in the group. Another lights his smoke for him. He seems in his element, completely at ease and confident of his status within this group.  
(Field Notes: August 2/95)

Another older male, Sam, presents a similar image. In this excerpt from my field notes I am sitting at a table in a cafe just before closing time, observing this interaction.

Sam, Fran and Sarah are sitting together, Sam eating a sloppy chicken burrito while Fran begs scraps. She’s broke again and living off the charity of others. Sam torments her until the last bite, gobbles it down then orders another and gives her half. Fran complains she didn’t get any of the cheese, her eyes sparkling devilishly, she pokes a finger into Sam’s soft flabby stomach. He rolls his eyes and grins. At 21 years of age he holds down a security guard job nights and hangs out downtown by day. (Field Notes: July 1/95)

As younger individuals mature and move away from the community to further education or jobs, this brotherly image of people like Tom and Sam seems to become cloudy, and their status within the community is questioned. These older downtowners begin to be viewed as lacking in ambition and motivation for success. Several comments to this effect were made in the local coffee shops and bars. Some of the older community members themselves transmit the feeling that if other possibilities existed they might not hangout with the younger crowd downtown as often.

Cote & Allahaar (1994) offer a possible explanation for the continued presence of post-teens within the milieu of teen culture. He suggests that young people in our society are afforded a "moratoria" on the formulation of their individual identity. This time-out is when young people are, "expected to sort out the components that will constitute their adult identity" (p. 74). Some youth utilize this time to search for a solid sense of self through identification with role models and by taking on new experiences at school, travelling, or joining clubs. For those individuals who feel alienated within the school environment, or who do not possess the economic ability to travel or pursue new experiences, this moratorium period may set them adrift in a state of confusion. Some seek out a sense of belonging with other drifters in sometimes radical subcultural groups. Cote & Allahaar (1994) suggest, "the longer they experience this confusion, the more difficult it becomes to develop the ego strength necessary to enact adult roles".

Within the study group the continued identification of older members with young and pre-teens may be related to their inability to take on adult roles outside the safety of the youth community. They seem to relate to younger members who are experiencing a transition or searching period. These teenagers create a climate of unconditional acceptance and validation for

older members. However, as young teens move away and stretch their sense of personal identity, they change their perspectives of the older members, and become critical of their affiliation with teens and perceived lack of motivation to work.

Patterns of interaction amongst teenagers within the youth community, however, demonstrate some age-related barriers to socialization and group membership, especially amongst males. There seems to be little interaction between young male teens (12 to 15 year olds) and older teens (16+ year olds). On occasion incidents occur which demonstrate a power hierarchy within the community based on age. This excerpt from my field notes describes an incident between younger and older males at the site.

This afternoon I observed an older group of males playing hacky sack and some younger male skaters off to the side of the memorial, smoking and talking. These groups didn't intermingle except when one older guy suddenly wrestled a younger male to the ground and took his skateboard. The younger kid didn't try to fight back, he just swore a lot and waited for his board to be returned. The tone seemed cool between the two groups and a healthy distance remained between them for the rest of the afternoon. This type of intimidation and social distancing was evident between older and young males across the study group. (Field Notes: June 23/95)

Interaction between older and younger teen girls is quietly accepting but not intimately inclusive. These groups will join in a game of hacky or borrow smokes, but usually sit and socialize separately. Female community members generally seem comfortable with age differences and are tolerant of the evolution of attitudes and behaviours across age groups.



## Status

Status seems to be accumulated with the number of years hanging out downtown. Teens new to the youth community must fit in and get connected with others quickly to gain acceptance. This early transition into the downtown culture seems to have become easier in recent years. Peter, who has been part of the downtown scene since 1987, reflects on the process of gaining acceptance downtown.

When people start coming down here now they can be accepted right away but back when I first started hanging out downtown it was totally different. People used to beat you up, they used to spit on you, make fun of you for like about a year or two and then if you hung out for that long, they'd know that you were true and you were not fake, not trying to pose or anything, then they'd be nice to you. (Peter)

Peter believes that if this initiation process were still in place, "a lot of people wouldn't be hanging out down here and it would be a lot better place". Peter feels that the challenge of earning respect over time prevented undesirables from joining the community in past years.

For many young people this site has been a consistent hangout spot for several seasons. They meet new friends here and introduce others to the downtown youth culture. The community then grows and changes with the flow of new young blood into the site and the departure of older ones bound for work, university, trade school, or to the mainland to find work. For those who continue to frequent downtown sites and interact with the youth community, they seem to enjoy a higher status and are shown respect by others. On occasion these individuals refer to their number of years downtown and label themselves "true downtowners". They distinguish

themselves from new entrants or “posers who just come downtown to be cool and fit in” (Terry).

True downtowners know the layers of people who have passed through and those who still return. Their net of contacts captures a multi-layer of age groups, backgrounds, and subcultural groups. They know Patrick or Zoe or Mr.F., or Tom, the older guys who have been hanging out at the War Memorial for almost a decade. They are “downtowners for good” (Patrick). The status afforded these individuals relates to their “social capital”. Thornton (1995) describes social capital as, not so much what you know but who you know, and who knows you within a community. “Connections in the form of friends, relations, associates and acquaintances can all bestow status” (Thornton, 1995, p.10). Older community members who have accumulated a high level of social capital seem to move more freely across subcultural boundaries, experience a greater degree access to events and parties, and are afforded more latitude in expression, dress, and attitude without being criticized.

### Class

Many of the individuals who visit the site do not live in the downtown area. They are dropped off and picked up by parents or friends and make the War Memorial their place to socialize. Some travel in from as far away as Flatrock, Portugal Cove, and the Goulds (10-20 km. distance).

My impressions of the backgrounds of individuals in this community is that they represent a blend of soci-economic levels and family configurations. Several young people, however, identify the socio-economic status of the community as mainly middle to upper class. One individual whose family exists on welfare sees young people downtown as mostly wealthy

even though they concoct a facade of poverty.

Most people that hang out down here are from middle class families, rich families. It's the same people that come up to you like 'oh man can you give me some money I'm poor'.

Like, I'm actually poor and they're just pretending to be poor. (Peter)

Paul, an 18 year old who has years of experience within the downtown culture, describes it as "a preppy monoculture, a melting pot, where individuals are indoctrinated into groups and moulded into conformity". He is especially disturbed by increasing affluence of the youth community downtown, which is cloaked by the lucrative rags worn by Skaters, Art Fags, and others (see Youth Subcultures). "These teenagers are upper class sucks who can go home to mommy at night and have them buy the expensive grunge and street gear, same as what I buy at the Salvation Army for fifty cents" (Paul). These sentiments are shared by other young people in difficult family and economic situations. They perceive a gap between themselves and other young people downtown who demonstrate rebellion and angst yet have money, supportive family, a safety net which makes their resistance seem hollow. These concerns have lead Paul and others to distance themselves from the youth community and remain on its fringes with others who don't feel they fit in. These individuals are sometimes referred to by others as "fringe dwellers".

Thornton (1995) describes the willfulness of youth cultures to transcend the class based dominant structure of society. "At one level they aspire to a more egalitarian and democratic world, while on the other hand classlessness is a strategy for transcending being classed" (p. 167). Many of the young people in the study group who are from wealthy families display an

eagerness to distance themselves from their parent's socio-economic status. These young people would dress down, talk about being broke, and slander other "upper class sucks" in order to create a persona of poverty which is more accepted amongst their peers. Through my interactions and observations across the subcultural groups there appears to be a commonly fashioned facade of classlessness where no one member can be identified as being more privileged than the others. Flaunting wealth is considered uncool here, yet having money is highly valued and brings with it a fair measure of status within the group.

Levinson, Foley & Holland (1996) introduce the concepts of "class culture", which is the culture associated with social position or socio-economic status, and "intimate culture", which refers to the culture of the social group (p. 22). Within the study group there appears to be a strong affiliation between individuals who share common social positions or class culture. Underprivileged youth tend to form tight, yet sometimes underground connections with other underprivileged youth within the community. Commitment to class culture seems, at moments, to override the commitment to the social cultural group or intimate culture. In times of tension between subcultural groups, or when divisive issues arise within the community, young people sharing the same working class roots often present a united front. This aspect of youth culture, class and relationships requires further study to solidify these initial interpretations.

### Unity

According to AI, an older downtowner, the War Memorial is not a community but "a bunch of cliquy groups with no unity". My observations support the sentiment that the collection of individuals who hangout at the War Memorial does not represent one unified group

of young people. Interaction generally occurs in pockets which do little intermingling. A pattern of interaction emerges as I observe their movements. There is a clustering on the west end of the site where mostly Art Fags and Freaks (see Youth Subcultures) hang out and play hacky sack. An older group stakes their claim on the east and harbour side, away from the bustle of the street. A few fringe dwellers sit or stand on the street side of the War Memorial and talk to passers by. Very little skateboarding occurs on the actual war monument. Young people at the site seem divided on whether skateboarding should be allowed at the upper site. On occasion the Skaters cruise up from the lower site to chat over the street side fence. These groups migrate throughout the site during the day, but a distinctness seems to remain in their location and groupings.

Young people at the site are also divided on some of the issues which effect the community. In a discussion we had about vandalism and littering at the War Memorial, Sarah expressed frustration about teenagers who cause trouble at the site and give the whole group a bad name. She described these “troublemakers” as individuals who have not bought into the spirit of respect which she feels is prevalent within the community. “They are rude to passers by and throw their junk on the ground for others to pick up” (Sarah). She laments that there is no united front presented by young people in terms of their territory and how it, and those visiting it, are treated.

### Ownership and Place

It may be easy to get the sense that the youth down here have no sense of ownership or connection to the War Memorial because they appear so laid back and transient. On occasion this notion was called into question. This is an excerpt from my field notes.

Two guys are priming the iron grates around the memorial for a new coat of paint. Upon noticing them, one of the young women says that their presence makes her feel nervous. She wants to know why they are here making changes to “our” place. Her tone is one of resentment over an intrusion into her living space. (Field Notes: July 27/95)

The War Memorial has remained over many years as the one consistent congregation spot for young people in the downtown. Its permanent structure and lack of private ownership allows young people freedom from restriction. Many of the other meeting places for youth are ephemeral. In the early summer, coffee shops, cafes, and games rooms are swarmed by groups of teens. They smoke, talk and joke loudly, and hangout for hours until vendors begin to place restrictions on their behaviour.

On one occasion when I commented on the boisterous crowd of teens who seemed to be taking over a newly opened cafe, Tanya explained. “We’re doing the usual thing, we take over a new place, hangout, wear out our welcome, then get kicked out. We’ll be finding another place soon”. This transient existence is seen as an inevitable cycle which is both self-inflicted and inherent in the intolerance of the adult world. “But we don’t give a shit”, Tanya adds.

Many of the downtown businesses are targeted as “non-youth friendly zones” and are boycotted by teens. Others are “cool places” where the owners and staff “love teenagers and want our business” (Fran). Young people tend to remain in places the least restrictions (especially on smoking), and where they are treated with respect.

### The Evolving Community

The type of young people who make downtown a hangout appears to be changing over time. Mark, a twenty-one year old who has been coming downtown since 1986, perceives a change in the behaviour of young people downtown. "I find a lot of kids going around becoming more obnoxious, they're becoming more rebellious". "Yeah young people are more obnoxious lately" (Eric). This perception is echoed by others who find the new entrants to the site louder, more destructive, and yet more apathetic. There is more talk of disunity and a widening gap amongst the subcultural groups.

John, paints a different picture of the new generation of youth congregating at the site. There is a bit of apathy around but I don't think it's any more than there ever was. I think there's always been a bit of apathy around...50 years ago I think there was apathetic teenagers. I'd say there are more like rednecks here than in like big cities like but I mean they're still just the same, there's assholes and then there's nice people. Like, I mean Toronto is full of scumbags too right. Here there's probably like more nice people per capita. Here you don't get the big city attitude, like teenagers in big cities are really messed up, they think they are all gangsters or stuff, they act like really tough and stuff. Here people are just a bit more laid back. (John)

The apparent boredom and destructiveness of some young people downtown may be a function of the lack of things to do. There is concern that there are fewer activities and places for young people to socialize in the downtown than in the past. People involved in the music scene comment on the erosion of all ages dances and shows in the downtown. "All ages shows can't

sell booze, so owners are not interested in hosting events because their profits are less” (Patrick).

This leaves young people with fewer options and outlets to gather and socialize.

### Youth Subcultures

Subcultures arise as attempts to resolve collectively experienced problems arising from contradictions in the social structure, and they generate a form of collective identity from which an individual identity can be achieved outside that ascribed by classes, education and occupation (Brake, 1980, p. vii).

