Young Queers Getting Together: 
Moving Beyond Isolation and Loneliness

by

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A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

July 2002

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University and to the best of my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis. This thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of the bibliography and appendices.

Greg Curran
Abstract

Over the last decade, education-focused research/studies on young queers (or same-sex attracted young people) have highlighted the many problems or difficulties they face growing up in a homophobic, heterosexist society. Strategies to address these issues (proposed in numerous research articles and reports) have largely focused on the school setting. I argue that these strategies are limited by heterosexual norms, which regulate and contain in advance what is possible (for queers) within the formal school system. I examine the ways in which these heterosexual norms work to constrain the queer subject in education-focused research and studies on young queers.

Within this field of study, young queers have largely been characterized as victims: of homophobic abuse and harassment, and neglect by families and schools. They’re said to be lonely and isolated, ‘at risk’ of attempted suicide, unsafe sex, drug and alcohol abuse, and homelessness. I argue that these representations convey a negative portrait of young queers – as wounded subjects. I illustrate how the emphasis on the wounded queer subject can work against the interests of young queers. In particular, it obscures those queer perspectives involving agency: first, queer cultures and communities; second, the knowledge and experiences of those who have gained confidence in their queerness, who have queer social and sexual lives. These (agentic) queers can offer us ways of understanding how young queers move beyond isolation and loneliness.

This study highlights the importance, for many young queers, of having opportunities and spaces where they can connect with each other. Socialization and sexualization among young queers involves a certain openness – being and doing queer – a practice which is unintelligible within most education-focused research/studies on young queers. This is illustrated and explored through comparative analysis of queer subjectivities in two differentiated spheres: on the one hand – education-focused research and studies relating to the school context, and on the other – gay/lesbian/queer studies and literature relating to queer social and sexual contexts. The key contexts and themes examined here are: early sexual experience and beats, queer cultures and communities, and queer youth support and social groups.
Acknowledgements

Simon – it’s difficult to adequately express how important our relationship has been to me, during this thesis, but the following aspects were especially significant (for me): the challenges to ‘go for it’, the intensely provocative questions (and statements), the hugs (hugs, hugs….), the passion, the long walks filled with explorations, ponderings, ramblings, laughter and (you guessed it) challenges and questions, the much needed and appreciated sex breaks – that got me away from the thesis, the belief you showed in me, the craziness and silliness, as well as the array of support you offered.

Johanna Wyn (my supervisor) – Thank you for your flexibility, for your recognition of how my thesis was shifting and changing, and how it had progressed. Your recollections let me know that I was really getting somewhere. Thanks also for your valuable insights and advice on various drafts of this thesis, and your encouragement and confidence in me.

My thanks and appreciation to Chloe, Frankston Youth Resource Centre, Ian Seal, Jane, Laura, Louise, Nan McGregor, Shelley Walker, Vicky Guglielmo, the Victorian AIDS Council Community Education Manager, and the other youth-workers (with queer youth support and social groups) who participated in this research. Thanks for your willingness to be involved in this research, and for sharing your insights, experiences and/or strategies with me.

To the facilitators and participants of the Victorian AIDS Council peer education programs and workshops (Gay Now, Keep on Loving, Sexy Summer Sizzlers) that I participated in so many years ago. Much of this thesis is testament to the importance and positives of queer sex, queer cultures and queer communities. You played an instrumental role in my recognizing this in my own life.

Susie Carter and Amadeo Marquez-Perez – I’ve really appreciated the opportunities to talk over ideas and issues relating to my research – as well as other matters!! Your support, enthusiasm and passion are sources of energy for me.

Dad and mum – Thanks for being there and showing your support in so many different ways.

Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli – Thanks for our various discussions, from which I gained many insights, particularly around teaching practice. Thanks also for your support and encouragement.

Michael Crowhurst – Thanks for the support, the useful thesis advice, and the numerous useful references you alerted me to.

And finally an acknowledgement of the bird and insect life, in my tiny courtyard, that provided much needed distraction from my thesis writing, as well as
entertainment in their own right; the streets, parks, beach and cafes around St Kilda and Elwood in Melbourne – where ideas were developed, scrapped, explored, re-worked, expanded upon, critiqued and challenged – where I laughed, worried and panicked, felt confused, gained a sense of calm and a feeling that I belonged – where I felt like I knew what I was doing, enjoyed the assortment of people, bird and animal life there, and had bloody good times (sometimes all on the one day) – all whilst doing this research.
# Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACM</td>
<td>Adelaide Central Mission</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFAO</td>
<td>Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALSO</td>
<td>Alternative LifeStyle Organisation – A gay community-based organisation in Sth. Yarra, Victoria</td>
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<tr>
<td>FYRC</td>
<td>Frankston Youth Resource Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GALE (WA)</td>
<td>Gay and Lesbian Equality – Western Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLB</td>
<td>Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLBT</td>
<td>Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender</td>
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<tr>
<td>GLCS</td>
<td>Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service – Western Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLRG</td>
<td>The Gay and Lesbian Rights Group – Western Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMFA</td>
<td>Gay Men Fighting AIDS – An organization based in England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV/AIDS</td>
<td>Human Immuno-deficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT</td>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
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<tr>
<td>PFLAG</td>
<td>Parents and Friends of Lesbians And Gays</td>
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<tr>
<td>SSAY</td>
<td>Same-Sex Attracted Young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSPLAY</td>
<td>Same-Sex Attracted Young People Leading Activities for Youth – A recreation program offered by Youthworks (in Lilydale) and Knox Youth Services (in Knox)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STD</td>
<td>Sexually Transmitted Disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VAC</td>
<td>Victorian AIDS Council – Sth. Yarra, Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Western Australia</td>
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<td>WAAC</td>
<td>Western Australia AIDS Council</td>
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WTI  

YAP  
Young And Proud – A queer youth support/social group offered by Frankston Youth Resource Centre in Frankston, Victoria

Y-GLAM  
Young Gays and Lesbians Around Moreland – A Performing Arts Project for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and/or queer people aged 14-25 years, based in Brunswick, Victoria
Glossary

**Education-focused research/studies on young queers**
The term ‘education’ (in this phrase) refers to *school* education.

**Beats**
Beats are “places such as parks or public toilets where men may meet other men for sex” (Kippax et al 1993:110).

**Bfriend**
This term refers to a gay-community based peer mentoring or buddy program for people identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender – in Adelaide and Tasmania

**Midsumma**
Midsumma is an annual month long (January to February) gay and lesbian festival held in various locations around Melbourne. It has a wide array of arts/cultural, sporting and political events that cater for a range of interests and desires. On the final Sunday of the Midsumma Festival, a carnival day is held. At this carnival, there are numerous stalls, entertainment events and carnival rides.

**Pride March**
The Pride March is an annual event in St Kilda, Melbourne. It involves various queer community groups, organizations/services, media, and queers in general. A number of political parties and Police contingents, City of Port Phillip Council and queer affiliated organizations are also involved. It is part of the Midsumma Festival (see above).

**Queer Film Festival**
The Queer Film Festival is held annually (during March) in Melbourne. It shows films on a range of issues relating to gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, transgender and intersex people. In the 2001 and 2002 Queer Film Festival there was a youth section.
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Introduction

What if…queer research were to be something more essentially disturbing than the stories we tell ourselves of our oppressions in order to precisely confirm, yet once more, our abjection, our victimized subjectivity, our wounded identity?

What if, therefore, queer research were to actively refuse epistemological respectability, to refuse to constitute that wounded identity as an epistemological object such as would define, institute and thus institutionalize a disciplinary field?

(Haver 1997:278)


The term *wounded identity* is a useful way of encapsulating the various discourses of oppression, abjection and victimization that underscore much of the writing about young queer subjects within education-focused research/studies. For me, the term ‘wounded’ also conveys images of helplessness, dependence, damage/injury and reduced capacity. The wound may be physical and/or psychological.

Becoming wounded is generally assumed to be something to avoid. Hence the need for protection from, and avoidance of, places, people, and circumstances considered to be ‘dangerous’. In this way the concept of woundedness is also linked to discourses of ‘risk’ – which is discussed in detail in chapter 4.
In many respects, the notion of the wounded queer subject is not simply a matter of *becoming* wounded, rather the queer subject is constituted as *always already* wounded. For example, within education-focused research/studies, same-sex attracted young people are often positioned as growing up in a homophobic, repressive society, said to be surrounded by negative images of gays and lesbians (especially from the ‘media’), and facing one of the most hostile environments on a daily basis – schools (Anderson 1995, Bochenek and Widney Brown 2001, Blumenfeld 1995, Buston and Hart 2001, Glynn 1998, Hillier et al 1998, 2001, Jordan et al 1997, Lipkin 1995, Malinsky 1997, Morrow 1997, Reynolds and Koski 1995, Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State 1999, Telford 1998, Thurlow 2001, Unks 1995, Warwick et al 2001). With this account, simply existing in such a society inevitably means that same-sex attracted young people are *always already* wounded. I seek to critically interrogate this idea in this thesis (see chapter 4).

Of the many issues arising in relation to the wounded identity I am particularly interested in isolation and loneliness. It is a recurring theme that is central to this thesis. There are a number of key reasons for this. Firstly, in education-focused research/studies on same-sex attracted young people, isolation and loneliness is often raised as an issue (Anderson 1995, Blumenfeld 1995, Buston and Hart 2001, Hillier et al 1998, 2001, Lipkin 1995, Malinsky 1997, Morrow 1997, Reynolds and Koski 1995, Thurlow 2001, Unks 1995, Warwick et al 2001). Secondly, within the context of support groups for young queers – an important focus of this research – the theme of moving beyond isolation and loneliness is a common discourse (see chapters 8-10). Finally, my own experience as a gay man has contributed to my interest in this area. This is discussed on page 5.

In this thesis I seek to explore how we can move beyond constituting young queers as *always already* wounded. I recognize however, that inquiring into isolation and loneliness inevitably runs the risk of giving substance to, or confirming, the very notion (the wounded identity) that I'm attempting to shift away from. In this regard, I wish to emphasize that I consider isolation and loneliness to be social and structural products rather than being a necessary or
Introduction

constitutive characteristic of queer and becoming queer. This notion underlies and guides much of the inquiry undertaken in parts 2 and 3 of this thesis.


Despite the extensive documentation of the problems faced by young queers, there has been surprisingly little attention given to research/studies that investigate the ways in which these problems are resolved, particularly in terms of empirical studies of queers who have found effective ways of overcoming these problems. For example, studies (over the last two decades) have shown that for gay men, a significant factor in overcoming these problems is their participation in social activities with other gays (See Savin-Williams 1990:61-2, Plummer 1989). This point is illustrated by Savin-Williams (1990:62) who
reviewed literature from the 1970s and 1980s that examined self-esteem and gay related activities and interests:

There is clear evidence that those involved in the lesbian and gay subcultures, meaning those who participated in gay and lesbian activities and socialized with other lesbians and gays, and who were committed and accepting of their homosexuality, had the highest levels of self-esteem.


This array of knowledge of how queers overcome various problems affecting them has not been drawn on within much of the research/studies targeting school education. These studies generally adopt a school-centric approach, presuming or arguing that the solutions for the problems faced by young queers can be found within the school education system. This is despite evidence showing that schools are heavily implicated in the problems facing young queers, and a lack of evidence to support the notion that schools contribute to young queers’ lives improving (Bochenek and Widney Brown 2001, Griffin 1994, Hillier et al 1998,

I argue that the “negative, problem-centered approach” adopted by those seeking to reform school education has, for the most part, not led to schools adopting a queer-focused reform agenda, and consequently, has done little to improve the school experiences of young queers (see Savin-Williams 1990:183 who critiques the “negative, problem-centered approach”). I also argue that the school-centric approach of education-focused research/studies on young queers works to reinscribe heterosexual norms that limit and contain queer social and sexual practices and cultures in the school setting.

Another theme examined (in this thesis) is the marginalization of queer perspectives in education-focused research/studies on young queers. I argue that the predominant focus on school reform in educational research/studies has worked to marginalize, rather than encompass, many aspects of queer culture that have been shown to play a crucial role in helping young queers to adopt a positive attitude towards themselves and other queers. This marginalization occurs through the omission, subordination, and/or rendering suspect, of queer perspectives that are central to the lives of many queers, yet incompatible with the dominant norms of the school institution. This practice (of marginalizing queer cultural perspectives) is therefore highlighted as a key issue in relation to (barriers to) achieving better health and well-being for queer youth.

**Drawing on My Experiences in This Research**

Queer theory, as discussed in chapter 2, recognizes the value of personal experience and political activism in the shaping of theoretical ideas and critical analysis. As such, I wish to draw on my own experience (or ‘gayness’) in relation to matters central to this thesis. I believe that by including accounts of my experience within parts of this thesis, this can help to illustrate and inform the topic under discussion. To proceed with, I will give a brief account of the critical points in my shifting away from feelings of isolation and loneliness.
As a gay man, I can relate to the stories of isolation, loneliness and harassment experienced by young queers in schools. My moving beyond this involved making connections with other queers, through participating in support groups offered by queer organizations (such as London Gay and Lesbian Centre and the Victorian AIDS Council).

As a consequence of participating in the sex positive peer education groups offered by the Victorian AIDS Council, I began to value my sexuality and began to shake off the guilt and shame that I associated with gay sex. I became more comfortable speaking openly about my sexual desires. I learnt of other sexual ‘turn ons’, techniques and practices – drawing upon the sexual knowledge, skills and strategies of the gay men in the group.

Through participating in queer support groups I learnt that a queer world existed beyond these groups and that life did not have to be about secrecy, loneliness, suffering, condemnation and feeling alienated. Here I was able to reconsider my future and my sexuality in more positive ways. With my queer friends, I participated in queer community events, venues and organizations/groups – celebrating and enjoying my sexuality. Queer friends drew my attention to various aspects of queer culture such as literature, arts and media. I began to read and watch as much as I could about other queers’ experiences of growing up and overcoming problems they encountered. I found an array of materials that spoke to my experiences, which were affirming of queer desire and sex. I also found much material that took me beyond the familiar, alerting me to other interests, to other sexual possibilities and pleasures.

Over the past 5 years, I’ve noticed an increased number of queer youth support/social groups participating in queer community events. For instance, a number of queer support and social groups for young queers (such as Bit Bent, Young And Proud, Minus18 dance parties and Kaleidoscope) have had a presence at Melbourne’s Pride March. Young queers have also run stalls for their support and social groups at Midsumma Carnival day (such as Minus18, Pride & Diversity, Knox Youth Services SSAY Support Group and Youthworks SSAY Recreation Program), and have performed as part of the Midsumma Arts
Program (for example, the queer youth theatre group Y-GLAM). Education-focused researchers/academic writers have largely ignored agentic young queers (such as these) opting instead to focus on those who are non-agentic. This research departs from this taken for granted practice, by focusing on young queers and agency.

Organization of the Thesis

Part 1 – Educational Discourse on Young Queers

Conceptualizations of young queers are central to, and inform the strategies and politics of sexuality reform. They also serve to place limits around the strategies and political intervention. In Part 1, I inquire into young queer (gay and lesbian) subjectivities within the field of school education (chapter 3 – 5). I argue that the discourses about young queers in these fields focus upon and emphasize the problems they encounter at school, such as loneliness, social isolation and harassment, as well as invisibility of homosexuality within the school curricula. I also argue that there is very little attention paid (within these fields) to how young queers overcome these problems, as documented in gay, lesbian and queer studies and literature.

Part 1 begins (in chapter 3) with an analysis of interviews that I conducted with two secondary school teachers who describe themselves as being supportive of gay and lesbian youth. This chapter is primarily interested in how young queers and their interests are represented/constructed by these teachers, and the ways in which these representations/constructions work to limit or constrain the queer subject.

Chapter 4 reviews Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Well-Being of Same-Sex Attracted Young People (Hillier et al 1998). This major Australian research report on same-sex attracted young people (SSAY) adopts a school-centric perspective. It relies on traditional notions of youth development, which are prominent in the field of (school) education.
Youth development discourse often informs how young people are understood in education-focused research/studies. I argue that youth development discourse is structured around heterosexuality and concepts of age-appropriateness (especially in relation to sex) and therefore does not provide a satisfactory way of conceptualizing young queers.

Youth development discourse is also implicated in the conceptualization of young queers as being more ‘at risk’ than others (young heterosexuals), as lacking the knowledge needed to become ‘normal’, ‘rational’ adults, and as not having the agency to overcome difficulties. It positions the institutions of the school and the family as the most appropriate sources of information and support for all young people.

I argue that we need to shift away from giving primacy to youth development discourse. Instead we need to make use of conceptual frameworks where queer desire, queer sexualities and queer sex are the reference points, and where queer cultures and queer communities are recognized and valued.

In schools, the heterosexual hegemony works to limit and constrain what is possible in relation to homosexuality-related initiatives. I therefore argue that queers and queer communities (including their organizations and groups) are better placed to provide young queers with the sorts of knowledge they need to overcome isolation and loneliness, to deal with sexuality-related issues, and to assist and/or improve their sex lives. This argument informs my emphasis on queer socialization in latter chapters of this thesis.

Finally (in respect to chapter 4), I argue that the approach of comparing young gay/lesbian queers with heterosexual young people (understood to be ‘normal’) contributes to the homogenizing of them as a problematic group; it hides the differences among them. Those who don’t fit the negative profile are excluded, or given little emphasis. They’re not considered to be important. By contrast I argue that agentic young queers can offer ways forward – in terms of how they overcome the problems commonly associated with young queers.
Chapter 5 critically examines the dominant strategies that have been proposed in relation to sexuality reform (in schools) over the last decade. These strategies generally fall into two categories: curriculum that is inclusive of homosexuality, and anti-harassment measures. These strategies do not seek to increase the visibility of young queers in schools. They do not seek to assist young queers to connect with one another or queer communities. For this reason, I argue that the aims of these strategies need to be critically re-examined. It is not only the details of these strategies, but more importantly, their political aims that I wish to question.

**Part 2 – The Social and Sexual Worlds of Young Queers**

Being gay is stigmatized due to the shame associated with gay sex. Michael Warner (1999) argues that there is a need to target this sexual shame. Education-focused researchers/academic writers, in their efforts to gain support for a group “defined in part by sex, and even by the most undignified and abject sex” have generally been silent about or not elaborated on gay sex and queer social worlds (Warner 1999:48). Thus, for the most part the shame associated with gay sex has not been challenged – being gay in schools therefore remains stigmatized.

Warner (1999:171) argues that autonomy “requires the circulation and accessibility of sexual knowledge, along with the public elaboration of a social world that can make less alienated relations possible.” Part 2 takes up this argument and examines discourses from gay, lesbian and queer studies and literature in relation to three themes: *early sexual experience* (chapter 6), *casual sex and beats* (chapter 7), and *queer socialization* in the context of queer youth support/social groups (chapter 8).

Chapter 6 examines discourses relating to the early sexual experiences of young queers – predominantly same-sex attracted young men – in gay and lesbian literature. The conceptual framework for this chapter is based on Dowsett’s (1996) life-history research on gay and homosexually active men (in relation to their early sexual experience) in Australia.
Chapter 7 examines discourses relating to the use of beats by young men. It draws upon materials from gay studies and literature, and education-focused research/studies (on young queers). The conceptual and theoretical framework is based primarily on Dowsett’s (1996) research. It also draws upon Warner’s argument (1999:177) that queers learn about sex through participating in talk and fucking, rather than sex being an inborn instinct.

Chapter 8 examines young peoples’ comments about their involvement in queer support and social groups in Melbourne and Perth. Their comments can help us to identify the benefits that come from participating in queer support and social groups.

**Part 3 – Support Services for Young Queers: Organizational Models, Strategies and Programs**

Social models of health promotion have been particularly influential within many organizations that provide support services specifically to queers and queer youth. Social models of health emphasize the importance of involving communities in health initiatives targeting them. This is a shift away from the traditional Health Belief Model (predominant in the school system), which is characterized as a top-down approach.

Chapter 9 examines key principles of social health models and their implications for queer support services and young queers. It also examines the reasons why the social models have been adopted by queer support services rather than the Health Belief Model. I argue that social models are, in many ways, incompatible with the organization of the school system. For instance, they conflict with the notion that teachers are necessarily more knowledgeable than students are, and that students learn primarily through the receiving of information. Social models, in relation to young queers, recognize them as having agency and encourage visibility. Both these notions are extremely problematic within education-focused research/studies and schools.
Chapter 10 examines educational strategies and programs for young queers in two different spheres: queer support and social groups (in Melbourne) and Victorian AIDS Council (VAC) peer education programs for gay men. The practices of these groups are, in many ways, consistent with key principles of social models of health promotion.

These queer youth support services have a strong focus on socialization and peer support. This provides opportunities for young queers to exchange sexuality-related knowledge and strategies, and to develop friendships and relationships. These groups also encourage young queers to participate in queer cultural life. In these contexts, young queers can imagine and experience new possibilities for themselves. In this way, being queer does not necessarily equate to loneliness, isolation and harassment.

VAC peer education programs challenge the shame associated with queer sex and/or queer sexual desire. In these groups, being queer is not stigmatized; queer sex and sexual desire is recognized and valued. Young queers can be open about their sexuality – checking out and eying off one another, along with talking openly about their sexual desires and sexual experiences.

Materials for this chapter are drawn from various sources: interviews I conducted with a Community Education Manager at VAC and facilitators of queer youth support/social groups (in Melbourne), course material for the VAC peer education program Young & Gay, HIV/AIDS research on gay and homosexually active men, and also from my own experience as a participant in, and peer educator with, VAC peer education programs.

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Next, I turn to the methodology informing this research project. In this chapter, I detail how this research departs from traditional education-focused research/studies on young queers. I explain why I have chosen to draw upon queer theory, and why I have utilized a qualitative research approach. I also discuss the methods of inquiry I have made use of. Finally, I outline the structure/scope of this research project (Research Design). This includes a
discussion of the key themes, research questions, and research materials. I also explain the interview process and provide background information on research participants.
Methodology

Background

Education-focused research/studies on young queers (as described in the Introduction to this thesis) has sought to identify and describe the problems they confront in the school environment. It has emphasized their ‘at risk’ status (compared to heterosexual young people) and has proposed ways of making the school environment more amenable to them.

The problems for gay and lesbian youth have been seen as resting with a school climate “that allows or countenances victimization” (Tierney and Dilley 1998:57), along with institutional structures and practices, which (implicitly or explicitly) position homosexuality not only as inferior to and less desirable than heterosexuality, but also as a threat, something to not be spoken about and/or catered for in the school’s programs. The dominant approach, within education-focused research/studies on young queers, is to call for inclusion of gay and lesbian perspectives within school curriculum, and anti-harassment measures (see chapter 5). Conceptually, this usually involves adding a gay/lesbian container (or category) while leaving the existing structures (of the school system) undisturbed.

This research project departs from the usual approach to education-focused research/studies on young queers by questioning whether a politics of inclusion is sufficient to bring about the school reform hoped for (within education-focused research/studies on young queers), or greater autonomy for young queers, when heterosexuality is infused in the very constitution of the school institution.

In the bid to gain inclusion of gay and lesbian perspectives into the existing frameworks and structures of the school institution, researchers have discursively
produced (for those institutions) a gay and lesbian subject that could be described as a “wounded identity” (Haver 1997:278). This has involved the producing and emphasizing (over other data) of data that shows gay and lesbian youth to be victimized, harassed, lonely, isolated, lacking agency and knowledge. These issues have generally been defined as pedagogical problems, which, it is argued, can be addressed in school curriculum and policy. The dominant strand of education-focused research/studies on homosexuality has therefore tended to be school-centric in its focus.

This research project takes a different approach. It focuses on the question of how young gay/lesbian queers gain knowledge of being/doing queer – recognizing (in this respect) the critical importance of the production and circulation of queer knowledge. It calls into question whether the formal school system plays (or is able to play) a pivotal role in these two areas, and whether there are other institutions that are better equipped for this task. This approach has played a central role in the shaping of Parts 2 and 3 of this thesis, in which queer institutions and perspectives are examined. It has enabled me to draw points of contrast between these (queer) perspectives on the one hand, and the dominant perspectives within education-focused research/studies on young queers.

Poststructuralist and queer writers often use the term heteronormativity to refer to the dominant assumption that “institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements” (Ingraham 1994, quoted in Letts 1998:98). In other words, “heterosexuality is the norm – unmarked, unspoken, presumed (Epstein and Johnston 1994), and compulsory (Rich 1993) – against which all else is judged as different, other, abnormal” (Letts 1999:98). It also often brings with it a silencing that renders invisible what is considered normal and “diverts critique away from economic, social, and educational institutions which organize class, race, and gender hierarchies” (Fine 1987, quoted in Letts 1999:98).
The issue of heteronormative school practices and structures has received little attention within education-focused research/studies on young queers. Thus, heteronormativity remains hidden, embedded in the assumptions and naturalized discourses within the school institution (and education-focused research/studies) and therefore not subjected to critical inquiry. Queer theorists, by contrast, seek to challenge and disrupt heteronormativity (Warner 1993, Letts 1999). This does not mean that heterosexuality is considered a bad thing. Rather, it involves taking a stand against *hegemonic* heterosexuality, that is, “the version of heterosexuality that essentializes, naturalizes, and obscures its own presence – causing it to be taken for granted” (Epstein and Johnston 1994, 1998, quoted in Letts 1999:98).

Challenging heteronormativity is one of the key themes underlying the analysis of discourses in Part 1 of this thesis. This involved examining the ways in which heterosexuality is essentialized, naturalized, and obscured in educational discourse. This was achieved primarily through asking questions (relevant to the particular context being examined) that were intended to expose the heteronormative operations of the discourse. This resulted in questions such as:

- How does this practice work to re-inscribe heterosexual norms?
- What are the particular ways in which gay and lesbian perspectives are regulated and contained so that they remain obscured?
- Is there a sexual hierarchy (embedded within the discourse) that positions homosexuality as inferior to heterosexuality?

**Queer Theory**

This research draws upon queer theory for its theoretical framework. My reasons for doing this are briefly explained in this section. Chapter 2 provides a more extensive discussion of the issues, concepts and understandings that I am drawing upon from queer theory, to inform my approach and analysis.
Humanism underpins the hegemonic notion of sexuality in education-focused research/studies on young queers, where heterosexuality is understood as superior to homosexuality. Understanding homosexuality in a way that does not render it inferior to heterosexuality means a deliberate shifting away from heterosexual norms. There has been a need therefore (in this research) to look for theoretical alternatives to humanism and humanist-informed systems of knowledge such as ‘youth development’ theory, which underlies the dominant conceptualization of youth within education-focused research/studies (see chapter 4).

Queer theory does not pre-configure any particular sexuality as superior to another, which makes it particularly useful in exposing heteronormative practices. It provides ways of identifying, conceptualizing and analyzing situations in which homosexuality is not (positioned as) inferior to heterosexuality. I have also drawn on queer theory to elucidate the agency of the queer subject (see chapters 6-10) and the ways in which young queers are (within dominant educational discourse) discursively positioned as non-agentic (see chapters 3-5).

In this research, I take the position that young queers’ sexuality-related knowledge and experiences (relating to sex, relationships, disclosure of sexuality and homophobia, for example) should be regarded as a crucial component in the task of formulating educational and support strategies and programs for young queers. Queer theory provides a way of understanding the practices of queers from the perspective of queer people – that is, in their words. It can therefore inform the development of more effective strategies and programs.

**Queer Informed Research**

This research project, in adopting a queer informed approach, departs from the conventional approaches to (homo)sexuality research in schools in a number of ways. Importantly, it does not seek to re-constitute the wounded gay or lesbian identity (see Haver 1997:278). Queer theory reveals this practice to be implicated in the reinscribing (and institutionalizing) of the gay or lesbian identity as
abnormal, less than, unnatural and non-agentic. The production of the ‘wounded’ queer subject, therefore, is *compatible with* the heteronormative structures and practices of the school institution. It is a means by which the queer subject is regulated and confined within the school sector.

This research (informed by queer theory) is interested in the representation or conceptualization of the queer subject – especially in relation to concepts of agency and knowledge. In this regard, I focus upon the binaries, knowledge and exclusions involved in the constitution of the gay subject (in educational discourse). In regard to exclusions, I devote particular attention to those queer subjects who do not fit the ‘wounded identity’ subjectivity (such as agentic young queers). I am, to quote Butler (1993:118), seeking to “ta[k]e stock of the constitutive exclusions that reconsolidate hegemonic power differentials, exclusions that each articulation [of the wounded gay and lesbian subject] was forced to make in order to proceed.”

**Looking Beyond the School: Focusing on Social and Sexual Cultures**

As previously mentioned, this research departs from the school-centric focus of traditional education-focused research/studies on same-sex attracted young people. The often exclusive focus on *school reform* has meant that little attention has been given to queered sites that offer programs and services for young queers (such as queer youth support groups); to contexts in which young queers develop sexual/social lives with other queers; and to fields such as gay, lesbian and queer literature and studies along with HIV/AIDS research/education on/for gay and homosexually active men. These fields/sites offer insights into the (making of) social and sexual lives of queers, enabling a focusing on subjectivities that exceed the ‘wounded’ gay or lesbian subject. They therefore inform the discussion and analysis within Parts 2 and 3 of this thesis.

I consider connection with other queers to be crucial to the development of confidence and pride in one’s sexuality, to the accessing of sexual knowledge, to the exchanging of strategies to deal with sexuality-related issues, and finally to the formation of friendships and relationships. This is why I focus (in Parts 2 and 3) on young queers who are not ‘wounded’ – that is, those who have social and
sexual lives with other queers. They’re able to provide insights into the gaining of agency and knowledge – offering practical ways to overcome the problems commonly associated with young queers.

