Resist-stance Work and Critical Social Learning: Queer Young Adults as Activist Educators for Social Justice

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Abstract: This paper employs critical social learning perspectives to argue for the need to develop an emotional sociology to investigate individual and collective learning as impetus for social justice initiatives. In this paper I trace the lived and learned experiences of three queer young adult activists who integrate emotional labour and learning in resistance, identity, and political work to create counternormative educational spaces of resist-stance and resilience. I explore how these young adults represent organic intellectuals who engage in social and political learning through oppression to create “subaltern counterpublics” that contest the limits of who is included and excluded in what constitutes the “public” in Canadian k-12 public schools.

Introduction:
Emotions as Impetus for Social Learning and Collective Action for Social Justice

Goodwin and Pfaff (2001) posit the need to develop an emotional sociology, which they suggest “recognizes the ubiquity of emotions, moods, and affect in social life and which treats emotions as potential causal mechanisms, or components of such mechanisms, and not simply as epiphenomena or dependent variables” (p. 283). Rather than attempting to bracket emotions out of research, Goodwin and Pfaff propose that we should understand emotions as “constitutive of [the very] social relations and actions” (p. 283) that undergird individual learning and collective action. Correspondingly, researchers concerned with understanding social justice movements are prompted to explore the role that emotions and emotional management play in providing impetus for consciousness raising, individual learning, and collective social action.

In their historical conspectus, Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) relate how emotions and social learning had first been studied as a primarily crowd based phenomena (1950s) and then later largely as an analysis of individual personality conflicts (1960s). In each instance emotions were situated as primarily negative, conflict-based factors that had to be controlled and overcome. In the 1970’s and 80’s understandings of social movements broadened and were heavily theorized as resource-based community mobilization models, which relied upon empirical, scientific, and techno-rational approaches concerned with cost-benefit calculations and scientized policy analysis. In the 1990’s, at the zenith of the culture wars, cognitive approaches, featuring frames, codes, schema, discourses, and narratives dominated theoretical explorations of the social movement literature. Despite these new more critical frameworks, even today “science, not feeling, is the dominant language of legitimation and persuasion in today’s liberal societies. Measurable costs and benefits, atmospheric data, with occasional reference to legal precedents or God thrown in,” (p. 15) all serve to devalue and frame emotions and individual and collective learning in predominantly pejorative ways.

For many individuals, emotions often come rushing to the surface long before cognitive processes can be articulated, examined, and developed into guidelines for
individual or collective strategic action. Gamson (1992) situates emotions as not only pivotal in the fight for justice, but also as vital in the rage over injustice, which he describes as “the righteous anger that puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul” (as cited in Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta 2001, p. 32). Many of these “outlaw” emotions have served as a historical base for launching powerful political challenges as evidenced in African-American civil rights, feminist, and queer social movements. Upon close inspection emotions permeate all aspects of social action and social relationships that range from the intensely personal to the outright and in your face political (For example, Queer Nation and ACT-UP). Correspondingly, Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) argue that we need to investigate how emotions are socially and culturally constructed in an effort to enrich and further our understandings of social learning.

Research into complex issues, such as emancipatory social learning, depends on our understanding of the daily events that surround and inform the learning process. From a critical perspective, individual emotions and their associated responses can be understood as internalized and constructed responses. Often emotional feelings or experiences are related to an analysis of events and experiences prompted by a desire for a better future, the indignation of exclusion, or the outrage at marginalization. In many cases visceral emotional experiences often become the root for larger social and political change. Many astute activists often work to “weave together a moral, cognitive, and emotional package of attitudes” (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001, p. 16) in an attempt to translate individual experiences into the call for a collective social responsibility. For example, often through a strategic shift in emotional emphasis, individual fear can be marshaled into collective courage, private shame into public pride, and experiences of silence into a resonant voice. Effective activists help to focus on transforming these types of emotions into cognitive beliefs and concrete actions that can mobilize both individual and collective will against the forces of oppression. Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) suggest that the “emotions and experiences that prepare individuals for political action” (p. 23) are vastly understudied in social movement and learning theory literature.