The diverse nature of young people within the downtown community is readily apparent. Mike thinks of it as a “mini-world” with distinct subcultures with different interests, backgrounds, talents, opinions, values, and beliefs. The labels given these subcultures and descriptions of them are uniformly held by community members. These labels describe common characteristics or behaviours associated with group membership. Chris’s synopsis of the interaction of these subcultures draws clear boundaries between subcultural groups and represents one way of seeing and orienting oneself to others in the community.

...you’ve got your people that are into grunge music, you got your skaters and your skaters hate all the people into grunge music, your skaters hate everybody...then like you got people like small groups who listen to Hardcore, then the Freaks who are supposed to be so open minded are always the ones who poke fun at everybody. We don’t hang out with skaters, we don’t hang out with Art Fags, we hang out with ourselves. (Chris)



A rich portrait of Skaters, Art Fags, Donnies, Freaks, Skullies, Tall Socks Girls, and other subcultures emerges from the stories, jokes, photos, songs, and patterns of interaction on the street corner. Understanding the subcultures which exist is a vital part of understanding the wider youth culture. The following summaries of these subcultures are a combination of the voices of young people and observations of life on the street corner.

### Art Fags

Art Fags are really politically correct, you know, into peace, like boycott Nestle and all that kinda stuff. We're not into that stuff...vegetarian, eat tofu like I don't discriminate but then if your don't agree with them they...(looks exasperated and shrugs shoulders). (Peter)

"Art Fags" are frequently discussed and represent a fair number of individuals who are part of the youth community downtown. This group is defined by their artistic focus, lofty values, and preoccupation with the state of the world. "They sit around and drink a lot of coffee, complain about the world but don't really do anything about it" (Peter). Art Fags are often portrayed by others as hypocrites in that they advocate openness while being a tight, somewhat exclusive group. Brad feels that, "...a lot of those sort of people are supposed to be so politically correct but at the same time they're so close minded". Joe (a self-proclaimed Art Fag) defines an Art Fag as, "...someone who goes to all the plays at the LSPU Hall and has those big 50s glasses, pays too much for their clothes, and has nice shoes".

According to my observations and involvements with members of the Art Fag subculture, they appear to be active in community events and involved in issues of local concern. They

demonstrate initiative for change and display the uncommon ability to mobilize their members around a cause.

### Freaks

A Freak is anybody who is different. (Carl)

Closely linked to Art Fags and many times painted with the same brush are a subcultural group known as “Freaks”. This label is mostly given to individuals who are different in their dress, language, or beliefs. Many times the label is self-imposed by individuals who pride themselves on their unique qualities and wish to separate themselves from the other subcultures. It is not unusual in conversation for a young person to say “yeah, I’m a Freak”, or “I was the first Freak in my school” (Tammy). The label carries with it the identification of a different mind set which places them apart from, “...people who hang out at Churchill Square or out around the bay...or at a convenience store” (Tom).

Freaks generally believe they go against the status quo by confronting issues and attitudes like sexism, racism, or environmental degradation, in order to raise consciousness and promote change. They are, “someone who gives a shit” (Joe). The main focus is to break down barriers and stereotypes by dressing the way they want and engage others in dialogue about issues. Being who you are, expressing yourself, believing in yourself, dealing with problems, and keeping an open mind are some of the self-professed qualities of the Freak subculture.

Freaks tend to be a very tight social community that supports difference in appearance and lifestyle. They often hold hands when walking or sit together and embrace. This is true both

between the sexes and with those of the same sex (mostly female). Homophobic attitudes are shunned in this subculture, and the individuals who are openly gay receive complete acceptance and support.

In contrast those outside of this group interpret the behaviour, attitudes and opinions of Freaks as hypocritical, close-minded, and exclusionary, very much like the characterizations of Art Fags. On occasion young people would drive by the War Memorial and yell out "Freaks" as an insult to anyone at the site. It seems that young people from outside the downtown area consider all downtowners Freaks. Many of these outsiders are called Skullies and are considered to be the nemesis of Freaks.

### Skullies

Skullies are people who are really big and tough and they wear all the leather jackets and everything you know, and all they want to do is beat up other people and whatever (Tamara).

The label "Skully" is liberally applied to people who are rough around the edges and considered potentially violent. It seems that class enters into this categorization as well. "Skullies are the kind of people who live on Cabot Street and Shea Heights. They are red neck, long haired, and listen to heavy metal music" (Peter). Shea Heights and Cabot Street are commonly known as tough, lower class neighbourhoods. The image painted by many young people is that Skullies are rural types living in the city who are bigoted, and often of low intelligence. A common joke is that Skullies are the product of inbreeding.

Unlike Freaks, there is no pride attached to being a Skully. They are looked down on, and to an extent feared for their unpredictable aggressive behaviour and prejudices. "The Skullies will beat you up and not care" (Robin). "If they don't like the look of you they'll beat the crap out of you" (Tamara).

The East End Games Room, only blocks away from the War Memorial, is a well known "Skully hangout". Downtown youth and Skullies rarely mix despite this close proximity. Sam describes his first and only visit to the Games Room as a "terrifying experience, I felt all the 'Skully eyes' looking at me as if they were going to jump me". There are clear lines drawn between hangout areas. It is rare that a Skully visits the War Memorial, or Freaks venture east from the War Memorial towards the Games Room.

Skully is really a term used for males of this subcultural group. Girls who hang out with them are referred to in a possessive way as, "a Skully girl". These girls are considered as low class. During an informal group discussion Brad confessed that during the worst period of his life when he had no friends, the only girl he could get was a Skully girl. His buddies broke into fits of laughter and jeers at this comment. This derogatory remark was repeated on several occasions.

My enquiries into the origin and meaning of the term Skully was often met with some uncertainty. Many young people can describe a Skully vividly but do not know where the term came from or what it means. Others make guesses about the meaning, "I think they wear the skull and cross bones...they usually have something shaved" (Robin and Tamara).

### Donnies

Donnies are beer drinking, sexist, violent bay types from St. John's. (Ched)

“Donnies” are described in a similar way to Skullies, and in many cases young people can’t explain the difference between the two. The term Donnie is used in a humorous way to personify someone from a rural, traditional community with a heavy rural accent and “goofy” mannerisms. In describing a Donnie several people play acted using a heavy, slurred accent while lumbering along, tongue lolling out saying things like “what are ya at Donny” or “what about them fish and brews wha”. There is clearly an association made by these young people between traditional rural Newfoundland ways and narrow or simple mindedness characterized in the Donnie subculture.

Donnies may live in the downtown area, but do not hangout at the site. They frequent places “like the hut in the Goulds outside St. John’s to get loaded and laid” (Sarah). There is a definite air of superiority in the voices of people when they describe Donnies. Donnies are considered thick or dumb and are going nowhere in their lives. Unfortunately, there was no data collected to represent the views of those identified with this subculture, as they rarely interact with youth at the site or in the downtown area.

### Skaters

These young people [Skaters] have no energy for change, they are going nowhere. They will have their little life, wife, kids, suburban home and join the consumer society (Sarah).

Skaters make up a large portion of the downtown youth community. They are a prominent feature because of their dress, language, and activity. The uniformity of their dress is quite

remarkable, and is often a source of amusement to other groups. “They are all trying to be different, same as the rest of them” (Al). The baggy pants, large pockets in the back with frayed bottoms, plain baggy long sleeved shirt down past the waist with an oversized t-shirt over top, black or beige heavy low top sneakers and a ball cap worn backwards are the typical attire of skaters.

Early in the study the generally negative impressions of Skaters by others in the youth community became evident. During introductions to the study, many young people questioned my intent to interview Skaters. “You don’t really want talk to skaters...they have nothing to say” (Sam, Mariaya, et al.). One young person insisted that Skaters would ruin my study by giving all young people a bad name (Shannon).

Boys are predominantly the ones who skateboard. Apparently there is one girl who skateboards downtown but, “she gets a lot of slack for it from the guys” (Anne). The girls who hang out with skaters are sometimes referred to in a possessive manner as “Skater Girls” or “Tall Socks Girls”. They can often be seen wearing heavy dark lipstick and mascara, mini-skirt, tight fitting top, thigh high dark stockings and small shoes. They tend to clump together, watch, and socialize with the skaters, and travel in unison into and out of the site. These girls tend to be in their early teens.

There seems to be less interaction between the sexes within the Skater group than in other subcultures. There is little friendly and intimate touching, holding hands, or rough play between girls and boys. They hangout and skateboard at Harbour Side Park (lower site) or at the War Memorial, even though deterrents have been set up around the monument and skating is supposedly not permitted. The search for a place to skate and hangout is a constant hassle, as

skateboarding is not legally permitted in the downtown area. This appears to be weakly enforced.

I heard more comments about Skaters than any other group. Mostly these comments were unfavourable. An eighteen year old girl who was travelling through St. John's on her way home to British Columbia was surprised at the generally negative feelings about Skaters. "There's a really weird thing here like they don't like the Skaters. Nobody talks to the Skaters" (Cara). When asked why she thought this was the case she responded, "there's a lot of people who dress like Skaters except they can't skate, that's what everybody keeps telling me, and they are posers, they (other young people) don't like that" (Cara).

Predominantly skaters are portrayed as heavy drug users, aggressive and obnoxious, with the exception of a few "nice skaters" (Mark). "A lot of them have an attitude, a major attitude problem its like I'm a skater, step back and let me do everything" (Summer). Skaters have been implicated, by other youth, in recent attacks on homosexuals in the downtown area.

I'll never be able to get along with skaters because you know some of them are just as bad as you know like Tammy and Donny from around the bay...they're still as homophobic you know, except their parents buy them nice skater clothes. (Unknown)

Even some members of the social group of Skaters disapprove of their behaviour. One fourteen year old girl who hangs out with Skaters told me, "they're really a bunch of pigs, they're rude and ignorant, they're really into drugs...a lot are drug dealers" (Michelle). Michelle is also a self-professed heavy drug user, "I smoke everyday, but I never have to buy it. I deliver a few grams then have a toke with them". She hints that accessibility to free drugs is the only reason she associates with Skaters.

There was a stronger Skater presence at the upper site in the later part of the summer and this prompted more criticisms from others. Skaters are primarily seen as intruders on the upper site, mostly because skateboarding gets in the way of other activities and intrudes into the peaceful social space of the site. I got the distinct impression that people feel Skaters don't belong at the upper site and wish someone would do something about it.

I am concerned that in presenting these descriptions, comments, and observations, that the Skater subculture is being misrepresented. They were indeed a difficult group for me to get to know, gain acceptance, and build trust. In such a short period of time and without assistance from insiders, meaningful contact with group members was near impossible. I did not establish the rapport with Skaters that I did with other subcultural groups, although I spent a good deal of time observing their interactions and listening to them in group discussion.

My own background and life experience must also be brought out here as a possible hindrance in getting connected with this group. Being from the mainland and having little exposure to their music, ways of interacting and communicating, the drug scene, and skateboarding, and being female, all may have played a role in lessening access to group. I feel strongly that an important addition to this study may require a resubmersion into the Skater group with the help of an insider in order to capture their perspectives of others and themselves as a distinct subcultural group.

### Grunge

Grunge as both a style and way of thinking and interacting needs to be mentioned here. Grunge dress and music are part of a recent trend in youth culture downtown and elsewhere.



Initially I only associated Skaters with this trend, but Dan set me straight by offering this description.

Grunge is more plaid shirts and ripped up jeans, long hair, and looking basically like a new-hippy...except instead of wearing something from Pipers (a discount store) they wear Calvin Klein. They go downtown and they have like you know their grunge outfits on because they've heard of Nirvana once...they're not really being themselves, they're just trying to fit in with everybody else. (Dan)

Grunge Puppies (as they are commonly referred to) are criticized for their conformity to a set style. They are perceived as lacking in authenticity or posing behind the fashion. Some young people are disgusted by the Grunge. "I don't believe in that grunge...dirty bathroom filth, that's how I look at it. When you open your refrigerator, the stuff that's like behind your frig building, that's grunge. They have lots of money and only want brand names" (Tamara). It may be that the Grunge scene is fading somewhat and with it the excitement and novelty that came with it. "This year is a quiet year because grunge is old news" (Summer).

#### Case Study of an Icon

Particular individuals who, over a period of many years, continue to invest their time and energy in the youth community downtown, become landmarks for others. They act as role models and become symbols of downtown youth life. In rare cases these landmark members serve an even more significant function within the community. They become an icon for youth culture, receiving widespread uncritical devotion from community members. During the summer of 1995,

a landmark member was lost and an icon born. This presented a rare opportunity to share in the stories of the role landmark members play within the community, to study the impact of their loss, and to witness the resurrection of an icon.