My examination of young queers’ sexual and social lives involved the adoption of a sex positive approach and an interest in “improper subjects” (Britzman 1995:153). In this sense I seek to “imagin[e] difference on it’s own terms: as eros, as desire, as the grounds of politicality…[I seek to return] to practices of bodies and bodies of practices” (Britzman 1995:154). This research, therefore, does not seek to be readily intelligible within the dominant strand of education-focused research/studies on young queers. I use the language that queers themselves are using, not seeking to clean it up and not seeking to make queer subjects more appealing or more ‘normal’ through desexualizing them or highlighting those who are in line with idealized heterosexual norms.

Queer theorists (Britzman 1995, 1998, Luhmann 1998) have highlighted how rendering subjects intelligible can serve to produce new forms of subjection. Particular subjects must be ignored, excluded, put down and/or distanced from – in order to produce a homogenous, stable subject that is readily intelligible to a mainstream audience (see chapter 2).

**Departing from the Notion that Education = Schools**

This research initially focuses on schools in order to examine and critique the taken for granted approaches and understandings within education-focused research/studies on young queers. This includes (as discussed above) the production of the ‘wounded’ gay or lesbian subject. It also includes the notion that education is the exclusive province of formal school institutions. I regard as problematic assumptions that skills and knowledge, in respect to young queers, can only be found in the (traditional) field of education – whether that be in schools, education departments, or in the universities that train/inservice teachers.

Queer informed writers such as Warner (1999:178-179) have highlighted how sexual knowledge circulates and accumulates over time within and across sexual cultures. Participation in sex and talking about sex (with other queers) are
therefore considered to be especially important in terms of developing sexual autonomy – enabling young queers to not only gain access to sexual knowledge, but to also have the opportunity to produce and utilize sexual knowledge themselves. These arguments have particular implications for research on young queers, especially that which is interested in those (young queers) who are lonely and isolated (as I am). They effectively call for a focusing and elaborating on sites where sexual knowledge circulates and accumulates. This has taken me outside the formal confines of educational institutions – into queer cultures and communities.

Within the formal school system, sexuality is usually considered a private matter. Underpinning this notion is the assumption that sexuality is innate. These notions work to obscure, rather than illuminate, the ways in which sexual knowledge circulates among people or accumulates over time in sexual cultures (Warner 1999:178-179). It is unintelligible (within dominant educational discourse), given the heterosexual hegemony in schools, and traditional notions of education, that queer-related institutions, services and groups have knowledge, skills, strategies and resources that are useful to young queers. It is also unintelligible that queers in general have much, if anything, to offer young queers in these areas. Both these notions run counter to the heteronormative notion of queers as a threat to young queers.

The idea that young queers are, or can be, agentic in respect to sex – possessing sexual knowledge and strategies that would be useful to their peers – is also unintelligible within much education-focused research/studies. Youth development theory and binaries such as educated/uneducated and naïve/experienced are significant influences in these respects (see chapters 4 and 5). This research, informed by queer theory, is interested in making sense of and remarking upon the myriad of things that educational authorities (including teachers and researchers) cannot bear to know, or discredit or disassociate themselves from (see Britzman 1995:154).

In focusing on sites such as queer youth services or HIV/AIDS research/education (see chapter 10), I document strategies (that are currently in
existence), which seek to address young queers’ needs. In so doing I draw attention to the (queer) specific knowledge and skills that circulate within these queer focused institutions and fields. I also seek to highlight the role that institutional norms and values play in making these practices not only legitimate in these settings, but also valued. All of this takes this research beyond what seems to be a stalemate in traditional education-focused research/studies, with it’s reiterating of particular recommendations for schools in respect to young queers (which have not been adopted by the vast majority of schools). The queer sites/fields, as well as the queer subjects that I focus upon, offer ways to rethink grounds of knowledge and pedagogy (Britzman 1995:151).

**Challenging Sexual Normalization**

Sexual normalization is another key focus of attention within queer theory (see chapter 2). I take a stance (in this research) against various practices of normalization commonly found within education-focused research/studies on young queers. These practices include the constituting of the ‘wounded’ subject, the school-centric focus, and the neglect of queer sex, sexual desire, and queer institutions and services. This is a necessary part of a political approach that seeks to proliferate queer subjectivities that confound intelligibility (within school education). Thus, to quote Britzman (1995:165) I am:

…attempting to exceed binary oppositions such as the tolerant and tolerated and the oppressed and the oppressor [whilst still seeking to] hold onto an analysis of social difference that can account for how structural dynamics of subordination and subjection work at the level of the historical, the conceptual, the social and the psychic.

This stance is also political in that it seeks to acknowledge, celebrate, and elaborate (particular aspects of) queer cultures, communities, institutions, services and sex – since I believe that these are important aspects, which contribute to young queers moving beyond isolation and loneliness – towards enjoyable social and sexual lives.
**Qualitative Research**

This research adopts a qualitative research approach, as it allows for ongoing flexibility in regard to research design, data collection and the development of theories and concepts (Neuman 2000). It enabled this research to be responsive to, and informed by, the particular circumstances, issues and understandings of those (young queers) being studied (Neuman 2000, Strauss and Corbin 1998). Thus, theories and data could inform each other throughout the research project (Neuman 2000, Strauss and Corbin 1998).

I was interested in having maximum room to move and/or being able to change direction (in this research) for two main reasons. Firstly, I did not want to remain locked into something that I didn’t consider a particularly useful contribution to the field of research on young queers in schools. Secondly, I did not want to be locked into something that was uninteresting, and lacking in meaning, relevance and inspiration to me as a gay man.

As a gay man, I have particular experiences, feelings, desires and insights of relevance to a number of aspects of this research. First hand knowledge is recognized as being of possible use, or as something to take advantage of within qualitative research (Neuman 2000). It can provide perspectives that those uninvolved (personally) with the situation, setting or issue may be unaware of. It can contribute to the development of a broader understanding. Thus, the qualitative researcher can explicitly state their personal involvement or can make their presence known when discussing particular situations or issues. They need not seek to keep themselves distant from their research, as though this would establish their ‘objectivity’ as researchers (Neuman 2000).

Qualitative research is a means of tapping into the experiences and points of view of those being studied (Neuman 2000). It is a means of gaining an “insiders view” (Neuman 2000:148). That is what this research has sought to do in respect to young queers. It has attempted to detail and analyze accounts of how they feel about and understand issues such as sexual desire, sexual experience and socialization with other young queers or queers in general (see chapters 6 to 8).
The placing of issues within socio-historical contexts is seen to be particularly important for understanding the social world within qualitative research (Neuman 2000:146). Context is understood to be critical to understanding particular social actions, issues and/or statements. This approach is especially useful for this research since young queers have generally been positioned (in research/studies targeting school education) within the rigid confines of educational institutions, especially the formal aspects of these institutions. The positioning of young queers within broader socio-historical (including sexual) contexts, within parts 2 and 3 of this thesis, is a means of developing alternative ways of understanding and/or conceptualizing the sexual desires, experiences and issues of young queers.

**Methods of Inquiry**

**Elaboration**

A key premise of this research is that queer sex and socialization contributes to young queers gaining sexual autonomy. Warner (1999:7-9) highlights that the isolation experienced by gays, particularly during childhood and adolescence, is due to their lack of access to a culture of sexual knowledge (in relation to queers). He says that individuals “have a stake in a culture that enables sexual variance and circulates knowledge about it, because they have no other way of knowing what they might or might not want, or what they might become, or with whom they might find a common lot” (Warner 1999:7).

This research (in Part 2) takes up the task of circulating sexual knowledge (relating to queers), primarily though a “public elaboration of social [including sexual] worlds that can make less alienated relations possible” for young queers (Warner 1999:171). This elaboration (in this research) involved drawing upon queers’ discourses about their sexual and social lives – then discussing, commenting and/or reflecting upon them.

Part of the process of elaborating in this research involved utilizing theoretical frameworks in order to describe, explain and conceptualize queer social and
sexual worlds. In order to imagine difference in its own terms, I have drawn upon theories that are queer focused – developed, adapted and extended in relation to queer lives. These theories acknowledge and value queer sex, queer socialization, queer cultures, institutions, groups and organizations. Without them, the elaboration may have risked reinscribing heteronormative values and assumptions.

‘Public elaboration’ about queer sexual and social worlds brings this research (in many ways) into tension with the hetero-normalized education-focused research/studies on young queers. It may be seen (by some) as daring or risky to publicly speak of that which is usually considered to be threatening, undesirable, inappropriate and unnatural, according to the heteronormative values that structure much education-focused research/studies on young queers. In this respect, speaking publicly is a political act. It’s giving voice to that which is normally shut out, and stigmatized.

Education-focused research/studies on young queers, for the most part, does not elaborate on young queers’ sexual and social worlds. This doesn’t mean that there is an absence of data relating to such areas in this research. Some researchers (such as Hillier et al 1998 reviewed in chapter 4) include young queers’ comments relating to their social and sexual lives but don’t analyze this data in any substantive way or factor it into their research conclusions and recommendations. I put some of this data to use in this research, elaborating on it, asking questions of it, and using it to inform the research approach that I adopt.

**Deconstruction**

I was interested in analyzing the representation and production of queer subjects in education-focused research/studies. As subjects are discursively constructed (in part) through binaries, deconstruction is particularly important for this task. Terms such as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘same-sex-attracted young people’ (SSAY) were therefore subjected to a critique that “interrogate[d] the exclusionary operations and differential power relations that construct and delimit invocations
of [those terms]” (Butler 1993:29) within educational discourse. This was achieved through asking questions such as:

- which gay or lesbian subject is represented by which use of the term and which gay or lesbian subject is excluded? (see Butler 1993:227)

- “what kinds of [educational] policies are enabled by what kinds of usages [of particular terms] and [what strategies] are backgrounded or erased from view?” (Butler 1993:227)

- what does this particular representation or strategy offer in terms of the autonomy (or agency) of queers?

Another means used to deconstruct the homosexual subject (constituted by researchers, or the teachers interviewed for this research) involved focusing upon particular incidents where the ‘wounded’ gay or lesbian subject was invoked. In these contexts I asked “what happens in terms of the power relations, if instead of being constituted as ‘wounded’, the gay or lesbian subject is constituted as agentic?” I asked “what is disturbed, particularly in terms of the hetero/homo binary, when the gay or lesbian subject is constituted in this way?”

The production of the ‘wounded’ gay or lesbian subject reinscribes the hetero/homo binary. That is, the gay and lesbian subject is constituted as a weak, abnormal, ‘at risk’ victim whilst the hetero subject is constituted as autonomous, superior, natural and desirable. It suggests that gay and lesbian subjects need tolerance, protection and support (among other things) from heteros – if they’re to be free of (and to remain free of) abuse, harassment and negativity. If the gay and lesbian subject is agentic however, all of these presumptions are disrupted. They don’t (necessarily) need heterosexuals to protect or support them. Thus, I consider what implications this agentic conceptualization might have for teachers and the heteronormative school system.
Exploring the issues and questions raised in the preceding paragraph enabled me to consider the conditions and contexts that contribute to the agency (and non-agency) of gay or lesbian subjects discursively produced within educational discourse. If it was not necessarily about hetero teachers or the heteronormative school institution supporting gay students, then I could start to think beyond the conventional (heteronormative) parameters regulating and containing research/studies on young queers. I could focus upon the queer cultures and contexts that contributed to gay and lesbian subjects gaining agency. This was another means by which to expose the norms (particularly in relation to power relations and exclusions) involved in the production of the ‘wounded’ queer subject.

The Study of Limits

This analytical strategy involves “engag[ing] the limit of thought”. It “attempts to get at the unmarked criteria that work to dismiss as irrelevant or valorize as relevant a particular mode of thought, field of study or insistence upon the real” (Britzman 1995:156). I used this strategy to analyze instances of tension in my interviews with schoolteachers and also to analyze particular contexts in education-focused research/studies (on young queers) where there is a lack of recognition of queers as agentic or knowledgeable. I did this through exploring the following questions:

- What idea/representation/strategy is intelligible in this particular context?
  - What makes it intelligible or thinkable?

- What can’t the teacher or researcher bear to know – what is unthinkable to them – in this context?
  - What makes it unthinkable?

- What must the teacher or education-focused researcher/academic writer shut out to think as they do in this particular situation or context? (see Britzman 1995:156)
This analytical strategy is a means of uncovering some of the “regimes of truth that regulate – in a given history – the thinkable, the recognizable, the limits, and the transgressions discursively codified through legal, medical, and educational structures” (Britzman 1995:156).

**The Research Design**

In this thesis there is a bias towards the experiences of gay men. This is due in part to my interests and experiences as a gay man. I have chosen to use the term ‘young queers’ in order to blur the boundaries of the sexual identity categories. I acknowledge however, that many young queers who identify as lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex will not see themselves as part of the experience that I have given space to in this thesis. The term ‘young queers’ therefore, should not be read as a ‘catch-all’ phrase, representative of all those young people who identify as queer. Rather, it takes on different meanings in different contexts throughout the thesis.

This section, *Research Design*, is divided into two sub-sections. The first sub-section provides an overview of the *case-studies/interviews* I conducted with teachers and youth-workers/facilitators, which are drawn upon in chapters 3, 9 and 10. I discuss aspects such as recruitment, the interview samples and interview procedures. The second sub-section focuses upon the *key themes, research questions* and *research materials* – for Parts 1, 2, and 3 of this thesis.

**Case Studies/Interviews**

This research was approved by Melbourne University’s Arts and Education Human Ethics Committee (see Appendix 1). In this research (see chapter 3), I draw upon data from the case studies of two Melbourne-based secondary school teachers, and interviews with youth-workers/facilitators of queer youth support and social groups in Melbourne (see chapters 9 and 10). Each is considered separately in this section (firstly – teachers, secondly – youth-workers/facilitators) since there are some key differences in my approach with each.
Teacher Recruitment and Selection

Prospective (teacher) research participants were provided with information about this research project through an initial phone chat and an information sheet (see Appendix 2 and 3). They were asked to indicate their consent to participate in the research through signing a University of Melbourne Consent Form. Research participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research project at any time, and that they could withdraw any unprocessed data at that time. They were provided with contact numbers for counseling services in case any issues arose for them during or after the interviews.

Four secondary school teachers were selected for participation in this research. All were considered (either by myself or colleagues in this field of study) to have expertise in terms of recognizing, supporting and exploring sexual diversity in their classrooms and/or school environment. I was seeking teachers who had strategies and methods for:

- improving the school environment for gay and lesbian students;
- dealing with homophobic abuse and harassment;
- subverting heteronormativity.

Of the four teachers selected, only two are focused upon in this research (Louise and Jane). This is because one teacher withdrew (early on) due to other commitments and the other one completed three interviews yet had little discourse relating to gay and lesbian youth.

Jane was recommended for inclusion in this research by a colleague who has been involved in a number of education and support initiatives relating to SSAY. I knew Louise through workshops and conferences about SSAY that I had attended.
Biographical Information on Teacher Research Participants

Jane

Jane, was 40 years old at the time of research. She was born in Australia and has a “largely Irish ethnic background”. She identified as heterosexual.

Jane had been teaching for 16 years within the State Secondary School system in Victoria, at the time of research.

Jane described herself as being a “lefty” and a feminist – who was interested in social justice issues. She had been involved in the unions and prior to teaching worked in the public service for a number of years.

Jane started her teaching career in the Technical system in the western suburbs of Melbourne. She remained working in the western suburbs and was teaching in a State Secondary College there when she was interviewed for this research.

Jane’s subjects are history and politics. In the latter part of her career, she retrained as a teacher-librarian. She had been working in that role for four years at the time of the research. Jane was also her school’s Equal Opportunity Coordinator at the time of the interviews.

Jane became involved in issues relating to queer youth (in schools) in 1994/1995 after a gay friend spoke to her about the need for role models for gay and lesbian youth – particularly with so few ‘out’ gay and lesbian teachers in school.

Jane has done some research on gay and lesbian youth, and is acquainted with people who research and/or work with queer youth. She is also familiar with the Writing Themselves In report (Hillier et al 1998), having organized a presentation around it in her current school (at the time of research).
Louise

Louise, at the time of research, was 43 years old. She was born in England (both parents are English) and came to Australia when she was 11.

Louise had been teaching for twenty years in the Catholic secondary system at the time of research. She had taught in Tasmania, New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria.

Louise taught for 2 years, before becoming a “religious sister” – a role in which she continued teaching. After 9 years, she left the religious order yet continued teaching. At the time of the first interview, it had been 9 years since she had left the religious order.

Whilst completing a Bachelor of Theology degree Louise became “very engaged” in Liberation Theology. She says she realized that “like Jesus, we needed to liberate the oppressed”. Louise also became involved in a gay and lesbian group that ministers to people who don’t feel welcome within mainstream churches. Through this she came to the realization that she was “most probably lesbian” (2 ½ years prior to the first interview).

Louise is out as a lesbian to a small number of staff members, including a colleague (who is lesbian) who she collaborates with on many of the practices she adopts in support of gay and lesbian youth. For the most part though, she is closeted about her sexuality presuming that the majority of staff, including the principal, would see her differently if they knew. Outside of the Catholic system Louise has numerous contacts and involvements with people working in fields that encompass SSAY issues.

Louise (at the time of this research) was working at a large Catholic Co-educational Secondary College in Melbourne, where she was Religious Education Coordinator. She taught Religious Education and English.
Case Study Rationale (in Respect to the Teachers)

This thesis adopts a case study approach in terms of the teacher participants. I chose this approach for a number of reasons, which are discussed below.

I wanted to be able to unpack (in some depth) various discourses relating to the addressing of gay and lesbian issues in schools (as expressed in teachers’ ideas, understandings, beliefs, values, knowledge, arguments, worries and fears). I wanted to explore the array of influences, situations, experiences and background factors (among other things) that contributed to particular ways of seeing or conceptualizing people and situations, and led to the adoption or rejection of particular strategies (relating to gay and lesbian young people). I wanted to be able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the teachers and their lives, to understand how they saw things – from their perspectives (see Neuman 2000). I wanted to see how particular issues evolved and how specific incidents at particular points of time impacted on their approaches, views and understandings. I also wanted to establish whether there were difficulties in sustaining approaches. Case studies appeared to be the best way of meeting these various aims.

Explanations or interpretations (especially in relation to gay and lesbian issues in school) can be complex, impacted upon by many factors. These factors are not always readily apparent to the interviewer and/or the research participant. An extended focus over time (through case studies) enabled me to continue questioning, problematizing and challenging – so as to gain a more thorough understanding of the various explanations, understandings, and interpretations offered or raised by the teachers.

Case Study Sources of Data

In order to flesh out the issues from the viewpoints of the teachers, multiple sources of data were sought:
• I interviewed each teacher 4 times. Interviews lasted between 1 ½ – 2 hours each and were semi-structured. They took place during the years 1998 and 1999;

• I wrote questions that emerged from my first pass through the interview transcripts and sent these (along with the transcript) to the teachers to answer. These questions enabled me to clarify particular points they were making and/or gain further information about particular issues they discussed in the interview;

• Teachers wrote about key incidents or thoughts that occurred in relation to gay and lesbian issues in their school. Given the heavy work commitments of the teachers, and the time already given to this project I did not specify that a particular number of entries were required. Teachers wrote when they were able to;

• One teacher (Jane) contributed some additional sources of data. This included policies and frameworks she had worked upon as the school Equal Opportunity Coordinator.

Teacher Interview Procedures and Issues

The interviews with the teachers were semi-structured. I therefore went into each interview with a number of questions but was prepared to deviate from these, in response to issues that arose during the interviews (as often happened). This way the interviews became more tailored to each teacher’s particular circumstances and issues.

My interviewing approach shifted and changed as I gained more experience, and became immersed in poststructuralist and queer theory. In the first round of interviews I pretty much accepted what the teachers said, and had not problematized or challenged any of their arguments and statements. For the most part, I positioned them as experts. I saw my role as one of trying to gather as much detail about the various strategies that they had to offer.
Poststructuralist and queer theory and pedagogy offered me various insights that were relevant to the strategies, understandings, and conceptualizations of subjects that the teachers were reliant upon. It contributed to my interest in conceptualizations of subjects (and binaries), institutional norms and power relations. Consequently, in later interviews I began to seek further clarification about issues the teachers raised. I challenged or problematized particular beliefs they had expressed or practices they had spoken about. I zeroed in on particular discourses they were using (influenced by my readings), returning to these on a number of occasions throughout the interview – so as to unpack them in some depth.

This change of interviewing approach enabled me to move into areas of doubt, uncertainty and annoyance. The discourses of the teachers (at times) became messy and less coherent. This was a definite change from the smoothness of the initial interviews, where I had felt (at times) that certain things weren’t being said, or that strategies or issues were being rendered coherent. Changing my approach therefore took me into areas that I may not have got into had I maintained my initial interviewing approach. It also led to a change in the dynamics of some of the interviews.

On one occasion, an interview became particularly tense. I decided to do something not only to defuse the situation but also to ensure that the interview did not have a deleterious effect on the teacher concerned. I suggested that we both write to each other about the interview, detailing how we felt about it and what we were concerned about. This proved to be particularly useful – the teacher commented later that the “exercise was a good idea”. She was able to highlight various issues that she felt challenged by in the interviews. For myself, it was a means by which I began to realize some of the unspoken assumptions (of the teacher) in respect to our various roles in the interviews. It also enabled me to reflect on:

- where I had not been explicit enough in terms of explaining my purposes and approaches with respect to interviewing;
• issues relating to power-relations in the interviews;

• issues relating to institutional norms;

• how she wanted to be understood (the sort of subject position);

• discourses used to dismiss particular types of interview approaches.

Another strategy I utilized to deal with particular tensions (in the interviews) was phoning the teacher after the interview to check in with them and to discuss any issues they had. I also devoted a part of the final interview (with Jane and Louise) to talking about the interview process so they could air any outstanding issues or concerns. This was a constructive (and positive) way to bring closure to the interview process.

**Youth-worker/Facilitator Recruitment and Selection**

I was interested in finding out about support and/or social groups for young queers under 18. When I began data collection relating to this area (January-February 2001) there were a small number of these groups catering for queers 14-18 years (and some beyond this age) in Melbourne. All existed outside the education system. I found out about them through workshops and conferences relating to young queers in school, through queer media, and through colleagues working in this field of study/work.

I approached all of the groups known to me at the time (n=10). Nine out of these ten groups chose to participate in the research. These are listed in the table below. Further details about each group can be found in Appendix 5 and 7.

Of the nine groups, eight were located in the Melbourne and metropolitan area, and one was located in a regional area of Victoria. I interviewed one youth-worker/facilitator from each group.
### List of Queer Youth Support and Social Groups Interviewed

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<td>• Young And Proud (YAP)</td>
<td>• Anonymous</td>
<td>• Young &amp; Gay</td>
<td>• Under 18 support group for gay and bisexual males (no name existed for the group)</td>
<td>• Minus18</td>
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<td>• Not Quite Straight</td>
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<td>• Knox Youth Services SSAY Support Group</td>
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<td>• Youthworks SSAY Recreation Program</td>
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### Rationale for Including the Support/Social Groups in This Research

**Local Government and Church Based Support/Social Groups**

I decided to focus on these groups since they specifically cater for GLBT young people under the age of 18 (and some beyond this age). They have (for the most part) been set up as a result of suicide/mental health funding. They operate within the youth-services divisions of their respective organizations.
Chapter 1     Methodology

Victorian AIDS Council Support Group

I was interested in the Victorian AIDS Council’s (VAC) Young & Gay program – for a number of reasons. Firstly, I had participated in and facilitated a number of VAC peer education programs for gay men and knew how valuable they had been to me (see Introduction to this thesis). Second, sexual stigma and shame was a theme I was pursuing and I knew that the VAC programs adopted a sex positive approach. Third, the Young & Gay program caters for an older age group (18–26) and I figured that this would afford them more scope in relation to sexual content and issues than those programs catering for young queers under 18 years in the local government sector.

Family Planning Victoria/Victorian AIDS Council Support Group

In 1994, Family Planning Victoria (through the Action Centre) in collaboration with the Victorian AIDS Council established the first support group (in Victoria) for under 18 gay and bisexual young men. It therefore had the longest history in terms of existing queer youth support groups. I wanted to tap into the knowledge, skills and strategies that had developed there.

PFLAG (Victoria) Social Group

I was interested in the PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians And Gays, Victoria) venture – Minus18 (Dance Parties for under 18 SSAY) for a number of reasons. Firstly, Minus18 is arguably the most successful social initiative for SSAY in Australia. Secondly, Minus18’s success has led to the development of a number of similar ventures in other Australian capital cities (Sydney and Perth). Finally, Minus18 offers a quite different structure to the other groups involved this research, in terms of being a dance party.

Youth-workers/Facilitators Interview Procedure and Purpose

Prospective research participants were provided with information about the research project through an initial phone chat and an information sheet (see Appendix 4). They were informed that they could withdraw from the research
project at any time, and that they could withdraw any unprocessed data at that time.

Research participants were asked to indicate:

- their consent to participate in the research through signing a University of Melbourne Consent Form;

- whether they and/or their support group wished to remain anonymous in the research, through filling in another form (see Appendix 4).

Two youth-workers/facilitators and their support/social groups chose to remain anonymous.

As I was mainly focused on the strategies utilized by queer youth support/social groups, I did not gather biographical information on the youth-workers or facilitators I spoke to. Further details about their groups however, (including names of youth-worker participants and contact details for the groups) can be found in Appendix 5 and 7.

Interviews were conducted with eight youth-workers and facilitators. One youth-worker was involved in two groups, and was therefore interviewed in relation to both groups. I intended to use the data to elaborate the strategies they utilized with young queers. I was therefore interested in finding out about as many of their strategies as possible. I wanted to know the purpose of the strategies, how they were set up and conducted, and the effects of some of them (in terms of young queers).

One to two phone interviews (of 30-60 minutes duration) were conducted with each youth-worker or facilitator. The interview was semi-structured, with scope to explore particular issues that were raised by the youth-workers or facilitators.
Notes were taken during the interviews. These were written up and a copy was sent to the youth-workers or facilitators. They were asked to check the notes for accuracy and to make changes where necessary. They were also asked to delete any parts of the notes that they didn’t wish to be included in the research.

Some research participants were also sent a list of further questions. This occurred when I wished to clarify a point that was made in the interview, or to gain further detail about something they had mentioned.

One youth-worker and a facilitator were interviewed by email. The same process as detailed previously was followed, except that after consent had been given to participate in the research, the questions were emailed to them. They emailed their responses back to me.

In the final section of this chapter, I conclude my focus on Research Design. I detail the key themes, research questions and research materials for Parts 1, 2 and 3 of this thesis.

**Key Themes, Questions and Research Materials**

The overall theme explored in this thesis is: young queers moving beyond isolation and loneliness – the role of education. I focus on two major spheres – the *formal school institution* in Part 1 (chapters 3 to 5), and *queer social and sexual worlds* (which encompasses queer youth support services) in Part 2 (chapters 6 to 8). The models and strategies employed by queer youth support services are focused upon in Part 3 (chapters 9 and 10). I make frequent comparisons between these two spheres (throughout the thesis), primarily in terms of differences (and the implications of these differences) rather than similarities, in an effort to make some generalizations about each (Neuman 2000). I make comparisons in relation to four main areas: representations of young queers, theoretical frameworks relied upon, strategies or approaches relating to young queers, and the outcomes or consequences for young queers.
Part 1 – Educational Discourse on Young Queers

My initial area of interest when beginning Part 1 of this thesis (chapters 3-5) was – Teacher strategies for dealing with or addressing gay or lesbian issues in schools.

Part 1 is made up of three stages. The first stage involved case studies of two Secondary School teachers (as discussed earlier in this chapter) – Jane and Louise. From these case studies, key themes and research questions were identified. The first two themes define the issues with respect to young queers, in terms of teacher’s beliefs, whilst the latter themes identify the strategies seen as important for young queers.

Representations of Young Queers

- The Wounded Subject (as in suffering, struggling, harassed, isolated, lacking in self-esteem);

- Young queers as lacking agency and knowledge, and needing protection by schools (considered to be ‘at risk’).

Strategies

- Anti-harassment and Equal Opportunity policies that include gays and lesbians;

- Mentoring;

- Including gay or lesbian topics in the classroom;

- Protecting gay and lesbian students.
Key Research Questions

- How are (young) queers conceptualized within education-focused research/studies?

- What contributes to isolation and loneliness?

- What is the impact of school education on the loneliness and isolation of young queers?

- What is the visibility of queer people and queer culture in these fields?

- What are the strategies and programs targeting young queers?

- How effective are these strategies and programs from the perspective of young queers?

These themes and research questions guided the second stage of the research, which involved a review, and critique of existing education-focused research reports and articles on young queers. I decided to focus on the dominant strategies advocated (to address issues of young queers) utilizing gay and lesbian studies, gender research and queer theory to not only problematize and critique them, but to also highlight reasons why such strategies have generally not been adopted in formal school institutions.

I pursued (further) the other theme of the wounded subject through an in-depth review and critique of an Australian report that relied on the ‘wounded’ gay and lesbian subject (The Writing Themselves In report – see p.40), and advocated strategies that are common in education-focused research/studies on young queers. This was an attempt to gain a better understanding of how the ‘wounded’ subject was constituted. I was interested in the theoretical frameworks that informed the production of this subject, the data used to support it, and also the exclusions (i.e. that which was ignored or not commented upon in the production
of this subject). I was also interested in the link between the ‘wounded’ subject and the strategies that were advocated.