**Learning Through the Struggle: LGBTQ Young Adults and Critical Social Learning**

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, and queer (LGBTQ) young adults, important social learning occurs within a variety of formal, non-formal, and informal spaces within their families, communities, and schools. Church et al. (2001) challenge theoretical orientations that propose reductionistic methods narrowing investigations of learning into discrete categories, fixed places, or analytic units of study. Rather than investigating specific sites where learning is traditionally thought to occur (For example, in the classroom), the authors articulate how critical learning in the struggle against oppression is fluid, complex, non-linear, contradictory, dialectical, and necessarily occurs across time, space, and interest groups (p. 244). These authors draw upon Foley’s (1999) description of “learning through social action” to situate critical social learning as an embodied and embedded experience that is highly situational and relational.

In this essay I situate critical social learning as a complex, messy, emotional, and often contradictory experience that occurs in dialectical tension to educational institutions that strive to replicate the status quo and police public space (Allman, 2001; Epstein &
Sears, 1999). I examine the themes of emotional resilience and intellectual resistance evident in the experiences of three gay male young adults whom I situate as activist-educators who immerse themselves in a pedagogy informed by a resistance to heteronormative learning. In this educational milieu, I argue that these youth represent organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1992) who create “subaltern counterpublics” (Fraser, 1993, p. 14) that contest the limits of who is included and excluded in what constitutes the “public” in Canadian public schools (Gaskell, 2001).

This research is based on the lived and learned experiences of three male youth who were selected to participate in this study in light of the unique ways in which they have worked to become critical change agents in their high schools. I focus on how these youth draw upon their emotions as impetus to develop counternormative and LGBTQ inclusive educational spaces in Edmonton, Alberta, Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, and Sault St. Marie, Ontario. These three cities represent fairly typical social, cultural, and educational environments found across Canada. All of the participants are recent high school graduates and have signed consent forms agreeing to use their own names and experiences in this research. We held a series of telephone interviews with each of the research participants and I transcribed and analyzed the conversations for themes that emerged from the research data.

Today’s LGBTQ youth have a greater sense of self-awareness and knowledge about their sex, sexual, and gender differences than previous generations (Ryan & Futterman, 2001). This knowledge and understanding has enabled many LGBTQ youth to lead more fully integrated lives as they learn to successfully come to terms with their marginalized identities (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). However, as Ryan and Futterman (1998) note “self-identification as lesbian or gay at younger ages also means greater stress, more negative social pressure, and greater need for support, particularly from nonjudgmental and informed providers who can offer appropriate guidance, health education, and referrals” (p. 10). This support is of paramount importance in helping LGBTQ youth to combat feelings of social difference, which can lead to experiences of isolation and alienation as they come out and come to terms with their sex, sexual, and gender differences.

Depending on the context, LGBTQ youth are allowed to be “out” to different degrees and in different ways. Geographic, religious, and cultural contexts all serve to influence and shape the ways in which these youth are able to express their identities in their schools, families, and communities. For example, while Bruce was able to help establish a Gay Pride Day in his urban high school, Jeremy, who was from a northern and more rural community, faced significant resistance to not only his sexuality, but also to his racialized identity as well. Jeremy’s efforts to challenge heteronormativity in his northern community were met with racial slurs, homophobic taunts, and physical threats.

Prior to making demands or articulating discourses or strategies for individual or collective social change, LGBTQ persons must first develop an intrinsic belief that they deserve more than a legacy of discrimination, emotional violence, and physical abuse. Jeremy, Ryan, and Bruce recount their own coming out and coming to terms processes, and the emotional labour and learning involved in their disclosures, which became emotional catalysts and generative seeds that helped them to develop the capacity for their subsequent LGBTQ social justice activism.
Jeremy: Just when I came out and came to terms with my sexuality, then along came homophobia. In a sense homophobia was easier for me to deal with, because I had already experienced racial discrimination based on misconceptions and ill education…. When I entered high school in Sault St. Marie there was very little cultural diversity. I stood out like a huge sore thumb. You could tell I was brown. Everybody saw it. They’d yell, “Hey brown boy!” or I’d get called “Nigger,” or they’d say “Hey, Nigger fuck off and go back to your own country.” It was a huge shock. I had never ever in my life been called a Nigger. I was Canadian! There was a lot of buried hatred in that community when it came to cultural diversity and a lot of belief in stereotypes.