### Landmark Members

In the changeable climate and negotiable context of the youth community downtown, consistency of presence is a rare commodity. As the study progressed, and my relationship network broadened and deepened, my movements would be frequently noted and questioned. At one point I spent three days away from the study site. My return late one night was greeted by a flurry of attention and questions about why I had left for so long. One girl whom I had recently interviewed, expressed concern, "I thought you'd given up on us" (Fran). Even though my apartment was only blocks away, I was perceived as being out of touch and needing to be updated on current happenings. This was my first hint at the depth of feeling attached to constancy of presence.

Some individuals who have spent many years in the downtown and are widely accepted by the youth community become important symbols of continuity for the young. They enjoy widespread notoriety and are able to move freely within and across subcultural group lines. These individuals seem exempt from both the expectations and qualifiers of regular group membership. These landmark members are afforded a distinct regard and their absence elicits acute uncertainty which permeates all sectors of the community. They are a crucial part of the identity of downtown youth culture.

### Mr. F

Mr. F was one of those special individuals who acquired this multi-access status. His level of openness in music, socialization, and lifestyle, and his “off-the-wall” brand of humour, were cited by young people as reasons he moved freely throughout the community and maintained friendships even with members of rival subcultural groups. Many viewed Mr. F as a slightly obnoxious, bizarre fixture within the community. With his long, dishevelled hair, torn jeans with lumber jacket and work boots, Mr. F was not really “in” on this scene. He trudged around downtown talking loudly to strangers on the street, about any subject, for an indefinite period. His detached attitude towards criticism of his unusual behaviour, seemed to afford him a certain level of unsolicited respect. Mr. F is reminiscent of a lone eccentric, embodying childlike zeal and an untarnishable ego. He lived with his mother and dedicated most of his energy to the music scene in St. John’s.

Mr. F died on July 10th 1995. In a freak accident, he slipped on a rock, fell into a river, and drowned. The community’s reaction to this loss, echoed the strong identification with landmark members. The following field note, written on the morning of Mr. F’s death, gives a sense of the atmosphere surrounding this loss.

As I walked toward the site Summer and Dawn rushed out to greet me with the news that Mr. F had drowned at Flatrock. They were wide-eyed, grasping to realize the finality that youth resists. Maliaya and Kate, and a few girls I didn’t recognize sat in the shade at the west end of the site. I joined the group with nods and silence. The quiet was broken by intermittent sighs and shaking of heads in disbelief. The entire site was enveloped in a subdued atmosphere of intense grief. (Field Notes: July 10/95)

He was 24 years old, a fixture downtown. “He was the downtown music scene, he was just always there. Mr. F was always here, there, and everywhere downtown” (Mark). He hung out occasionally with Al and Derek, John and Mark, and seemed to be known by almost everyone. He was known by everyone for his unique approach to conversation. “He wouldn’t talk to you he’d talk at you...it wasn’t too cool at the time but now that he’s gone you kind of have a different perspective” (Peter).

In the minutes, hours, and days following Mr. F’s tragic death young people formed a tighter network based closely around the War Memorial. The Skaters moved up from the lower site (an uncommon phenomenon), while Art Fags, older downtowners, and other groups mingled around the monument. Some felt that the Skaters were being too noisy in a time of mourning, but no one intervened. Many of the younger teens openly expressed their grief, while some remained subdued, “I didn’t really know him that well, but he was important down here”, or “I wish I would have gotten to know him better”, or “I feel guilty that I didn’t listen to him more, he could be a bit of a pain” (unknown). Others closer to Mr. F, were disbelieving, “it just couldn’t happen to him man, he was so real” (John).

It also became evident that this loss was profoundly affecting some of the most vulnerable members within the community. Mr. F acted as something of a lifeline to those experiencing family or emotional problems. His openness towards others may have afforded those in trouble a safe haven and short-term assistance in a time of need. Mr. F seemed to take an interest in everybody, “he just talked to me, he knew who I was, and he helped me out when I was broke and strung out” (Jessie). Mr. F understood downtown life well, and didn’t turn away from people in pain. Mr. F. was also known as a guy who gave struggling bands a break. He was committed to

the music scene and to getting young, new bands exposure. "He gave our band a gig that we wouldn't have gotten. He listened to Blue Rodeo, KD Lang and shit like that...he talked to anybody, but he was cool" (Brad). These Hardcore band members respected the fact that Mr. F didn't discriminate against their kind of music. In this excerpt from my field notes, the significant role Mr. F played in lives of others becomes clear.

Earlier today I ran into Anne and Jessie as they walked past Vincent's (cafe) in tears. I grabbed hold of Anne as she was crumpling to the ground and directed her to a seat by the road. They were grieving over Mr. F's death. Jessie couldn't seem to grasp the fact that Mr. F had died. She felt betrayed and intensely lonely. "He gave me money when I needed it - is it true that he's dead". She asked this over and over again. Jessie told me her father had died just over one year ago, and her mother was sick and living away. She is now a ward of Social Services and lives in a bed sitting room on Gower Street, "surrounded by druggies, pushers, and some schizophrenic guy" (Jessie). Jessie is 18, a heavy drug user, her arms are carved up badly both from an incident with her ex-boyfriend and self mutilation or skin carving. She says she wants to get off drugs, but that it's hard where she's living. "I'm just trash...nobody cares about me, but he (Mr. F) did" (Jessie). (Field Notes: July 11/95)

The following journal reflection describes a gathering of young people, friends, acquaintances, to mark the passing of a landmark member within the youth community.

This gathering of near fifty youth on the beach not far from where Mr. F died is a tribute to him. The friendship connection feels easy and fairly calm. In Sarah's words, "this is the

right way to say goodbye to Mr. F. He is here...I can feel it". The cops pay the group a visit and warn them to get rid of all the beer. Tom talks to them and they ease back into the night without further harassment. Someone lights a joint and curses the cops for intruding on their grief. Small fires are built, blankets draped on stones, and people huddle in groups. There is the odd laughter, but the tone remains sombre, someone plays a tune on a weatherworn guitar. Sam and I sit back, he's crying softly, and apologizing at the same time. "You can't replace a guy like Mr. F, he leaves a big hole for all of us". After a few hours I slip away, feeling I've intruded enough. (Journal Entry: July 12/95)

#### Loss of an Icon

Over the weeks that followed young people began building a community forum to express their grief for the loss of a person who had become an icon of the young. Through artistic expressions, musical tributes, and memorial gatherings they demonstrated their deep affection and respect for Mr. F. Afterwards, some wanted to move on, "I hope people don't let it screw up the whole summer" (Joe), yet many others cited the event as a transforming experience. "Since Mr. F's death nothing is going right" (Summer). "It's changed something for me, like my attitude, like it made me realize like to give people a second chance before I just you know brush them off" (Robin). "Now I try to think of the good side of people" (Dawn). Fran talks about Mr. F's death and how he was a constant force in her life. Her mom had also been there for her and had recently died. I think Mr. F's death has had a profound effect on Fran and has caused her to reflect on who and what she can really count on in her life. She believes that all young people have been touched by Mr. F's death. "Mr. F was the downtown, he would be there even when

you didn't want him to be" (Fran).

There is now a portrait of Mr. F, painted by a local teenager, on a rock wall near the War Memorial. Friends and strangers sign their names there. Two months after his passing, he remains the object of uncritical devotion. As the years pass, Mr. F will probably have a continuing presence within the community. He may become a legend, passed down through the stories of older members and internalized by the young.

Young people's attachment to landmark members and the emotional upheaval following Mr. F's death may be partly explained by what Danesi (1994) calls "role diffusion". According to Danesi, the journey through adolescence involves a search for identity which is marked by a strong identification with a hero or leader, to the extent of even losing a personal sense of identity. Leaders and heroes (like Mr. F) within the youth community downtown seem to symbolize tradition within their changing community, and they represent a common link which connects youth as a whole. The loss of these members seems to create insecurity or an identity crisis amongst young people who are lacking a common point of identification.

#### Chapter Summary

The youth community is comprised of relatively distinct groups which migrate in and around the immediate downtown area with the locus of activity being at the War Memorial. It is a relatively peaceful community, yet one experiencing the growing pains of transition in the makeup of its population, and in the wider society in which it exists. The older members seem to provide stability in transitory periods, and at times watch out for the best interests and immediate needs and wants of younger members. New members go through some initial interrogation of

their authenticity by older downtowners, until they become affiliated with a social group with which to identify. They gradually build up a network of contacts and accumulate status over several seasons of consistent presence downtown.

The inter-relationships of subcultural groups weave a fascinating web laden with insight into the community as a whole. Through close examination and dialogue with young people a rich network of groups and linkages between groups emerge which are not apparent at first glance. Social groups are identified by labels which characterize their dress, attitudes, backgrounds, interests, or activities. These labels are commonly recognized by young people in the community, even though the characterizations associated with the labels are not unanimously held. Overwhelming, young people attach negative or derogatory characteristics to subcultural groups outside their own. This is especially true for Donnies and Skullies, who do not hang out within the youth community downtown. Unlike other subcultures, Donnies and Skullies recognize the label associated with their group, but don't apply it to themselves.

Each subcultural group has its own pattern of linking, unlinking, and relinking with other subcultures throughout the community. Accounts given by young people depict these linkages as continually evolving, being constructed and reconstructed, taking new form as the community is reshaped by the entrance and exit of its members. Some groups have a diverse network of linkages with outside groups, others are fairly isolated, while a select few are not clearly identified as a subculture and move fluidly between groups. The ease of movement and level of connection (from acquaintances to friends) a subculture creates may partly rely on the openness, diverse interests, and self-confidence of the individuals members. Subcultures who seem isolated from the community have a narrow or clearly defined range of interests, distinctive and



standardized characteristics (dress, language, activity), and generally feel discriminated against by others. For instance, some smaller groups like the self-proclaimed Hardcore group (not described in Subcultures) base their membership solely around the criteria of musical taste. They share few commonalities with other groups and feel persecuted because of their musical taste. This isolates them from others within the youth community. Conversely, the Freak subculture casts a wide net of interests, values, dress etc. This prompts greater frequency and depth of interaction with other subcultures and seems to strengthen their connection and feeling of unity with the whole community.

Examination of the shifting of relationships details the exclusive life-worlds of the young. Patterns of interaction, subcultural affiliations, identification with landmark members, and the creation of icons, characterize the complex blend of choices and forces at work within a community. Understanding these elements gives meaning to the simple definition, "I'm a Freak", and allows us to contextualize the experience of the individuals within the wider society. The depth of our knowledge about the social fabric of youth culture affords us rich material for shaping learning encounters and leads us to a more informed approach to teaching contemporary youth.

### Chapter 3: Shaping of Identity

Popular culture was where the action was - it marked out territory where pleasure, knowledge, and desire circulated in close proximity to life of the streets. There was something always forbidden about this culture, with its comics, pinball machines, restricted codes, visual excesses, and overly masculine orientations (Giroux 1994, p. ix)

The street corner is free space, a podium for the creation and recreation of identities. Young people watch, listen, and experience life outside of adult imposed boundaries. Their language is uncensored, their actions are spontaneous, they are refining and reshaping who they are.

This chapter borrows the dialogues and rhythms of life as it was played out over the summer of 1995, and examines them as influences (forces) and perceptions (lens). The section on influences traces the forces at work, from within street corner life and from other life spaces, which are shaping the identity of young people at the site. These influences were most frequently cited by the study group as having a significant impact on their development. This section does not address mass media as a critical influence of youth identity and culture, as it is beyond the scope of this study. The section on perceptions presents young people's unedited interpretations of themselves, their world, and those who inhabit it. These perceptions characterize the ongoing process of identity creation. The categories highlighted within both of these sections were generated from common themes which emerged from the data.

In order to do justice to the voices of young people who openly participated in the study,

the structure and content of this chapter must be introduced with a note of caution. The forces at work in shaping the identity of these young people change over time. This study is only a portrait, created at a moment in their collective histories, and should therefore be considered as a rough sketch. Much of what is represented here is drawn from the uninhibited moments of interaction, silent reflections, and uncensored speculations, surrounding the everyday choices made by young people on the street corner. Formulating interpretations of these secret moments is risky business, and therefore worthy of cautious qualification. Much of the personal analysis wedged between the dialogue is based on my years of close contact with teens in formal and experiential educational settings. References from the literature are also used to generalize these interpretations beyond the study group.

### Influences

The most prominent influences acting on the lives of young people which emerged through both observations of and interaction with study participants were friendships, family, school, and drugs. Friendships seemed of greatest significance in influencing the attitudes, values, and behaviours of this age group. Family life figured most prominently in decision-making and future aspirations of teens in this study. The value placed on schooling and attitudes towards teachers and school climate seemed to affect both their family relationships, and to a lesser extent, their social groupings. Drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes pervaded most teen interactions at the site in the form of topics of conversation or actual use. The prominence of these substances within the downtown culture as a whole, and the changing pattern of drug use and attitudes towards drugs, makes them a significant part of the day to day existence of young people

downtown.