I chose the report *Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Well-Being of Same-Sex Attracted Young People* (Hillier et al 1998) for a number of reasons:

- It is (at the time of writing) the largest national study of same-sex attracted young people (SSAY) in Australia;
- Its design and emphasis was in line with existing national sexual health research on secondary students in Australia (Lindsay et al 1997);
- Its conceptualizations of young queers including the problems they’re said to face, its emphasis on the role of the school, and the recommendations it makes are all consistent with education-focused research/studies on young queers (for references relating to these areas see Introduction chapter, and chapters 4 and 5).

Three themes became particularly important, as a consequence of my analysis and critique of *Writing Themselves In* (Hillier et al 1998). These themes were: queer socialization, sex and sexual desire, and queer communities. They emerged from the narratives of SSAY included in the report – not from the analysis provided by Hillier et al (1998).

I decided to pursue the three themes relating to queer cultural life further. This necessitated a moving outside of education-focused research/studies, into the fields of gay, lesbian and queer literature and studies, along with HIV/AIDS research on gay and homosexually active men (see Part 2 below). I used the following research questions to guide my investigations:

- How are (young) queers conceptualized within these particular fields of knowledge?
• How do young queers come to form friendships and relationships with other queers?

• What meanings are associated with socialization and sexualization?

• How does social and sexual interaction impact on self-esteem and well-being?

• What are the strategies and programs targeting young queers?

• How effective are these strategies and programs from the perspective of young queers?

Additional themes emerged through reviewing this field of literature/research. These themes were: queer support groups, casual sex and beats, early sexual experience, sexual stigma and shame, and sexual knowledge. These themes were influential in determining the subsequent research paths I took in parts 2 and 3 – which focus on queer sex and sexual desire, and queer socialization.

**Part 2 – The Social and Sexual Worlds of Young Queers**

The first two chapters in this part (6 and 7) explore the sexual worlds of young queers, predominantly same-sex attracted young men, whilst the last chapter (8) examines young queers’ social worlds – in the context of queer youth support groups.

**Key Research Questions**

• How do young queers come to form friendships and relationships with other queers?

• What meanings are associated with socialization and sexualization (with other queers, or same-sex attracted young people)?
• How does social and sexual interaction affect self-esteem and well-being?

• What happens when society is understood differently, as not being entirely oppressive, but instead as encompassing a wide range of attitudes and behaviors that include both positive and negative aspects?

Queer Sexual Worlds – Research Materials

Queer sex and sexual desire is explored in relation to early sexual experience (in chapter 6), and casual sex and beats (in chapter 7). The key theoretical framework, which informs these chapters, comes from Gary Dowssett’s (1996) life history research on Australian gay and homosexually active men, *Practicing Desire: Homosexual Sex In The Era Of AIDS*. This was chosen as the major piece of research guiding the sections on sex for a number of reasons. It is Australian based HIV/AIDS social research and provides a conceptual framework in relation to young males’ same-sex sexual experiences. Dowssett’s research remains true to the language, issues, interests, desires and experiences of the research participants. It’s in their terms – not re-worked, sanitized or normalized so as to make their sexual experiences intelligible to mainstream audiences. It is sex positive, valuing and celebrating of sex in its varying forms and contexts. This was important to me in the context of much education-focused research/studies on young queers not talking about or elaborating on queer sex, and/or rendering it risky and dangerous.

Dowssett’s (1996) research does not subordinate homosexuality to heterosexuality and does not subordinate sexuality to gender (which is common in much education-focused research/studies). He also recognizes (in line with the stream of HIV/AIDS social research he’s been involved in) the role of gay communities in some gay and homosexually active men’s lives. Dowssett’s research is consistent with another significant HIV/AIDS social research project in Australia, *Sustaining Safe Sex: Gay Communities Respond to AIDS* – Kippax et al 1993. He was a part of the research team for that project. His social research-work has been recognized and drawn upon in more recent HIV/AIDS

The chapters on queer sexual worlds also draw upon discourses from queer autobiographies (see Appendix 6). I chose discourses that related to Dowsett’s (1996) theoretical framework about young males’ sexual experiences. They provided a means to further explore and analyze particular ideas and understandings arising from his research.

Youth development discourse along with school-focused sexual health research on young people in Australia (that relies upon youth development discourse) is also drawn upon in the chapters relating to sexual experience (chapters 6 and 7). It is contrasted with same-sex attracted young people’s discourses about early sexual experience in order to:

- identify the specific mechanisms that render young queers non-agentic (in terms of their sexual experiences and knowledge) and render young queers’ sexual experiences as dangerous or risky;
- highlight the ways in which queer sexual cultures are obscured within sexual health discourses (in education);
- highlight the dimensions of sex that are discarded in sexual health discourse, such as the pleasures of sex, the knowledge gained through having sex, and the collective and social contexts of sex (in education).

The school-focused sexual health research reports focused upon are: Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality Health and Well-Being of Same-Sex Attracted People (Hillier et al 1998) and Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health 1997 (Lindsay et al 1997). The latter report was a national (representative) study of 3550 secondary students (Years 10 and 12) from 118 schools around Australia. It was commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services as a follow-up to a 1992 national
study conducted by the National Centre in HIV/AIDS Social research (Dunne et al 1993). Lindsay et al’s report (1997) has a question relating to sexual attraction, but does not specifically focus on SSAY.

**Queer Social Worlds – Research Materials**

A number of sources of data are drawn upon to discuss and elaborate queer (gay and lesbian) social worlds in chapter 8. They largely focus upon queer youth support groups.

1. **Australian Queer Youth Autobiographies**

I have drawn upon young queers’ discourses (in books and magazines) relating to their social experiences in existing support and social groups (for young queers) in Australia, and in particular Melbourne. There is little (published) Australian autobiographical material relating to young queers’ social worlds. I therefore broadened my scope to include the websites of a number of support and social groups in Melbourne (predominantly) and Perth, as well as an Australian video on young queers in rural areas (*Out in the Bush* – Willison 1997). I located young queers’ discourses that related to their overcoming of isolation and loneliness. In so doing, I focused on agentic, knowledgeable queer subjects who had friendships with other queers.

2. **Australian Research on Young Queers**

This research also draws upon young queers’ discourses about *socialization* (with other queers) from two Australian research reports:

- *Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Well-being of Same-Sex Attracted Young People* (Hillier et al 1998);

The *Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project* (Goldflam et al. 1999) was a joint project of the Western Australian AIDS Council (WAAC) and The Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service (GLCS) in Western Australia. It received funding from the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy in Australia (Brown 1998, Goldflam et al. 1999). The project was “designed to prevent suicide and self-harm in young people with same-sex attractions” (Brown 1999:28). I was interested in drawing upon discourses from this report since it evaluated existing GLB support/social groups and/or peer education programs (in Western Australia) and drew upon young queers’ comments relating to these groups/programs. It also presented a number of queer youth case studies. These detailed the changes that occurred for young queers as a consequence of their participation in particular queer youth groups. I was especially interested in utilizing data that related to overcoming isolation and loneliness. In particular, I wanted to know what assisted young queers to overcome isolation and loneliness and what the overcoming of isolation and loneliness meant to the young queers involved.

3. ‘You’re not alone’ – An Australian Publication for Queer Youth

One offshoot of the *Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project* was the development of the booklet, ‘You’re not alone’. This was jointly produced by GLCS and WAAC. In this publication, young queers describe their experiences in support and social groups (for young queers) in Western Australia. I drew upon some of their discourses – in particular, the meanings they attributed to socializing with other young queers.

Choosing the Discourses

The queer youth discourses I’ve chosen specifically relate to queer youth support groups in Australia. My choice of discourses was based upon relevance to the research questions and themes I was pursuing (Neuman 2000). I do not claim that these discourses are representative of queers in general nor of groups of queers. These discourses are, however, recognizable in queer cultures. That is, they circulate within different queer contexts/ mediums – and are not unusual or exceptional discourses. That’s not to say that it wouldn’t be useful to explore less
common discourses relating to socialization and sexualization. That would potentially make for a quite interesting project. However, that was outside the scope of this research.

Issues/Problems in Accessing Queer Youth Discourses

I have drawn upon various sources of data relating to young queers’ social and sexual experiences with other queers. I did not seek however, to interview young queers themselves. That was outside the bounds of what I had originally put forward to (and approved by) the Melbourne University Human Research Ethics Committee. It would therefore have meant submitting a new ethics application. Over a number of years, I had known several colleagues who had sought to gain approval for PhD research projects (at various universities) focusing on young queers. I had heard of numerous problematic situations arising, which had led to lengthy delays in their research projects and re-negotiating of their projects so as to gain approval. I figured that my interest in the sexual desires and experiences of young people (at school) would be particularly problematic to gain ethics approval for. And given that my focus on this area (as well as socialization) came about late in the research project, I did not have the benefit of time to try to gain ethics approval for interviews with queer youth.

After documenting some of the meanings attributed by young queers to socializing and sexualizing with other queers, I decided to investigate some of the Australian-based services that bring young queers together in support and social groups. I was interested in the health promotion models which informed/supported their approaches (in respect to young queers) as well as the strategies and programs they offered (see Part 3).
Part 3 – Support Services for Young Queers: Organizational Models, Strategies and Programs

Key Research Questions

• What are the influential health models in respect to support services for queers and young queers (in Australia)?
  o What are the key principles of these models?
  o How do these principles inform the development and approaches of existing support services?
  o How do these models and their principles sit within the context of school education?

• What are the strategies and programs targeting young queers?

• How effective are these strategies and programs from the perspective of young queers?

• How do they deal with the stigma and shame attached to being queer and queer sex?

• What is the involvement of queers and queer communities in the strategies and programs?

Research Materials

There are various sources of material utilized in Part 3. Chapter 9 is primarily focused on the health promotion models that inform a number of support services for queers and young queers in Australia – that is, social models of health promotion. My discussion and analysis of social models is informed by:

1. Health Promotion Literature

I utilize two key sources: The Australian publication – Theory in a Nutshell: A practitioner’s guide to commonly used theories and models in Health Promotion...
(Nutbeam and Harris 1998), and the World Health Organization’s (1986) Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion – which is an influential model, particularly in the HIV/AIDS sector.

2. HIV/AIDS Research and Studies on Gay and Homosexually Active Men

I was particularly interested in literature that illustrated why social models are drawn upon in the HIV/AIDS sector, and how they influence thinking and approaches in this sector.

3. Queer Cultural Literature

I draw upon literature relating to two key areas:

- Queer community-based initiatives for queers and young queers in Australia: Bfriend (in Adelaide), Working It Out (in Tasmania), and the Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project (in Perth);

- Gay Rights and Activism (both past and present) in Australia.

These two fields of literature inform my discussion about key principles of social health models. I analyze practices adopted by these queer organizations, which are consistent with these principles.

At the end of chapter 9, I list the key themes that have emerged from my exploration and analysis of social models of health promotion. These themes inform the organizational framework for chapter 10, which analyzes the practices and programs of queer youth support and social groups (in Melbourne). This chapter draws upon the following materials:
1. Interview Data

As discussed earlier in this chapter, I interviewed 8 youth-workers and/or facilitators of queer youth support and social groups in Melbourne. These interviews focused on the aims, strategies and results of these groups.

2. Research/Studies on HIV/AIDS Education/Prevention Initiatives for Gay and Homosexually Active Men

I draw upon research/studies (predominantly Australian) that explain the origins of particular educational practices adopted by AIDS organizations such as the Victorian AIDS Council (in particular peer education and support, and facilitators drawing upon their gayness) and/or critique or put forward limitations of particular practices.

3. The Victorian AIDS Council’s (VAC) ‘Young & Gay’ Course Material

Young & Gay is a peer education course for gay men 18-26 years. My choice of activities to describe and analyze (from Young & Gay), in chapter 10, was based upon the themes of socialization, sexual autonomy and the circulation of sexual knowledge. I was therefore interested in activities that either recognized queers as being agentic or facilitated the gaining of agency. In particular, I was interested in sex positive activities that encouraged peer-based discussions about sex. This related to the theme of sexual shame and stigma – in the sense of challenging it.

4. Personal Experience

I draw upon my personal experiences, as a participant in, and facilitator of, Victorian AIDS Council (VAC) peer education groups for gay men – to shed light on some of the strategies utilized in VAC peer education groups (see chapter 10). In particular, I highlight practices that are related to the theme of sex (especially those that are sex positive) and queer communities (in particular, the roles that gay men play as facilitators of the groups). My experiences are also drawn upon (at times) to inform my discussions about Young & Gay activities.
The next chapter of this thesis details the theoretical framework (queer theory) underpinning this research. In particular, it focuses upon the key concepts and understandings (from queer theory) that have informed the direction, shape and analysis of this research.
The primary analytical framework used in this thesis comes from *queer theory*. As such, an understanding of queer theory – its aims and concepts – is essential in the reading of this thesis. This chapter attempts to explain the key concepts of queer theory that inform much of the analytical work within this research project. It draws on a range of theory from the fields of queer theory, poststructuralism, gay and lesbian studies, and HIV/AIDS activism to underscore the main issue/s. In particular, it draws upon the works of Britzman (1995, 1998, 2000), Butler (1990, 1993), Davies (2000), Kayal (1993), Luhmann (1998), Rofes (1996, 1998, 2000), Seidman (1993), Tierney and Dilley (1998) and Warner (1993, 1999). This chapter also draws upon Jagose’s *Queer Theory* (1996) since it provides an introductory account to many of the concepts discussed in this thesis.

Queer theory is a contemporary theoretical framework that has developed predominantly out of gay and lesbian studies. It has significantly impacted on – if not transformed – this field of study over the last decade. A key influence in this regard is the extensive body of work of Foucault (1976, 1977, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1994). Queer theory is informed by poststructuralist understandings of identity, power, knowledge and desire. It has also been influential in gay/lesbian/queer activism, and has been prominent in the field of HIV/AIDS. Within the field of education, queer pedagogy has emerged as a critical academic discourse.

Queer theory does not attempt to define a coherent, stable, unambiguous theoretical model. Instead, it defines itself against what is taken for granted as self evident, seen as normal, and therefore outside of questioning. In particular, it seeks to contest the self-evident nature of identity categories (see Jagose 1996:76-78, Stein and Plummer 1996:134), and to denaturalize identity-related binaries such as male/female and homo/hetero. It establishes as political the
signifying practices that establish, regulate and deregulate identity (Butler 1990:147, see also Tierney and Dilley 1998:60-64).

The focus on denaturalization within queer theory has meant that it potentially offers space for those who don’t fit within the self-evident or the taken for granted sexual order, or for those who take a stand against ‘regimes of the normal’ in relation to sexuality (Jagose 1996). As Butler (1993:4) notes:

   Indeed, it may be precisely through practices which underscore disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminist and queer politics are mobilized.

Queer theory seeks more than toleration or equal status. It focuses on the various sites of normalization (Warner 1999). In so doing it moves away from the individual as the site of attention to the cultural and institutional practices that frame sexual identity in particular ways (Tierney and Dilley 1998). As Tierney and Dilley note (1998:65), “if one assumes that the structures of knowledge in part have defined normalized relations that have excluded homosexuals, then one needs to break those structures rather than merely reinvent them” (see also Jagose 1996:106-107, Lehring 1997:190-191).

**Identity**

Dominant understandings of identity rely on humanist notions of the ‘essential self’ (or ‘who one is’) that exists independently of social relationships and discourse. This notion of identity creates a separation of the ‘real’ (or biological self), from the ‘representations’ of what is purported to be real. Subjects are often constituted in ways to make them appear coherent and stable, and identity is considered fixed or unchanging throughout one’s lifetime (Butler 1990, 1993, Davies 1994, 2000, Weedon 1997).

Humanist conceptualizations of the sexual subject assume that sexual identity is grounded in the biological or essential self. Thus, sexual identity is regarded as
being fixed and stable, signifying a natural condition that is independent of social and cultural influences. This essentialist understanding of sexual identity is embedded in the conventional configuration of the sexual order – or sexual hegemony – that positions heterosexuality as the natural sexuality and homosexuality as perverted or deviant. Gay and lesbian identity politics, in the bid to establish homosexuals as a distinct and recognizable minority group (worthy of civil rights) also relies on the essentialist notion of identity. Thus, the homosexual identity is constituted as not only natural and normal for some people (i.e. gays and lesbians) but as fixed, coherent and stable (Carlson 1998, Gamson 1996, Jagose 1996, Seidman 1993, Stein and Plummer 1996, Warner 1999).


**Identity Politics and Queer Reconceptualizing of Identity**

Identity categories have been deemed necessary by various minority groups to gain civil rights. From the mid 1970’s, gay and lesbian-feminist communities adopted an “ethnic model” of identity and politics, which was, committed “to establishing gay identity as a legitimate minority group, whose official recognition would secure citizenship rights for gay and lesbian subjects. [It was] constructed as analogous to an ethnic minority – that is, as a distinct and identifiable population rather than a radical potentiality for all” (Jagose 1996:61, see also Rofes 1996:111-112, Seidman 1993:117, Spargo 1999:29).
Being a distinct and identifiable population also meant being intelligible to those who did not identify as gay or lesbian. It relied on the notion of a unitary gay or lesbian identity that is just like heterosexuals – wanting the same things (such as state rights and political representation). The key point of difference, then, is in respect to sexuality, which is figured as stemming from one’s essence (Tierney and Dilley 1998:52-53,58-59 also see Manning 1996:99-100 for a critique of this approach). An important part of establishing a recognizable and distinct minority group was the development and increased visibility of a gay and lesbian community, along with gay and lesbian institutions, media, networks, arts/culture and commercial venues (Seidman 1993:117, Rofes 1996:112).

The move towards an ethnic model of politics occurred between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s. At this time, gay men and lesbian feminists had gone their separate ways, creating their own subcultures. And though there were differences between them, such as the gay male community being orientated toward assimilation while lesbian feminists pursued a gender-separatist approach, there were also similarities. Both, for example, emphasized, “community building around the notion of a unitary lesbian and gay identity.” Personal identity and lifestyle was also a central focus in both groups. They differed however, in the details relating to both of these areas (Seidman 1993:116-117).

The identity-based politics that underpins the ethnic model of politics has been the site of much contestation. The main area of critique has been its reliance on establishing a unitary gay and lesbian identity that is not threatening to the dominant, an identity that would be seen as appropriate and worthy of civil rights (see Jagose 1996:61-71, Spargo 1999:29-33). This includes the reliance on establishing a ‘respectable’ gay and lesbian culture or community. Political representation that relies on a stable and unitary gay and lesbian identity runs the risk of excluding, putting down, and/or distancing itself from those identities, attitudes, sexual practices and/or ways of organizing relationships that threaten the stability or coherence of the unitary identity (Jagose 1996:62-71, Lehring 1997:192, Manning 1996:100, Martin 1996:101-104, Spargo 1999:31-33, Warner 1999:31-33, 48-49, 66, Young 1997:55-68).
It has also been argued that identity politics contributes to the reinscribing of the heterosexual/homosexual binary and that it privileges the identity category of sexuality over other identifications such as race (Seidman 1993:121). People of different races, as well as bisexuals, have contested the notion that sexual-object choice is the predominant means by which to understand oneself (Seidman 1993:120-121). This notion has led to the understanding of individuals as having “a core gay identity, around which race or class add[ed] mere social nuance” (Seidman 1993:120, see also Jagose 1996:63). Along similar lines, various writers have argued that the ethnic model privileges the white and middle class (Jagose 1996:62-63, Seidman 1993:117,125, Spargo 1999:31, Warner 1993:xvi-xvii) where race was unmarked, not visible and subordinated to sexual-object choice. The multiple boundaries that exist among same-sex attracted people such as those along lines of race, or sexual interests, or socio-economic status for example, make “the question who is and is not ‘one of them’ [gays or lesbians] not merely ambiguous but rather a perpetually and necessarily contested issue” according to Warner (1993:xxv, see also Seidman 1993:129).

Differences have also emerged (in relation to the ethnic model) around the notion of gender preference defining sexual orientation. This relies on the heterosexual/homosexual binary and has been challenged by those into sadomasochism (S/M) and those who identify as bisexual (see Jagose 1996:63-4, 67-69, Rust 1996, Seidman 1993:121, 125).

Challenging the notion of a unitary gay or lesbian identity has been a predominant aspect to organize around for those whose lives are not “reflected in the dominant representations, social conventions and political strategies” (Seidman 1993:117-118). Seidman (1993:125) writes that individuals have “formed their own subcultural identities, networks and political agendas [and] challenged [the] hegemonic culture” within lesbian and gay male communities. “Leatherfolk” (in the USA) for example, formed a nationwide network in response to a number of key issues in gay communities. These included the condemning, ignoring and harassing of leatherfolk by other gays, the lack of concern from gay media over harassment (of leatherfolk) from police officers, the blaming of leatherfolk for AIDS due to the “perceived excesses of radical
"sexuality", the labeling of leatherfolk as “bad” gay people, and the “betrayal by gay leaders who distance[d] themselves [from leatherfolk] for the sake of mainstream rights” (Thompson 1991:xii). Thus, the rights of the (perceived) ‘few’ (leatherfolk) were understood (by some leatherfolk) as being sacrificed for the acceptance of many or the majority. A nation-wide group of leatherfolk was therefore seen as a means of protecting their interests (Thompson 1991).

The “notion of a gay subject unified by common interests [has been characterized as] a disciplining social force oppressive to large segments of the community in whose name it sp[eaks]” (Seidman 1993:125). Even if more people are included, their inclusion relies upon the exclusion (and subordinating) of others. Inclusion into the established order involves accepting what has come to be seen as the normal and acceptable identity. It is inclusion into a theoretical framework (seen as problematic and reliant on the hetero/homo binary) that remains otherwise unaltered (Lehring 1997:190-194, Manning 1996:100, Warner 1993:xv-xvi, xxi). What needs to be compromised, excluded, or taken on board in order to become part of the established? Of interest here, are the terms through which identity is articulated. These terms, and how they become established as the normal, are the focus of political activism (see Butler 1990:147, Tierney and Dilley 1998:60-64).

The development of poststructuralist theory was of particular use in regard to the challenging of the unitary gay and lesbian identity. Poststructuralist theory provided a range of discourses through which to articulate dissenting views. It showed how the mobilization of identity categories (assumed to be fixed and unitary) could actually work against the interests of those it claimed to represent, “limit[ing] and constrain[ing] in advance the…possibilities [the particular identity category] is supposed to open up” (Butler 1990:147). Identity categories were also understood within poststructuralist theory to be implicated in the reinscribing of hegemonies with respect to particular identity categories. Many of those who didn’t fit the unitary gay or lesbian identity (as discussed above) had found this.
‘Community’

Queer theory contests the idea of a single, all-encompassing gay or lesbian community (Jagose 1996:111). Communities within queer theory are understood to be dynamic, constituted and shaped through discourses, impacted by power relations, context-dependent and historically situated. The notion of the unitary community (like the notion of a unitary identity) that has an ongoing basis, (as is prevalent within the ‘ethnic model’) is understood (within queer theory) to be the effect of the repetition, over time, of particular acts and discourses among particular people. These give the appearance of a fixed, unitary community (see Butler 1990:144, 24 for a discussion of this idea in relation to gender).

The denaturalizing of the concept of ‘community’ within queer theory does not mean that it ceases to be of importance. Nor does it mean that queer theory is advocating the abolition of the use of the concept ‘community’. What is questioned and critiqued however, is the “knowledge which maintains such concepts as if they’re ‘self evident’ and indisputable” (Jagose 1996:111). There is a resistance here to ‘regimes of the normal’ where differences within the group are seen to be problematic, threatening the unitary community identity. In addition, attempts at making the concerns of a specific community “intelligible to a varied and non-specialist audience”, as the ethnic model can be seen to be doing, is understood to limit the extent of denaturalizing that queer theory seeks to do (Edelman 1994, quoted in Jagose 1996:111).

Queer theory allows for commonality without disallowing difference. Jagose (1996:113-114) notes that “queer raises the possibility of locating sexual perversion as the very pre-condition of an identificatory category, rather than as a destabilization or a variation of it”, as is the case in the ethnic model of politics. The commonality here is around sexual perversion – and yet differences in perversions are allowed for. Shared ‘essential identity’ is not relied upon, in contrast to the ethnic model. Hypothetically then, this allows “for a collectivity comprising all forms of non-normative sexuality” (Jagose 1996:114, see also Seidman 1993:133, Warner 1999:39). The term ‘queer’ is sometimes used to describe this. Jagose (1996:111) notes that this particular deployment of ‘queer’
is “perhaps the most controversial” since hypothetically it allows for a collective
that could include those whose sexual behaviors, desires and interests are seen as
not acceptable (and therefore intelligible) to the mainstream. Some writers have
distanced themselves from the use of queer due to this possibility (see Jagose 1996:112-114).

Queer theory, however, neither mandates coalitional politics between various
collectives, nor advocates for the inclusion of particular groups of people. Nor
does it rule out negotiating with the ethical (Jagose 1996:114). In this sense, it is
not a deconstruction of the political (Butler 1990:148). Queer theory seeks to
remain open ended, whilst denaturalizing and rendering suspect that which comes
to be seen as normal and self evident; this becomes the ground of political
denaturalization of identity categories can serve to make visible that which was
previously unmarked and invisible, such as the binaries and sexual norms that are
implicated in the constituting (and sustaining) of the identity categories (Jagose

**Intelligibility**

Asserting the queerness of the world in a way that is unintelligible within the
sexual order (where hetero is the norm) is of interest within queer theory (Warner
1993:xxi, see also Luhmann 1998:146-147). Thus, queer theory does not seek to
tone down or distance the subject from those traits deemed problematic. Nor does
it seek to appropriate concepts dominant and naturalized within the prevailing
sexual order so that a subject can be more easily understood and made sense of
(that is, rendered ‘normal’). This seeking to be assimilated into the prevailing
order is understood as producing new forms of subjection (Luhmann 1998:146,

In understanding the production of normalcy to be problematic (particularly in its
‘immanent exclusions’) some (queer informed) writers talk of the “proliferat[ing]
of alternative sites of identification” (Wickham and Haver 1992, quoted in
Britzman 1998:80); identifications which “confound the intelligibility of the
apparatuses that produce identity as repetition” (Britzman 1998:81 see also Butler 1990:145, Luhmann 1998:146-147). There is a desire to keep the subject unfixed (an ongoing task in itself), in a form that renders it difficult to make sense of within the prevailing sexual order. This involves a resistance to “the desire for authority and stable knowledge” (Luhmann 1998:147) – that is, this is what a ‘gay’ person is.

In resisting intelligibility, queer theory focuses on what is ignored through the production of normalcy, such as the everydayness of queer lives and bodies, sexual pleasures, desires and experiences (Britzman 1998:81-82, see also Sumara and Davis 1998:217). Difference here is of interest on its own terms (that is, the terms used by the people or person being focused upon) – not through the terms of the dominant sexual order (Britzman 1998:82).

**Normalcy**

Queer theory seeks to denaturalize that which is seen as having a ‘natural’ basis, and/or is assumed to be ‘self evident’ and beyond questioning (Jagose 1996:98-99, Tierney and Dilley 1998:60-65, Warner 1993:xxvi-xxvii). In relation to sexuality then, heterosexuality, understood in the sexual order as predominant, and the norm from which to consider others, is no longer the defining point of reference. Normalcy is the issue of significance that queer theory defines itself against, not heterosexuality (Warner 1993:xxvi).

There are an infinite array of research possibilities with normalcy as the focus. These include the ‘regimes of the normal’, the practices of the normal, the idea of normal, normal behavior, normal business, normal practices and normal discourses (Warner 1993:xxvi-xxvii). The broad scope of queer theory (particularly in the field of sexuality research or activism) is enabled by: its openness; its refusal to be pinned down (to secure for itself a fixed place or identity); its refusal to mandate particular practices; its refusal to have fixed sites of interest (Jagose 1996:131-132).
Queer theory is particularly interested in the practices of normalization that seek to “restrain the potentially disruptive force that homosexuality poses” (Luhmann 1998:144). It is interested in those practices that seek to keep homosexuality distinct and inferior to heterosexuality so that it doesn’t threaten or contaminate it or so that heterosexuality is not at risk of collapsing into homosexuality. These normalization practices can include violence towards gays and lesbians, legal and social sanctions against homosexuality, and gestures of toleration that position homosexuality as “equal but different” (Luhmann 1998:144). Queer theory, in focusing on the practices of normalization, illustrates the instability of sexual identity categories as well as their interdependence (Luhmann 1998:144-145). It seeks to illustrate how sexual norms are constructed, maintained and reinscribed within particular contexts, along with challenging and disrupting these sexual norms (Luhmann 1998:146).

**Binaries and Normalcy**

Queer theory seeks to “deconstruct the binary oppositions that govern identity formation”, since they are understood to be critical to the production of normalcy (Carlson 1998:113). Binaries are central to decision making, teaching, learning and politics, Luhmann (1998:144) argues. They are a means to make sense of ourselves and others, as well as a means to make sense of particular situations, practices or behaviors. One binary of particular interest in queer theory is the hetero/homo binary (Luhmann 1998:144, Tierney and Dilley 1998:65). The heterosexual and homosexual subjects are understood (within queer theory) to be mutually interdependent, each gaining meaning in relation to the other. This can be seen in the construction of the normative sexuality – heterosexuality, where the abject, inferior Other (homosexuality) is required for its own coherence and intelligibility (Luhmann 1998:144, Stein and Plummer 1996:135).