Jeremy, in his comments below, further probes and problematizes the construction of essentialized identity categories and exclusionary educational environments as an important opportunity to learn from his experiences of marginalization.

It seemed like every time that I was at my worst spots in life something would happen to me. Be it a racial slur or a heterosexist remark…. That’s when it would hit home. I’d be really, really shocked and part of me would be feeling, “Crap, not another thing to deal with.” But then another part of me would say, “If I’m a Nigger, I’m a hard worker, and if I’m a hard worker I can deal with this and I can get off my ass and I can make a change and prove to these people that I’m more than their stereotype. I’m more than that queer faggot boy who would likes to wear pink, but doesn’t find the right outfit for it, so I’ll wear a boa instead.” It just lifts me up in a way that I can delve into my work and prove (mainly to myself) that I can be better than the names that they call me.

In his reflective statements, Ryan, like Jeremy, recounts the emotional stress of coming out and trying to find an accepting and accommodating space and place in a heteronormative world.

There’s definitely pressure to be straight. Everyone assumes you are. They ask over and over, “Why don’t you have a girlfriend?” I started to get that a lot in grade twelve. That just made it harder to make friends or to get really close to anyone, because you know that as soon as they start to find out about your life they can figure it out pretty easily. Although no one every made fun of me because I don’t act like it or show it [being gay] in any way that I can tell. But for me the easiest way to tell that I’m gay is to watch my eyes. When I see a couple walking by, I don’t look at the girl. Other than that I don’t think it’s too obvious. I always knew that I was different than everybody else.

Based upon their research with LGBTQ youth, Epstein, O’Flynn, & Telford (2003) state that the “naming one’s sexuality to family and friends is felt by many young people to be one of the most challenging aspects of coming out as queer” (p. 127). Yet, without this act of disclosure Ryan, Jeremy, and Bruce would have had great difficulty finding the supports needed to become critical change agents within their schools. As the following youth narratives attest, parental acceptance and support is a key component of building the capacity and resiliency of LGBTQ youth to address issues related to discrimination, homophobia, and heterosexism in their schools and communities. Ryan highlights how coming out to his parents helped to actually more fully include him in his family.
I came out to my parents the night before my calculus final. It was also the day of my parent’s twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. I had just gone on my first date with a boy a few days before and I was typing an email to him on my computer. My mom was standing behind me reading the email over my shoulder…. So she pretty much just caught me. She said she was going to go wake up my father…. They sat down with me and said that they were proud of me. They said that they could only imagine how hard it must have been to go that long without telling anyone.

Disclosure does not always come without risks to the self, and as Ryan suggests, to his family as well.

I know that my dad won’t talk about it much. He won’t tell anyone, especially at work. I also don’t want anyone he works with to know, because I work for him and they gay bash pretty bad. Sitting in the lunchroom some days makes you feel sick. Here they are making fun of being gay, and I’m thinking, “I’m gay, look around!” They just don’t seem to see it. A lot of them have said that gay people should be dragged into the street and shot. Where does that come from? Why would you say something like that? They’re all talk, but it still hurts.

[After coming out] I finally feel like a whole person. There is no better feeling. I wake up in the morning and I have direction in my life. Having a boyfriend is great. For once I’m not alone. I have someone to talk to and spend time with. I just feel so much better about life.

As Ryan’s comments indicate, coming out is a continual and lifelong process that is always mitigated by issues of safety, vulnerability, individual comfort, and perceived levels of support and acceptance.

Bruce’s comments below demonstrate how coming out is a complex and lifelong process of learning that involves more than just the disclosure of one’s LGBTQ identity. The coming out experience is directly linked to a larger coming to terms process that involves both the individual who discloses their non-heterosexual identity and the recipient of that disclosure. This emotionally laden coming out and coming to terms process becomes a novel and often-unexpected source for social learning.

I came out to my family before my friends actually, which seems to be contrary to what a lot of people my age do. I told my grandmother first. My mother was fine with it. She’s got gay friends, so she really had no problem. She already has another son, so I guess she doesn’t have to worry about the grandmother thing. However, my biological dad took it kind of hard. I’m his only son. He spent about three hours on the porch shaking his head while I was sitting in the living room going “Oh, no!” We’re still working on my being out. It takes a while. It’s a process I guess. It’s kind of hard for him.