Issues involving friends, family, school, and drugs permeate the street and other life spaces of youth. They are intertwined in the successes, failures, highs and lows of everyday life. They shape not only the identity, but the transitory worlds in which these young people exist. These forces themselves and their interplay across the contexts in which youth exist are certainly sufficient fodder for extensive study on their own.

### Friendships

In almost all of my conversations with young people throughout the study, the topic of friendship would eventually arise. Young people are never neutral in their discussions of the importance of their connections with friends. They often see their particular friendship bonds as being more significant or real than those outside their intimate circle.

A lot of people just hang out with each other cuz they're stoned, and if you're stoned you don't really care who you're around. O.K. you have ten bucks I have ten bucks let's go get a gram and we'll hang out. That's how he knows who his friends are, whoever has that quarter ounce or has that sheet of acid, and that's who he hangs out with at that time, and as soon as that's gone he hangs out with someone else. A lot of people downtown...it's not real friendships it's drug buddies. (Peter)

Our friendship is about looking beyond face, you know what I mean, we actually like each other. We don't always agree with each other all the time but we respect each other.  
(Brad)

The friendship bonds examined in this section are those which provide the mainstay of support and make up the primary social group of the individual. They are not relationships based on convenience or necessity. These types of friendships provide young people with the support, confidence, skills, and safety mechanisms vital to membership in the community. They are also safe harbours where new identities can be modelled and critiqued. These functions of friendship can not be fulfilled by family members, teachers, or other adult figures.

#### Trust: The Essential Ingredient

The most important quality attributed to true friendship is overwhelmingly trust. "I think friendship is like when you have a friend and you can rely on them and trust them...hang out and have a good time, and if things go wrong they're going to be there for you" (Mandy). A level of openness and honesty within friendships is expected and even demanded. Friends become engrossed in each others personal stories of family life, sexual interests, and problems. Often a tight group goes through emotional upheavals along with a friend who is experiencing difficulty at home, school, or in an intimate relationship. Advice is liberally offered and progress reports are collectively examined by the group. Problems shared in confidence are expected to be kept within the group. Overall, trust seems to be the critical criteria for maintaining close bonds over time.

#### "Best" Friends

Subcultural group membership is possibly the strongest point of identity for its members, but these large groups may not be the most effective support system for individuals. Within large

subcultural groups, usually two or three members have particularly tight bonds which provide the life blood of acceptance and personal nurturing. According to many young people who were interviewed, they have one or two “closest” friends. During the study, I interacted frequently with two close friends who belong to the Freak subculture, but primarily rely on each other for support. They have created their own image through the evolution of unique modes of dress, sense of humour, and language, to the extent that they form a mini-subculture within the larger subcultural group. It is evident that their beliefs, values, and ideas are primarily shaped by the depth of this friendship within the confines of the wider subcultural context. Coleman (1992) stresses the importance of studying both the friendship groupings and subcultural experiences and practices. “Young men and women in their own social groups cannot ultimately be divorced from the wider material and socio-cultural contexts of which they form part” (Coleman, p. 121).

In such significant relationships there are intense feelings of betrayal and loss when one person severs the friendship. This was mentioned especially in conversations with girls, who had lost a friend when she started seeing a steady boyfriend. In his studies of peer groups, Coleman (1992) finds that females are emotionally intense yet much less stable in their friendships because of the effects of boyfriends monopolizing their leisure time. “A young woman has to work against the grain if she is to maintain contact with her peer group” (Coleman, 1992, p. 110). Loss of a close friend is regarded as a traumatic life event and is often accompanied by a crisis of self-concept and confidence. Having special friendship connections seems to be a vital part of social and psychological wellbeing of young people at the site. “If I didn’t have my friends, I’d go nuts” (Ched).

### Street-Proofing

Groups of friends seem to challenge or cajole each other into developing “street-wise” attitudes and behaviours. In the following conversation with four young teens, they discuss this process of toughening up their weaker members for survival downtown, at school, and in intimate relationships.

Tamara is great because she helps me stand up for myself. (Robin)

We used to have these little things where like say we'd be sitting down somewhere and I'd say something really mean but only to try to get her to talk back to me...for practice or whatever...because before she wasn't able to stand up for herself really. She just lets other people push her around. So I just say like, fuck you, and she'd like say something back to me, and then I'd say something worse, and then I'd say that was good, that's cool.

(Tamara)

I'm still working on Dawn. People keep fucking her up. [Summer tells a story about Dawn not standing up to guys that she doesn't like] You can't keep letting people step on you. (Summer)

I really find it hard to yell at people.[softly] (Dawn)

You don't need to yell. Just say in a calm voice I don't need your shit, fuck off. (Summer)

I can be nice when I want to be but when somebody fucks me over then I just tell them

where to go. (Tamara)

Danesi (1994), describes this exchange of insults as “ritual conflict”, which usually takes place in front of a peer group. These young women used this duelling of words to train its weaker members in the art of self protection and impression management. This street proofing function of friends is prevalent, especially as younger members enter the downtown scene and are taken under the wing of friends with more experience.

#### The Friendship Safety Net

Teen friends demonstrate an intense level of concern for one another. This became quite apparent in the aftermath of Mr. F’s death when several young women took it upon themselves to look out for friends who were emotionally distraught. Some friends describe each other’s concern as similar to a motherly role. “Oh crap man, she’s (close friend) like my mom whenever I want to do anything, it’s like Tamara what are you doing, I’m really upset with you” (Tamara).

Friends sometimes encourage each other to participate in risk-taking behaviour such as smoking, drug use, sexual intimacy, and physical challenges, but not beyond certain “safe” limits. Drug abuse, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases, are primary concerns friends expressed for one another when taking any risks. These concerns can turn to agitation when a friend gets involved in dangerous practices with unknown individuals, or takes part in new, high risk activities alone. Attempts are made to bring the straying friend back into the security of the friendship network, and to curb the deviant or dangerous behaviour by talking it out.



### Building Confidence

Young people speak openly about the admirable qualities and talents of their friends.

Older teens tend to compliment their friends for gains in self-confidence and on the development of new skills. Amongst one particular close knit group of older teen girls, friends are praised for their involvements in community work or artistic endeavours outside the friendship. There is a sense that personal development is an important piece of what the individual brings to the friendship, and affects the intensity and longevity of the attachment (Hope, Sarah & Fran). Male friends tend to demonstrate less intimacy and give less praise for personal growth, yet they seem more encouraging of the acquisition of skills valued by the friendship network, such as guitar playing or skateboarding moves.

Personal growth is sometimes attributed to strength drawn from the friendship bond itself. "Like there's just so many things that she's done now knowing that she has other friends that feel the same way, like getting her nose pierced" (Tracey). Close friends draw strength from each other and can be a highly positive force in building confidence.

The one thing that Linda has given me is a good sense of logic, like she really helps me have a level head or whatever, like I don't know what I'd be doing if I wasn't with her cause she's really set me straight about a lot of things. (Dawn)

Friends talk passionately about issues and listen intently to the views of others. They show concern for each others health and safety, and defend each others honour and reputation. At the moment of these interviews, most young people felt that friends made during their teen years would remain close throughout their lives. However, over the course of the summer friendship

groups evolved, adding new members and leaving others behind. Sam identified this as a normal pattern, “...soon everybody will be changing friends and groups, it’s got the feel of transition in the air, it happens every summer”.

### Parent Relationships

Young people’s stories of family life seeped into conversations about personal freedom (music, dyed hair, piercing), trust, and future careers. Almost half of the study participants come from single parent homes, live with a guardian, or on their own. Some are juggling visitation times between parents, but most report a complete severing of the relationship with the absentee parent. Parental relationships appear to influence the formation of social groups, and the construction of viewpoints and values of teen children. Relationships with sibling seemed of lesser significance in influencing the daily lives of most of these young people.

### Freedom Versus Rules

As may be expected, conflicts with parents about the limits of free choice when living at home are commonly reported, especially amongst younger female teens. This conflict seems to reach a critical point when the teenager joins a social group where members are afforded more freedom by their parents. This excerpt from an interview describes the sense of urgency to establish a level of trust with, and freedom from parental control.

The only amount of trust in my family is my dad, my dad trusts me. My mom, like god, she wouldn’t trust me to walk two feet away from her. (Linda)

I'm afraid for Linda because when she grows up and she's legal age to do anything about whatever, she's going to go out and do anything she wanted to do growing up, and she's going to get herself really hurt. (Tracey)

I want to sleep over at someone's house, I want to dye my hair, I want to get my ears pierced, I want to stay out past nine [really yelled this out]. I can't do anything about it except run away and that's dumb. (Linda)

Linda is a member of a friendship group which is afforded more freedom to stay out late, visit each other, or talk on the phone. By the end of the summer, the parental limits placed on Linda were beginning to isolate her from her friends. The group participated together in events like dances and social gatherings where Linda was not allowed to go. The scope of shared good times diminished, and she was left on the margins of her social group. In this way, levels of parental control over their teenagers affects their social network and the longevity of their friendships.

Several older teens have left home because of irresolvable issues with parents around personal freedom and choice. Many others overcame impasses with parents on these issues and now enjoy open and trusting relationships, particularly with mothers, in the family home. Parents, described as 'cool', appear to encourage the unique expressions of their teenager rather than resist trends in music, dress, or attitude. They view teen transformations as a "trying on" period, which doesn't warrant alarm nor require the imposition of restrictions.

Fathers less often receive praise from their teen children. They are associated with greater

restrictions on behaviour, higher expectations, and lower tolerance for alternative lifestyles.

Oh my god my father rushes me. He wants me to be in Dalhousie. He wants me to become a dentist, like I don't know, I'm good at cutting peoples hair. I don't care what people think about hairdressing, but I told my dad that and he's like, 'you're not going to make any money off that'" (Dawn).

Both our fathers are assholes. I don't really have a problem with what my father's doing to me, you know, I could care less, but he's so intimidating to my mother she doesn't know how to deal with it (Sandy).

#### Trust: Impact on Choices

The level of trust in the teen-parent relationship seems to have some effect on the teenagers decision-making. Those experiencing high levels of parent trust tend to incorporate parental values into their decision making. Some study participants reflect on parent values before engaging in acts like smoking, drinking, drug use, or promiscuous sexual activity. This is especially evident when the teenager knows the behaviour would not meet the approval of the parent figure. This does not mean that parental values become a code of conduct, quite the contrary. These teens tend to make independent decisions which are sometimes an inspired compromise between their own and their parent's beliefs. Teens with high-trust parent connections often intend to share their choices, such as experimentation with drugs or intimate relationships, with their parents at some point. I also noted on occasion a higher level of self-confidence exhibited by teens who identified their parents as "cool" or trusting.

Teens experiencing low levels of parent trust, and who view parent figures as intrusive and rigid, seem to respond with resistance. Imposed parental values are rejected and sometimes become the rationale for risk-taking and experimentation. These young people sometimes turn to older community members to replace parental support and nurturing. They also invest more of their time and energy into the street culture.

### Value Gaps

Many parents are at a loss to understand the values and lifestyles choices of their children. Dan, a teenager who is very involved in the music scene and has little interest in school, feels pressured by his parents view of success.

My parents don't like anything that I do. They wouldn't want me to do what I want in my life any other way then they did it. If I felt good about going out and playing music they would feel bad about it cuz I wouldn't be that lawyer or whatever. (Dan)

Sarah, a highly intelligent, motivated sixteen year old, has given up trying to make her parents understand her strong feminist beliefs and her desire to pursue a career in film making. "They (parents) want me to shave my armpits and be a real lady, they don't understand who I am". Sarah views home as a place to sleep and catch the odd meal. There is a sense of complete detachment from her parents because of their conflicting values. This complete fracturing of the relationship between parent and teenage child was characteristic of several of the study participants.

Mead (1969) explained the widening gap between youth an parent figures as a function of

their different knowledge bases and life experiences.

In the past there were always some elders who knew more than any children in terms of their experience of having grown up within a cultural system... today there are none... It is not only that parents are no longer guides, but that there are no guides (p. 78)

This explanation seems even more relevant today in times of technological change and information explosion. Young people are becoming ever more distant from the social forces which shaped the lives of their parents, and are gaining competence in new technologies which mystify those outside their generation.

Within the study group several teens were living alone, either escaping difficult family situations, or had become wards of Social Services. Jessie, Paul, Carl, Anne and Hope, all teens living on their own for different reasons, spoke often about the financial and emotional stresses of surviving without family support. For teens in all of these living situations, the significance of a trusting and caring parent or adult figure seemed paramount to their sense of emotional security. Teens living alone seem to lack the value guidance of strong family ties. This seems to result in more frequent participation in high risk activities within street corner life.