Warner (1999:37-38) examines many of the assumptions pertaining to heterosexuality, and describes how these form a “heterosexual package” (in terms of males):

…if you are born with male genitalia, the logic goes, you will behave in masculine ways, desire women, desire feminine
women, desire them exclusively, have sex in what are thought to be normally active and insertive ways and within officially sanctioned contexts, think of yourself as heterosexual, identify with other heterosexuals, trust in the superiority of heterosexuality no matter how tolerant you wish to be…

The homosexual male is rendered particularly problematic in terms of this package. He is figured as deviant and abnormal for desiring other males and for being (assumed to be) ‘passive’ (in sex) which is associated with being female. This highlights how the rules governing the assertion of an intelligible ‘I’, that is, enabling a person to be recognizable and knowable as a subject, are partially structured along “matrices of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” [along with their associated binaries]. They “operate through repetition” (Butler 1990:145).

Warner (1999:37-38) notes that the assumption in terms of the “heterosexual package” is that you “never change any part of this packaging from childhood to senescence… If you deviate at any point from this program you do so at your own cost.” The potential costs (of deviating from the norm) are punishment, stigma and/or shame. Deviation is particularly problematic within straight culture since it can serve to highlight the instability of the identity categories ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’, rendering suspect the dichotomy in terms of sexual difference. It can show the interdependence between the two identity categories, drawing attention to the infinite number of possibilities that mess up and recombine aspects of these identity packages. In such contexts, heterosexuality does not maintain its distinct and superior status, and homosexuality is not kept restrained and contained.

There are various other binaries that serve to privilege and reinscribe the superiority of heterosexuality over homosexuality. Assumptions about sex, for instance, play a key role in this respect. Rubin (cited in Warner 1993:25-26) highlights some of the binaries that are used to sort good sex from bad. These are indicated below:
Those traits understood as “Good, Normal [and] Natural” are listed in the left-hand column (Warner 1999:25). Privilege, benefits and status reside with these. By contrast the traits in the right-hand column are figured as “Bad, Abnormal [and] Unnatural” (Warner 1999:25). There are stigmas, rules, regulations and punishments in different contexts associated with the transgression of these binaries and hierarchies.

However, all the traits in one column are seldom used together as a package. Warner (1999:26) argues that most people would cross between both columns (shown above), with only a minority inhabiting the left-hand column exclusively.

## Het Culture

Het culture according to Warner (1993:xxi) “thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very mode of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist.” The sexual order highlighted here is embedded in a wide variety of institutional and cultural practices and in accounts of the world (see Warner 1999:47). There is much privilege associated with it, according to Warner (1993:xxi). Identity politics, for the most part, in contrast to queer theory,
does not seek to challenge or disrupt this sexual order; it seeks to become part of it. In queer theory however, tolerance and political interest representation or equal status are not seen as enough whilst the sexual order remains untouched and unchallenged (Warner 1993:xxi, xxvi, Tierney and Dilley 1998:65). Queer theory could therefore be described as a politics that involves “problematizing power relations structurally” in order to bring about changes in power relations (Blasius 1994:24).

**Politics of the Normal: Sexual Shame**

Gay and lesbian sex, understood within the hetero/homo binary to be abnormal, deviant, unnatural and undesirable, has been seen by some gays and lesbians as threatening their chances of attaining civil rights. As Warner (1999:48) asks, in exploring what he terms a “politics of the normal” (Warner 1999:60), “how is it possible… to claim dignity for people defined in part by sex, and even by the most undignified and abject sex?” Thus, gays and lesbians in various movements for reform have sought to claim dignity for themselves as a group through disavowing, or distancing of themselves from sexual acts (Warner 1999, Lehring 1997:191). This has been understood as a way to render gays and lesbians respectable, normal and intelligible so that they are seen as worthy of rights and privileges. This is achieved in part through the drawing of a distinction between sexual identity (understood as stemming from one’s ‘essence’) and sexual activity (Warner 1999:27-33, Lehring 1997:191). Through this distinction, the claim can be made that being gay or lesbian is not necessarily about sex. With sexual identity figured as coming from one’s essence, and as being “fundamental to one’s personality and …not [being] mere sexual behavior” (Warner 1999:29), it can also be argued that it is only right and just that gays and lesbians have civil rights and representation (Lehring 1997:187-189). In addition, any [negative] judgments made about gays and lesbians irrespective of their [sexual] actions can be labeled irrational prejudice (c/f Warner 1999:29).

The distinction between identity and sexual acts enabled a challenging of the stigma of identity, “without in the least challenging the shame of sexual acts” according to Warner (1999:29). The putting down (by gays and lesbians) of sex,
the distancing of gays and lesbians from sex, and the normifying (or cleaning up) of gays’ and lesbians’ conduct in respect to sex is understood (within queer theory) to reinscribe the hegemonic notion that gay and lesbian sex is abnormal, undesirable, inferior and unnatural (see Warner 1999, Rofes 2000:138). The heterosexual/homosexual binary, which relies on such understandings of gay and lesbian sex, is left intact and undisturbed as gays and lesbians draw “the curtain over the sexual culture without which it could not exist… speak[ing] whatever language of respectability it thinks will translate.” (Warner 1999:49)

Gay and lesbian people who articulate political issues in ways that play well to the ‘normal’ will generally have more success, according to Warner (1999:44). He argues that “the more a political or cultural group defines itself in this way…the more it is likely to be staffed and supported by individuals who have resolved their ambivalence in this way.” Conversely, those who frame issues in the terms of the non-normative collectives they’re a part of, are likely to have less success (according to Warner 1999:44).

**Queering Sex**

A queer informed approach to sex is substantially different to that taken in identity politics. Warner (1999:35) notes that “[i]n those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn’t pretend to be above the indignity of sex.” Here, sex doesn’t need to be normalized, authorized, sanitized, toned down, or rendered intelligible according to others’ standards. Notions of being above others in terms of hierarchies associated with particular types of sex are disrupted in line with challenging what comes to be seen as normal. Those whose behaviors render them ‘unworthy’ of higher status on a hierarchy, those who may be seen as ‘beneath oneself’, are considered the people from whom one could learn most from (Warner 1999:35).

A queer theory informed approach allows for a reveling and delight in sex, in its various messy and unruly forms – in the language that circulates among the people into that sex (not toned down – desexualized or normified for mainstream consumption). In so doing, it challenges the shame associated with non-normative sex, rather than being preoccupied with sexual identity.
**Agency**

Poststructuralist theory provides a theoretical basis for a different notion of agency than that relied upon in liberal humanist conceptualizations (see Davies 2000:55-68). For those (in marginalized groups) who are constituted as powerless, oppressed and therefore lacking agency, poststructuralist theory can be useful in deconstructing the discourses and binaries that establish and hold in place the limited, negative and subordinated subject positions assigned to them. Central to this is the understanding that subjectivity is constituted through discourse, and is therefore contingent. They can consider what possibilities exist for the mobilization of agency given the existing configurations of discourse and power (Butler 1990:144-149). McNay (1994, quoted in Davies 2000:10) summarizes this process:

> By interrogating what are held to be necessary boundaries to identity or the limits of subjectivity, the possibility of transgressing these boundaries is established, and, therefore, the potential of creating new types of subjective experience is opened up.

Through deconstruction, that which is taken for granted as a description of the ‘real’, that which is understood to be the necessary boundaries of identity for queers can be challenged, resisted and transgressed. Queers can draw upon discourses that circulate within the collectives or subcultures they’re a part of. These discourses enable the production of subjects that are not reliant upon the hetero/homo binary. These discourses can be used to refuse, resist, subvert and challenge negative and subordinated subject positions, subject positions that make agency almost unattainable for queers.

Agency in this context involves the “freedom to recognize multiple readings such that no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture and control one’s identity” (Davies 2000:67). This involves recognizing that agency isn’t fixed or ongoing, but is a discursive position, which may be occupied in some discourses (such as discourses circulating among those with
similar identifications), just as it may not be occupied in other discourses (such as those premised upon the understanding that heterosexuality is the normal, natural and superior sexuality).

**Knowledge, Educational Institutions and Queer Pedagogy**

Knowledge, or what comes to be seen as knowledge, is another concept that is deconstructed within queer theory. In the process of deconstruction, various related binaries have been examined, such as educated/uneducated, knowledgeable/ignorant, knowledge/ignorance, teacher/student, rationality/irrationality. These binaries are briefly discussed below.

The educated/uneducated binary is critical to the notion of formal education, and has been so, since compulsory education was first legislated according to Britzman (1998:2). The rationality, certainty, measurement and control that education relies upon is dependent upon this binary (Britzman 1998:2). Educational institutions seek to teach various linguistic processes by which students can dominate or overcome ‘irrational’ aspects of self, that could threaten their claim to a coherent identity (Davies 2000:57, also see chapter 5).

Within dominant educational discourse, knowledge, or what comes to be seen as knowledge, is understood to be critical to attaining coherence. It is figured as certain, stable and fixed, something that can be readily packaged and delivered to students, who are generally conceptualized as ignorant (or unaware). Ignorance (within liberal humanist understandings) is understood as being a passive or innocent state, with knowledge understood as the antidote to such ignorance (Britzman 1998:88). Knowledge and ignorance, in queer theory, are understood to be mutually implicated rather than mutually exclusive or in opposition to each other. They structure and enforce each other (c/f Britzman 1995:154, see also Luhmann 1998:149). Ignorance is understood to be an effect of knowledge, it is seen as the limits of what is taken to be knowledge (c/f Britzman 1995:154, see also Luhmann 1998:150).
Contesting Conventional Understandings of ‘Knowledge’

Developmental approaches to learning are predominant in educational institutions. Knowledge is divided up and delivered (by those presumed to be educated) according to what students ‘need to know’ at a particular age. Of particular influence here, is the notion of ‘age appropriateness’. That is, the age at which students are presumed (by educational authorities) to have the necessary incremental knowledge, maturity and rationality for the reception of particular knowledge. The notion of what students ‘need to know’ and the concept of ‘age appropriateness’ has been problematized by various writers (Britzman 1998:67, Silin 1995, Watney 1991 quoted in Britzman 1998:72). Some of the issues that have been raised will be briefly considered below.

The needs of teachers, the school culture and community are more influential in determining the knowledge to be delivered to students than the needs of students, according to Silin (1995:133). Acknowledging and considering this, he argues, “would suggest the more fragile, situated nature of the discourse in which [teachers] engaged and the power arrangement on which it was built.” Along similar lines, Watney (1991, quoted in Britzman 1998:72) asks, “what is it that adults want or need of children in the name of education?” Exploring such a question would effectively require “adults to implicate themselves in how adult desire also structures educational imperatives and the construct of child development” (Watney 1991, quoted in Britzman 1998:72). Queer theory can be used to render visible the desires of adults (in education). In so doing it can draw attention to the ‘top-down’ approach to education that prevails within the school system. Queer theory can also be used to highlight and deconstruct the binaries that structure what comes to be seen as normal and natural in (school) education.

The concept of ‘age-appropriateness’ relies on a homogenizing of bodies in each age group, constituting each age group in particular ways. ‘Regimes of truth’ are of particular significance in terms of regulating what is thinkable and unthinkable with respect to bodies at particular ages. The ‘normal’ body is understood to “personify a stable meaning even as that meaning must become adjusted through developmental discourse” (Britzman 1998:63). This figuring of bodies as stable
is important not only for the regulation of students but also for the maintenance of the status quo.

Pinning down, categorizing, and rendering stable forever more, bodies and knowledge in respect to sex has been problematized in queer theory. Sex itself is seen as constantly liable to undergo change or fluctuation, in respect to its “aims, knowledge, pleasures and practices” (Britzman 1998:66). Indeed, in the range of “perverse” possibilities, in the “capacity of humans to be exponential in their strategies of meaning and passionate attachment, [as well as] their strategies of sex”, sexuality could be conceptualized as movement, with bodies seen to travel (Britzman 1998:65, 66, 64).

Queer theory is critical of the fixing or securing of knowledge. It regards as problematic the notion that knowledge is certain and stable, as well as the “positing of foundational claims” since both are implicated in the production of hierarchies that privilege some and subordinate others (see Britzman 1995:164). Queer theory doesn’t seek guarantees – or certainty. It refuses to secure thought through reliance on particular binaries, such as rationality/irrationality, or hetero/homo. Thus queer theory “refus[es] to crystallise in any specific form” (Jagose 1996:98) such that it has a fixed basis of knowledge that is readily intelligible. This would mean being assimilated into the prevailing sexual order, and would work to reinscribe the existing sexual hierarchy.

**Problematizing the Notion of ‘Receiving Knowledge’**

The notion of ‘learners’ readily apprehending and incorporating the ‘knowledge’ presented to them (a notion the school education system is built around) is problematized within queer theory (informed by psychoanalytic method) (see Britzman 1995:156-159, Britzman 1998:2-4). Here, there is an interest in what happens when students meet knowledge, an interest in the tension between the knowledge that is offered through pedagogy (by the teacher) and the knowledge brought to pedagogy (by the student) (Britzman 1998:5, see also Luhmann 1998:149-150). Learning is understood to necessarily require the “relearning of one’s history of learning” (Britzman 1998:5). This involves a process of interference or conflict from within which must be transcended if learning is to

The knowledge students bring to the pedagogy can provide a basis to dismiss knowledge presented in class and can act as a form of entitlement or justification for their ignorance (Britzman 1995:159). Receiving knowledge can also be problematic since it disrupts how one imagines and understands oneself and the ‘Other’, as well as how one understands particular behaviors or actions (Britzman 1995:159).

These understandings about receiving knowledge have particular implications for the inclusion of content about homosexuality in the classroom. For a student who understands heterosexuality to be natural and normal and homosexuality to be unnatural and abnormal, lessons that rely on the idea that discrimination against homosexuals is wrong may be problematic to receive, as may lessons which present homosexual role models and/or gay and lesbian culture/history as though they have something to offer heterosexual students. As Britzman argues (1995:159), how is identification supposed to occur when that basis for identification is ordinarily constituted as irrelevant and offering nothing of worth to society?

**Sexual Knowledge and Curriculum**

Queer theory is interested in what happens to sex in order that it is not only seen as a ‘proper’ subject to include in the curriculum, but is accepted as having a ‘proper’ place in the curriculum. It is interested in what becomes “unthinkable” in such a situation (see Britzman 1998:63). What processes of normalization structure its inclusion, and regulate its ongoing place in the curriculum? How does normalization impact on the scope of the sexual knowledge presented, or what counts as knowledge? What types of subjects are produced through the ‘knowledge’ in the curriculum? What forms of knowledge are affixed to particular subjects? In short, what happens to sex once educational authorities or teachers get their hands on it? (Britzman 1998:65, 73).
Sex has been inserted into youth developmental discourse within schools (see chapters 4 and 5). This has wide ranging implications for the scope of coverage it is given. The hetero/homo binary is of significant influence within youth development discourse. Students are presumed to be heterosexual and are expected to eventually marry and have children. Sex education, with its focus on “proper object choice”, and “marital reproductive sex”, could be characterized as a rehearsal for the future (for heterosexuals), and not to do with “practices of the self” (Britzman 1998:69, 73). Britzman (1998:65) has noted that even the “thinkable” in terms of sex education is particularly “dreary”, with the focus on duty, along with the dangers of sex (for example, STD’s and contraception).

Within youth development discourse educational institutions are seen as the site where knowledge resides. Here, there are clearly defined subject positions, which can be seen in the teacher/student binary. The teachers are presumed to be the knowledgeable, educated ones who have been educated (through the ‘appropriate’ institutions) and who therefore possess what is seen as ‘knowledge’ within the institution. Such positioning requires the (presumed) uneducated, ignorant, passive and inexperienced ‘student’ (Silin 1995, Britzman 2000), who needs to receive ‘knowledge’ from the ‘educated’ one (the teacher) so that they may also become educated. There is an expectation here that students do not say or do anything that contradicts such subject positions (see Silin 1995:71, 120, 122, 131,134).

The teacher/student and educated/uneducated binaries have particular implications in regard to the topic of sex in schools. With this configuration it is unthinkable that students could have active sex lives and could be more knowledgeable in particular aspects of sex than teachers are.

**Queer Theory and HIV/AIDS Activism**

One of the domains in which queer theory has been influential is HIV/AIDS activism in relation to gay and homosexually active men (Jagose 1996, Morris 2000). It is a site where homosexuality is recognized as legitimate and desirable and is not subordinated to heterosexuality. HIV/AIDS activism has significantly
impacted on the approaches and strategies adopted by HIV/AIDS organizations in Australia (also in the USA and UK). It has also inspired critical academic debate in this field.

Before turning to a discussion of how queer theory became influential in HIV/AIDS activism, I will present a brief historical background to AIDS and its impact in relation to gay men. With gay identity marginalized and rendered deviant and abnormal within the dominant sexual norms of various institutions/fields (such as media, health institutions, religious institutions, educational institutions, scientific research, Government) HIV/AIDS was often understood (within these institutions) as a natural consequence of this deviancy. It was seen as something that gay men had brought on themselves through their ‘abnormal’ and ‘abhorrent’ sexual behavior (Kayal 1993: 28, 36, 40-41, Warner 1999:51). AIDS therefore provided politicians and religious leaders with a means of fanning hatred towards gay men (Kayal 1993, Warner 1999). They drew upon notions of deviancy, and arguments that gays had brought AIDS upon themselves, to justify lack of support for AIDS research/initiatives (Kayal 1993:44). AIDS was also a means for some to stake a claim to “moral righteousness” (Kayal 1993:37).

In the USA, prejudice and hatred affected how medical experts discussed HIV/AIDS, with talk of a “gay lifestyle” and a lack of focus on the scientific evidence, according to Kayal (1993:41). There were concerns, among researchers and government officials, that reputations could be adversely affected through being associated with gay men and AIDS (Kayal 1993:37).

Prejudice, guarding of reputations and moral righteousness have been influential in a number of areas relating to AIDS. For a period of time (in the USA) politicians refused to release funds for medical research into AIDS (Rofes 1998:99, Warner 1999:199-200). In 1987, laws were passed in the USA (though later amended yet still in a negative form) “blocking public money from any program that might promote or encourage, directly or indirectly homosexual sexual activity” (Warner 1999:200, see also Rofes 1996:99). Sex-on-premises venues were closed down and legislation was proposed that sought to regulate the

Gay men, lesbians and bisexuals who had HIV/AIDS and those who had friends, lovers or partners dying of HIV/AIDS needed to take action. It was a crisis, and waiting for government, medical and scientific institutions to take up the cause would have meant more people dying (Kayal 1993:15, 23, 36-37, 62-63, Rofes 1998:43-47, 113-117, 130). Fear, ignorance and prejudice were impacting on the treatment of those with HIV/AIDS in hospitals and public spaces. They (along with gays in general) were the subjects of stigma and shame (Myrick 1996:42-50). In addition (as discussed above), there were attacks on gay men’s sex cultures and increasing government regulation of gay men’s sex, in the USA (Rofes 1998:12-13, 168, Warner 1999:51). This is not just something that happened in the past. Rofes (1998:173-209) and Warner (1999:149-193) highlight that attacks on gay men’s sex cultures (in the USA) are occurring in more recent times.

People affected by HIV/AIDS called on governments – as a matter of urgency – to instigate measures to fight the disease and its devastating impact. These measures included: research into HIV/AIDS; development and increased availability of drugs for treatment; and education/prevention efforts. Yet, this was either not occurring or not occurring fast enough. This led to a disidentification (among some gay, lesbian and bisexual people) with the regulatory norms that contributed to this inaction and/or slow progress (by health officials, for example) as well as the prejudice towards gays and people living with HIV/AIDS. This disidentification (for some) manifested itself in HIV/AIDS activism.

**Contesting Dominant Notions of Identity**

Through AIDS activism notions of identity as stemming from the essential self were rendered suspect. Coalitions were formed between diverse groups of people who shared not an essential identity, but an affinity in terms of a shared commitment to resisting and contesting the regimes of the normal, such as

The notion of gay identity was also shown to be problematic, in respect to safe sex education. HIV/AIDS research had established that men could have sex with other men but not necessarily identify as gay or bisexual. Dowsett’s (1994:56) report Sexual Contexts and homosexually active men in Australia noted that most homosexually active men “find no purpose at all in the notion of a sexual identity.” Those involved with safe sex education for gay and homosexually active men recognized that education and prevention efforts that relied on identity categories such as gay were likely to be seen as irrelevant by homosexually active men who did not identify as gay. Consequently sexual practices, rather than sexual identity, became the focus of education/prevention initiatives (Bartos et al 1993 in Jagose 1996:94, Spargo 1999:35).

Reconceptualizing Power and Agency

Struggles with medical authorities over research and access to drugs, and struggles with governments over funding and immigration policies (Halperin in Jagose 1996:94) led to traditional understandings of power being problematized within HIV/AIDS activism. Activism through groups such as ACT UP showed that more contemporary notions of power were being utilized to shape the form of actions, so that they would gain immediate attention and more quickly impact upon the actions of various levels of governments and medical/scientific institutions (see Spargo 1999:35-6). There was a refusal to go about political change in the ‘normal’ or ‘appropriate’ ways, a refusal to rely solely on the dominant institutions that deal with health, and a refusal to rely on the ‘knowledge’ emanating from government and medical/scientific institutions (Kayal 1993, Rofes 1998:67, 1996:129-130, Warner 1999:51, Willett 2000:186-192).

HIV/AIDS activists recognized the need to contest and resist the negative and problematic positioning of people with HIV/AIDS (Jagose 1996). This was understood to be critical to their sense of agency and level of self-esteem. With
the awareness that discourse has constitutive effects, there was a focus on the terminology used to describe people with HIV/AIDS. The taken for granted labels of ‘AIDS sufferers’ or ‘AIDS victims’ were seen to be limiting and constraining. These labels effectively characterized people (living with HIV/AIDS) as being at the mercy of the disease, as if it controlled them. They kept them in their place – a place of no hope. By contrast, phrases such as ‘people living with HIV/AIDS’ provided a much more positive, powerful and agentic conceptualization in terms of the person’s relationship to the disease. In using the phrase, ‘living with AIDS’, there is a shift in the power equation. The person with AIDS is not at the mercy of it, as the terms ‘sufferer’ and ‘victim’ suggest. They are living with AIDS, getting on with their lives. AIDS is just a part of (not the sum of) their lives. The person is seen as active here, not passive (Rofes 1996:246, Kayal 1993:31).

The actions of gays, lesbians and bisexuals in the field of HIV/AIDS activism also served to highlight their agency. This was important given that these groups were generally conceptualized as non-agentic (particularly gay men in respect to HIV/AIDS); reliant upon the ‘generosity’, support and/or ‘tolerance’ of the ‘normal’ for their well-being. Gay men, lesbians and bisexual people were developing and implementing education and prevention campaigns; they were mounting effective political campaigns and activist events; they were developing an array of care and support mechanisms (including institutions) for those living with AIDS; and were drawing upon the knowledge and skills that existed among themselves (see Myrick 1996:50-54, 80-83, Rofes 1996:114-117, Weeks 1999:18-19).

**Challenging Sexual Norms**

AIDS activism challenged notions of normalcy in relation to sexual activity. This was particularly important given that many people within various institutions/fields (such as government) relied on assumptions of homo sex being abject, unnatural, deviant and abnormal. Such assumptions were used to stigmatize gays and to blame gays for the “virus that was killing them.” Linking gay sex to disease was a means to justify not talking (positively) about such sex
in any form. Sex was therefore an “excuse to let them [gays] die” (Warner 1999:51).

The scientific approach to educating had traditionally relied on the understanding that “materials cater[ing] to desires and fantasies may not be educational as they compromise the so-called neutrality of scientific knowledge” (Leonard and Mitchell 2000:3). However, talk about sex and sexual desire has been found to be an effective mechanism of education and prevention for gay and homosexually active men (Warner 1999:51). Through AIDS activism, there has been a recognition that shame and stigmatizing does not help. “Collective efforts at honest discussions, a realism about desire and a respect for pleasure” are seen as vital (Warner 1999:51). This means engaging with gay men from where they are at, using language styles, slang, vocabulary and images that are relevant and sexually appealing to them (Leonard and Mitchell 2000:11). It means staying relevant to them, in ways that avoid moralizing, judging and marking out what is ‘normal’ (see chapter 10).

Queer theory is an important tool in the disrupting of the business as usual approach of education-focused research/studies on young queers. It provides a contemporary framework with which to critique this sphere of study, as I seek to do in chapters 4 and 5. Queer theory also provides a basis to explore and elaborate queer culture and queer sex, which I seek to do in chapters 6 and 7.

In the next section of this thesis, I begin Part 1 – ‘Educational Discourse on Young Queers’. The opening chapter (3) examines how two secondary school teachers (interviewed for this research) conceptualize young queers, along with the practices they describe in respect to supporting queer students at school. The findings and issues arising from this chapter provide a framework for my subsequent explorations and reviews of education-focused research/studies on young queers in the remaining chapters of Part 1 (chapters 4 and 5).
Part 1

Educational Discourse on Young Queers
Interviews With Secondary School Teachers

This chapter focuses upon three key themes that emerged from interviews with two Secondary School teachers in Melbourne. These themes are:

- Young queers constituted as being ‘at risk’ and in need of protection;
- The perceived threat of homosexuality;
- The queer teacher acting as a ‘mentor’ for queer students.

Before moving on to these themes, I will briefly turn to the matter of heteronormativity in relation to the school institution, and the ways in which hegemonic sexual norms within these environments impact on teachers’ practices and perspectives. This point needs to be stressed here because it has significantly influenced the way in which I have come to make sense of the interview texts. For me, it marks a shifting away from a humanist understanding of teachers as subjects who are able to act independently of the institutional culture, towards a poststructuralist informed reconceptualization of power relations and subjectivity, and a queer theory informed critical interest in examining the operations of power in sexual norms and cultures, and the ways in which subjects are constituted as agentic or non-agentic.

As teachers, Jane and Louise (pseudonyms have been used at the request of the participants) operate within educational institutions and within the profession of teaching, where heterosexuality is understood as the normative, natural, and desirable sexuality, whilst homosexuality is understood to be abnormal, unnatural and undesirable. The spoken and unspoken norms (in relation to sexuality), along with the rules and conventions as to what are considered ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ behaviors, practices and discourses of teachers (within this
institution/profession) are constituted, in part, through the hetero/homo binary, in conjunction with other binaries such as educated/uneducated and knowledge/ignorance, that structure the dominant understandings of sexuality within the school institution. Jane and Louise then, can only be recognized as ‘teachers’ (within those institutions) to the extent that their behaviors, practices and discourses are compatible with the norms of the educational institutions (and teaching professions) they belong to. They’re subject to regulation and containment through the operation of institutional norms, and should not therefore be seen as agents that are able to be free of the workings of institutional norms.

Our ability to make sense of these teachers’ perspectives relies also on an understanding of the ways in which the norms, conventions and practices of the school institution work to regulate and contain those who are subjected by such ‘regimes of power’. So, although this section critically examines the perspectives of two school teachers (regarding strategies to assist young queers), it is not intended as a critique of the individual teachers who participated in this research, nor upon teachers in general. Instead, this critique aims to illuminate the particular norms, practices and conventions that work to regulate and limit, in advance, what is possible for teachers to do – in order that they remain intelligible and recognizable as subjects (teachers) within the school institution.

**An Analysis of Interviews with Jane**

**Theme: Young Queers ‘At Risk’ and in Need of Protection**

**Background**

The dominant discourse in education-focused research/studies on young queers characterizes the school, the family and general society as hostile to, and unsupportive of homosexuality and/or homosexuals. It also conceptualizes the young queer subject as vulnerable, non-agentic and ‘at risk’ (see chapter 4). Risk has been attached to the practice of being ‘out’ and not being ‘out’ (remaining invisible), in this field of research. It is the former however that has received
most attention (in education-focused research/studies on young queers), whilst the latter has either been ignored or given little focus. This is evident from the absence of initiatives to foster the visibility of gay and lesbian cultures at school in education-focused research/studies. The dominant approaches (in sharp contrast to the strategies of queer youth support groups examined in chapter 10) have tended to rely on gays and lesbians – as embodied subjects – remaining invisible (in school), whilst advocating for representations of, or information about gays and lesbians (or homosexuality) in curricula.

Jane, the first secondary school teacher focused upon in this chapter – is familiar with this problem-centered stream of education-focused research/studies on young queers (see Methodology). The dominant conceptualizations of young queers, the school and general society relied upon in this sphere of study would appear to inform her views relating to young gays and lesbians and protection.

Jane often conceptualizes the young gay and lesbian subject as “struggling with their sexual identity” and lacking agency. For the most part she positions them within classrooms, schools and a society that are framed as homophobic and/or hostile and unsupportive in relation to homosexuals and/or homosexuality. Consequently, gays and lesbians are seen (by Jane) as being in need of protection. She doesn’t have any discourses of working with “struggling” gay and lesbian teenagers, but talks of her awareness of “the struggles of teachers coming out” at various schools she’s worked at. Jane is also cognizant of issues that are often prominent in education-focused research/studies on young queers. These include the risks of suicide and drug use and the lack of gay and lesbian role models. She also positions gay and lesbian teenagers as being in a worse situation than other teenagers (assumed to be heterosexual).

The following section draws upon extracts from interviews with Jane, and illustrates the various ways in which the young queer subject is discursively constructed (by Jane) as non-agentic, wishing to remain invisible and needing the
teacher’s protection. It also details and problematizes the strategies she employs in this respect.