I’m very cautious about who I am close to. My close friends were fine with it. My best friend was mad that I didn’t tell her sooner! However, it wasn’t so easy with other students at school. Teenagers are teenagers, and they had the reactions that I expected in school. I guess I got what every gay kid gets: name calling and that sort of thing. I didn’t let it get me down. I had my close network of friends who supported me.
The research literature is dense with studies that have examined the negative experiences associated with being an LGBTQ adolescent (Blackburn, 2004). For example, LGBTQ youth face a significant number of increased emotional and physical risk factors, which may include (but are not limited to) negative self-esteem, drug and alcohol abuse, feelings of depression and isolation, disruptive school behavior, increased sexual activity, and decreased academic performance (Friend, 1993 & 1998; Ryan & Futterman, 1998). In correlation to these risk factors, LGBTQ youth have been found to have suicide rates that are two to three times higher than their heterosexual peers (Morrison & L’Heureux, 2000; Remafedi, 1994).

The negative risk factors associated with being an LGBTQ youth are well documented. Correspondingly, Russell and Joyner (2001) and Talburt (2004) urge researchers to move beyond “at-risk” models and the “psychopathological effects of same-sex sexual orientation on adolescents’ lives” to examine the resiliency factors, innovative social learning, and the “unique strengths that characterize the lives of sexual minority adolescents” (Russell & Joyner, 2001, p. 1280).

In an effort to address aspects of discrimination, educators have often used the “at-risk” label as a justification for the development of LGBTQ inclusive policies and teaching practices (Talburt, 2004). However, this classification delimits queer youth agency, social learning, and the types of programs, services, and supports that are established to respond to the diverse needs of LGBTQ youth. What subject positions are made available to LGBTQ youth when they are only understood as being “at-risk” (Talburt, 2004)?

What is less understood, and what the “at-risk” label conveniently leaves unexplored, is how homophobia is utilized as a weapon of sexism (Pharr, 1998) and racism to actively police and regulate student behaviour into strict gender and racial scripts of what it means to be and/or act as a male or female. LGBTQ youth activists that have the courage to speak out and disrupt these binary constructions and fixed subject positions often do so at great risk to themselves and their families. Ryan, Jeremy, and Bruce each speak to the physical and emotional costs of increased visibility and the disruption of the status quo.

**Ryan:** My boyfriend and I like to hold hands, but at the same time we are always looking around and over our shoulders, especially because he is deaf and he won’t see them coming. People do and say things. It’s not pleasant. For example, last weekend we had just come off the bus and we were holding hands. Some guy came up to us and said, “What the fuck are you two guys doing?” I just stood there. It was the first time that anyone had ever said anything like to me. I was more shocked than angry.

**Jeremy:** At school I was attacked a couple of times in the hallway. I was walking down the hallway and a guy jumped on me and pretended to fuck me. It was a big joke for him and his friends. After throwing him off me, I collapsed. I couldn’t believe that I had been violated in such a sexual way in front of the school. Worst of all were the days after when I had to deal with my parents. I skipped classes for two days and people were wondering what was going on. I also had to deal with
the student going around and saying that I was going to take him to court. I had to deal with total strangers coming up to me and saying, “What are you doing to my friend? How come you are taking him to court?” These people didn’t even recognize that I was the victim. I was not the one at fault.

**Bruce:** Not only was there verbal abuse in my school, there was also physical violence. The violence was there before and after I came out. It just seems like a constant. One time this group of boys surrounded me outside my school and they grabbed me by my hair and smacked my head on the curb. Another time in grade eleven I was in a park after school with a gay friend and another group of guys came along. We weren’t dating or anything. We were just sitting in the park talking and they came up to us and beat us up.

These are the things you expect to happen to you when you’re gay. Of course I was afraid of being physically hurt, but I guess I just decided that I wouldn’t let it bother me emotionally. I prepared myself. I decided I wouldn’t let it affect me in terms of making me feel bad about myself or who I was. I have to be myself.