### School

The topic of school generated mediocre interest from young people at the site. "School is just a place where young people meet and learn through contact with each other, not necessarily from the courses or teachers" (Fran). This may reflect the tendency of young people to resist discussion about school during summer holidays. Considering this, issues involving school were

only discussed if the topic was raised by study participants. Their comments reflected, rather low expectations of teachers, discomfort within competitive and sometimes cruel school environments, and a mistrust of the intent and process of education.

### Teachers

For Brad school is a place where he feels rejected by teachers, but continues to cling to the notion that it is in his best interests to attend.

Do you think school has prepared you well for the future? (Interviewer)

No, No...I think if anything it's kinda going to harm my future because there's so many teachers that are set in their ways and if you're different you're no good. (Brad)

Is school too structured? (Interviewer)

It's for my own good. (Brad)

For Joe, a sixteen year old gay male, school is a hard place to gain acceptance. "It's pretty hard you know like you always have people that'll cat call and stuff, but you know like they're idiots anyway, I wouldn't want them to be my friend even if I was straight" (Joe). Although ridicule in itself is not surprising amongst students, Joe believes teachers also harbour hurtful stereotypes based on race, sex, and sexual orientation. He is hesitant to share his sexual preference with teachers, fearing some form of backlash.

I'm not sure teachers should know (I'm gay)...well yeah I think teachers should know. I kind of hint at it at school and stuff cuz some teachers are real jerks. I'm not going to put up with anything. Some of my teachers make like sexist jokes, racist jokes and homophobic jokes. (Joe)

Several of the study participants criticize, yet are quite understanding of the shortcomings of classroom teachers, and are even sympathetic to their plight. "There aren't many good teachers though, many don't want to be there, but I wouldn't want to be teaching those little teen brats" (Fran). Many teenagers seem to separate the human side of the teacher from their teaching role. "This teacher was really boring, a terrible teacher, but he was a great guy" (unknown). Fran feels that teachers should receive more consideration from teenagers. "Young people forget that teachers were once young and have many of the same fears and concerns as young people do" (Fran).

It is interesting that some of the criticisms about boring or unhappy teachers were rationalized by several teens as student problems. Shor & Freire (1987) provide a possible explanation for this. "If students see and hear a teacher's contempt or boredom or impatience, they learn again that they are people who inspire disgust and weariness" (p. 24). This is a powerful lesson which may result in diminished self worth and confidence of students in the classroom.

Most of the study participants seem to have strong ideas about what good teachers should be like. They rank, "caring about kids", as the number one quality of a good teacher. Caring in their definition includes, understanding teen life, appreciating each student as a unique



individual, and going beyond the structured lesson format to offer creative learning opportunities. "I think most young people think of a good teacher just as how well they teach, but actually I think if kids are talking about a teacher it's because the teacher knows how to talk to us and such" (Cara).

### Life at School

"The way it is in high school and junior high is if you're not in the bunch, you're non-existent. I got teased and teased constantly. Why can't I be accepted?" (Summer). Summer, like many other young people, talk about getting tormented at school for acting, dressing, or being different in any way. For many teenagers, the summer months bring relief from the ridicule they suffer at school. They can congregate together with others and feel a sense of solidarity in their uniqueness. The War Memorial is a place to try on new images, and shed others, without fear of permanent damage to their reputation or serious reprisals from peers. Some teens expressed anxiety about returning to school and losing the security of subcultural group membership. One young male Skater fears reprisals at his school because he is the only Skater and, "they hate Skaters at my school" (unknown).

### School Agendas

Several young people expressed concern that schools are only preparing students for the traditional roles accepted by the wider society, even though these may not be viable today. They question the function of school as preparation for the work force, and challenge the system to stretch its vision to fit the diversity of opportunity, desires of young people, and range of choices

for alternative lifestyles.

I don't like school because it didn't encourage anyone to do anything except go to university and raise a family and it totally didn't show anybody any other type of lifestyle. There's so much neat stuff people can be doing, you don't have to go live in a rich house and have a family (Cara).

Giroux (1996) blames outdated school practices and educators who, "refuse to give up the long-held assumption that school credentials provide the best route to economic security and class mobility", for youth disenfranchisement from school learning (p.6).

In a discussion with two teens about school, they cited inequity of services to students as a major concern. "One thing I hate though is enrichment. They take the smart kids and make them smarter and they don't like try and help people who aren't as bright" (Robin). "Yeh, why don't they take the so called dumb kids and try to enrich them" (Dawn).

Despite concerns about schooling practices, mediocre teachers, and peer harassment, young people still believe that school is important, if not to themselves directly, then to those who are the determinants of their collective futures. "I think blowing school off is really dumb, it's one of the most important things, you won't go anywhere in this world without it" (Tamara).

### Drugs

Most of the study participants have, even in their pre-teen years, made conscious decisions about drugs. Either they pride themselves on being drug-free, or they classify their use of drugs as responsible. "I don't think that there's a problem with pot, if you want to smoke it

and not cause a problem about it, not glamorize it” (Robin). For the most part, they feel in control of their drug use and view drugs like marijuana as harmless in moderation. “I like, smoke my toke but I don’t do it in abundance and I, you know, take my time with it. It doesn’t make me irresponsible, it doesn’t make me evil, it doesn’t make me want to hurt other people” (Summer). There doesn’t appear to be stigma attached to being drug-free with this community, unless the individual becomes preachy in their attempts to influence

### Drug Abuse Is Not Cool

The general atmosphere of acceptance of casual drug use did not extend to habitual reliance on “hard” drugs. Some of the study participants were clearly out of control in their use of drugs. This was evident particularly amongst a few girls in their early teens where sporadic use of marijuana had escalated into experimentation, then frequent use of acid, sedatives, and intravenous drugs in conjunction with alcohol.

Michelle (14 years) and Jessie (18 years), already admit to having multiple drug addictions. They hang out with Skaters, mostly males, and act as runners for older community members who deal drugs in the downtown. This gives them access to drugs and places to crash. These girls are often referred to by their peers as a “lost cause”, or become the target of jokes when they show up stoned or hung over at the site. Drug abuse within the youth community is not considered cool by the majority of members.

Young people are familiar with the anti-drug messages which focus on lethal addiction to drugs like crack cocaine. These messages, proliferated by the media and in schools, neglects the most common early experiences of young teens with alcohol and marijuana. Like the “stop

smoking” campaigns, the “stay clean - stay real” anti-drug message seems to have little impact on the choices of these young people.

### Hemp Legal

The drug of choice at the site appears to be marijuana, mostly referred to as weed or pot. It is easy to get and relatively cheap. Smoking joints at the site is a common occurrence and is usually a communal activity. Most of these teens support legalization of marijuana. They wear clothing with cannabis leaf logos, “hemp legal” slogans, and tote bags made of hemp products. A few are members of underground marijuana advocacy groups which actively campaign for the legalization of marijuana.

Young people point out the contradiction between the social acceptance of drinking and smoking with their devastating consequences to health, family life, and productivity, and the social rejection of cannabis products which have useful medical and environmental applications. A few young people shared their experiences with an alcoholic parent, and the subsequent family problems and abuse. They feel that alcohol is the drug of choice for their parents, and therefore it is validated by the wider society. Many describe marijuana as a safer choice, after experiencing extreme hangovers and feelings of being out of control when drinking.

### The Changing Drug Scene

Many young people are alarmed by the appearance of harder drugs at the site, and are concerned about the hold that these drugs have on some young people within the downtown community. “Yes, its definitely getting worse, people aren’t just smoking pot anymore or just

you know getting a flask anymore, they're actually going out doing crack, speed, and pills" (Peter). For a teenager visiting from the United States, the pattern of drug use in St. John's seemed unsettling. "Here there's a lot of acid and stuff. In the States that would be, like, unacceptable. If you smoke pot that's really fine, that's really normal, but not the rest of that stuff" (Cara). One young person shared a story of a friend who turned to drug abuse to escape her "troubled mind frame". "She snorts Prozac and crushes up codeine to shoot up if she get desperate for a fix" (unknown). This type of creativity for getting high seems to springs from limited available cash for mainstream drugs.

Some feel that there is more pressure to buy drugs lately, and the quality of these drugs is questionable.

All anybody tries to do anymore is try to sell you pot. It's becoming a real problem too cuz a lot of people like to rip you off. They prey on people who probably haven't smoked any tokes before, who don't know what it looks like. So what they do is just sell them fake stuff and take off with their money. People are starting to shoot up now, like in their arms and everything. (Linda)

Representations of drug use frequently arose in photographs taken by study participants. Shots of drug paraphernalia, alleyways used for drinking and drug use, and poses mimicking smoking joints were familiar images. Drugs are a preoccupation for young people and seem to have a great influence over development of attitudes, behaviours, and the formation of social groups. Study participants, however, seem fairly enlightened about the effects and contents of the drugs they use. This stands in contrast to the popular media image of the reckless drug use

rampant amongst youth today. Drugs are discussed openly, and the study group seemed to enjoy my interest in their opinions on a topic often guided by adults with an agenda.

### Perceptions

What are some of the lenses through which young people view the complex worlds in which they exist? Can examining these lenses provide useful insights for educators in bridging the gap between street corner life and school cultures? These questions guided the collection of youth perceptions, and the values, beliefs, ideas, and feelings which inform them.

Through their interactions with others, body language, dress, subcultural codes, and popular art forms young people are sketching a rough draft of the world as they see it. Through observation, informal chats, and collecting personal expressions (photographs, poetry, music), the perceptions of young people in the study group were accessed. Young peoples' perceptions seemed to focus around six themes; adults, peers, youth identity, future hopes and concerns, media representations of youth, and Newfoundland heritage. These broad themes capture both commonly held and divergent perceptions expressed by the study group. The expressions, where possible, are placed in context along with interpretations made at the time of the study. Analysis is drawn from current literature and is used to make linkages with educational practice.

#### Adults: How Youth View Adults

Adults are a familiar topic of discussion amongst young people. These adult figures may be parents, unrelated older people, tourists, local business people, teachers, police officers, reporters, or other figureheads. Young people seem preoccupied with their personal perceptions

of how adults view teenagers. These perceptions in turn shape teen attitudes and approaches towards adults. Adults are viewed in a multiplicity of ways, however, comments from the study participants focus around a few key characteristics.

### Adults Are Conformist

It is a commonly expressed view that when people get older (20 to 30s and beyond) they conform both outwardly and inwardly. The physical conformity in terms of appearance and dress is expected, but mental conformity shows that adults are letting go of their personal beliefs and values (Michelle). Young people don't want adults to go around acting or dressing like teens, however, teenagers feel that they shouldn't lose their individuality and expressiveness as they age.

In a series of photographs taken by two 16 year old girls, this phenomenon of aging into conformity is clearly captured. The self-titled photograph, "Going Nowhere Within the Speed Limit", is their spoof on regulated adult life. It is taken from the roof of an office tower, peering downward onto a busy two lane street. The cars look both uniform in size and shape, and are an equal distance apart. "They are such responsible, law abiding citizens, they're following the rules towards oblivion" (Kate & Mandy). To these young women the process of becoming an adult means the exorcism of spirit and vitality.

According to study participants adults don't appreciate the unique styles of dress, attitudes, and behaviours of teens today. "Adults feel that being different is bad, they don't want to deal with difference" (AJ). Adults judge too much based on outward appearance, they neglect to look beyond the dyed hair or pierced nose to really get to know the individual (Hope). There is

resentment towards adults for their limited margins of acceptability. "They say they work hard for their paycheck and they shouldn't have to put up with seeing people like that on the street (body piercing, head shaved, wild dress)" (Joe).

The notion that adults used to dress weird themselves in the 60s, and therefore don't have the right to look down on teens today, was mentioned on several occasions by young people. Some expressed disappointment that the spirit of freedom and love youth experienced in the 60s has been abandoned and replaced with rigid standards in adulthood. One young woman spoke about her mother as someone who maintained a "60s attitude", "...she's so cool and we're like so connected" (Tamara).

#### Adults Fear Youth

According to young people, adults fear them for a variety of very different reasons. Fear of change, violence, loss of employment, and youth power for social change, cultivates feelings of anxiety towards young people.

Youth haunt adult society because it references our need to be attentive to a future that others will inherit. It simultaneously serves as a symbol of how a society thinks about itself and as an indicator of changing values, sexuality, economy, and the spiritual life of a nation. (Giroux, 1996, p. 10)

Adults are generally considered by the youth world as being "change-phobic". According to teens, this creates a mind set which is not conducive to being open about youth today. "Maybe it's like old people are kinda not listening because they're afraid that we might actually have a



good point. They might think, they're actually not that bad. They're afraid to change their mind about us" (Dawn).

Teens believe that adults fear young people, especially in large groups, because youth symbolize potential violence. Giroux (1996) believes that adult panic within the social spheres of youth arises out of the social construction of youth identity as, "aberrant, unpredictable, and dangerous in terms of the investments they produce, social relations they affirm and the anti-politics they sometimes legitimate" (p. 11).