Theme: Protection from Targeting

The notion that gays and lesbians need protection arises in a number of places with Jane. One practice she considers they need protecting from, is targeting. This involves the direct or indirect focusing of attention on young queers’ sexualities. It is considered problematic by Jane due to the non-agentic conceptualization of queers that she relies upon:

…whilst you’ve got to address issues of sexuality with kids I think if you target them it just makes it harder for them. I mean they’re struggling already with identity and how they fit into the whole scheme of things. They haven’t got any role models. They’re really lost so if you target them you’re just gonna make it, their lives much more difficult then it was before.

Jane mentions three main forms of targeting, summarized below:

1. Pressuring gay and lesbian students to come out – to take pride in their sexuality;
2. Practices that lead to other students targeting gay or lesbian students;
3. Practices that lead to gay and lesbian students feeling embarrassed or self-conscious (thereby potentially leading them to out themselves).

Each of these will now be discussed in some detail.

1. Pressuring Gay and Lesbian Students to Come Out – to Take Pride in Their Sexuality

The Australian research report, Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Well-Being of Same-Sex Attracted Young People (Hillier et
al 1998:75) has cautioned against the encouraging of SSAY, arguing that this may result in violence and homelessness. One meaning of targeting that Jane discusses goes much further than encouraging. It involves pressuring young gays and lesbians to come out – to take pride in their sexuality:

…you know kids get bullied, you know about suicide rates, you know about drug abuse and you know how rough it can be being any teenager, let alone one struggling with their sexual identity. Yeah I just think you know those things and standing a kid out on the oval saying, ‘listen he’s gay and he should be proud of it’ would be really counterproductive.

The notion of standing a gay or lesbian teenager on an oval – pressuring them to acknowledge and be proud of their sexuality is not something that I’ve suggested to Jane. It’s not something that I’ve seen advocated within education-focused research/studies on young queers, nor am I aware of any initiatives directed at schools that are seeking for this to occur. It seems to be to be quite extreme (see the section “The invoking of extreme scenarios” on page 91). I try to connect Jane’s comments back to her actual practices when I say:

Greg  So you see that the material you’re using could put people in a situation where they don’t feel safe?

Jane  Yeah, or make them feel like they’ve got to come out before they’re ready to come out. You know if you’ve got a thirteen or fourteen year old kid, maybe they’re gonna need till they’re seventeen or eighteen or twenty five for that matter, to say yeah I’m gay or lesbian. But if you’re pushing saying, ‘yeah it’s okay, it’s okay to be gay or lesbian, it’s okay’ (forceful tone) you’re pushing someone beyond p’haps what they’re not ready for.

Jane relies once more on the struggling gay or lesbian subject, unsure and lacking confidence. It’s an important part of the ‘extreme’ scenario she presents. This seems to refer to a ‘radical’ teacher who is more interested in saying ‘it’s okay to
be gay’ (perhaps evidence of a political agenda) than in the struggling gay or lesbian ‘kid’. Jane’s invoking of this radical gay (and fictional) scenario, in this context, can be seen as a way of distancing herself from a radical gay agenda (constructed as dangerous), while positioning herself as a teacher who is sensitive to the issues and concerns of young gays and lesbians.

The presumption (in the example above) appears to be that ‘gay pride’ discourse (it’s okay to be gay) will result in a young person prematurely assuming a gay or lesbian identity before they’re psychologically ready. It’s something they need to be protected from. The highly preferable alternative would thus appear to be leaving them alone to develop at their own pace – not invoking positive gay discourses. Such an alternative is compatible with the heterosexual hegemony. Interestingly therefore Jane can position herself as supporting young gays and lesbians whilst, at the same time, reinscribing traditional notions that homosexuality, or gay positive discourse, is dangerous – especially to young people (to young queers in this case).

Within the school institution, discourses such as “it is bad to encourage young people to come out” may appear as self-evident. However, within gay, lesbian and queer studies, access to gay positive discourse is seen (by many) as a crucial factor in people coming to make sense of, and be accepting of, their queerness. It is this tension that Jane appears to be responding to in the extract above, which she attempts to resolve by reasserting the dominant values of the school institution she is part of.

2. Practices that (Potentially) Lead to Other Students Targeting Gay or Lesbian Students

Targeting (according to the discourses used by Jane) does not just refer to the singling out of gays and lesbians and exerting pressure on them by the teacher. It also refers to practices (of teachers) that may lead to other students targeting gay and lesbian students (in the form of abuse and/or harassment). For example Jane says she does not want to publicize (to the school community and beyond) that
the library (through her efforts as the teacher-librarian) has gay and lesbian books and resources. As she discusses this below, there is a hint once more of extremes:

It’s not something that you publicize in a local newspaper because you know that there will be a backlash…

….if you go out of your way to, if we became the gay and lesbian friendly library of the western suburbs then there’d be all hell break loose. Religious parents would freak and…it would be counter-productive to what we’re trying to achieve. It would also make it very hard for the gay and lesbian kids to borrow the books cos [other students might say] OHHHHH, YOU BORROWED [a gay book].’ So it’s gotta be low key, so they can come in, comfortably borrow a book, walk out the door and not worry about it.

It would appear that Jane is arguing that an increased profile of the library – in respect to being gay or lesbian friendly would lead to greater scrutiny (from students) of what other students borrow. That is, the students would be checking if anyone borrowed a gay or lesbian book – and making fun of those who did. Another potential problem (alluded to) is that the increased profile afforded the gay and lesbian books may lead to less access by gays and lesbians due to fears about being scrutinized and possibly being abused.

All these potential problems that Jane points to are a reflection of the stigmatization of homosexuality – as are the practices she advocates. That this doesn’t emerge as a key issue to confront, in Jane’s discussion of the above issues, indicates the extent to which stigmatization and practices associated with it, become naturalized or taken for granted.

Instead Jane is able to position her “low key” approach as being in tune with the needs of gays and lesbians – protective and supportive of them – in contrast to
Chapter 3 Interviews With Secondary School Teachers

those who would seek to raise the profile of the gay and lesbian materials. She is reliant here on a unilateral view of power – with vulnerable, non-agentic, ‘closeted’ gays and lesbians and all-powerful bullies.

Those gays and lesbians who don’t fit the limited conceptualization relied upon (by Jane) – who would render them problematic – are of no interest. This would include agentic, confident gay or lesbian subjects who are not worried about borrowing gay or lesbian books. It would also include those who have learnt strategies from other gays and lesbians to deal with negative comments from others – in a personal and/or in an administrative sense.

The problematizing of the ‘gay friendly’ library scenario (by Jane) is also dependent on the production of an opposing, all-powerful force from outside the classroom. The religious subject (presumed to be anti-gay) is particularly useful to invoke in this regard (even within a state secondary college). It’s assumed that their voices of condemnation would dominate other voices and that they would cause serious damage for a teacher. Although this is clearly a hypothetical situation, it doesn’t really seem to matter whether or not this is likely to occur. This discourse works to position gay visibility as a threat – not only to the teachers and school authorities (from religious parents), but also to gay and lesbian students who may wish to borrow books. It’s naturalized discourse in relation to gay and lesbian issues (in schools), and therefore would not be seen as extreme within the school institution.

Elsewhere in the interviews Jane highlights the lack of institutional support at a school and Education Department level around issues relating to homosexuality – particularly in relation to parental conflicts:

There’s also the fear of the administration not backing you up if it comes to crunch. And it’s not really a fear but it’s an awareness that if things got
really down and dirty then the principal would probably run scared
because they’re an agent of the Ministry of Education

Various researchers/academic writers have highlighted how concerns about
conflict with various groups (including religious and/or ethnic parents,
educational authorities), in the absence of institutional support, have led to a lack
of content about gays and lesbians in schools (Hogge 1998, Irvine 1996,
Marinoble 1997, Sanders and Burke 1994, Unks 1995). The dominant strand of
research/studies on young queers in the field of education however, has yet to
adequately address these concerns. At times it would appear that strategies are
being advocated without any consideration of the various concerns teachers (like
Jane) have with introducing gay and lesbian content.

Jane’s approach (in this context) is one that is in line with the norms of the school
she works in. She contains the gay or lesbian materials – not drawing significant
attention to them – keeping them “low key” – not prominent. What would also
appear to be important here is not taking a stance (such as declaring the library to
be gay and lesbian friendly) that could be construed as favoring gays or lesbians
or approving of homosexuality. Both would conflict with the heteronormative
values of the school and could lead to conflicts with some parents.

Jane’s purchasing of gay and lesbian books is however in line with the school
library collection policy. It states that they “are trying to cater for all groups
within the school”. Consequently she feels “totally justified” and has “always felt
on very solid ground” in respect to these purchases.

The gay friendly label can be conceptualized in other ways. Far from being a
threat to the well-being of young queers, it can also be seen as one part of a
strategy that seeks to challenge the stigma associated with homosexuality and the
shame of being gay and lesbian (which queer support groups could be seen as
doing). In some contexts being known as gay friendly is seen as valuable or
critical for particular institutions, businesses or services (including libraries), potentially contributing to increased access by queers.

3. Practices which (Potentially) Lead to Gay and Lesbian Students Feeling Embarrassed and Self-Conscious

Another form of ‘targeting’ involves practices which are directed at the entire class (not at any particular gay and/or lesbian students), that lead to gay or lesbian individuals feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed or self-conscious. In the following scenario, Jane again relies on a conceptualization of gays and lesbians as struggling, vulnerable and hiding. It’s necessary in order to show that they need protection from gay and lesbian content, which is seen as (possibly) having a negative impact on their psyche. This is due to them being concerned that everyone will look at them, (possibly) recognizing them as being gay or lesbian:

…it’s like you bring up gay and lesbian discussion in the classroom, does that target the kid who’s sitting over there in the corner struggling with their sexual identity. It might devastate them, you know, OH MY GOD everyone’s looking at me, that sort of thing.

Research/studies in the field of education (Crowhurst 2001, Misson 1995) have raised the issue of gay content potentially leading to gay or lesbian students giving themselves (that is, their sexuality) away through their reactions. Crowhurst (2001:147) and Misson (1995:29) do not, however, advocate the ignoring or erasing of gay content because of a student feeling uncomfortable. Crowhurst (2001:147) argues that “being uncertain and tense go hand in hand with educative processes...[and that] [w]hile it is an important ethical consideration that such tension be managed and eased, it is also an important educative consideration...that it be encountered.” Crowhurst (2001:148) also highlights the importance of spaces where such students can “encounter, construct and take up positive discourses.” In this regard queer youth support groups would be particularly appropriate (see chapter 10). Misson (1995:29) also says, “I would argue that explicit teaching about homosexuality is, in the end, in
the interests of [gay and lesbian] students” because nothing will change in terms of discrimination against homosexuals, until it is made more visible.

The discourses utilized by Misson (1995) and Crowhurst (2001), to argue for talking about gay content, despite young queers’ potential embarrassment would appear to be at odds with dominant notions of the ‘good’, ‘caring’ teacher and dominant notions of the ‘safe and supportive’ classroom environments. This is particularly so in light of the dominant strand of education-focused research/studies on young queers that conceptualizes them as being ‘at risk’. For Jane then, it would be unthinkable (that is, considered quite inappropriate and dangerous) to take the line of action that Misson (1995) or Crowhurst (2001) advocate. As she says it could “devastate” the gay or lesbian student.

Jane’s reading of the above situation tends to rely on ascribing fault to the person introducing the gay and lesbian content; content that is linked to negative outcomes for the gay student. By contrast, Crowhurst (2001) shows that it is much more complex. He argues (2001:146) that the privileging of heterosexuality in the school environment (“heteroprivilegism”) is central to gay or lesbian students feeling tense or embarrassed with gay or lesbian content. Yet, as can be seen with Jane, this key influence in relation to embarrassment remains naturalized, unexamined, unchallenged and obscured due to practices such as avoiding embarrassment.

Crowhurst (2001:147) says that the gay student “blushes and feels uncomfortable at the thought of moving into presence as a young gay man partially because he has constructed his gayness in accordance with a series of reactive discourse that have told him that he should only occupy space in a constrained fashion.” The gay student then, is used to being constrained in the classroom. When gay content is mentioned however, there is a feeling that they’re moving (or being moved) beyond what they’re familiar with. They’re “conscious of …newness…of doing [their] gayness differently…in a manner that [they’re] not certain about.” Thus the queer student blushes or feels uncomfortable.
Jane’s discourse above works to homogenize queer subjects as basically not wanting gay content – without having engaged with them. She generally doesn’t initiate discussions on gay and lesbian issues – preferring instead to wait for homophobic comments to respond to. Crowhurst’s (2001) qualitative research on SSAY at secondary schools in Australia reveals contrary perspectives – on the subject of providing homosexuality related content. In a summary of their views he says (2001:116) that “[y]oung people wanted to discuss a range of sexualities” and that “[g]enerally the participants were angry and annoyed about the absence of same-sex perspectives in subject content”. Such discourses are in line with the views of some SSAY in the Writing Themselves In report (Hillier et al 1998).

This situation with respect to gay related content highlights the importance of queer visibility. Throughout the interviews, Jane doesn’t utilize any discourses about interacting with young queers – to see if they want to be left alone, to see if they want gay and lesbian issues discussed in class – to see how they feel about themselves and their sexuality. Queer invisibility (in this context) means that there’s no one to challenge Jane’s representations of gays and lesbians or her approaches to gay related issues. Consequently she speaks for, and at them – telling them how it is – specifying what is ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ for them. And whilst some of her practices are not in line with education-focused research/studies on queers, the narrow and limited conceptualization of young queers she is so invested in, is quite consistent with this sphere of study (see chapter 4). It provides a basis to justify her containing and regulating of gay content or materials at school.

The limited conceptualization of gays and lesbians in this context again enables the dominant sexual order to remain unchallenged. It provides a basis for keeping young gays and lesbians subjugated, effectively “limit[ing] or control[ling] what[‘s]… possible for them to be…” (Crowhurst 2001:133). In respect to those ‘struggling’ gays and lesbians that Jane so often invokes, her practices offer nothing that would contribute to (or support) them gaining agency as young
queers – in that particular context. It’s left up to them to sort things out with no help from the teacher.

A notably different conceptualization of the queer subject is apparent in the queer positive spaces of queer youth support groups (involved in this research, see chapter 10) – where queers are ‘out’. Rather than being homogenized as struggling, vulnerable, non-agentic and in need of protection, they’re generally conceptualized as having agency – as being able to effect positive change in their lives. This doesn’t occur by leaving them to sort it out themselves. Open and honest discussion about sexuality-related issues along with queer socializing and community networking are seen as crucial. Young queers, in these groups, are not constituted as needing protection from gay/lesbian discourse (as though it’s a threat). On the contrary, these groups aim to familiarize them with such discourses – through interaction within the group and through immersion in queer community cultures. These discourses are seen as integral to young queers gaining agency (as queers).

**Theme: The Threat of Homosexuality**

Another theme that consistently runs through the interviews with Jane – is the perceived threat of homosexuality, and though it is not explicitly stated – the threat of radical gays and lesbians with their gay agenda. As will be seen in this section, Jane invokes a number of extreme scenarios – defining herself in opposition to them. She could therefore be characterized as seeking to protect the school – her classes – and (at times) gay and lesbian students from these threats. Another interpretation of this, is that her practices and discourses serve to reinscribe and support the heterosexual hegemony – though this is usually obscured by discourses of protecting and supporting young gays and lesbians.

**The Invoking of Extreme Scenarios**

In my initial reading of the interview texts, I was tempted to dismiss or ignore Jane’s comments (see p.83) about “standing the kid on the oval”, or the teacher who goes on and on about it being okay to be gay, or the teacher who goes into
the class launching straight into homosexual issues in a pressuring manner. They seemed so extreme and irrelevant to what we were discussing. Yet I decided to investigate the notion of extremes, particularly since I’d been aware of Jane using them earlier in the interview (my third interview with her). I wanted to see if there was any common thread running through the extreme situations she spoke of. I wanted to consider whom she might have been referring to (in terms of wanting to initiate these approaches). I wanted to consider the effects of invoking these extremes – considering (for example) the role they played in her discourses around teachers needing to protect young queers.

Before considering the extreme scenarios, I wish to describe the context in which they emerged. The third interview with Jane started with a focus on the pace she adopted with respect to gay and lesbian issues. This was a theme that I wanted to explore, as I was motivated by a sense of urgency in finding practical solutions to the problems confronting young queers, and had presumed that the teachers being interviewed would share this sense of urgency. I adopted an approach of problematizing and challenging what she described as her “slow” and “gentle” approach to gay and lesbian issues in school – an approach Jane saw as necessary so that people felt “safe” and also to protect gays and lesbians. The slow and gentle approach was put on a binary (by Jane) with “mov[ing] too quickly”, offending (other staff, religious parents), and embarrassing and targeting (gay and lesbian students). In my challenging the ‘taken for granted’ and self-evident approach of Jane – (slow and gentle) it appears that Jane has positioned me on the other side of the binary – (that is, as seeking to move too quickly, seeking to push the gay cause in schools). She has therefore sought to show the extreme consequences of such a position.

There is a pattern among the other extreme scenarios or situations that Jane produces in interview number three. Each seems to involve domination by gays and lesbians, in terms of them taking over particular sites within the school such as the classroom, the Equal Opportunity Committee and the curriculum.
...I would rather give the tough message in small doses, to actually say what I mean but not every minute of every period, every day cos I think that would be embarrassing kids in the classroom and p’haps creating a negative situation, ‘oh she’s just pushing her own bandwagon here, and she’s off on a tangent.’ But not caution to the point where you temper everything you say...It’s [pause] you know you just have to accept that gay and lesbian people exist in our society and you’re going to have to come to terms with this and [it’s] an Equal Opportunity issue and it is a sexual harassment issue...

The “tough message” (in this context) is aimed at those intolerant of gays and lesbians. It offers nothing to foster the agency of gay and lesbian students. This context (like a number of others in this section) relies on them being invisible, vulnerable, struggling and non-agentic, requiring the teacher to tell how it is for them – what their issues (as gays and lesbians) are.

The “tough message” here appears to be telling the class that gays and lesbians exist and that they have to come to terms with it – within the context of Equal Opportunity and sexual harassment discourses. Jane may have thought at one time that she had a “tough” message to deliver regarding gays and lesbians. What she delivers however is quite another matter. Concerns about conflicts with parents and authorities, and concerns about offending or embarrassing, mean a low key, non-threatening message is delivered; it’s a discourse of tolerance and ‘equality’ (informed by humanism) within social justice and equal opportunity parameters. People are eased into any mention of gays and lesbians. Jane ensures that they initially feel comfortable and non-threatened, safe. She seeks to maintain this through regulating and containing the ‘threatening’ gay and lesbian subject.

Jane positions herself (in this context) as unafraid to say the ‘tough’ things about gays and lesbians, yet in a way that minimizes the possibility of negative situations. She can therefore be seen as being sensitive to the needs and values of
students in the classroom – whilst avoiding claims that she’s pushing the bandwagon (a variation on the discourse of pushing the ‘gay agenda’). This refers to going on (excessively) about something, which is understood to be ‘personal’ – or pushing of one’s view/s onto others. Such actions are quite problematic within the school structures. They’re positioned as being the domain of the extreme teacher (in this case, presumably a radical gay or lesbian), who in this context continually repeats the “tough message…every minute of every period, every day”.

Gay agenda related discourse is used within the field of education to (among other things) regulate and contain discussions about, or initiatives for, gays and lesbians. This is mainly because the ‘agenda’ of gays is positioned as inappropriate, extreme and threatening, seeking excessive or undue influence over the school and its structures and programs – notions that would appear to inform the extreme scenarios Jane relies upon.

In the next extreme scenario, the school’s Equal Opportunity Committee is shown to be vulnerable to excessive influence from those into gay and lesbian issues (which again presumably would be gays and lesbians):

…it’s like in terms of the Equal Opportunity committee, I could make the entire Equal Opportunity committee function entirely around gay and lesbian issues but I don’t think that serves the purpose really because it’s part of that broad spectrum…

The notion of the ‘gay agenda’ can be considered once more here – with the radical gay and lesbian activists seeking to dominate or take over committees in the school – so that only their issues are discussed. Jane by contrast, positions herself as much more moderate, balanced and objective – seeing gay and lesbian issues as just one part of a “broad spectrum”.

The school curriculum is also positioned by Jane, as vulnerable to take-over – potentially resulting in only gay and lesbian issues being taught:

…I don’t think I can base my entire school curriculum on gay and lesbian issues and it’s finding that line…

In each of the above situations (along with the kid on the oval and the it’s okay to be gay situations) it would appear (though it’s not stated) that the threat to moderation, balance, and the safety and well-being of students, particularly gay and lesbian students, comes from radical gay and lesbian activists. Various researchers/academic writers (in the field of education) have documented how homosexuality and gays and lesbians themselves are represented as a threat, whether that be to vulnerable young gays and lesbians, adolescents, heterosexuals or institutions such as the family or the school (Britzman 1998, Epstein 1997, Irvine 1996, Plummer 1989, Redman 1994). The formal school institution, in particular, has been seen (by various anti-gay groups, politicians) as vulnerable to excessive influence by gays and lesbians – who are seeking to ‘promote’ or push homosexuality onto vulnerable youngsters through curriculum and literature for example.

The discourses Jane draws upon above would appear to be a version of those utilized by groups and individuals opposed to gay and lesbian initiatives in schools. By relying on notions of radical gays and lesbians (which it seems she is positioning me as being one of), she is able to position herself, and the approach she utilizes in respect to gay and lesbian issues, as much more balanced, sensitive, objective, caring, reasonable and fair. This is particularly important given that the young gay and lesbian subject is conceptualized as struggling, vulnerable, non-agentic – and in need of protection.

The ‘Scary’ Nature of Homosexuality

Jane also relies on two extreme scenarios to justify classroom practices that keep homosexuality regulated and contained. In both situations homosexuality is a
threat, but in quite different, and contrary ways. In the first situation, Jane conceptualizes students as being “frightened” by talk of homosexuality, and/or likely to clam up with the mere mention of homosexuality:

…you don’t go straight in and say ‘okay we gotta deal with homosexuality, we gotta deal with it right now.’ You know if you do that they clam up, they get frightened, they panic. Whereas if you say to them, ‘alright this year we’re gonna look at social justice.’ And by the third lesson down the track you’re sort of saying things [like] ‘well gay and lesbian issues are part of social justice, you’re allowing them to put things in a framework and not scaring them so much…

Homosexuality is positioned as scary and threatening in this extreme or ‘over the top’ scenario. The only way that the students can potentially cope with it – is through the containing and regulating of homosexuality within social justice frameworks. The teacher builds them up to the mention of homosexuality – over three lessons – starting with the more acceptable and intelligible forms of social justice. When gays and lesbians are eventually mentioned, the teacher shows that it’s not some ‘free for all’ discussion about homosexuality – there are limits. Gays and lesbians are only being (briefly) referred to in relation to social justice. This is apparently a much less scary prospect for the students. Social justice, in this context, can be understood as a means of limiting in advance the possibilities for gay and lesbian subjects.

The didactic approach advocated above, involves the teacher speaking for (and at) gays and lesbians, whilst they remain invisible. They find out that their issues are to do with ‘social justice’ (not pleasure, fun, sex, relationships, friendships or culture) – albeit well down the hierarchy in this field. This offers nothing in terms of fostering their agency as queers – but then again, it’s not meant to, since this would run counter to the heteronormative functioning of the school.
The scared and frightened student can be a particularly useful conceptualization to draw upon. It (potentially) enables Jane to position her approach (as discussed above) as being sensitive to the feelings of these students, ensuring they feel comfortable and not threatened.

The limiting of space given to gay and lesbian perspectives or issues has been mentioned in various studies on SSAY (Buston and Hart 2001, Lipkin 1999, Redman 1994, Rogers 1994, Telford 1998). Max, (a 16 year old, who identifies as lesbian) a participant in Crowhurst’s (2001:131) research on SSAY discusses how “they just sort of brush over” gays and lesbians in her sex education class. It’s just a “few little sentences”. A number of other SSAY make similar comments in Crowhurst’s research. He links (2001:131) the limiting of the “diversity of knowledge that is constructed [in classrooms]” to teachers “unduly (consciously or unconsciously) exercis[ing] authority over processes of learning”. This would appear to be the case with Jane, who throughout the interviews shows herself to be quite concerned about control, structure and order. This is important if she wishes to remain within the norms of the school institution she works in.

*Homosexuality – as a Threat to Classroom Order and Stability*

Initiating discussions about gay and lesbian issues also contributes to classroom disorder, according to Jane. It’s apparently not, however, a disturbance that can be effectively dealt with – rather it’s an “explosion” that Jane seeks to avoid:

…normally I wouldn’t bring up an issue; usually I would grab an opportunity to bring up an issue in response to something that was said. So it’s almost like a waiting game cos you know something’s going to be said eventually…I would not come in and say, ‘today we’re gonna do gay and lesbian issues’…you sort of know that the explosion is going to happen because the masculine power in the school is based on not liking girls and not liking gays so you know that if the issue arises then [it] will feed it and power figures in the room will try to dominate the discussion straight away and will scream and yell, ‘Die faggots!’
In the above scenario power is conceptualized as operating unilaterally – with the “power figures” presumably exerting their force over what goes on in the classroom. The other students (and also teacher) are therefore effectively conceptualized as being unable to withstand this onslaught. Within this context Jane can position herself as preventing negative, dangerous situations through not initiating discussions about gay and lesbian issues. She can understand herself as being a ‘good teacher’ who within dominant discourse in education, is expected to be constantly in control of the class, ensuring that the environment remains safe for all students.

The focus on order and discipline – can tend to obscure the negative consequences of the approaches Jane discusses. That is, gay related discourse is largely non-existent in the classroom, outside incidents of homophobia, or the containing parameters of social justice and/or equal opportunity. This is quite a contrast to queer youth support groups (examined in chapter 10) where there is far more scope for expansiveness in relation to queer issues.

Various writers have discussed the notion of gay and lesbian content leading to disruption or conflict in school classrooms (Sanders and Burke 1994, Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995, Misson 1996, 1999). SSAY in Crowhurst’s research (2001:135) mention how in “some instances teachers used their power within the classroom…to limit student enquiry and to close off discussion of queer issues [much like Jane] where the consideration of such issues generated tension (and misbehavior).” Dominant norms (in schools) position conflict or tension as “something to be managed and controlled rather [than something which is] a necessary part of the learning process” (Crowhurst 2001:177). Thus the dominant strand of education-focused research/studies on young queers focuses upon the importance of intervention against homophobic comments, for example, but offers little beyond this, such as how to deal or work with potential classroom chaos without shutting down the discussion of homosexuality.
The field of queer pedagogy has been a site where tensions and conflicts in the classroom (relating to queer perspectives) have been explored (Luhmann 1998, Miller 1998, Rofes 2000, Sumara and Davis 1998, Talburt 2000). Writers such as Britzman (1995, 1998) have posed various questions for educators to consider, and have explored different ways by which tension may be worked with in classrooms. In contrast to dominant discourse in education-focused research/studies on young queers, they’ve embraced tension and conflict – seeing these as a crucial part of learning. Crowhurst’s (2001) thesis on SSAY in Australian schools, in part influenced by Britzman, has taken a similar line. These writers have highlighted the complexity of issues involved in this area. Their work shows that teachers would not only need to invest much time and effort, but would also require a considerable amount of support and confidence if they were to work with tension and conflict in ways that are often unintelligible within educational institutions.

It would appear highly unlikely that Jane would take a contrary stance on tension and conflict (or on the other approaches she adopts) in the classroom. The ideas and insights from queer pedagogy are not located within the mainstream – and would therefore require her investing the time to seek them out. As Jane notes, in this regard, unless she’s “upgrading [her] qualifications and …hanging around Melbourne Uni…reading the journals…[she] wouldn’t see [current research]”. Disidentification with the status quo may be a significant reason why those who are exploring tension or conflict (in the classroom), became involved in the area in the first place. Jane by contrast seeks to remain part of the status quo – the heterosexual hegemony works for her. To challenge and disrupt that which is taken for granted (which queer informed approaches seek to do) would place her in conflict with the regulatory arrangements of her school.

An Analysis of Interviews with Louise

The second part of this chapter draws on extracts from interviews with Louise – a lesbian secondary school teacher who is not ‘out’ at school. It illustrates:
1. how Louise is able to assist a gay student through an informal, private relationship in which she takes on the role of being a ‘mentor’;

2. the problems and limitations that arise in relation to:
   - the teacher concealing her sexuality (not being ‘out’) at school;
   - the teacher-mentor not being comfortable with going to ‘gay’ places;
   - the teacher-mentor acting alone, not liaising with queer support services and queer community networks (that is, having limited access to and/or not utilizing queer resources);
   - the difficulty (for the teacher) in maintaining an informal, private relationship with a gay student given the conflict with institutional norms concerning acceptable and ethical practices.

**Tensions and Conflicts: Homosexuality and the Catholic System**

You know that within the church homosexuality is not accepted. It’ll never be normal to be gay in the Catholic Church.

(Louise)

Louise, as mentioned in chapter 1, identifies as lesbian. She has many issues with being a (closeted) lesbian in the Catholic school environment. A number of times during the interviews she breaks down as she talks of her “loneliness” (in respect to the constant self-monitoring, and not having a relationship with another woman), and sense of isolation from other gay and lesbian teachers in the Catholic system. She says she has a “hard time believing people aren’t homophobic” and how she “still [has] a really hard time believing [people who] say ‘it’s okay for me to be a lesbian.’” Louise also points out that she doesn’t fit in with the “gay scene”. It’s not surprising then, when she says (during the final interview) “[that] it feels too big to hold by myself and it does feel like it’s by myself”. Though she says, “it is also liberating…doing something you know that
not many other people are doing in the Catholic system” this sentiment coexists with negativity, (internal) conflict and a lack of official support:

Yeah I think it’s the exhaustion in the end that will get me. Mmm it just seems like you’re hitting your head against a brick wall so often.