**Activists as Educators: Learning to Resist/Resistance Learning**

In this section I highlight how Ryan, Jeremy, and Bruce have learned from their emotionally laden coming out and coming to terms experiences to position themselves as cultural workers (Freire, 1998) who actively work to contest public space through resistance strategies designed to counteract oppressive regimes of the normal. As Fine and Bertram (1999) ask:

Where are the corners in which class, race, language, gender, sexuality and (dis)abilities can be reclaimed, reconstituted and taken back?….We ask this because we struggle to find (and delight when we do) those spaces from which the next generation of political work emerges. (p. 158)

Below Ryan, Jeremy, and Bruce elaborate on the safe space work and counterhegemonic pedagogies they developed in their schools. Notably, these pedagogical strategies were not a part of the official curriculum of the school. Rather, it was a lived curriculum based upon a politics of exclusion that became the site for these activist-educators to challenge heteronormative strictures and structures. Here Ryan recounts how he took the opportunity to “re-do” his grade twelve graduation prom.

This year I decided to do my prom over again and I went to my friend’s prom as his date. Neither of us asked for permission. We just went. To be honest I don’t think any of the teachers cared. I even knew one of the teachers there and he asked me who I was there with and I just said Mark. He just kind of gave me this “ohhh” and then changed the subject…. It was really nice to go with Mark, it felt like I did it right the second time. It was like a second chance.

Jeremy’s resistance took a different approach as he engaged in the “possibilities for interruption” (Weis & Fine, 2001, p. 521) and the politics of visibility to assess the potential ramifications of his contestation with the heteronormative status quo.
I realized that [in starting a positive space campaign] I had an opportunity to do something with my life. Being in my last year of high school, I knew that if something [negative] did happen to me, I was better able to defend myself in both the emotional and physical sense. Also, by that time my family had become very gay positive…. I wouldn’t have started any of it if had my family and I all not satt down and talked about it. We were never quite sure where the campaign would take us, especially with bringing gay issues into my high school. We all talked about it. We felt that this could go in a million and one directions. In a worst case scenario our house could be lit on fire, or maybe nothing would happen, or it could effect me and my brother, or it could also effect my parent’s jobs living in such a small community. Taking all the risks into consideration, our family’s commitment to activism, and our personal beliefs, we all decided that it was important to do it. My parents were fully supportive and were quite willing to help out. .

Like Jeremy, Bruce also challenged the structures of disavowal in his school. There were homophobic experiences in school. Negative comments were made everyday. The word “fag” was tossed around all the time. One time when I walked into the school someone shouted a name at me and chucked a water bottle at me. That incident was a catalyst for me. I felt that homophobia was on the rise in our school. I wanted to tell the principal that this was unacceptable…. Our school is extremely multicultural. It’s a big thing that we are proud of. If anything racist happens there is absolutely zero tolerance for it. I told the principal that I expected the same zero tolerance for homophobic comments and actions.

Bruce also highlights the importance of his school’s GSA as not only a space for personal, political, and pedagogical resistance, but also as an important space for emotional recuperation where LGBTQ youth can build community, solidarity, and find support (Barry, 2000).

In the first year or two the GSA was mostly a small discussion group. We met in this little room across the hall from the main office. It had tinted windows with a pride sticker. We would just sit there and eat our lunches while we talked about homework. Sometimes we’d just listen to music. Over time the GSA became more focused on bringing anti-homophobia education into the school. We started moving beyond just a discussion group and out into the school. We made posters and put them up around the school. They were ripped down continuously, but we’d just have poster parties and put up more. We also painted pride rainbows on the walls with sayings like “Love knows no gender!” Then we started talking to the administration and staff about their roles in stopping homophobia. We talked about going into staff meetings and doing staff education. We started formulating lesson plans for doing anti-homophobia workshops in classes. This past year we focused on having a gay pride day in our school. We talked about how exciting and ground breaking it would be for a Canadian high school to have one. We set the date for May 22nd, 2002.