Some teens feel that adults fear job losses to young people who are better trained and have superior communication skills. "They're afraid we might steal their jobs" (Linda). This sentiment may be more prominent within the current climate of high unemployment and financial belt tightening in Newfoundland.

Adults seem afraid of the potential of young people for social change. "They're afraid that we're going to grow up and lead the world the wrong way" (Tracey). For the most part, teens feel that the ability of young people to provide leadership towards positive social change is questioned by most adults. "Adults fear for the future in the hands of youth" (Fran). This scepticism seems to have been internalized in young peoples' assessment of their own ability to provide leadership adequate to the challenges of the future.

### Adults Don't Respect Young People

When probed about what teens would change in the way adults view young people today, they overwhelmingly said they wanted more respect. This complaint was repeated over and over by the study group. "We're supposed to have so much respect for adults when they treat us like

shit...I mean we deserve respect too” (Anne). The issue of respect surfaced in discussions of family life, school, and the work place. In these situations teens often feel their opinions and ideas are not valued, their wishes are not respected, and their interests and aspirations excluded in the midst of adult-oriented agendas. According to an extensive survey done in 1992, the study participants concerns are echoed on a national scale. “Only one in two young people between the ages of 15 and 24 perceive that older adults ‘respect their opinions’ and fewer than one in three perceive that adults ‘have confidence in young people’ or ‘understand young people’....while 75% of all Canadian teens place a high value on being respected (Bibby & Posterski, 1992, p. 301).

Young people share stories of rejection, stereotyping and persecution by adults and view it as an inevitable part of life today. They report collisions with older folks in the local coffee shops and bars over matters of etiquette and seniority. On occasion I observed young people, when in mostly adult company, emulating expected negative behaviours to elicit the anticipated negative responses. They might shout or swear in a restaurant, then resent critical comments from the staff or owner. These clashes are then held up as an example of the persecution young people face in the adult world. The “adults don’t like teens” perception seems to be a double-edged sword.

### Adults Can’t Be Trusted

The perception that adults can’t be trusted first emerged during my introduction into the community. Gaining acceptance in the community as an adult figure was difficult. My intentions and expectations were carefully scrutinized by young people before they began to provide honest

impressions of their lives. Teens frequently asked how their words, thoughts, and actions were being presented, and how they might appear to others through my thesis. "It is too great a risk that adults will get the wrong idea about us if our world is taken apart piece by piece" (Linda). Hebdige (1988) has coined the phrase "hiding in the light" to characterize this aspect of youth culture. For the most part young people appreciate adult interest in their lives but not scrutiny of it. The reactions and questions of young people throughout the study revealed an intense scepticism and mistrust of those who inhabit the adult world.

#### Adults: How Adults View Youth

The other way to look at youth perceptions is to examine the impressions young people have of how adults view them. Study participants downtown enthusiastically offer their opinions about how adults view youth today. According to study participants the image of youth through adult eyes is black and white, and highly distorted. Adults do not have the right impression of youth for a multitude of reasons which are exaggerated by media stereotypes and limited experience and exposure to youth cultures (Hannah).

#### Young People Are "Generation X"

Young people are well aware of the attributes connected with labels like "Generation X", "The Nowhere Generation", "13th Gen", or "Slackers", and they resist these labels. "Adults are full of stereotypes about us, how the youth generation are all grunge puppies and all the kids today are freak body piercers, and follow Kurt Cobain" (Robin). "I hate that Gen X stuff, I hate being typecast" (Cara). "Adults buy into this image that teens are full of angst and suicidal and

stuff, I think that's fucking stupid" (Tamara). Young people resent the representation of teens as mindless worshippers of a musician who killed himself. "What's the message when they relate teens to him (Kurt Cobain)?" (Sarah). In national surveys, teenagers have repeatedly expressed this same frustration of being stereotyped (Bibby & Posterski, 1992).

The Generation X persona, largely proliferated through the media, becomes the lens through which many adults view youth today. "It makes adults think our opinions don't matter, we're just going through puberty and we're all mixed up and we're going to change and we're going to realize this is the way we're going to be ...we're going to find ourselves" (Anne). From these comments and many others like it, it becomes clear that teens feel the association with labels like Generation X directly impacts the way they are treated in society. The Generation X stereotype provides adults with a destructive framework to evaluate youth behaviour, and a platform to justify disregard of or discrimination against an entire generation. Within this frame of reference, the intense feelings associated with teen problems may be trivialized by adults. "I hate when people tell me I'm going through a phase, if I'm really angry or upset, it's like they're not listening" (Tamara).

### Young People Are Troublemakers

Teens talk a lot about adult misconceptions of who they are. "Many adults feel young people hang out downtown because they're from broken homes, their families are drunk and always stoned, their (parents) don't give a shit about them so they hang out, and it's not true" (Peter). Young people are conscious of being under scrutiny while hanging out on the street corner, and for the most part, feel the verdict on them is that they are troublemakers. Giroux

(1996) cites Hebdige's portrayal of youth as a problem in society.

In our society, youth is present only when its presence is a problem, or is regarded as a problem. More precisely the category 'youth' gets mobilized in official documentary discourse...at those times when young people make their presence felt by going 'out of bounds' by resisting through rituals, dressing strangely, striking bizarre attitudes, breaking rules, breaking bottles, windows, heads, or issuing rhetorical challenges to the law. (p. 27)

This image translates into adult concerns that teenagers are also a bad influence on others. Several study participants commented that parents worry they will corrupt their younger siblings by being a bad role model. A few young people shared stories of being kicked out of the family home to soothe parental fears of lethal contamination of siblings with their abnormal behaviour and exotic dress.

Through observation it became evident that young people did little to dispel this opinion. In photographs taken by young people there are ample representations of the "sullen rebel" image co-opted by many young people downtown. This tough and distant image, intentionally projected by many youth, seems to intensify the suspicion of adults and furthers the perception that these teens are troublemakers.

### Young People Have No Direction

Another commonly held perception within the youth community is that adults regard youth as rudderless beings, without any sense of direction in their lives. "Adults incessantly tell

teenagers that their life experience isn't valuable and they are going nowhere in their lives" (Carl). Study participants cited parental demands that they get a job or go back to school, as stemming from the belief that they need structure and direction to get on with their lives. It appears that the teen years are viewed by many adults as but a meandering interlude before getting on with the real business of life. A sense of direction, according to adults, is provided by the external structures, rules, and guidelines imposed on young people within adult-oriented contexts.

### Peers

Most comments about peers were offered during informal chats on a one-to-one basis, with negative comments being made mostly about peers outside ones own subcultural group. Most of these comments targeted particular features of group memberships, such as, dress, language, attitudes, and interests. However, there appear to be a couple of commonly held perceptions of peers which traversed the entire community. It is these generalizations about peers as a whole which are highlighted in this section.

### The New Wave

There is some feeling that the quality of new youth downtown is changing over time. The new generation who are coming downtown to claim their spot, are sized up by the outgoing generation. Some older teens are critical of these new entrants. "The new wave of young people are more obnoxious lately, lazy and louder" (Eric, John). "They're noisy punks, what a messed up generation, they're just weird" (Lou).

Another common point of criticism is the extent of the new entrants perceived submersion into apathy and conformity. These younger teens are ridiculed for hanging out for hours doing nothing at the War Memorial (Sarah, Al, Sam). According to Bibby & Posterski (1992), "Canadian youth today...are more inclined to conform than to innovate, and more comfortable being quietly passive than radically active".

Joe expressed a less popular view of his peer group. "The youth of today, a lot of them, are a lot smarter. Maybe the next generation will be able to overcome, become empowered and get what we deserve. Now its kinda like the age of enlightenment, people are really getting educated about things" (Joe).

### Just Be Yourself

Peers are also commonly criticized for being fake or trying to hard to fit in. These individuals are identified as "posers" and become the targets of jokes and pranks within the youth community. "Young people worry about their image more than who they really are" (Jasmine). "Preppies" are also harassed for trying too hard to impress others with their slick dress and careful manners. "Where's their sense of identity man?" (Tom).

Most teens state that they respect unique individuals who are not shaped by a need for popularity, or shape their style as resistance to social trends.

Individualism is important you know, like someone who is individualistic has their own views and their own strength kind of thing. They are themselves and they haven't been weighted down by all, this is what you should be in society, or this is what you should be so I'm not" (Bruce).

The high value placed on being yourself or being real seems to contradict, however, the highly choreographed impressions modelled by many adolescents. "Coolness" appears to be most often an attribute of a carefully manicured attitude and attire designed to impress ones peers. Although study participants placed a high value on genuineness in their peers, many themselves seemed overwhelmed by the pressure to conform to subcultural norms and maintain an image of coolness within the context of youth culture.

### Youth Identity

Reflections of youth identity surface in how they define themselves as being, for or against, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, indifferent or concerned etc. These definitions emerge in many ways, the most significant of which appears to be in their universal investment in music. A collective sense of youth identity also seems to be built around cooperatively assumed guides or core values for living within the community. Through both their music and core values, study participants paint a rich self-portrait of youth identity.

### Music and Identity

Music is vital in the creation of personal identity for youth. It is difficult to disentangle some teen's sense of the world, values, and beliefs, from the lyrics and attitudes expressed in the songs they listen to. Music is a socially powerful stimuli which shapes the modes of dress, behaviours, attitudes, and language codes that are meaning-making to the peer group (Danesi, 1994). Subcultural group boundaries within the community are constructed and maintained, in a large part, by the style(s) of music subscribed to by the group.



Over the course of the study, I interviewed several bands. In each case our discussion of the evolution of their musical tastes, generation of lyrics for original material, and image production of the band, mapped the landscape of personal growth of these individuals over time. It becomes apparent that music leaves an indelible mark on the identity of youth, and young people use music as a transformational tool in shaping their subcultural spaces, personal image, and outlook on the world.

Many of the local bands write original lyrics and set them to the borrowed beats of their favoured styles of music. Hardcore, blues, folk, acid rock, grunge, and metal are all styles subscribed to by youth subcultures downtown. The attitudes associated with the music are incorporated into the identity of the players. "Our music is kinda like macho red neck directions, kinda dark and evil and stuff. It's pretty angry music, but the lyrics are not like serious or about anything very real, it's just kinda like evil" (Band Y). These images are shaped by band members and become part of the personal image worn on the street corner.

Songs written by these bands either convey a highly personal message or are intentionally void of meaning and substance. Band X projects a personal, yet non-political message through their songs.

Well they're (lyrics) really personal, they're like...mostly stuff that angers me and is on my mind like you know, instead of going to see a psychiatrist I'll write a song about it. Most of the time I sing about girls, or I sing about people around me like friendships or just really personal stuff that people can relate to, I'm not trying to be political or anything like that because people get bogged down in stuff like that...who am I to say this or that you know tell people what to think (Peter, Band X).

In contrast Band Y burst out laughing when asked about the message in the lyrics they write.

“Don’t take us seriously, it’s not like we’re really being serious, we just like kinda a light-hearted approach, kind of a parody” (Band Y).

Young people talk about their music with a sense of ownership and commitment. Musical tastes are fought over precisely because people define themselves and others through what they like and dislike. Taste in music, for youth in particular, is often seen as the key to one’s distinct sense of self (Thornton, 1995). This personalization of a style of music seems to create a strong attachment and sense of commitment. “We would never sell our sort of music out” (Band X). Some young people express resentment when their style of music is misappropriated by others, especially adults, who are unable to connect with the true meanings of the art form. Band Z’s mission is to resurrect in their style of music, its original purpose and attitude.

I think the blues thing has been dominated by yuppies for too many years. When it started out it was really evil and loud and nasty, and for some reason it decided that it did not want to be nasty anymore, it’s been dominated by yuppies in cafes and stuff. People who buy blues records these days tend to be like my parents and stuff. I don’t think they have a grasp of what it’s about. (John)

Contact with these bands left the impression that musicians and musical styles are explored by teens in great detail. Individual band members seem to have a unique set of impressions and opinions about the music they play and listen to. They are able to trace the evolution of their musical preferences in terms of their personal maturity process.

Despite the divergent musical tastes across the youth community, music itself does not

seem to be a point of friction between the subcultures. Musical preference may not meet with approval from peers, but the intensity of the connection with music seems to be understood and respected by youth downtown as a whole. "Even if it's not my style of music I can relate though, if I go see a band and the singers singing about something, life problems, that he had that I can relate to or whatever, we're all youth, we can relate to something" (unknown).

### Core Values

Most young people view themselves as distinct from adult beings, and they seem to solidify their uniqueness through collective adherence to a set of attitudes, beliefs and meanings in their everyday lives. These are integrated into the identity of individuals as part of being a youth. Geeks, nerds, preppies, and posers, are said to be out of touch with these unique aspects of teenagerhood. They are chastised for being out of sync with their peers by being too serious, narrow minded, or compliant (identified as adult values). Although youth identity seems to be based around these core values, they act only as guiding principles, not necessarily codes of conduct. These core values are widely accepted and proliferate life within the youth community. These core values become a guide for maintaining a youthful attitude, and they appear to shape the identity of participants in community life. The most commonly expressed core values young people identify can be encapsulated in the following statements. It must be noted that some individuals divert completely from these values, in resistance to accepted group norms.