Theme: ‘Mentoring’ a Gay Student

I don’t think I’ve had [that] sort of trust from a student before or that connection about something that really mattered. It’s hard to put into words.

(Louise)

Louise is talking (above) about an informal mentoring relationship she has with one particular gay senior school student (year eleven), in a Catholic secondary college. It’s a particularly significant relationship for Louise, yet apart from some close friends, she has told no one in the school about it. She is concerned that if her sexuality became known to others at the school, or if they were to find out about her (mentoring) relationship with a gay student, that she would be in trouble and/or lose their respect. This is not just a matter of non-compliance with formal institutional rules, though. For Louise is clearly being influenced by the dominant norms of the school she works in, which would render such a relationship inappropriate and wrong. And if Louise were to be identified as lesbian she could be positioned (in terms of dominant norms) as trying to exert influence on the young gay person (assumed to be vulnerable to suggestion and undue influence) in respect to his sexuality, seeking to promote or encourage homosexuality (which as a practice is understood – within the Catholic school system – to be unnatural, abnormal and sinful) to him. Louise illustrates this point in the following comment:

…any person who tries to work openly with gay and lesbian kids in Catholic schools is deemed to be encouraging a suspect sexuality or a suspect morality and so these kids become, no-one cares about ’em.
It can be seen here that it is precisely because of the heterosexual hegemony (of the school) that Louise has made this mentoring arrangement a private matter. The requirement to keep it secret however, imposes limitations and constraints on what she can do. This can be seen throughout the interviews, where she talks of the mentoring relationship being increasingly problematic to maintain, and by the final interview she has shifted away from the idea of mentoring gay or lesbian students. This illustrates how the dominant norms of the school work to regulate and contain the behavior of teachers in their efforts to assist young queers.

It’s not just a matter of Louise differing from (and being at odds with) the dominant norms of the Catholic system though. Education-focused research/studies on SSAY does not advocate or explore the practice of mentoring young queers (in schools). This could be due to various factors such as the problematics around queer teachers being ‘out’ in schools, the heteronormative notions of the predatory older gay or lesbian, as well as the linking of queer visibility with ‘risk’ The idea of mentoring young queers does have currency however, away from the school institution. Within queer communities around Australia (often through queer institutions) a number of mentoring type initiatives (for queers, including young queers) have been established (see chapter 9).

The mentoring situation described in this section involves only one student. Louise has no previous history of mentoring gay or lesbian students in schools and she doesn’t mentor any other students during the interview period. Indeed it would seem that with the dominant norms with the Catholic system opposed to such practices that it would be extremely difficult to be mentoring more than one student in this system. It would (potentially) increase one’s chance of being caught out by authorities. Also, the dominant norms of the institution, which position homosexuality as abnormal and wrong, mean that there’s no funding, support (for the teachers involved), resources, promotion (of the initiative) or space made available within school structures and programs so that more queer
students could be involved. This highlights the importance of institutional support for such initiatives. I’m not, however, advocating for change in schools in this respect. This is not because I think that schools are alright as they are or that they shouldn’t change, but rather because I do not want to make the mistake of underestimating the power of the school institution to defend itself against a politics of (homo)sexuality reform in the maintenance of the heterosexual hegemony.

What I am arguing here is that we need to look at practical alternatives (to gay school reform) that are not contingent on gays and lesbians (and their allies) winning a major political battle with a conservative institution, a battle significant enough to substantially impact on the sexual hegemony. If we look beyond the school sector there are a range of alternatives such as queer youth support groups, that do not need to limit the numbers of participants on the basis of maintaining secrecy or having no institutional support. This point highlights how practical answers to seemingly intractable problems can be found through looking outside of heteronormative institutions, by focusing instead on the institutions that are able to support young queers without first requiring a major program of reform.

Returning to the interview material, the gay student Louise ‘mentors’ is studying Religious Education in the senior school, but he isn’t a student of Louise’s. Louise has recently introduced the topic of ‘homosexuality’ into the Religious Education curriculum, and this student approaches her, enquiring about Church teaching on homosexuality. Louise is the school’s Religious Education Coordinator and is the ‘expert’ in this area (in her school). In some ways therefore it can be seen as appropriate that the student asks her for information (about what he’s studying). In the course of their first conversation about Church teachings on homosexuality, the student tells Louise that he is gay and she tells him that she’s lesbian. She says she felt as “if part of me was watching the conversation saying, ‘you’re crazy’.” From this point on Louise and the gay student meet often, on the pretext of talking about Church teachings about
homosexuality. But the conversations go much further than this. As the student begins to confide in Louise about his sexuality she begins to gain an insight into what life is like for him:

I began realizing that he was a very lonely person, that he [didn’t] know another gay person apart from me and he didn’t know anyone his own age [who is gay].

At this point of time, Louise considers it’s problematic that he doesn’t know other gay people. She later talks of the importance of gay kids “be[ing] with their own kind”. Thus through her contacts she finds some gay students (of his age) that he can meet up with:

…through a friend I arranged to take him out for lunch in the holidays and introduce him to two other gay kids so at least they could exchange telephone numbers.

This practice of facilitating socialization with other gay students would be considered inappropriate or wrong according to dominant norms within Catholic schools (and State Schools also). It would be particularly problematic (especially to her job) for a Religious Education Coordinator, one of the most important religious roles in a Catholic school, to be involved in such a practice. The dominant strand of education-focused research/studies on young queers itself, is in line with these norms, and doesn’t advocate queer socialization. It’s a topic that is left unexplored. Louise is much more in line (in this situation) with the norms and values of queer youth support groups, which recognize the importance of socialization between young queers and utilize various strategies to facilitate it (see chapter 9). Socialization (including sexualization) between queers is also a theme within gay and lesbian literature and HIV/AIDS research on gay and homosexually active men. It’s a theme that I take up and elaborate in this research (see chapters 6-8).
Louise is also interested (initially) in facilitating the gay student’s connection with gay cultures – through gay newspapers:

I began taking him one of the gay newspapers each week to school and he’d pick up what we called study notes (laughs) in the staff room in a manila envelope (laughs)…

The value of the mentor is shown once again – in terms of Louise knowing about existence of gay newspapers and knowing where to get them. It’s important to note here that the gay student lived in an outer suburb of Melbourne – where there is no ready access to the gay newspapers. This practice (of Louise bringing in a gay paper) can also be viewed as a means of bypassing the presumed ‘risk’ associated with a young person getting the gay newspapers themselves. This practice, similar to others in this section, relies on Louise organizing and setting up things.

The gay newspaper practice (in line with the other mentoring practices) relies on cover-up, or secrecy about what they’re doing. They draw upon a discourse of “study notes” to justify (or render intelligible) the gay student coming to the staff room each week. There’s a certain amount of pleasure here, in being involved in this cover up and in getting away with it. Louise also talks of feeling empowered by the relationship she has with this student. In the context of a school environment where there is no official recognition of gays and lesbians and where there are no queer support services – there is a sense of pride, a sense that they’re (Louise and another gay teacher) achieving something in what’s seen as a negative environment for gays and lesbians. This pride could also be linked to teacher discourse of making a mark on students, that is, having a positive impact on them. This can be especially significant given the context they’re working in:

…it was just that sense of…the same empowering sense that I had with my colleague [who is also mentoring a gay student] knowing that we
were both gay and we both had this pride in ourselves as human beings, the knowledge that we could do some good here.

At the end of that school year, Louise gains employment at another school. She tells the gay student she’s leaving and offers to put him in touch with another gay teacher on staff – which he agrees to. They continue to keep in touch however, with Louise mentioning that they arranged to go to a gay café in the upcoming school holidays. The gay student at this time is in year 12.

Even recently I’ve since left that school, I was speaking to him on the phone and we’re going out for lunch in the coming holidays. I said I can pick you up at your place and we’ll go somewhere near you or we can go to a gay café and he jumped through the phone and he wanted to go to a gay café. So I think companioning...for a gay kid in particular allows [them] to have perhaps a slice of experience that heterosexual students just take for granted. They can be with their own kind without an adult there. I don’t think gay kids can [do that] certainly not in the suburbs if they’re miles away from the city.

Although Louise no longer works for the school that the gay student goes to – the idea of a Catholic secondary school teacher, let alone a Religious Education Coordinator, socializing with a gay student in a gay café is still problematic. Louise is also not ‘out’ to most staff, including the principal. Thus being spotted in a gay café could be problematic, let alone being spotted with a gay school student.

The gay student is, according to Louise’s description, extremely excited about the possibility of going to a gay café. Certainly this accords with some of the discourse of the young queers in chapter 8 (of this thesis) who after being isolated and alone (from other queers) talk of the excitement of meeting up with other queers, or going to queer venues or events. Louise at this stage sees the gay café as offering a space where he (the gay student) can “be with [his] own kind”.
With heterosexuality being the norm, heterosexual socialization readily occurs in various contexts for young people. Louise notes how naturalized it is, noting that “it’s taken for granted”. There’s recognition though (by Louise) of the need for intervention in respect to this gay student, given that the status quo in schools will mean that opportunities will not be provided for queer socialization – invisibility (of queers) is the norm. Neither school institutions, (state or religious ones) nor education-focused research/studies (on young queers) value queer visibility and queer socialization. They don’t (for the most part) advocate for it, support it or seek to facilitate it.

Louise also highlights that it’s problematic for young queers living in the outer suburbs, since she considers gay spaces to be located in the inner suburbs. Since that interview (with Louise) however, numerous support groups for young queers (through Local Government youth services, in particular) have been established in various suburbs around Melbourne (see Appendix 7).

In the gay café situation above, Louise is once again in charge (the agentic one) – assuming the gay student lacks agency with respect to getting around the city by himself. It seems to be a case of he needs me – otherwise he’d be alone. Whether or not this is the case with the student, such positioning can work well for both. He gets a lift to the gay cafe (and doesn’t have to sort out public transport) and she gets to feel useful and supportive. Louise can position herself as crucial to this young gay guy’s life improving.

Nine Months Later…

It is nine months later when I next interview Louise and her views (relating to mentoring) have noticeably changed. She’s still in contact with the young gay guy, who has now finished VCE, and they still meet up occasionally. They no longer meet up in gay cafes though and Louise no longer talks of the importance
of gays being with their own kind. Now when they meet up it’s in cafes that aren’t gay. Louise also indicates that she no longer wishes to be a mentor:

…my choice to not eat at a gay café this time, it was like … no I don't have to be the sort of, surface mentor to a gay kid.

The language around being a mentor has shifted. Here it seems as though she’s positioning herself as having originally felt under some pressure to be a mentor – perhaps in the sense of recognizing that there was no support for the gay student in the school – and as a lesbian feeling that she had an obligation to do something. In her earlier discourses around mentoring, there’s evidence of her feeling responsibility to do something, but not of feeling under pressure to do so, or of feeling any resentment about it. Nine months earlier she had described gay kids as “hav[ing] no voice” and said “it’s like a silent screaming, there’s nothing for them.” In many ways, the various strategies she initiated (of which the mentoring with this student was just one) could be described as a personal mission with respect to gay and lesbian young people. It was incredibly important to her, something that she was passionate about (as she said nine months earlier):

I think I realized I had a voice, the kids couldn’t have a voice, and therefore I felt a certain responsibility to do what I could…

I think [there’s a] sense of, certainly for people like himself [another gay teacher] and me of watching out for the gay kid. I don’t know whether it’s normal or not cause I haven’t had the chance to speak to any other gay teachers about this but there’s a sense of looking out for kids who belong with …you know gay or lesbian people and I know that I am I have probably too much of an interest in them, in their well-being. I watch them carefully. If I think a kid is gay, I’ll listen more acutely.
What’s impacted on Louise’s change of stance with respect to going to gay cafes? What’s led to her no longer talking of the importance of gays being with their own kind? Louise’s lack of connection (and disidentification) with the “gay scene” appears to be critical:

Louise …I think before I was trying to facilitate him meeting something of the gay scene and I was belittling my own presence almost when we’ve met before in a strange way.

Greg  Ok can you tell me a bit more about that…

Louise It’s like, it was as if I was making the same mistake that I accuse other people of doing. And that is, I think before I was …saying… ‘welcome to the gay community, this is wonderful, lets go to this café, because it’s gay.’ And when I first realized I was lesbian one of the things I HATED about it was that I didn’t fit in the gay scene and yet I was saying to him, where we eat is more important than you or I meeting.

Nine months earlier when she spoke of going to the gay café the focus had been on the gay student’s excitement (in anticipation of going), and about him being with his own kind, which she was facilitating. Now it’s about them meeting. There are no discourses relating to the gay guy’s feelings about gay cafes, or what he wants. And the gay café has become synonymous with the “gay scene” which she doesn’t feel comfortable in. This means it’s not just a matter of going to another gay café. It means avoiding all gay cafes (and possibly any venue that is gay focused). There’s no discourse of Louise seeking to do something about her feelings about the gay café – that is, seeking to work out what the issues are – and working through them.

Louise’s relationship with this gay student – both before and after her change of stance and thinking, sheds some light on a number of issues with respect to working with young queers. Firstly, Louise works within institutions that do not
support or sanction what she is doing. This limits the scope of what she can do – in particular, it means that what she does with the gay student must remain secret. Secrecy, hiding and covering of one’s tracks mean that the gay student is still kept contained and regulated. Being invisible, self-censoring, self-monitoring of one’s behavior and talk, and covering up evidence of homosexuality – are some of the array of practices that queers may be involved in due to the stigma and shame associated with being gay. The gay student Louise is working with was involved with some of these practices, before he met up with her. Yet through (much of) their relationship, the hiding continues. Thus, the stigma and shame associated with homosexuality and being gay remains unchallenged.

In queer youth support/social groups by contrast, working with young queers is sanctioned (at an institutional level) – and queer desire and sex is not subordinated to heterosexual desire and sex. Thus there is much more scope in what can be done with the young queers. It’s a (generally) positive, open environment for queers. There isn’t a need to hide, cover up, self-censor or self-monitor. Young queers are therefore able to be open and proud about their sexuality in these contexts. And this doesn’t just apply to the young queers. It also applies to the youth-workers and facilitators who are not focused on self-monitoring or self-censorship – seeking to ensure that they don’t get caught out for assisting the young queers – or seeking to ensure that their sexuality remains hidden. Louise highlights this range of pressures (in relation to herself) when she says that although there are moments when students show they “have a heart [it’s]… not enough to keep me going.” I ask whether that’s because of “acts of resistance” from some students in class, and she says:

No, just because of the whole loneliness. It’s just too hard to have to think so critically about everything you say in public or think ‘am I doing homosexuality as an issue in Ethics because it’s my agenda or is it a valid issue to cover in Ethics? All this self-monitoring, it’s just so tiring.
The queer youth support groups in this research (examined in more detail in chapter 10) recognize the importance of young queers developing relationships and connections with other queers. They seek to facilitate and support the extension of young queers’ networks so that they’re not reliant on any one group or person (including the youth-workers running the groups). Here there is a notion of young queers being able to effect positive change in their lives. By contrast, whilst Louise connects the young gay guy with some other queers, it seems that she is (often) reliant on conceptualizing him as non-agentic. This enables her to position herself as having a significant role in his life.

**Summary**

The interviews in this chapter represent just how compromised teachers positions can be, indeed very often are. This is especially so given that teachers often do not have the time, resources and access to some of the experience and knowledge that is afforded researchers. As Jane herself comments:

> There is so little time to do things properly in teaching and this has got worse in the last few years. We do almost no professional reading or proper reflection on our teaching because we are all exhausted keeping up with the prep and correction and the social, educational and emotional needs of between 125 and 300 students each.

There are many ways that these interview texts could be read. I have endeavored to read these texts in ways that highlight and emphasize the following themes, which are explored in subsequent chapters of this thesis:

The ‘wounded identity’ – Young queers constituted as non-agentic, ‘at risk’ and in need of protection. This theme is explored next in chapters 4 and 5, in relation to education-focused research/studies on young queers.
The tension between the need for greater visibility of gays and lesbians and the risk associated with queer students being visible or ‘out’. This theme is explored further in chapters 4 and 5.

The idea that gay and lesbian content leads to classroom disruption and conflict with school authorities and parents. This theme is discussed in chapter 5 in my examination of educational strategies for young queers.

The importance of socialization between queers – through introducing young queers to the gay community and other young queers. This theme is explored in chapters 8 to 10. Chapter 8 focuses upon young queers’ discourses about socializing with other queers. Chapter 9 focuses on social models of health promotion – and examines a number of mental health initiatives (based in queer communities in Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania) that prioritize socialization between queers. Chapter 10 examines some of the strategies queer youth support groups in Melbourne utilize to facilitate socialization between queers.

Lack of institutional support for queer youth initiatives. This is a consequence of the heteronormative culture of the school institution. Thus in chapters 9 and 10 I look beyond school institutions to focus on organizations/services for queer youth that are immersed in queer culture and queer communities. I examine their organizational culture, as well as the strategies utilized to support young queers.
Youth development discourse underlies many of the assumptions about youth and sexuality in education (Wyn and White 1997). It constitutes young people as ignorant, irrational and dependent, reliant upon adults (in schools and families) to provide guidance, information and support in order that they may become autonomous adults. One of the key concepts in youth development discourse is the notion that some youth are more ‘at risk’ than others. This notion is applied to particular individuals or groups that are considered to be in danger of straying from the path of ‘normal’ development.


‘At risk’ discourse is embedded in much of the education-focused research/studies that focuses on the problems and difficulties young queers encounter because of their sexuality. They are said to be more likely to engage in risk taking behavior such as unsafe sex, suicide and drug and alcohol abuse, than are heterosexual young people. The main contributing factors are said to be isolation and loneliness, homophobic abuse and harassment, invisibility of gays and lesbians in society and at school, and lack of support and information relating

This chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first section, I examine ‘youth development’ discourse. The key themes explored in this section are: adolescence, ‘risk’, the role of the school and family, and sexuality.

In the second section (of this chapter), I examine how youth development discourse influences the construction of the young queer subject. I do this through focusing upon a major Australian research report that is informed, in part, by youth development discourse. This report: *Writing Themselves In – A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Well-Being of Same-Sex Attracted Young People* (WTI) (Hillier et al 1998), involved the largest survey of same-sex attracted young people (SSAY) undertaken in Australia. In many ways, this report is representative of the ways in which young queers and the problems they face, are conceptualized in education-focused research/studies.

**‘Youth Development’**

The concept of ‘youth’ assumes meaning in relation to the concept of ‘adulthood’ according to Wyn and White (1997:11). Youth is understood as a “state of becoming” and adulthood is considered to be the “arrival”. Thus, youth are positioned (within youth development discourse) as dependent and reliant in contrast to the independence and autonomy of adults, ignorant in contrast to knowledgeable adults and also irrational and incoherent in contrast to rational and coherent adults (Wyn and White 1997).
The young person, in youth development discourse, is understood as having a “presocial self” (also referred to as an ‘essential self’) which “exists independently of social relationships and which will strive to gain expression” (Johnson 1993, quoted in Wyn and White 1997:25). The ‘essential self’ assumes importance in terms of a young person’s development through to adulthood, since a ‘sane adult’, according to humanist notions of identity, is characterized as having a “continuous, unified, rational, and coherent” identity (Davies 2000:57).

Adolescence is considered a key stage in relation to the (gradual) emergence of the ‘essential self’. It is characterized as a period where young people start to think about ‘who they are’, through testing and exceeding boundaries, “def[ying] the conventions of society” and/or trying new things out (Wyn and White 1997:19). Terms such as ‘danger’, ‘risks’, ‘turmoil’, ‘conflict’ and ‘storm and stress’ are often associated with this stage (see Hillier et al 1998:7, Wyn and White 1997:19, 53). They serve to highlight the many ‘threats’ to a young person’s (successful) transition through to adulthood.

The term ‘at risk’ is used within youth development discourse to describe those groups or individuals, who in contrast to the ‘normal’ or mainstream, are ‘at risk’ of not becoming autonomous, ‘rational’ and ‘normal’ adults. Various risks are spoken of including delinquency, suicide, drug use, homelessness, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and reliance on welfare. These risks are understood to affect physical, sexual, social, emotional and psychological aspects of development (Heaven 1994, Wyn and White 1997, Education Victoria 1998a, b).

Within youth development discourse, the individual (in line with humanist notions of identity) is figured as being separate to society. Young people (assumed to be ignorant, irrational and dependent) are constituted as reliant upon the guidance, acceptance and support of society. It is considered to be crucial (particularly during adolescence) so they don’t become ‘at risk’ in any aspects of their development (and therefore unlikely to become autonomous, ‘coherent’ and
‘rational’ adults). Thus, two institutions are seen to be particularly important for young people: the school and the family.

Schools, within youth development discourse, fulfill a key role in respect to monitoring and assessing young people. These practices enable the identification of ‘at risk’ individuals, and the devising and implementing of intervention strategies that seek to move them from marginalized status into the mainstream, among the ‘normal’ (Wyn and White 1997).

Another key function of schools (in terms of youth development) is the teaching of “rational linguistic processes” which enable young people to keep in check and control “those irrational, emotional aspects of self that might otherwise disrupt claims to coherent adult identity” (Davies 2000:57). Through classroom discussions, for example, young people are taught the ‘acceptable’ ways of discussing an issue. They must learn to be ‘rational’ and ‘objective’, justifying their ideas with evidence. They must learn to show respect for others through taking turns, speaking one at a time. The regulating of young people’s behavior by teachers plays an important role through all of this. Young people may be policed in terms of not raising their voices, not getting emotional, irrational and/or becoming personal. These behaviors can be highlighted as signs of immaturity illustrating that the young person still has a long way to go until they’re an independent adult.

Schools are therefore considered important agents of socialization within youth development discourse (Heaven 1994, Wyn and White 1997). They (along with the family) are positioned as the legitimate institution to teach values. This involves the provision of the ‘right’ or ‘accurate’ information about ‘appropriate’ topics to young people. Social progress (through the next generation and beyond), in relation to critical issues, is assumed to occur through this process. As young people become adults (and parents) and their identity becomes fixed (an assumption within youth development discourse), it is understood that they can draw upon all that they’ve been taught at school. This is considered
Chapter 4  The Construction of the Wounded Subject

especially important given that the wider society (which includes various forms of media, and ‘dysfunctional’ families) is often assumed to have incorrect and/or inappropriate knowledge, attitudes and behaviors.

The family is another significant institution within youth development discourse (Heaven 1994, Wyn and White 1997). It’s seen as crucial in respect to providing support and guidance (particularly during adolescence), as well as necessities such as shelter, food and comfort. Parents are viewed as role models for their children, teaching them how to treat others, how to conduct themselves in a (heterosexual) relationship and how to be intimate (Heaven 1994). They’re understood to be key to the formation of ‘appropriate’ values in young people. Again, this is considered important in respect to social progress.

**Sexuality Within Youth Development Discourse**

Heterosexuality is assumed within youth development discourse, with the young person expected to progress (developmentally) through to sexual relationships with the opposite sex. Consequently, homosexuality receives little attention. A number of researchers (such as Cass 1979, 1984, Coleman 1982 and Troiden 1979, 1984/1985, 1989) have constructed homosexual identity formation models but these do not (for the most part) inform the dominant strand of education-focused research/studies on young queers, or mainstream education itself.

There is an expectation, within youth development discourse, that sexual activity should only occur after the individual has completed the necessary developmental tasks, and has (along the way) received the appropriate information (in line with their age) about sex from the legitimate institutions (that is, family and school). Penetrative sexual activity therefore (according to this model of development) should only occur between those who have the necessary emotional, cognitive, physical and psychological maturity. This is understood to be reached in late adolescence/early adulthood for those who have progressed normally, had suitable adult role models (in their family for example) and received appropriate guidance and information from their family and/or school (Heaven 1994).
Early sexual activity (before ‘maturity’) is considered – within youth development discourse – to place a young person and their sexual partners at risk. Heaven (1994:142-143) says “younger adolescents… are less able to reason about risk and probability and are therefore more likely to engage in sexual behaviour regarded as risky for HIV infection and pregnancy.” Youth development inspired research/studies have also documented the factors that are said to contribute to young people’s participation in sex (see Heaven 1994). In so doing they ascribe risk to particular situations and circumstances.

As previously mentioned, the ‘youth development’ conceptual framework is often embedded within discourses about young queers and the problems they face in school. This is discussed further in the review that follows.

**The Writing Themselves In report**

**Overview**

The *Writing Themselves In* (WTI) report (Hillier et al 1998) is a mix of qualitative and quantitative research, involving 751 same-sex attracted young people (SSAY) aged between 14 and 21 (49% male 51% female) from across Australia. It was funded by a Commonwealth Government AIDS grant. The need for figures about SSAY, according to Hillier et al (1998:1), arose out of a “general concern about the spread of HIV into the adolescent population and a specific concern about these young people’s emotional well-being”.

The WTI report (Hillier et al 1998) is not explicitly set within a theoretical framework. Many aspects of it, however, appear to be influenced by youth development discourse. These include the focus on adolescence (along with the conventional understandings of adolescence) which Wyn and White (1997:52) argue is the “cornerstone” of a “youth development approach to conceptualizing youth”, the privileging of the school and family as important sites in the young
person’s progression to adulthood, and the ‘at risk’ focus they take (in regard to SSAY).

The WTI report (Hillier et al 1998) has achieved significance in terms of being the largest survey to this point of SSAY in Australia. It has been cited in research/articles about young queers (Crowhurst 2001, McLean, 2000, Seal, 1999, Shale, 1999), the Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (2000) report on discrimination and abuse experienced by lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people in Victoria, press releases from VicHealth about homophobic discrimination (VicHealth 2000a, b), reports on the educational performance of males and females in schools (Kenway et al 2000), and submissions to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Boys Education in Australia (Deakin University – Faculty of Education 2000).

Key Themes Examined in Writing Themselves In

The Need for Affirmation and Supportive Environments

Hillier et al (1998:7) highlight that affirmation is important for young people in the context of the “risks and dangers that need to be safely negotiated” during adolescence. They say that:

…much has been written about the importance of a positive affirming home and social life for young people, and we as a community like to think that we provide this. It is within supportive environments that young people learn about independence, self worth, skills for the future and intimacy in relationships.

In this text, young people are effectively positioned as dependent, lacking self worth and skills. “[S]upportive environments” are characterized as sites where young people are affirmed – where they develop and mature (through learning about independence, self worth, skills for the future and intimacy in

Some young people do not fare well in relation to affirmation, according to Hillier et al (1998:7). SSAY unlike “young heterosexuals” are said to be “less likely to feel affirmed and supported through their teenage years”. Hillier et al (1998:71) also highlight (in WTI’s conclusion) that “[their] research points to the absence of wide-spread public affirmation for homosexuality, as a practice or an identity”. In this respect they point to SSAY’s “[f]ear of being ‘outed’ and of ‘coming out’ to parents and friends” and to the “considerable number… [who] were experiencing overt abuse and discrimination in their daily lives.” The “wide-spread public” is therefore positioned as key in respect to SSAY’s development, through their granting or withholding of affirmation for homosexuality.

Affirmation in this particular context is one part of a ‘supportive environment’. It would appear to involve the provision of support, and acceptance. In relation to SSAY then, this may include talking about and/or providing information or materials about homosexuality. It could also include the use of gay, lesbian or bisexual role models. There is an expectation here that affirmation should come from others such as the community or more specifically the home or school – so that the young person can progress through to adulthood. At that stage, it is expected that the person will begin to affirm themselves – including their sexual identity. This is known as ‘self-affirmation’.

The skills and knowledge that Hillier et al (1998:7) highlight as being learnt within “supportive environments”, (independence, self worth, skills for the future, intimacy in relationships) are often linked to being an adult, in terms of youth development or humanist discourses (Davies 2000, Heaven 1994, Wyn and Dwyer 2000, Wyn and White 1997). The mention of “self worth” by Hillier et al (1998:7) can be seen as referring to the ‘essential self’, a having confidence in ‘who we are’. ‘Supportive environments’ are understood to play an integral role
in creating the ‘right conditions’ for not only the emergence but also the establishment of the young person’s ‘essential self’ as they move through to adulthood. They are especially important in the context of the ‘risks’ and ‘dangers’ often associated with adolescence.

The ‘At Risk’ SSAY

SSAY’s development (through to adulthood) is said to be threatened in a number of ways in WTI (Hillier et al 1998). Categorized as ‘young people’ (within a youth development conceptual framework) they’re positioned as dependent or reliant, as well as lacking knowledge. When homosexuality is factored in, they are considered to be ‘at-risk’ of discrimination and abuse/harassment with consequences such as suicide, higher rates of drug and alcohol use and higher rates of homelessness (Hillier et al 1998:8-9, 49-54). The reference points here are their heterosexual peers. They’re effectively positioned as having fewer problems progressing through to adulthood than SSAY.