Bruce’s narrative illustrates how a sustained set of commitments to counter heteronormativity takes significant time, localized effort, and consciousness-raising strategies. Greene (2000) echoing Bruce’s comments identifies these lived and shared public spaces as critical sites that
may release [student’s] imaginations enough to project changes for themselves… [and invite others] to share available space in such a way that the obstacles or injustices they face are viewed as common concerns, not only to be resisted and escaped from but also to be transformed and somehow overcome. (p. 295)

In describing the transition from lived (personal) to shared (public) space, Bruce illustrates the importance of what Greene (2000) identifies as “challengers” who take on initiatives themselves and “therefore, without knowing or even noticing it, begin to create that public space… where freedom can appear” (p. 297).

When I went to that very same principal who four years earlier had been so reluctant and told him that the GSA wanted to have the first ever pride day in a Canadian high school, he said, “Let’s do it!” I worked very closely with him in planning the day. He even gave pride-flag stickers to every teacher to put on their classroom door to symbolize the importance of the day. It’s really great how he came around. I think the kind of education that the GSA brought to the school really helped.

Understanding that building an inclusive public space would require more than just his individual effort; Bruce relates how he attempted to mobilize his school community with an unexpected and potentially risky challenge.

Two or three months before the pride day I was thinking, OK, everything is coming along nicely what else can I do? I thought that a pride day is pretty unexpected. What would be the next thing that they wouldn’t expect? So I thought it would not only be good to have a pride day, but to do the pride day in conjunction with other student clubs. Maybe this would show all the students that we were working toward the same goal – inclusion. So we invited the school’s Christian club to help plan the day. I went and spoke to them and gave them this speech about how important it would be if they joined us and publicly expressed their support. To my amazement they agreed. I brought the news to the principal and told him, “This is the most important announcement you are ever going to read!” The announcement said, “Today at lunch there will be a joint meeting of the Gay-Straight Student Alliance and the Christian Club.” I bought eight pizzas and we made posters and decided that we would run this day together and show the school that we were all against homophobia.

Lived Spaces, Counterpublics, and Public Schools

In this concluding section, I develop a conceptual analysis that draws upon and extends the counter hegemonic educative work of Ryan, Jeremy, and Bruce to situate their emotive experiences and individual efforts to overcome discrimination within a larger critical discourse that analyzes how the personal, political, and pedagogical intersect with and contest the “public” domain of schooling.

As demonstrated throughout this essay, Ryan, Jeremy, and Bruce have articulated how their very personal and at times emotional experiences with oppression provided them with the impetus to develop a variety of creative and innovative ways to enable themselves and others to become critical change agents in their schools. Each of these resist-stance strategies operates in both very private and public ways to interrupt the dominant ideology of heteronormativity. This ideology affords heterosexuality a position
of domination and control while subordinating LGBTQ identities to deviant or “Othered” subject positions.

The institution of schooling is not an open and accessible place for all students. Students of colour, different socio-economic classes, abilities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and gender identities are often excluded from full, equitable and meaningful participation within this public sphere. As much as public schools might like to believe that these differences can be “bracketed out” of official educational discourse, the daily discursive practices and interactions that govern student’s abilities to live in the everyday are never neutral. A series of formal (institutional) and informal (peer-to-peer) pressures govern which identities are publicly valued, who has the right to speak, and at what risks to the speaker.

Fraser (1993) describes the sites of resistance that students like Ryan, Jeremy, and Bruce create as “subaltern counterpublics,”(p. 14) which are created in dialectical tension with the “very exclusionary practices of the public sphere” (Fine & Bertram, 1999). These counterpublics contest the exclusionary norms and Othered subject positions that deny LGBTQ youth full and equitable participation and inclusion in their public schools. In this environment of negation, Ryan, Jeremy, and Bruce demonstrate how they develop the capacities and resiliencies to become activist-educators who seek to disrupt the heteronormative status quo in an effort to find a valued and recognized space and place for their sex, sexual, and gender differences.