1. It's O.K. to do it if you're not hurting anyone else.
2. Say it like it is.

*Just don't say you're into it when you're not. You've got to have respect for it, if you're*

*going to go to our shows, don't go around and bash our band after we leave. (Brad)*

3. Be open minded.

4. Be who you are. Don't just try to be different.

*I don't believe in changing for someone else. You change from what you feel you don't change from what other people tell you. (Eric)*

5. Don't sell out on your friends or your music.

6. Don't lose sight of your ideals.

*As long as organizations such as Youth For Social Justice or Oxfam stay around it will be a little bit easier because I'll have them to make sure I don't go under. People in these organizations say, don't lose your ideals, don't lose your identity, don't conform. (Tammy)*

7. Having a sense of direction is important.

*Where you're going go...if you don't have direction you don't have anything, have respect for yourselves too. (Brad)*

I believe that if you work hard at what you're doing your dream will come true...it just takes time. (Mark)

8. Speak your mind and don't let people push you around.

*We're outspoken, we speak out, if somebody is pissing you off don't let it go. (Peter)*

9. Don't get too politically correct.

*If it's funny, it's funny. (Luke).*

10. You get respect for what you do.

*We look up to a band, then we started up a band and play, then another crowd looks up to us and then they start up a band, and then people look up to them. It's just like a cycle or something, you get respect for what you do. (Mark)*

### Future Prospects

Within the study group there is a wide range of opinions and feelings about the future. Some feel hopeless and therefore apathetic or cynical about the future, while others feel positive and are determined to be active participants in shaping a better future. These orientations could roughly be divided along subcultural lines. Art Fags and Freaks tend to view themselves more as part of the political and humanitarian process towards change. They demonstrate this through their community involvements and efforts to raise awareness of issues through popular theatre and art. They also feel more hopeful about their own potential for a fulfilling career, satisfying personal life, and ability to contribute to their community. Sarah is hopeful about the future, "...people complain and ridicule Freaks for their artificial activism but some action is better than nothing. I feel I have the best hope of contributing on feminist issues because I understand it, its part of my life experience" (Sarah). Other subcultural groups such as Skaters and Skullies seem to be more pessimistic about their own personal futures and the future of society. It proved difficult to access specific feelings and concerns of the individuals within these groups beyond a determined sense of hopelessness. They don't seem to buy into the dream of material well-being and social mobility, and appear reluctant to depict their hopes on the uncertain canvas of the future. According to Giroux (1996) this sentiment is spreading within youth cultures. "What used to be the pessimism of a radical fringe is now the shared assumption of a generation (Anshaw cited in Giroux, p. 27).

A universal concern amongst study participants seems to be that adults are rushing young people too early into decisions about careers and lifestyle choices. "There is too much push to decide what you want to be and do in the future, I'm only 15, what's the rush?" (Kate). "I'm 17

years old, I can't sit down and go, what am I going to do with my life, it's really hard" (Brad). Some, like Peter, don't know where they're headed, but are certain where they don't want to go in the future. "I don't particularly know (about my future), all I know is not addiction, that's all, that's all I know" (Peter).

Most teens realize that the adult world presents its own stresses and responsibilities, and they wouldn't mind holding off on the transition to adulthood a little longer. "I want to hang onto the excesses and irresponsibility of youth as long as possible" (Kate). According to Giroux (Fall 1994), for postmodern youth "...adulthood means pulling back on hope and trying to put off the future rather than taking up the modernist challenge of trying to shape it (p. 15). Young people in this study group seem more comfortable centring their expressions around the immediacy of present events and the people who populate their immediate world, then looking towards the future.

### Media Representations of Youth

Young people who hang out at the War Memorial get a fair amount of attention from local media. They are interviewed when conflicts arise between youth and the general public or police, or when complaints about the state of the site or conduct of teenagers surface. Last year there was a rash of articles in the local paper and letters written to the editor criticising teenagers at the site for littering, using offensive language, and defacing the war monument. Equally, there were responses in support of the youth community and stories of young people helping tourists and behaving respectfully while at the War Memorial. So far this summer there has been no media coverage about the site or the young people there.

Study participants express frustration and mistrust of people in the media and dislike the media's angle on youth downtown. "The media perceives all young people that hangout downtown as freaks and drug addicts" (unknown). "I think the whole fucking media misconception of youth is like we're all out there drinking, doing drugs irresponsibly and stuff" (Summer). Young people feel their messages are distorted by the press. "Last year I was on the news and they came down and asked us all these questions and they (press) took the bad side of it and edited out everything that we said" (Robin). Thornton (1995) describes these distorts about youth as "moral panic stories" which turn, "youthful leisure into revolt, lifestyle into social upheaval, and difference into defiance" (p. 6).

Over the summer, following the death of a member of the youth community (Mr. F), criticism of the media was reignited. Friends feared that the media would try to link alcohol with his death, smear his name, and make it seem like just another tragedy self-inflicted by the irresponsible acts of youth (unknown).

"The fuckin' media keep interviewing those Skully assholes from Middle Cove. Those reporters keep asking them about diving off the cliff, partying and drinking out there and stuff...Mr. F wouldn't dive off, he couldn't even swim for Christ's sake" (Sarah).

I was given a glimpse of how some young people view media attempts to change the self-destructive habits of youth such as smoking, drug use, and unprotected sex. Kate and Mandy think the media anti-smoking blitzes directed at teens are a joke. In one photograph they captured the warning label on a pack of cigarettes which states, "Tobacco Smoke Causes Fatal Lung Disease In Non-Smokers". "So all the non-smokers get cancer and we can happily go on smoking in good health...oh goodie" (Mandy). They feel the anti-smoking media hype is just attracting

youth to the dangers and forbidden image of smoking. “They’re attacking the problem by telling kids not to smoke, which makes them more attracted to smoking. The ads are really funny” (Kate). The huge impact mass media has had on study participants in terms of consumer habits, identity formation, attitudes, and behaviours is beyond the scope of this study.

### Newfoundland Heritage

Being a Newfoundlander seems to present an attractive challenge to youth. This may be an odd statement, but almost without exception, teens express that the “underdog”, “rough around the edges” and “unpredictable” characterizations associated with being a Newfoundlander appeal to the spirit of youth. Newfoundland is a place that seems to inspire a deep sense of loyalty in youth. “I don’t want to bail out on it now, I hope to see it survive, and I want to stay here and watch it survive, and maybe help” (Summer). Some young people feel they must resist the economic injustices heaped on the province by “the feds”. “I’m glad to be from here, this is always going to be my home cuz I just think it’s really excellent....we’ve been through shit down here like so much shit, they’re always putting us down cuz all the fish are gone now we’re all on welfare you know, none of us have jobs” (Tamara). There is a sense of urgency to resurrect the image of the hardworking, ever humorous, and tolerant Newfoundlander, and to be understood by the outside world. “I want people to know about this place, there are people that think we live in igloos” (Robin). “It’s that overall view that we’re drunken fishermen and we’re all on welfare that bugs me” (Anne).

Despite this determined pride and loyalty, many young people are critical of their traditional heritage. People in the fishery are criticized by some young people who feel they are



“leeching off the government”, or “lazy” (unknown). Even teens who seem to support Newfoundland music, local arts and culture, characterize youth from rural areas as “backward”, “stupid”, and “lazy”. This apparent contradiction would be an interesting subject of further study.

Overall, two contrary opinions about Newfoundland heritage and opportunity within the province surfaced. Firstly, it's a place with little opportunity for career, social and cultural growth. Secondly, being a Newfoundlander is a point of pride, the province is truly home, and young people don't want to abandon it. The latter opinion was most commonly expressed by study participants.

#### Chapter Summary

The process of shaping identity is an ongoing interactive cycle. As described by study participants elements such as, family, peers, school and, drugs influence young people's perceptions of adults, peers, parents, youth identity, media, future prospects, and cultural heritage. These influences and perceptions offer reference points, opportunities for collective struggle, and cognitive material from which to create an individual identity.

This kind of exploration of the elements which shape the identity of youth, is critical to moving beyond reactive and defensive representations of youth. “ I research the spoken and written words of the students to learn what they know, what they want, and how they live. Their speeches and writings, are privileged access to their consciousnesses” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 9). Finding these access points into youth consciousnesses provides a depth of knowledge which raises our awareness, heightens our sensitivities, and highlights the importance of connecting with contemporary youth experience.

#### Chapter 4: Bridging The Gap Between Youth and School Cultures

There is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active co-operation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying. (John Dewey, p. 43, 1938)

The fundamental logic of including young people in the purposes of their education has a long history. However, in contemporary society this logic remains on the sidelines of school management policy, and has been relegated to the back benches in the current chaotic climate of educational restructuring. It is my assertion that any plans for educational change are doomed to failure without the consideration of contemporary youth experience as an integral part of school life and as a critical object of study.

This chapter will apply the understandings of youth culture gained through observations, interviews, and focus groups with study participants and examine them in relationship to contemporary school cultures and current pedagogy. Firstly, an introduction to school cultures will be provided distinguishing some of the basic structures, functions, and contradictions which characterize school life within the current climate of educational change. Secondly, potential cultural gaps between youth and the adult-oriented worlds of teachers, administrators, and others who shape life within schools will be highlighted. Lastly, suggestions will be made to bridge these cultural gaps in the areas of school vision, curriculum content, and approaches to pedagogy. These areas will be explored for openings where the inclusion of youth experience and knowledge may effectively bridge the gap between street corner and school cultures.

It is my hope that this chapter will confirm the importance of understanding youth cultures, and provide practical suggestions for educators in reaching out to the young people in their classrooms to more intensely involve them in the project of learning. References from current literature, my personal experience with youth, and insights gained from data collected during the course of the study will collectively inform this chapter.

### School Cultures

The culture of school is made up of the patterns of acceptance and rejection, the methods of gaining status and leadership, the ways of using authority and allocating belonging, the ideas about individuality and conformity, about what constitutes success and worth expressed in the formal and informal rules of conduct [that]-offer daily lessons for personal and group conduct. This culture teaches about life and relationships, good or bad, depending on what patterns and values it follows. (Taba cited in Hollins, 1996, p. vi)

The hierarchical system of governance of schools, the age and ability groupings, uniformity of curriculum, methods of student control and discipline, the set pattern of movement sanctioned by the ringing of bells are all part of the culture of schooling. School life is defined by these functions and structures which make up the everyday experience for students. School cultures are a reflection of the political, moral, and social fabrics of the wider society in which they exist. We can not escape the fact then that the cultural discontinuities of our society are also present in schools in the form of “differences in the treatment of students, and at times differences in the quality of education provided, based on classism, racism, and sexism”

(Hollins, p. 31). School cultures are shaped by the contradictions inherent in the human communities it serves, and these contradictions become part of young people's experience within them.

### School Culture and Change

Today is an unprecedented time of social change which has made the process of educating the young decidedly more complex, and for which school systems are radically unprepared. The influx of diverse racial and ethnic groups, agendas of special interest groups, involvements of business in education, and gargantuan leaps in technology amidst financial restraints and budget cutbacks, have thrown our educational system into chaos. Schools have become sites of intense cultural politics. According to Levinson et al. (1996), "Politics can engulf the curriculum, coalitions form and reform trying to appropriate the schools to their own ends and students, often the voiceless objects of education reform, may become recalcitrant" (p. 1). It is within this push and pull environment that students find themselves facing the most uncertain of futures in the elastic techno-world of the new millennium.

### Identifying Gaps

Is it not possible that the perceived problematic relationship between what students learn and experience in and outside schools is in part a consequence of the unreflective emphasis on learning and experience within schools? Can the issues surrounding the integration of learning at two different points in time within schools be discussed, let alone resolved, without attention to concurrent learning and experience in and out of

school? (Sarason, 1995, p. 198).

The separation, and in some cases alienation, of experience and knowledge gained within and outside the school walls, is the primary reason for gaps between school and youth cultures. Why do these gaps exist? Why is youth experience not validated within school cultures? Part of this seems to hinge on some of the basic differences or cultural gaps study participants identified between young people and adults (teachers, principals, parents etc.). These cultural gaps exist in the life experiences and future prospects, social commitments, and basic attitudes of contemporary youth and generations past, and if unreconciled, impede the integration of young people into the adult-managed environment of school. This section will focus on these basic cultural gaps and the changing societal contexts which sustain them. Adult managed institutions, like schools, need to become cognizant of the missions, programs, leisure activities, student groupings, and pedagogical approaches imprinted on a generation with which they share so little common ground.