Hillier et al (1998) emphasize numerous aspects that reinforce the notion of SSAY being ‘at risk’ mentally, physically, sexually, psychologically and emotionally. Crucial to this subject positioning is a characterizing of SSAY as non-agentic individuals who are pitted against a society, which is (seen as) acting forcefully upon them in many sites (see Davies 2000:55-56 for a discussion about humanist concepts of agency). SSAY in comparison to their heterosexual peers (as mentioned previously) are said to be “less likely to feel affirmed or supported throughout their teenage years.” They are also “far less visible” and “less likely” to “have access to positive discourses in their peer culture about sexual difference” according to Hillier et al (1998:7). SSAY are also positioned as more ‘at risk’ than other minority groups (Hillier et al 1998:8). Religious or ethnic minority youth, for example, “most often share their status with their families…[where] there is always [an] opportunity for affirming their identity.” For SSAY though this “is almost never the case [since their parents are] overwhelmingly likely to be heterosexual” (Hillier et al 1998:8).
There are a number of other aspects (highlighted in WTI) that contribute to the notion of the ‘at risk’ same-sex attracted individual (Hillier et al 1998:37-39). These include discrimination and/or rejection from parents and those around them, lack of support from professionals at school, and feelings of being unsafe in various locations (on the “street”, at a “sporting event”, “social occasion”, and/or “school”). In relation to schools Hillier et al (1998:73) argue that they need to consider developing policy relating to homophobia in order to ensure that the “unacceptably high levels of sexuality related abuse and harassment endemic in school environments are no longer tolerated.”

Being known to be gay or lesbian is therefore shown to be problematic within the WTI report (Hillier et al 1998). This is emphasized in a number of other respects, such as coming out or disclosure. Hillier et al (1998:75) caution against the encouraging of SSAY to “disclose their sexuality to family members” while they're financially dependent on them. The more ‘rational’ and ‘safe’ alternative appears to be waiting until you’re financially dependent before coming out. Hillier et al (1998:75) also say, “[e]ncouraging SSAY to ‘come out’ is not necessarily the solution” due to possible violence and/or homelessness. Earlier in the report, they also highlight the risks of “rejection and potentially negative reactions of friends, family and the community” (Hillier et al 1998:8).

Young women are positioned (by Hillier et al 1998:44) as more ‘at risk’ than young men in regard to “acting on their same-sex attractions”. Young men’s “sexual encounters” occurred outside the contexts of school, family and peers, according to (Hillier et al 1998:43). Young women’s “homosexual exploration”, “relationships” and “tentative sexual encounters” by contrast were in the context of “established friendships”. “Acting on their same-sex attraction” is positioned as “less safe” by Hillier et al (1998:44) in the context of them “declaring love for a best friend and wondering if she felt the same way”. Hillier et al (1998:44) say this is a “recurrent theme” among the females in their research. Two risks are spoken of: the ‘risk’ that other people at school may find out, and the “added concern of potentially destroying established and valued relationships.” There
are, it seems, more ‘appropriate’ sites for “acting on same-sex attractions”. Hillier et al (1998:44) say, “[y]oung women’s same-sex behaviours may well be postponed until… they can be explored more safely.” The options presented here are waiting until they’ve completed school or when they’re at university.

‘Coming out’ or disclosure, as shown above, is associated with a number of potential risks in the WTI report (Hillier et al 1998). Given the cautions against the encouraging of young people to “come out” in the report’s recommendations, it is represented as more of a risk than not coming out. At the same time the alternatives of “silence and denial”, as well as “passing as normal” are positioned as a risk to SSAY’s “emotional and psychological well-being” (Hillier et al 1998:8). Thus, SSAY are (according to Hillier et al 1998) ‘at risk’ if they don’t disclose their sexuality, and they’re even more ‘at risk’ if they do.

SSAY are also ‘at risk’ according to Hillier et al (1998) in relation to sex. They point out that SSAY are getting most of their information about gay and lesbian safe sex and relationships from the media and friends. This information, according to Hillier et al (1998:63) “is most likely to be incorrect or misleading” and “less likely to be useful” than information coming from schools. They also argue that prior research has shown that “young people” have a lower level of trust in information coming from media and friends.

WTI’s researchers (Hillier et al 1998) take the position that schools and families should provide information (about homosexual safe sex and relationships) but this is not happening. SSAY are therefore positioned as “having difficulty accessing the information they need to protect and resource themselves by the two groups with the largest duty of care” (Hillier et al 1998:63); two groups whom Hillier et al (1998:72) claim are “trusted sources” of information for “young people”.
Critical Perspectives on Key Themes of WTI

Youth Development Conceptual Framework

The reliance on a youth development conceptual framework by Hillier et al (1998) works to limit the representations of young queers in the research. Within this framework, “all young people are presumed to be heterosexual [and] homosexuality is deviance from the norm” (Griffin 1993 cited in Wyn and White 1997:60). In addition, adolescent sexuality is constructed “as a force which must be guided and controlled by experts [such as the family or schools] so that young people are able to make the transition into mature heterosexual adults.” ‘Normal’ development therefore means becoming heterosexual, whilst heteronormative institutions such as schools and family are privileged as the most important players in young people’s lives.

A “positive affirming home and social life” is held up by Hillier et al (1998:7) – in line with youth development discourse – as important for young people’s development. The usual conceptualizations of ‘home’ and ‘social life’, however, don’t encompass the queer communities and/or friendships/relationships with queer people, that some young queers speak of:

I have found that by making friends through other gay friends I have built up a supportive and very important “queer family” of people aged between 17 to 40…This family has also been the main reason for why I feel good about myself and empowered by my sexuality.

(Rowan, quoted in Hillier et al 1998:40)

Jeffrey Weeks (1999:20) argues that:

[f]or many self-identified lesbians and gays, friendship circles are like the idealized family (and infinitely preferable to the real one),
offering ‘a feeling of belonging to a group of people who like me’… ‘they support me…I socialise with them, talk about things that are important to me…

Although the WTI report (Hillier et al 1998) contains SSAY’s narratives about their (positive) interaction with other queers (see following paragraph), this is mostly unacknowledged in WTI’s analysis, conclusions and recommendations. In their conclusion, Hillier et al (1998:71) speak of “supportive and affirming environments” in relation to the internet and “some schools and families”. Nothing is said about SSAY’s interaction with queers in general, and nothing is said about the queers they interact with on the internet. This is consistent with the utilization of a mainstream model of development (that is, youth development) that relates to heterosexuality. Within this model, queer institutions, groups/services, communities and queer people in general are not recognized as legitimate, important, necessary or desirable in the development of young queers.

The WTI report (Hillier et al 1998) has a number of young queers’ narratives which (in part) discuss the importance of having queer friends. For example, Nathan (Hillier et al 1998:41) talks of “[t]he queer crowd [he] hang[s] out with [being] pretty damn well informed about the risks involved with unprotected sex.” Rowan, as mentioned above, (Hillier et al 1998:40) talks of gay friends/“queer family”- “provid[ing] invaluable information on relationships, sex and operating within the gay community” as well as being “the main reason why …[he] feels good about [him]self and empowered by [his] sexuality.” Rosa (Hillier et al 1998:70) talks of her friendships with other dykes and how she developed her “sexual being” through meeting a dyke. Liam (Hillier et al 1998:32) feels “great” about his sexuality and credits this to having sex with a guy, going to a support group for gay youth and meeting other gay people. Through this, he had access to “support, education and information”. Finally, Amy (Hillier et al 1998:60) talks of the “really close” older bi male friend who “guide[s her] in making decisions”.

The expectation that young queers should learn about “independence, self-worth, skills for the future and intimacy in relationships” in hetero home and social contexts is problematic in a number of ways. These are environments in which a young person generally learns how to become a heterosexual adult. How does a young queer learn about “self-worth” for example, in the home context where there is an absence of others who are queer, and where heterosexuality is the presumed and expected sexuality? How does this occur in the context of Hillier et al’s research (1998:58), which shows that the overwhelming majority of young queers are not disclosing their sexuality to their parents or their brothers or sisters? How does a young queer learn “skills for the future” at school, home or in hetero social contexts, if their sexuality is marginalized, put down, or not spoken of? A consequence of being in such contexts is that young queers may feel that they do not have a future worth looking forward to.

In relying on a developmental approach that is premised around heterosexuality, Hillier et al (1998) apply heterosexual norms to those who do not identify as heterosexual. Learning about “intimacy in relationships” for example, would then (according to dominant norms) relate to two heterosexual people, in a monogamous, long term relationship, that have sex in private. How well does this understanding of intimacy capture the range and types of relationships that queers form? Why focus on intimacy in the first place? What about sexual feelings and desires? The focus on intimacy would appear to be another influence of youth development theory. It is a means by which sex is not explicitly spoken of particularly since it is understood as a ‘risk’ activity for young people. Intimacy by contrast is viewed as much less threatening to talk about (than sex).

‘At risk’

A commonly used method for defining young queers as ‘at risk’ is the comparing of this group with a ‘normal’ reference group, that is, heterosexual young people. This occurs in a number of places within the WTI report (Hillier et al 1998:7, 49). This approach has been criticized by Savin-Williams (1990:182) who argues that it defines young queers as a group that is “outside normalcy” and contributes to a “negative portrait” of them. This approach is also problematic in that it
positions the young queer subject in relation to heterosexual norms. It suggests that intervention is required in order for young queers to become ‘normal’ youth. It characterizes young queers (as well as young heterosexuals) as a homogenous group, hiding the differences within the groups. Those young queers who don’t fit the ‘at risk’ profile are not accounted for and are rendered invisible.

At various times in the WTI report, Hillier et al (1998:34, 35, 47, 74-75) compare young queers with each other (not with hetero young people) on the basis of gender, age and/or rural or metropolitan location. However, this is often done in order to attach levels of risk to behaviors and situations, which also contributes to a ‘negative portrait’ of young queers.

**The Notion of Affirmation and ‘Wide-spread Public Affirmation’**

The ‘affirmation’ approach relied upon by Hillier et al (1998) directly positions young queers as ‘Other’, or deficient, requiring affirmation from the ‘normal’ (such as the ‘wide-spread public’). It is a means by which the young queer subject is regulated or kept contained.

Hillier et al (1998:71) refer to a lack of “wide-spread public affirmation for homosexuality, as a practice or an identity”. The non-specific nature of the term ‘wide-spread public’ conceals where the affirmation is and is not coming from. It seems to suggest that political strategies would need to target the ‘wide-spread public’ in order for homosexuality (as a practice or identity) to be affirmed. The pivotal institution in youth development discourse, in terms of contributing to social change, is the school (with the focus primarily being on curriculum and policy). This approach therefore relies on schools changing their practices and embracing homosexuality. From a historical perspective however there appears to be very little basis for this premise.

In utilizing the term “wide-spread public”, all the communities and/or subcultures within society are grouped together under one label. Here the WTI researchers (Hillier et al 1998) are influenced by the humanist ‘individual/society’ binary,
with the individual only seen in relation to society, from which it internalizes its values and norms (see Davies 2000:57). Thus, queer individuals are understood as isolated and lonely because the values/norms of society are not affirming of homosexuality. However, this is unable to account for those young queers (or queers in general) who are not lonely or isolated yet live in a (generalized) society that is not affirming of homosexuality. These queers can still be affirmed and can still have a sense of belonging (with other queers) through their friendships and relationships with other queers, and/or participation in queer community groups/organizations and events (see chapters 6-8). They don’t have to wait for society or schools to change. My argument here is that instead of conceptualizing society as one large group that is not affirming of homosexuality, it is more useful to ask “among which specific groups and within which contexts is homosexuality affirmed?” By exploring this question, affirming environments may be identified.

Hillier et al (1998) rely on the notion that homophobia is coming into the school from outside it. Media, society and/or the family are considered the key producers of homophobia, while the school is seen as the catalyst for societal change. By contrast, I argue that the school is one of the major producers of homophobic practices. Plummer (1999:89) says that “schools, and activities associated with schooling, are central to shaping homophobic experiences” and that the school ground, classroom and peers are the “key contexts of homophobia in childhood”, along with the family and media. By attributing homophobia to those outside of the school, Hillier et al (1998) position the school as being ‘off limits’ as a site for critical examination of homophobic practices. I believe that it is more useful to illuminate the homophobic practices of the school, rather than to conceal them.

**Assimilation**

The WTI report (Hillier et al 1998) is premised on the idea that young queers are socially isolated and alienated from society, and in particular, the school. Hillier et al’s (1998) approach to this problem effectively involves the assimilation of young queers into the school community where heterosexual norms predominate.
These norms position heterosexuality as the superior, natural and desirable sexuality. Homosexuality by contrast, is understood to be abnormal, deviant, unnatural and undesirable. Assimilation (in this context) therefore requires denying or hiding one’s homosexuality and/or appearing to be heterosexual.

This thesis takes a different position on loneliness and isolation. It takes the position that young queers are lonely and isolated because they do not know other young queers. That is, they don’t have young queers to socialize with, have sex with and form relationships with. Thus the queer community with its support and social groups, organizations, venues and events is seen as being particularly important (in this thesis) with respect to young queers overcoming isolation and loneliness (see chapters 8 to 10).

**Provision of Information**

Hillier et al (1998:5, 72, 74), in line with youth development discourse, consider the school and family to be integral in terms of provision of sexual information to young people. They argue that gay/lesbian safe sex and relationship information should come from the school and family, and that “young people” generally trust these sources. The WTI research (Hillier et al 1998:61-63) shows that the overwhelming majority of family and schools are not providing sexual health information to young queers. Also, the majority of SSAY (in the WTI research) do not trust parents, schoolteachers and student welfare coordinators since they did not disclose their sexuality to them and “rarely” sought support from them in relation to their sexuality (Hillier et al 1998:55). This idea of parents and schools as being ‘trusted sources’ of information (about homosexuality) is questionable then in respect to young queers. Hillier et al (1998) are invoking an ideal in relation to the normative – that is, heterosexual young people.

The idea of predominantly heterosexual institutions – schools and the family – providing safe sex and relationship information for young queers is problematic. The notion that these institutions are more likely to present accurate information about homosexuality, than media or friends, is highly suspect. Both notions fail to account for the following issues: the negativity of schools and families towards
homosexuality, the opposition to the inclusion of homosexuality in curriculum from those who authorize curriculum as well as various pressure groups, and the problematic relationships (which includes the lack of trust) between young queers and teachers, student welfare-coordinators, parents and family. These issues have been highlighted for over a decade within education-focused research/studies on young queers (see chapter 5).

Hillier et al’s (1998) argument in respect to information provision relies on rendering media and friends as inferior, inaccurate and dangerous sources of information for young queers. This means not accounting for the young queers in their research (see p.125 in this chapter) who are getting useful/beneficial information about safe sex, “relationships, sex and operating within the gay community” from queer friends or queer support groups (Hillier et al 1998:41, 40, 32). It also means not accounting for the role that queer friends, communities, media, support groups, organizations and events play in the lives of queers (in general), as important sources of information (among other things).

The WTI report (Hillier et al 1998:63, 74) says that information from the media is “often sensational” and “draws on a limited range of negative and misleading stereotypes”. It therefore dismisses the media as being a useful source of information about gay and lesbian safe sex and relationships for young queers. This homogenization of the array of forms and types of media involves not accounting for the variety of media (especially queer media), which provide useful information about queer safe sex and relationships. Though the authors of WTI (Hillier et al 1998) are critical of media, they do not have a politics of seeking to work with the media about its “negative” and “misleading” coverage of homosexuality. They rely instead on the idea of changing society (and its representations of homosexuality) through the school education system.

Hillier et al’s (1998) arguments in respect to information provision are at odds with the queer informed writing of Warner (1999) as well as HIV/AIDS social research on gay and homosexually active men in Australia (see Dowssett 1996,
Kippax et al 1993). This academic literature relies on the notion that sexual knowledge circulates within sexual cultures. It recognizes the importance of not only tapping into this (to develop educational approaches and strategies – see chapter 10) but also supporting and fostering the production and ongoing circulation of sexual knowledge among queers (see chapters 7 and 10).

Various HIV/AIDS and gay rights literature has highlighted the important role that queer media/organizations/friends play in respect to providing sexual health information to gay men (Dowsett 1996, Kippax et al 1993, King 1993, Willett 2000, also see chapter 9). Kippax et al (1993:105), for example, noted the importance of “gay press, friends [and] gay organizations” as the “main sources of information about ‘safe’ sex” for the men in their research. They do not put down, or render these sources as inferior, inaccurate or problematic. They say, that men in their research learnt “what they could do and how they could do it safely” from gay communities (Kippax et al 1993:105). In addition, they say, “the gay community, through its press and education campaigns has produced a climate of safe sexual practice” (Kippax et al 1993:107).

**Being ‘Out’**

Hillier et al (1998) favor a position in which young queers do not ‘come out’ because of the many risks of reprisal. These risks should be avoided (according to WTI) at least until they’re financially independent and in ‘safe’ environments. This approach positions young queers as non-agentic and vulnerable and offers nothing positive for them. There is no recognition here of the practice of selective disclosure, a practice which young queers in the WTI report (Hillier et al 1998) are using. This practice involves young queers selectively choosing whom they disclose their sexuality to. It means that young queers may be ‘out’ to some people and not ‘out’ to others (see chapter 10 for further discussion of this practice).
Sex

The Writing Themselves In report (Hillier et al 1998) limits what counts as sex, and confines its discussions about sex, in accordance with dominant norms in the education sector.

Hillier et al (1998:1) state that they “sought information regarding sexual feelings and experiences” for the WTI report. Later in the report (Hillier et al 1998:41) however, they say that “[s]pecific questions about actual sexual practices were not asked.” No reasons are given for this decision. It would appear to be a taken for granted (or naturalized) practice in relation to sexual health research on SSAY – possibly related to concerns about conflict with educational authorities or funding bodies.

There are four questions in a section of the WTI survey entitled “About your Sexual Behaviours” (La Trobe University, Victoria 1998). The first asks whether or not they have had sex, and whether their sexual partners are guys or girls. The remaining three questions relate to “protection”: whether they use protection with girls, with guys, and what sort of protection. WTI includes a chapter on ‘sexual behaviour’ (Hillier et al 1998:41-47), which, for the most part, quantifies the numbers relating to the gender/protection questions. Similarly, the Conclusions and Recommendations sections of the report, in relation to sex, revolve around protection and STD prevention. Sexual behavior then, is defined (in WTI) primarily in terms consistent with ‘at risk’ and STD prevention discourse. This contributes to a limited and distorted perspective on young queers’ sex lives.

The Writing Themselves In report (Hillier et al 1998) is not atypical in respect to its restricted approach to sexual health research. The Australian national sexual health research report, Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health 1997 (Lindsay et al 1997), also keeps sex confined – with it being predominantly linked to penetration or fucking (in relation to pregnancy and STD’s). ‘Sexual touching’ is also included, yet there is no explanation of what this means and no interest in the types of sexual touching that young people are involved in. Though
the research allows young people to identify as being “attracted only to people of my own sex “or” both sexes, it doesn’t break down the data to show the results (of each question) for SSAY (Lindsay et al 1997:67).

Lindsay et al (1997) exclude certain sexual practices from their research questions. They (1997:26) state that “questions about other sexual practices such as oral or anal sex were believed to be too sensitive to include in this survey.” Although they don’t indicate who it would be ‘sensitive’ to, it would appear that Lindsay et al (1997) are wary of conflict with educational authorities and funding bodies, who they (apparently) think would have enough trouble coping with vaginal sex, let alone contemplating young people into oral, anal, or other forms of sex. Early in the report, Lindsay et al (1997:15) acknowledge that not asking such questions is a limitation. They point out that it “perpetuates gaps in our knowledge of young peoples’ sexual lives” and that oral sex is “almost as common as vaginal sex and has the potential to be used as a safer sex strategy.”

**Conclusion**

The wounded queer subject – informed by youth development discourse – has been used by researchers (and others) in their attempts to persuade education authorities that urgent action or intervention is needed. But the emphasis on the wounded subject also works to obscure the positive experiences of young queers, as well as the importance of queer social and sexual worlds – especially in relation to sex and pleasure, and queer friendships and relationships. It also obscures the ways in which queers are working through and overcoming the difficulties highlighted by researchers. These themes are further examined in relation to queer cultures in Parts 2 and 3 of this thesis.

In this chapter, I have sought to challenge the notion that information needs to come from the school (and the family) in order that young queers can make informed decisions in matters relating to their sexuality. This relies on the Information Model approach (see chapter 9) and does not take into account the
production and circulation of sexuality-related knowledge within queer cultures (see chapters 6, 7, 9 and 10).


In the next chapter I turn to the issue of educational strategies, advocated by researchers and academic writers, for addressing the needs of young queers. In many ways, these strategies are informed by the youth development concepts, and representations of young queers, examined in this chapter.
For more than a decade, researchers and academic writers have documented the problems and difficulties confronting young queers, especially in relation to their school experiences. Accordingly, various strategies have been formulated and proposed within research journals, articles and reports. These strategies can generally be described as strategies for school reform, since they call for institutional changes – directed at the formal school system. They adopt a ‘top down’ approach, aimed primarily at high-level educational policy makers and school authorities.

The strategies for school reform can be summarized as follows: firstly, the implementation of anti-harassment and anti-homophobia measures in schools, and secondly, the inclusion of homosexuality or gays and lesbians within school curriculum.


In this chapter, I examine why the call for school reform has attracted little interest from school authorities and policy makers. I focus on the challenges presented by the strategies, and the issues that arise in relation to attempts at
implementing them. Through this, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the limits, as well as the possibilities, of these strategies. I also seek to illuminate the ways in which the strategies are influenced, and constrained, by the dominant sexual norms in the school institution.

This chapter proceeds with a discussion of each strategy. The first section examines those I have characterized as “anti-harassment strategies”. The second section looks at strategies for including homosexuality in curriculum.

**Anti-Harassment Strategies**


The line of inquiry that I pursue here relates to the issues that arise when attempting to translate this high-level objective into practical strategies. I will now examine these issues in some detail.
Homophobia is often understood to be synonymous with harassment (of queers). Thus, strategies for addressing homophobia are primarily focused on harassment between individual students or between a group of students and the individual (‘victim’). However, this focus is too limited. The concept of homophobia needs to be widened to include homophobic practices and culture. An examination of homophobia in schools would therefore entail focusing on the school institution in terms of its structures, discursive practices, culture, history, politics and regulatory mechanisms. These points have been made in relation to sex/gender-based harassment (Blackmore et al 1996, Hinson 1996, Kenway et al 1997, Redman 1996).

Frameworks or policies that are seen (by some) as necessary for the protection and freedom/support of minority groups can also work to regulate and contain minority groups. Protection frameworks/policies are one of the few contexts in which gays and lesbians are mentioned in education-focused research/studies (on young queers). These contexts have become the ‘appropriate’ or ‘proper’ place where gays and lesbians can be spoken about. The heterosexual/homosexual binary is reinscribed though this practice, with homosexuality being repeatedly framed in negative terms (see Britzman 1995:84 for a discussion of the problematics of a negative focus).

The discourses that predominate within anti-harassment frameworks/policies or in particular interpretations of such frameworks/policies may be utilized to regulate when, where and how frequently queers may be spoken about (in particular institutions). Overall then, they can serve to regulate the agency of queers even before they’re spoken about (see Butler 1990:144 and Bryson and de Castel 1993:343-345).

With homosexuality understood to be abnormal, unnatural and undesirable according to dominant sexual norms in educational institutions, the notion of young queers being legitimate, worthy and appropriate recipients of sympathy,
support, protection and assistance (in relation to harassment) is particularly
difficult to establish. For those who identify with dominant sexual norms it may
make more sense that homosexual people conceal their sexuality, not making it a
‘big deal’ or not ‘flaunting it’. Abuse or harassment towards homosexual people
may be understood as a natural consequence of homosexuals ‘flaunting’ their
sexuality, therefore able to be eliminated through regulating of behavior. Along
similar lines Hinson (1996:251) writes that “some teachers or principals express
the opinion that violence against gay males…is an ‘understandable’ consequence
of their not doing masculinity properly”. Similarly, Seal (1999:17) indicates that
some gay and lesbian students are “being told to straighten up or change the way
they express their personality, when they’ve complained of violence or
harassment at school” (see also Ferfolja 1998:409).

The practice of blaming young queers for harassment, along with young queers’
fears of being blamed for the harassment they experience, has been documented
in other research on young queers (Bochenek and Widney Brown 2001, Safe
Schools Coalition of Washington State 1999). Research on sex-based harassment
of girls has also highlighted the practice of blaming girls for the harassment they

School authorities and personnel (principals, teachers and other staff) are
implicated in a number of other problems that young queers face in respect to
harassment in school. These problems include:

• Queer and straight teachers not intervening against harassment of young queers due to concerns that they (the teacher) will be seen as gay or lesbian (Treadway and Yoakam 1992);


• School authorities refusing to publicly condemn harassment of (or violence towards) queers, or failing to hold students accountable for harassment of young queers (Bochenek and Widney Brown 2001, Crowhurst 2001, Hinson 1996);

• Teachers not knowing what to do when abuse of young queers occurs (Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State 1999, Thonemann 1999);

• Young queers feeling that they will not receive support from school authorities, that responses will be inadequate or hostile and/or that nothing will be done if they report harassment (Epstein and Johnson 1994, Griffin 1994, Hillier et al 1998, Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State 1999);

• Young queers not trusting or having confidence in teachers or counselors in terms of sexuality-related issues (Hillier et al 1998, Hogge 1998, Kendall and Walker 1998, Reynolds and Koski 1995, Sears 1992);
• Young queers not knowing who to talk to about harassment in school (Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State 1999, Plummer 1999).


There have been other issues raised in research on sex-based harassment (within Australian schools) that are also relevant to the issue of homophobic harassment. These are:

• School authorities denying that sex-based harassment exists (Kenway et al 1997);

• School authorities developing policies relating to harassment but doing nothing more at a practical level (Kenway et al 1997);

• School authorities seeking to make sex-based harassment issues palatable to the general school community – through toning down how they talk about particular issues (Kenway et al 1997);

• The positioning (by school authorities) of those who harass as “lacking in confidence, immature and therefore powerless because they are victims of their own psychological and physical maturation” (Blackmore et al 1996:204), or the excusing of violence/harassment on the basis of assumptions about an individual’s feelings or lack of skills (Hinson 1996);
• The social construction of the inevitability of male violence or harassment (by school authorities) as evidenced in phrases such as ‘boys will be boys’ (Hinson 1996, Blackmore et al 1996, Kenway et al 1997);

• School authorities using discourse “which naturalises [particular] male behaviours as ‘just mucking about and teasing’” (Blackmore et al 1996:205, Kenway et al 1997);

• Boys (who’ve harassred others) positioning themselves in ways to excuse or justify their behavior. This includes constituting themselves as victims, as powerless, as being weak and unable to take responsibility for their behavior along with being psychologically inadequate and lacking in self-esteem (Blackmore et al 1996:298);

• Girls reporting harassment being:

  • labeled as ‘whingers’ and ‘dobbers’ by their peers and often being disbelieved, ignored or pathologized by teachers (Blackmore et al 1996);

  • ridiculed for not being able to cope with ‘normal’ peer group behavior, for being ‘victims’ and for being unable to take a ‘joke’ (Blackmore et al 1996).

Another relevant issue, highlighted in Australian and USA research/studies on homophobia and harassment of queers, is that harassment often occurs out of sight of school authorities (Bochenek and Widney Brown 2001, Plummer 1999, Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State 1999).
In light of the issues noted above, it becomes clear that the problem of homophobic harassment and abuse in schools cannot be solved simply by calling for the introduction of anti-homophobia policy. This approach positions the school authorities as having agency, while young queers are positioned as playing a passive role. Solutions that rely on this approach are prevalent within education-focused research reports and articles on young queers. Conversely, approaches that focus on the agency of young queers are seldom discussed (if at all) in relation to the school context. In chapter 10, I examine the ways in which queer support groups are helping young queers to develop practical strategies for dealing with homophobic abuse. These strategies recognize the importance of young queers taking an active role in overcoming these issues.

**Anti-Homophobia Education**

Anti-homophobia education (along with inclusion of homosexuality in curriculum in general) has been one of the key areas of study or critique within the field of Queer Pedagogy. In particular, how learners are understood, and the subject positions that are offered within the discourses, has been problematized (Britzman 1995, 1998, Luhmann 1998).

Anti-homophobia approaches generally position learners as being part of the normative. They are, therefore, presumed to be ignorant in relation to homosexuality. This ignorance is understood to be the result of a lack of knowledge of the ‘real facts’. Consequently, ‘facts’ or ‘knowledge’ are seen as the antidote to ignorance. One of the expected outcomes of anti-homophobia initiatives is that learners will rationally decide to treat homosexuals better and/or have greater empathy, compassion and tolerance for them (Britzman 1995, 1998, Eyre 1997).

This approach to anti-homophobia education relies on the presumption that learners see their own ‘ignorance’ (in terms of the unintelligibility of the ‘Other’) as problematic for themselves. The receiving of new ‘knowledge’ is therefore
considered to be central to understanding what has previously been unintelligible (Britzman 1995) for them.

Queer Pedagogy has highlighted that receiving knowledge can be problematic for the learner; particularly knowledge that impacts on how one understands oneself and others (Britzman 1995:159, Luhmann 1998:149-150). It examines the question of what information must be shut out in order to keep thinking as one does. As Britzman (1995:159) asks, “what does one identify with…if the grounds of identification – history, culture, sociality – are already deemed irrelevant?”

Anti-homophobia education also relies on the premise that ignorance and knowledge are mutually exclusive. This premise has been deconstructed within the field of queer pedagogy (see chapter 2).

Us/Them, Tolerant/Tolerated

Britzman (1995:162, 1998:87) argues that an us/them binary is reinscribed in the approaches that seek the inclusion of gays and lesbians into curriculum (like in anti-homophobia education). Information is targeted at the presumed ‘normal’, who are required to show tolerance to the ‘Other’. The binary of hetero/homo or the prevailing sexual order is maintained as the ‘normal’ (presumed to be hetero) decide whether or not to tolerate the homosexuals. If they do decide to tolerate or show compassion for them, it can serve to confirm their generosity for doing so. In this regard, Britzman (1995:159) asks, “what has actually changed within the ethical imperatives of one’s identity?”