This contestation of public space, whether through the creation of GSAs, positive space campaigns, or the visibility of LGBTQ identities becomes a vital resistance strategy that brings with it the call to put the “public” back into public schools. This “public” is one built on the premise of a substantive social equality as guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This understanding of “public” space and the rights and responsibility of membership calls for the establishment of sites of true deliberation that are invested with a genuine need for and understanding of the Other. This is an Other that isn’t bracketed out of discourse or treated with notions of a power-laden tolerance (Freire, 1998). This need for the Other stems from the hope and possibility that exists when we understand and embrace diversity as a society’s greatest strength. Truly public spaces cannot be a monolithic ideologue dominated by a prevailing discourse. As Gaskell (2001) posits “public educational space is fractured, and the fracturing is constitutionally guaranteed” (p. 33).

GSAs and the establishment of LGBTQ positive spaces provide a way for this “fracturing” space to occur in public schools. These fractured spaces become critical areas for a deliberative communicative dialogue to emerge. These fractured spaces or counterpublics are not necessarily designed to be oppositional or combative. In many cases they become key sites for emotional recuperation and intellectual resist-stance that afford the necessary time and space for reflection, storytelling, and consciousness-raising to occur outside of the totalizing gaze of the hegemonic public sphere. Fraser (1993) postulates that these counterpublics “signal that they are parallel discursive areas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 14). In these subaltern spaces students learn to name, reflect, and take action based upon their everyday readings of the word and the world around them (Freire, 1998).
This counter discourse or contestation for the “public” space and what constitutes the “public” good is evident in Bruce’s comments that relate his attempts to advertise and acknowledge his GSA as an alternative educative space in his school. The ripping down of the GSA’s posters indicate how contested public space can become when counterpublics seek to reclaim even the smallest corners where “individual dreams, collective work and critical thought are stolen, smuggled in and reimagined” (Fine & Bertram, 1999, p. 158). As Gaskell (2001) points out “the treatment of difference in schooling is never static and is highly politically charged because it references ‘our’ assumptions about what children should learn in common, as citizens” (p. 20).

On their own, GSAs, positive spaces, and improved access to LGBTQ educational resources and visibility will not and cannot be the solution to “inclusivity” or “diversity” in schools. There is no one counterpublic that can represent the diverse needs and experiences of all students in today’s schools and society. Instead, we should encourage a multiplicity of counterpublics that recognize the need for deliberation and dialogue across differences as essential to creating an inclusive participatory democracy in schools. Students and teachers live and work amongst many counterpublics that are constantly overlapping and shifting. Perhaps we should be teaching students to develop critical literacies that enable them to negotiate and speak across multiple counterpublics rather than against them. This multiliteracy can be understood as a potential opening up and expanding the space of the possible, rather than a closing down and bracketing out of difference and diversity.

It is this organic intellectual and emotional labour and the resisting of the temptation to let our differences divide us that Ryan, Jeremy, and Bruce utilize as the basis for their counternormative pedagogical and cultural work. These youth engage in what Butler (2002) describes as an ethics of capacity that seeks to create even the most transient space, that if only, even just for a small moment, might allow for their individual and collective voices to be heard.

**Ryan:** The world doesn’t change on its own. You kind of have to give it a kick. What other choice do you have? You’re either going to go crazy or do something that’s not so good.

**Jeremy:** It all has taken its toll on me, but I also think that it has shaped me as an individual. It’s an experience to walk the halls of your own school and have people look at you and point their fingers and say, “You’re a queer! You’re a fucking Nigger! You and your fucking gay friends are going to die in hell!” It’s a very gut wrenching experience…. But I think I’m lucky because I’m educated on LGBTQ issues, but there’s more to it than just me. There’s an entire world around me. If it wasn’t for my family and friends, or my community, I wouldn’t be who I am today. I’m just one piece of the puzzle. Everyone has a social responsibility. I’m an educated activist. I think there’s a little bit of hero in all of us. Just make an effort in any direction – just pick a cause to believe in and fight for it.

**Bruce:** I view what I do as a professional obligation to ensure that I am not a second-class citizen in my own country. I just think that I am doing what’s necessary for me and the others who don’t fit in. I think that the most powerful
thing that we can ever do in facing homophobia is for gay and straight people to hold hands and say that homophobia is wrong.

Endnotes
i For a compelling account of the emotions that undergird HIV/AIDS activism and social movements see Gould 2001.
ii Dr. André P. Grace and myself conducted these interviews. We have submitted a paper, currently being peer reviewed, analyzing this research in terms of cultural work for social transformation.

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