### Gaps in Life Experience

Youth today inhabit a world which is uncharted wilderness to older generations. Technology is one of the primary areas which delineate adult and youth experience in contemporary society. Most adults perceive knowledge, skill, and comfort gaps between the technological worlds of themselves and the young.

Youth talk to each other over electronic bulletin boards in coffee houses in North Beach, California. Cafes and other public salons, once the refuge of beatniks, hippies, and other

cultural radicals have given way to members of the hacker culture. They reorder their imaginations through connection to virtual reality technologies, and lose themselves in images that wage war on traditional meaning by reducing all forms of understanding to random access spectacles. (Giroux, Fall 1994, p. 34)

This “techno-gap” creates uneasiness in the relationships of those charged with teaching young people. The once solid grounding of the teacher as the bearer of knowledge and imparter of wisdom is fundamentally altered in the instant access to information age of the young. Several young people in the study commented on their teacher’s limited knowledge of computer technology and their lack of understanding of the impact this revolution is having on youth cultures.

Along with advances in technology comes a virtual revolution in the world of work for the coming generation. Adults, whose experience with planning for a successful future included the acquisition of secondary or university level education in their field of interest, can not begin to conceive of what might appropriately prepare young people for future success. There appears to be a general loss of faith in any recipe for future security. According to Giroux (1994), life for the young is like a lottery with the luck of the draw determining whether you get a McJob or enter the high rolling world of finance.

It is no wonder then that gaps are created between youth and adults as they are dealing with a completely different prognosis of the future. Today, most parents, leaders, and teachers “don’t know how to teach these children who are so different from what they themselves once were, and most children are unable to learn from parents and elders they will never resemble”

(Mead, 1969, p. 84). It is essential that those involved in education both recognize the enormity of the gap which exists between their own life experiences and those contemporary youth, and search for commonalities of desires and experience which they can integrate into the learning process.

### Gaps in Social Commitments

As mentioned in Chapter 2, “Shifting of Relationships”, young people place a high value on friendships and form strong attachments to their subcultural groups. According to study participants, the peer group is the primary source of support and nurturing. The strength of friendship bonds and peer commitments amongst youth today, should not be under-estimated within school environments. Commitment bonds with peers can overwhelm commitments to school structures, and interrupt collaborative learning formations inspired by the teacher. “The use of collaborative methods in the classroom presupposes an uncomplicated relation between teachers and their official business, on one hand, and the subcultures of pupils on the other” (Brake, 1980, p. 115). The social constructions of teachers are sabotaged by the social commitments of students. The dialogue between young people on the street corner offer insight into the depth of their commitment to their friends, subcultural group, and to youth as a whole. Teachers tread across lines constructed on sacred trusts between individuals, and cultural codes fusing groups in solidarity. I have witnessed many teachers disregard of or disrespect for the invisible grid of complex relations created in corner life destroy any opportunity for meaningful learning within the classroom. The end result is usually legislated punishment or banishment of disruptors of the social order imposed by the teacher.

### Gaps in Attitudes

As demonstrated by the study group, many young people present an appearance of indifference which is modelled in their postures, attitudes, and hours spent in apparently aimless inactivity. This indifference stems from the rapidly changing social context and absence of traditional markers for the future (Giroux, 1991). Hence, the label most frequently associated with this generation, “slackers”. “Slacking is a rational response to casino capitalism, the randomization of success, and the utter arbitrariness of power. If no talent is still enough, why bother to hone your skills? (Giroux, Fall 1994, p. 26). The roll of the dice quality of making it in contemporary society is a completely unique experience to this generation which older people, who have followed the Protestant work ethic recipe to success, are unable to fathom. This creates an attitudinal gap between the current generation and those of past generations. Without a fuller understanding of the evolution of attitudes of the young within a wider social context, teachers are unable to relate to their perceived indifference within school environments.

In their school lives young people are buttressed against these gaps in life experience, social commitments, and attitudes through their dealings with teachers, administrations, boards, parent councils, and within their own peer groups. Gaining an awareness of these gaps is the first step in building bridges with young people in schools.

### Bridging The Gaps

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an



instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom', the means by which men and women participate in the transformation of their world. (Shaul cited in Hollins, 1996, p. 15)

Bridging cultural gaps requires a shift in our thinking from schooling into conformity to schooling towards transformation. This shift needs to be reflected within school visions, curriculum content, and our approaches to pedagogy.

### Changing The Vision

Contrary to the current back-to-the-basics mentality driving much of school restructuring movement across Canada, schools need to first address the shifting attitudes, experiences, knowledge, representation, and desires of this new generation of youth. This can not be done within the dominant disciplinary configurations of knowledge and practice within schools (Giroux, 1996). What has been called for by many educators and academics is a redistribution of power among teachers, students, and administrators to provide the conditions for students to become agents in their learning process (Giroux, 1996, Coleman, 1992, Bibby & Posterski, 1992, et al.). This power shift can be achieved through the infusion of practices and values found in the student's other life-worlds into school environments. Hollins (1996) suggests many ways of achieving a more equal and inclusive school vision which centres around youth knowledge, experience, and empowerment. Schools must legitimize the knowledge students bring to school; make meaningful connections between school learning and cultural knowledge acquired outside

of school; create a hybrid culture in school that is congruent with the students peer and family cultures; and balance the rights of students and teachers (Hollins, 1996).

Along with shifting power amongst students and staff, schools should strengthen their potential for social support of all students. "If school, besides being an institution providing knowledge and intellectual training, should also become a social platform, an encouraging part of the adolescent's everyday life...A 'good school' in this sense is a society's unsurpassable contribution to youth politics" (Hurrelman, 1996, p. 42). The social support role of schools is often mentioned as an additional burden which should be discontinued. In my experience, the social support provided young people within schools is an integral part of fostering learning and personal growth. A caring approach used by teachers in recognizing a student's absence, enquiring about a change in attitude or performance, or checking in during a difficult period, is vital to a student's sense of connection to school and learning. For study participants, the social support provided by teachers and principals was cited as very significant in fostering positive attitudes towards school and in increasing their motivation to succeed within the school context.

### Refocusing Curriculum

The dominant curriculum treats motivation as outside the action of study. Tests, discipline, punishment, rewards, the promise of future jobs, are considered motivation devices, alienated from the act of learning now....The best thing is always the thing you are not doing. No wonder students are non-cooperative. (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 5)

Students are not engaged in what is occurring in the classroom when the content is

presented as something to be mastered and not as something to explore. Young people need to see themselves, or things that relate to their worlds outside of school, reflected in what they are learning. According to Sarason (1995), "the more a classroom contains the characteristics of outside-school situations, the more the people in that classroom will experience and sustain interest" (p. 204). In many instances, "knowledge is handed to them like a corpse of information - a dead body of knowledge - not a living connection to their reality" (Shor & Freire, p. 5). "Shopping malls, street communities, video halls, coffee shops, television culture, and other elements of popular culture must become serious objects of school knowledge" (Giroux, Fall 1994, p. 27).

In Hollins (1996) book, "Culture in School Learning", he emphasizes that educators should gain insight necessary for making links between the student's experiences in and out of school by asking probing questions of themselves. Hollins presents the following questions to focus educators on the student's experiential background; "What significant experiences and social contacts have individual students had within and outside school that frame behaviour, learning and perceptions within school?", and "How can knowledge of these significant experiences and social contacts be utilized to support meaningful learning in the classroom?" (p. 156). These questions mark the beginning of validating youth experience within the curriculum.

According to Giroux (1996), it is not enough to place youth experience on the curriculum, it must become a critical object of study within the classroom. The challenge of including youth experience and knowledge across subject areas lies in engaging students to collectively analyse and ask critical questions about what occurs in their everyday lives and "...it must address how the different postmodern conditions and contexts of youth can be changed in order to expand and

deepen the promise of a substantive democracy” (Giroux, 1996, p. 46). Taking themes that are most problematic to students, and providing a forum for analysing them critically, empowers young people to resist complete acceptance of and immersion in mass culture. “Situating pedagogy in student culture does not merely exploit or endorse the given but seeks to transcend it” (Shor, 1986, p. 104).

### Reframing Pedagogy

Teachers have no choice but to inquire into each student’s unique culture and learning history, to determine what instructional materials might best be used, and to determine when a student’s cultural and life experiences are compatible, or potentially incompatible, with instruction. To do less is to build emotional blocks to communication in an already complicated instruction situation. (Berliner cited in Hollins, 1996, p. 29)

Early in the school year teachers need to reframe their role as transmitter of information to one of explorer and observer in the mission of gathering insights. The level of inquiry needed to flesh out the cultural lives of students within the classroom places the teacher in the role of researcher. “I examine the worlds and themes most important to them so I will have reality-materials for the class studies....The first researcher, then, in the classroom, is the teacher who investigates his or her students” (Shor & Freire, p. 9). Not only should teachers look for insights into youth experience, but also they must search for an understanding of the resistances and openings individuals present towards school learning. This type of research can be undertaken while the course is underway through dialogue and exercises (Shor & Freire, p. 11). It is

important that these awarenesses of student life and orientations to school learning occurs within an atmosphere where students agree to say, write, and do what is authentic to them.

In my experience, part of creating an atmosphere of honesty is through sharing pieces of my own world, and by doing what the young people in this study place high value on, which is to strive for authenticity and indeterminacy in my daily teaching. By “just being yourself” within the teaching role, young people tend to share more of themselves, leaving behind the “adult-filtered” versions of reality. Shor (1986) makes this point eloquently in discussing his approach to teaching. “I didn’t present a distant, teacherly manner and didn’t expect them to be disabled characters in a traditional school script. Both of us were free to be natural” (p. 25).

“Productive learning occurs when students and teachers teach each other” (Sarason, p. 14). Through sharing the learning experience and joining in open ended inquiry into subjects with students, teachers are modelling the attitude of life long learning and commitment to personal growth. This is what Freire & Shor refer to as “liberatory education”, where students and teachers are both critical agents in the act of knowing. This approach to teaching is an essential part of opening the doors to youth experience within the classroom. It signals the student that the teacher is willing to be vulnerable and take risks in order to further their own understanding. This approach requires that course structure remains fluid and responsive to the tides of student and teacher learning. “Indeterminacy rather than order should become the guiding principle of a pedagogy in which multiple views, possibilities, and differences are opened up” (Giroux, 1994).

Teachers themselves, across all subject areas and grade levels, are capable of reforming their pedagogy with only a change in their vision of learning. Through reforming their view of

students as receptacles of school sanctioned knowledge, and casting themselves as researchers and co-learners within their classrooms, teachers invite students to be curious, critical, and creative. The project of learning becomes one that transcends the boundaries of the classroom and engages the contradictions, choices, and commitments within street corner life.

### Chapter Summary

It is the knowing of young people, both as representatives of a novel culture, and as individuals within a particular context, that allows us to make connections instead of erecting barriers. Bridging gaps between youth and school cultures begins with the individual. Change is most effectively enacted by those most intimately involved in the struggle. It is teacher in the classroom, then, who must enrich their understanding of youth, and seek to engage others in informed dialogue about the students they teach. It is these grassroots innovations which will challenge prominent notions that changing school structures, adjusting curriculum, adding new clubs, installing video monitoring in hallways, streaming, segregating, or technologizing schools will improve the learning experiences and future prospects of contemporary youth. Bridging gaps requires a clearly defined shift in our thinking and daily practice of our new awarenesses within our classrooms.

### Closing Thoughts

We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time. (T.S. Eliot)

This passage from the “Four Quartets” summarizes the experience of researching the hidden textures of youth culture. As teachers, educators, administrators, or professors, young people are part of our daily existence and seem familiar to us. On closer examination, however, the familiar behaviours, attitudes, dress, speech patterns, and symbols of youth are resurrected as objects of curiosity and wonder. It is through these lenses that our students can be known again for the first time.

The participants in this study shared freely and with enthusiasm pieces of themselves and their world. Many have written to me since, enclosing sketches, poems, songs, and stories, of their everyday lives. They ask if I’m finished my study of youth, and I have to say no. This study continues because of my recognition that knowledge of youth cultures both enriches my teaching experiences, and is an essential ingredient in student success.

Young people are no longer individuals with limited histories and little knowledge. Their lives are no longer uncluttered and uncomplicated. They are no longer just teenagers, with teen problems, teen moods, and teen friends. I now know that they have rich histories and are full of profound insights. They are part of a complex network of social relationships with elaborate codes of conduct, language, and traditions. They belong to a historical context which is mysteriously foreign. They also face uncertain futures and monumental social problems within their lifetimes. These new awarenesses of youth, the extraordinary in the ordinary aspects of their cultures, open doors to a remodelling of educational thought and recast educators into the role of lifelong researchers. This study of the evolving life-worlds of youth will continue.

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