‘Tolerance’ or ‘acceptance’ can be understood to presuppose as well as require the delegitimation of the ‘Other’ (that is, homosexuals). There are two subject positions produced out of this, the “tolerant normal” and the “tolerated subaltern”; an us/them binary is therefore reinscribed (Britzman 1995:160). Nothing has changed in terms of the sexual hierarchy that was evident before the intervention. Heterosexuality is still considered/assumed to be superior, natural
and normal while homosexuality is considered/assumed to be inferior, unnatural and abnormal. The homosexual subjects are positioned as subordinate, reliant upon the toleration, generosity and compassion of heterosexuals if they’re to have a life free from vilification or harassment.

In respect to tolerance, various questions may be posed: How ‘different’ can a homosexual person be and still be considered worthy of toleration? What behaviors or ways of being or talking would be unworthy of tolerance? Which queer people are excluded and/or put down in order to construct a homosexual subject worthy of tolerance? In short, what forms of regulation and submission are involved in the granting (or maintaining) of tolerance?

Being tolerated is not a fixed, secure or necessarily comfortable position for homosexuals. Tolerance is tenuous and provisional; the ‘normal’ subject can revoke it at any time. It is only tolerance in a particular context at a specific time, and is dependent on the subject remaining ‘worthy’ of toleration (see Talburt 2000:7-8). Tolerance in this context can serve as a mechanism of regulation (and domination), requiring the homosexual subject to occupy an inferior position within the sexual order. The tolerant ‘normal’ subject, meanwhile, remains securely located at the top of the sexual hierarchy.

**Gay and Lesbian Guest-Speakers**

One practice utilized in some anti-homophobia education programs is gay and lesbian guest-speakers. From a queer theory perspective, one problem with this approach is that the gays and lesbians who act as guest speakers may only be those whose behavior is deemed acceptable and respectable, or rational or coherent according to the dominant norms within educational institutions (see Britzman 1995, Warner 1999 and Luhmann 1998 for a discussion of the practices of normalization). They may be the gays or lesbians who do not challenge the status quo or those who approximate idealized heterosexual values, speaking the language of the respectable (thereby potentially making themselves culturally intelligible).
Having gay or lesbian guest-speakers in queer youth support and social groups, by contrast, is a quite different situation to having them in schools. In these groups, there is not the presumption of the audience being predominantly straight, and heterosexuality is not the ‘superior’ sexuality. Such presumptions could impact on what guest speakers say, how they say it and what they leave out due to concerns about negative reactions from heterosexual students. It could also mean that their main concern is the heterosexual students, trying to make things intelligible, ‘normal’ and relevant to them. Within queer support and social groups however, queer desire and sex are accepted as being normal, natural, and desirable, and so the expectation/pressure to regulate themselves and their talk according to dominant heterosexual norms no longer exists (see chapter 10).

**Inclusion of Homosexuality into Curriculum**


More recent Australian research/studies targeting school education and mainstream ‘service providers’, however, shows that homosexuality is rarely included in school curriculum (Crowhurst 2001, Hillier et al 1998, 1999, Hogge 1998, Telford 1998). The idea that homosexuality should be included in the curriculum is not easily translated into practical strategies. Education-focused research/studies have identified a number of problems in this regard:
• Teacher fears/concerns that they’ll be seen as homosexual for talking about homosexuality (Bickmore 1999, Ferfolja 1998, Harbeck 1995, Harrison et al 1996, Unks 1995);


• Concerns (from teachers) that classroom discipline will be disrupted through talking about homosexuality (Crowhurst 2001, Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995, Sanders and Burke 1994);


- Taken for granted conceptualizations of childhood – that children are sexually naïve (or innocent) and/or incapable of understanding or too young to know about homosexuality. Also, the notion that children (and also adolescents) are too young to be gay, lesbian or bisexual (Britzman 1995, Cahill and Theilheimer 1999, Epstein 1997, Eyre 1997, Letts 1999, Letts and Sears 1999, Sears 1999, Silin 1995, Weems 1999);


The legitimacy of homosexuality appears to be a major issue here. Implicit in all of these discourses is the notion that homosexuality is deviant, abnormal, unnatural, undesirable and a threat.

**The Limits of the Homosexual Subject in Curriculum**

‘Regimes of truth’ determine what is intelligible, acceptable and appropriate to include in curriculum. The homosexual subjects that come to be included in curriculum are likely to be those that are palatable (that is, acceptable and appropriate) for mainstream consumption, such as those who are victims of homophobia, or those who are just “like heterosexuals except for ‘sexual
preference” (Duggan 1992, quoted in Tierney and Dilley 1998:53). The latter subject position tends to emphasize the similarities while de-emphasizing difference, particularly that relating to sexual desire and practice (see Britzman 1995, Luhmann 1998 and Warner 1999). Thus, the shame associated with homosex and the stigma attached to being homosexual remains intact.

It is not just a matter of who is included in curriculum. It is also a question of which queer people, sexual experiences, interests and desires are left out, distanced from or put down. Curriculum in this context can be understood as a site for the regulation and containment of queer people. It is a means of regulating the agency of queers in advance, as well as a means to exclude and/or put down queers who do not structure their lives according to the dominant sexual norms (Luhmann 1998, Manning 1996, Rofes 1998, Talburt 2000).

Within the school system, curriculum development is largely a top-down approach. It relies on adult educators (or authorities) deciding what is and is not to be taught about queers. The notion of young queers being involved in curriculum development for schools, or the idea that they might engage with curriculum (in the classroom) as openly queer people, remains unintelligible within education-focused research/studies. In this regard, with homosexuality assumed to be abnormal, unnatural or undesirable (in schools), queer students will probably feel that they can’t openly engage with the materials, putting forth their experiences as queers. With such constraints, there is little possibility of curriculum materials or discussions being in tune with the life circumstances of young queers in the classroom or the school.

The approach of including homosexuality within curriculum is almost always reliant on referring to (homosexual) contexts outside of the school. What is not made visible is homosexuality (and queer culture) within the school context. Thus, homosexuality is positioned as existing exclusively outside of school. This can work to reinforce, rather than challenge, the notion that homosexuals do not exist in the school. In doing so, it fails to address the issue of social isolation of young queers within the school.
Sex Education


The advocating for sex education for gays and lesbians appears to be another example of researchers or academic writers pushing a particular measure, while failing to account for the various problems (see p.146 in this chapter) that prevent such measures coming to fruition in most schools. This includes the major problem that gay or lesbian sex is still considered unnatural, undesirable and wrong within educational institutions (including among educational authorities) and society in general. This makes it particularly difficult to establish gay and lesbian (safe) sex as an intelligible and appropriate topic of discussion within a school classroom, not only to those who determine the curricula but also to teachers, parents and other interest groups.

Education-focused researchers/academic writers, such as Hillier et al (1998:8, 45, 63) in the *Writing Themselves In* report, have sought to justify the inclusion of homosexual content into curriculum, through citing the problems young queers face due to a lack of sexual knowledge (such as the risks of various STD’s). To add to this problematic scenario young queers are said to be gaining information from what Hillier et al (1998:72, 62) claim are “less trusted” and
most likely to be “incorrect” and “misleading” sources – media and friends (this notion is critiqued in chapter 4). This is an example of what Britzman (1998:71) terms “strategies of knowledge”. A problem is discussed, analyzed and then installed within a particular group, who are constituted as a problem group or population. This problem is shown to be particularly serious, with dangerous ramifications (such as disease) and a solution is offered for the problem. For example, young queers are in need of safe sex education from schools to avoid disease. A major limitation of this approach is that gay and lesbian sex is limited to a disease focus, reinscribing it as ‘unnatural’ and ‘abnormal’. Also, there is no factoring in of queer sexual desire.

This approach has been rejected by AIDS organizations in Australia. For instance, the writers of AIDS Council peer education programs for gay, bisexual and homosexually active men in Australia (informed by HIV/AIDS research) have argued that a disease-only focus is not likely to be particularly interesting, attractive, meaningful and/or useful to their participants. In their programs, they utilize ‘sex positive’ materials and discourses that are designed (by gay men) to be appealing to gay men (this is discussed in detail in chapters 9 and 10).

The Information Model and Desire

Approaches to sex education within schools have largely relied on the Information Model approach (Harrison et al 1996, Britzman 1998:75, also see chapter 9 for more information about this model). Young queers have been constituted as sexually inexperienced/naïve and lacking sexual knowledge. The provision of appropriate safe sex information (from ‘informed’, ‘educated’ and ‘appropriate’ sources) is seen as necessary so that they will make ‘informed’, ‘responsible’ choices in relation to sex, thereby avoiding the risks of unsafe sex (Leonard and Mitchell 2000:9, Rofes 1996:164-165). However, this top-down approach to safe sex education has been shown to be inadequate.

HIV/AIDS researchers and educators in Australia have recognized that the provision of information centered around the ‘facts’ about safe sex, on its own, is not effective in achieving sustained safe sex behavior (Leonard and Mitchell
2000, Kippax et al 1993). Key to the efficacy of contemporary HIV prevention education (in Australia) is the understanding that sexual desire does not always align with rational decision-making; desire therefore needs to be incorporated into safe sex educational approaches. A knowledge-only approach (which is reliant on the notion of fixed, ongoing identities) is also considered to be particularly limiting given that the desires of gay and homosexually active men can shift and change, impacted upon by a range of variables (see chapters 6 -10).

The predominant educational approaches in schools do not factor in desire. Some possible reasons for this are that queer desire and sex is considered (according to dominant sexual norms) to be unnatural and also a threat (see Britzman 1998:65-67). In addition, there is a view that scientific knowledge (presumed to be ‘neutral’) should provide the basis for ‘educational’ materials. The incorporation of desires and fantasies into ‘educational’ materials (as happens in AIDS prevention materials for gay men in Australia) is therefore seen as potentially threatening or compromising the “so-called neutrality of scientific knowledge” (see Leonard and Mitchell 2000:3).

Educational authorities (for the most part) have insisted that the scope for sex and pleasure (in school curriculum) be confined to utility (Britzman 1998:69). There are many reasons for this including anxiety about sex, notions of age-appropriateness, the presumed dangers of explicit sexual information, and the ever-present ‘threat’ of homosexuality. Sex has therefore been normalized (and rendered an ‘appropriate’ subject) through its confinement to “proper object choice” and “marital reproductive sex” (Britzman 1998:69), as well as disease prevention (Leck 1995).

With sex normalized (in schools), the notion of “perversity” – which Britzman (1998:69) defines as “pleasure without utility” – being the “grounds of possibility for sexuality” is necessarily forgotten. A reliance on constructs of age appropriateness, cultural appropriateness and relevance also means not accounting for the “geopolitics of sexual spaces”. These constructs “prohibit the thought that sexuality is movement and bodies travel” according to Britzman
(1998:76, 75). This leaves much about sex and pleasure that is not spoken about in school classrooms.

The presumption (and expectation) of stability in terms of bodies and knowledge (around sex) involves the regulating of sex and sexual practices. The maintenance of the status quo (or the hegemony) depends on it. Stability (or the appearance of it) involves excluding particular bodies and particular knowledge that renders suspect the notion of stability. It also involves subordinating and vilifying those who do not regulate themselves in order to maintain appearances of stability or coherence. What gives the appearance of stability is the repetition of particular acts, behaviors, discourses and ‘stylization’ of the body (which are regulated along “culturally established lines of coherence”), over time (see Butler 1990:24, 140 for a discussion of this in relation to gender).

Presumptions of stability (and certainty) in terms of bodies and knowledge are also integral to maintaining boundaries around what is counted as ‘knowledge’ within institutions. Knowledge circulating within other subcultures (such as queer subcultures) outside of the normative institutions (schools) may not be recognized as knowledge within the dominant discourses in educational institutions.

AIDS Council peer education programs in Australia (due to differing norms and values), have much more scope to explore and delve into ‘perversity’ (as defined by Britzman 1998:69 above). It is also recognized (in these settings) that sexual practices can be fluid – impacted upon by contexts and/or circumstances (see chapter 10).

Knowledge

Knowledge (based on the Information Model approach) is represented as a single, unified reality. It is a passive ‘representation’ of the ‘real’ world, something that can be readily imparted to, and received by, the ‘uninformed’ (the students). Engagement with those presumed to be ‘ignorant’ (the students) is not required in this approach. Consequently, in regard to safe sex education, the
same information is provided to all by the presumed experts (school authorities) – information that may be totally divorced from young people’s sex lives.

Schools are seen to be the appropriate providers of sexual knowledge in most education-focused research/studies (see previous chapter). This is a reflection of the top-down approach to school education – particularly sex education (as discussed above; see also chapter 9). It is unintelligible in the school-education sector (in contrast to the HIV/AIDS social research/education sector in Australia) that young queers are sexually knowledgeable; that other institutions/organizations/groups outside of school may be better placed to provide access to sexual knowledge; that sexual knowledge circulates and is produced within sexual cultures (see chapters 6, 7, 9 and 10).

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This chapter has thus far focused on anti-harassment measures and curriculum – the two key areas of the school-reform agenda (of education-focused researchers and academic writers). The next section briefly departs from this agenda. It focuses upon an issue that does not, for the most part, feature in the recommendations or suggestions of (school) education-focused researchers/academic writers: the notion of encouraging and supporting young queers and queer teachers to be ‘out’ in schools.

**Queer Teachers and Young People in Schools**

Whilst queer youth support and social groups and AIDS Council peer education programs have (and value) openly queer youth-workers/facilitators (see chapter 10), the issue of openly queer teachers is still a highly problematic area in schools. Research continues to show that gay, lesbian and bisexual teachers are generally not disclosing their sexuality at school due to concerns about discrimination, harassment and job loss (Clarke 1997, Epstein and Johnson 1994, Ferfolja 1998, Khayatt 1992, Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby 2000). There aren’t any initiatives in Australia at the present time, either in education-focused research/studies or in gay and lesbian rights movements that seek to do something about this.
The overwhelming majority of young queers still feel that it is unacceptable to be openly gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer in schools. This has been documented frequently in education-focused research/studies on young queers, and is reiterated in more recent research in this field (Crowhurst 2001, Hillier et al 1998, Hogge 1998). To consider the school as anything other than a heterosexual space remains unthinkable and unintelligible not only within the dominant discourses of school institutions, but also within education-focused research/studies on young queers.

Schools and education-focused research/studies (for the most part) do not encourage or support the development of queer cultures within the school setting – such that queer students and teachers would not only be open about their sexualities but would be interacting/socializing in the school setting as queers. The approaches recommended by education-focused researchers/academic writers usually rely on the assumption and/or advocacy of non-disclosure for young queers and queer teachers. It seems to be accepted as a fait accompli that queers must hide their sexuality. With the sites of school and family being the predominant focus (and no factoring in of queer contexts), the risks are seen as too great in terms of possible harassment, violence and homelessness.

**Summary**

Education-focused research/studies (on young queers) have consistently shown that most cases of harassment and abuse for young queers occur at school, and there is a lack of visibility of homosexuality in schools. These problems are well known among the queer population. In response to this, many queer-focused researchers and academic writers, over the last decade or so, have called for schools and education authorities to combat homophobic abuse, and to include gay and lesbian perspectives in curriculum. These articles/reports have proposed various strategies (approaches, methods) for addressing these problems. However, these arguments and strategies have received very little attention within the school institution. Those who actively engage with school authorities often come up against strong resistance, opposition and/or lack of interest in their efforts to introduce queer-focused reform.
To date, there has been little research (within the field of education) into why school authorities have not sanctioned and adopted these strategies. In this chapter, I have explored this theme through examining the strategies in terms of their (in)compatibility with the heteronormative school institution, the obstacles encountered in attempting to implement them, as well as the limits inherent in these strategies – that constrain what is (considered) possible, appropriate, and desirable for young queers in schools.

Here, it becomes evident that homosexual-focused initiatives in schools are limited – in what they aim to achieve and/or what they are able to achieve – due to the stigma associated with homosexuality. This can be seen, for example, in strategies for addressing invisibility of gays/lesbians – that focus on inclusion of gay/lesbian content in curriculum, yet do nothing to encourage or support increased visibility of queer bodies (teachers and students) in the classroom. In this respect, homosexuality is limited to representation – not corporeality – and remains invisible in the school classroom. This is particularly problematic given that many of the problems confronting young queers are a consequence of them not being aware of, and therefore not able to socialize with, and learn from, one another.

The topic of queer sex, along with queer relationships, is particularly troubling for many teachers and school authorities. Yet, these are perhaps the most important topics in the lives of young queers. The school system is ill equipped to handle these topics in any substantive sense. Strategies that call on the school system to perform this task tend to remain on the shelf – away from the classroom. Queer theory reminds us that we cannot overcome these barriers without directly challenging the stigma of homosexuality. This is not likely to happen when school authorities and teachers are fearful of adverse repercussions if they go beyond what is ‘appropriate’ in the school – which is, in turn, determined by heterosexual norms and values.

Outside of the school context, there are a number of initiatives targeting young queers, that recognize the importance of, and provide, contexts where they can
get together and gain access to queer knowledge. In these contexts, young queers can talk openly about queer sex and relationships. This is where I shift the focus to – queer support groups and services – in Part 3 of this thesis. The topic of queer sex and relationships (in relation to young queers) is explored next.
Part 2

The Social and Sexual Worlds of Young Queers
In seeking to understand the social worlds of young queers, there is a need to reconceptualize homosexuality as a sexual practice that is constructed actively and collectively, and not just something one is (Dowsett 1996:9). By conceptualizing homosexuality in this way, the individual and collective subjectivities of young queers are seen to have agency (Dowsett 2000:41), in contrast to the predominant conceptualizations of young queers as non-agentic (within education-focused research/studies on young queers – see chapter 4). They are understood to have sexual knowledge, experience, fantasies and desires, and are recognized as being interested in social and sexual interaction with other queers – again in contrast to predominant conceptualizations of young queers as lonely and isolated and lacking sexual knowledge.

The next two chapters focus upon the queer sexual desires and practices of young people. I examine young people’s narratives about their early same-sex sexual experiences – focusing on what sex means to them, what role it plays in their lives, how they access sexual knowledge, how they expand their sexual repertoires, and the pleasures and excitement that queer sex brings.

This chapter focuses (predominantly) on the early same-sex sexual experiences of young boys and young men. The term ‘young queers’ is therefore used in a particular, rather than universalizing, sense. This chapter draws upon Gary Dowsett’s 1996 Australian life history research on gay and homosexually active men (Practicing Desire: Homosexual Sex In The Era Of AIDS), which provides a conceptual framework relating to this area (see chapter 1 for my reasons for choosing this research). This chapter also includes narratives from young women/girls, as all of these narratives are useful in illustrating, and exploring, key aspects of the theoretical framework utilized here.
This chapter starts with a brief account of the key issues, understandings and norms that render queer sex (between young people) as problematic terrain to investigate, or discuss, within education-focused research/studies on young queers. I then, by way of contrast, discuss some of the key features of those fields (queer literature and HIV/AIDS social research and education on gay and homosexually active men) where queer sex (particularly male-male) is discussed and explored in some depth. This leads me to Dowsett’s (1996) research – which I briefly introduce before moving on to explore some of the key points (he raises) relating to early sexual experience.

The Taboo of Queer Sex

Queer sexual desires and sexual practices, particularly early queer sexual experiences, are seldom discussed (in any substantive detail) within education-focused research/studies (including school-focused sexual health research) on young queers. This absence (of queer sex, in an expansive sense) can be understood as a consequence of dominant norms – influenced by youth development theory and hegemonic heterosexuality – in the field of education which, in part:

- constitute early sexual experience as dangerous and problematic for young people, thereby putting them (and their sexual partners) ‘at risk’ due to their lack of emotional, cognitive, physical and psychological maturity, and knowledge;

- position homosexual desire and practices as abnormal, deviant, unnatural and undesirable – something not to be spoken about in any detail.

Agentic queer subjects who enjoy and pursue queer sex, who connect with others and access sexual knowledge through queer sexual cultures, are therefore rendered problematic in this field. Yet, it’s not only for the above reasons. These (agentic queer) subjects also threaten the predominant conceptualization of young queers as non-agentic and/or lacking or deficient in some ways. Their knowledge, experiences, skills and fantasies with respect to sex, as well as the (sexual) issues
important to them can serve to highlight not only the inadequacy and irrelevance of existing structures and approaches for dealing with sex (in schools and education-focused research/studies) but also how unsexy, and boring ‘sex’ education is. Often these sexually active subjects are only of interest insofar as they can be used to make a case for provision of information about (safe) sex in schools (as can be seen in Writing Themselves In – Hillier et al 1998:72). This could involve characterizing them as being ‘at risk’ – lacking ‘proper’ knowledge about safe sex.

Influenced by queer theory I find myself turning away from the traditional approaches in education-focused research/studies on young queers. I turn to the fields of gay, lesbian and queer literature as well as HIV/AIDS social research on gay and homosexually active men, in order to explore the early sexual experiences of young queers in a sex positive manner. In these fields, homosexuality is not subordinated to heterosexuality, queer sex and desire are valued and elaborated, and sex is not exclusively or predominantly linked to the risk of disease or pregnancy.

**HIV/AIDS Research and Education – and Sex**

The field of HIV/AIDS research and education (for gay men) provides institutional contexts where it is not only legitimate to talk about sex between males, but it is seen to be crucial (see chapter 10). The advent of HIV/AIDS (among gay and homosexually active men) has contributed to the growth of discourses relating to male’s homosexual experiences. Sexual pleasure, the various types of sexual practice, the contexts sex occurs in and the (varying and shifting) meanings attributed to it are (at times) important foci in the fields of HIV/AIDS social research, education and prevention (in relation to gay and homosexually active men) in Australia.

The expansive, sex positive approach to male homosexual practice, described in the preceding paragraph, would (likely) be considered inappropriate, disgusting and/or wrong in mainstream contexts (such as schools and education-focused research/studies). Its prominence in the fields of HIV/AIDS social research,
education and prevention (for gay and homosexually active men) therefore indicates a rejection (in particular contexts) of heteronormative values and assumptions determining what is appropriate and inappropriate for discussions relating to sex, research, and safe sex materials for gay and homosexually active men. The effectiveness of HIV/AIDS education and prevention campaigns for gay men in Australia has been linked to these non-traditional approaches (see Leonard and Mitchell 2000, Dowsett 1996).

Dowsett’s 1996 life history research, which informs this chapter, departs from the traditional (in school-focused sexual health research, for example) conceptualization of boys’ or young men’s sexual experiences as individual, private experiences, disconnected from wider historical, social, collective and relational contexts. It also departs from the dominant practice of “treat[ing] sexuality as a bundle of discrete behaviours” (Kippax et al 1993:45). This is a reflection of dominant understandings and values within the field of HIV/AIDS social research (in Australia). Here, sex is understood as a social practice, which varies according to its contexts. Dowsett (1996) therefore immerses himself in the sexual cultures of the men that he is studying, paying close attention to not only the contexts that sex occurred in, but also the (shifting and varied) meanings and motivations attached to particular sexual activity. He explores and analyses the collective and relational aspects of sex as well as the relationships between sex and wider historical and social contexts, in a sex positive manner. This contributes to a much richer and more complex picture of queer sex and queer lives, than is revealed in educational or school-focused sexual health research (see chapter 4).

**The Significance of Early Sexual Experience in the Constructing of Queer Sexualities**

Early sexual activity, in its “collective nature” and “ritualistic character” is “capable of structuring practice and meaning, [and is capable] of clustering and encoding possibilities” [for sex] according to Dowsett (1996:259, 261). In this sense it is formative, he argues.
Liam, a young queer in the *Writing Themselves In* report (Hillier et al 1998:32), highlights the significance of early (same-sex) sexual experience in his life. He says that before he was ‘out’ to family or friends his greatest fear was being found out or being asked, “Where’s your girlfriend?” He speaks of his concerns as to whether he was normal, and the only one going through the problems he had, along with his wondering whom he could tell. At the time of the research though, he says that he feels “great” about his sexuality. He attributes this, in part, to his first sexual experience (the “next most important thing” was going to a gay youth support group):

> And then for me personally I just came to a day when I said enough is enough and I took the plunge and had sex with a guy (YAHOO!)…There’s no more ‘maybe I am, maybe I am not’, its just ‘Yes I’m gay!’ I know it now.

Most education-focused researchers or academic writers (consistent with youth development discourse and hegemonic heterosexuality) tend to assume that young queers’ lives will improve through encountering representations of queers in curriculum and receiving information about safe sex from schools (or the family). This offers nothing however to deal with the confusion that young people (such as Liam) may feel about homo sex, in terms of wondering whether it’ll work for them.

For Liam, it’s having sex with another guy (trying it out) – that’s enabled him to make sense of things and move on. It’s the main reason why he feels “great” about his sexuality. This is something that educational authorities and researchers (focused on schools), for the most part, can’t bear to think about. It’s unintelligible in this field due (in part) to the influence of youth development theory and hegemonic heterosexuality (see earlier section on “The taboo of queer sex” on p.160. Also see chapter 4). This may explain why Liam’s thoughts are not discussed or analyzed in the *Writing Themselves In* report (Hillier et al 1998).

Information, education and support – along with meeting other gays was also important for Liam, in terms of knowing that he “was going to ‘come out’ of this
OK” (Hillier et al 1998:32). A gay youth support group was the vehicle for this, not schools. The limits and problems for schools in these areas (information, education and support) are discussed in chapters 4 and 5, whilst the more expansive range of possibilities or opportunities that queer youth groups afford in these areas are discussed in chapters 8 to 10.

The Pursuit, and/or Taking Advantage of, Sexual Opportunities

Early sexual experience (as boys or young men) was a major source of bodily pleasure for the gay and homosexually active men in Dowsett’s (1996) research. They would seek out sexual opportunities, taking advantage of opportunities when they arose. It’s quite a contrast to (much) education-focused research/studies on young queers, which gives the impression of lives bereft of pleasure or excitement.

The use of the term ‘opportunity’ is key to an important distinction between the approach taken in this chapter (influenced by Dowsett’s 1996 HIV/AIDS social research) and the approach taken in mainstream education-focused research/studies on young queers. I use it in a positive, expansive sense – as something that works (in various ways) for the young people involved. In particular, I focus upon opportunities for (homo)sexual pleasure, opportunities for connection with other queers, and opportunities to access queer sexual knowledge. This conceptualization of ‘opportunities’ would likely be characterized as dangerous or risky within the dominant strand of education-focused research/studies (including sexual health research) on young queers – due to the pervasiveness of youth development theory and hegemonic heterosexuality.

A number of the narratives examined in this chapter involve situations where young people do not have a clear understanding of the consequences of acting upon their sexual feelings, prior to acting upon them. Although there may well be elements of danger in some of these stories, this is only one of many elements that constitute their sexual activities. It is therefore important that we avoid generalizing this behavior as dangerous or as putting them at risk.
In the opening story, Alexandra Waters (Waters 1996:131-132) writes about her first sexual experience with another girl, her best friend Christa, when she was fourteen. Before this experience she’s fantasized about the two of them being together, but “[she] had never dare to act on [her] feelings” (Waters 1996:131). As it turns out though, it is Christa who takes advantage of an opportunity that arises. The initiation of sex that occurs here, between two female friends, would be considered risky, according to the Writing Themselves In report (Hillier et al 1998:44) in respect to potentially “destroying [an] established and valued relationship”. This sort of issue is not upper-most in these girls’ minds though. And the sexual experience works for them, in terms of pleasure and enjoyment. If the young girls were to follow the approach seemingly advocated by Hillier et al (1998:44) they would postpone sex (for safety and friendship sake) until they’re much older, independent and in ‘safer’ environments. That is, after they’ve finished school or when they’re at university.

It’s early evening and Christa, who often comes over unannounced, goes up to Alexandra’s room. She opens the door without knocking:

There I [Alexandra] stood in front of my dresser naked. I had just gotten out of the shower.

“Oh,” she said, “I’m sorry,” and started to close the door.

“No,” I said. “It’s okay. Come on in.”…

…She kissed me softly at first, then with increasing pressure. Her hands moved from my waist to my back to my breasts…Our bodies pressed together. She kissed my neck and arms and breast and stomach…

…We laid down on the bed and Christa’s clothing was quickly peeled. We continued to kiss each other all over, on every inch of
skin. Things got more intense. It was a wonderful blur of lips and hands and thighs.

Tim and Rhys in *Holding the Man* (Conigrave 1995:77) also actively pursue sex. In the narrative below, they’re on a weekend away with school friends. Both have agency, with each flirting, trying to lure the other, seeking to be the one that gets the other to respond sexually.

The setting is a bedroom, where a number of boys are lying on, or in their beds. Rhys asks Tim to lie down on his bed so he can give him a hug. Tim is concerned what the other boys will think and says he’s going outside. Once outside he lights a cigarette. Rhys comes out and joins him, asking him for a puff. He runs his fingers through Tim’s hair, and leans against him, his face in Tim’s neck:

He (Rhys) smelt warm and sweet. His hand worked its way into my jeans and took hold of my hardening dick. We walked down the hill to the paddock that ran along the river, climbed the barbed wire and squelched through the long wet grass. We hugged. Our flies were undone. We rubbed our cocks on each other’s bellies, holding each other’s balls, pulling each other. We collapsed to the ground and lay there on dewy grass. We rubbed and pulled and grabbed until we both came.

The influence of wider social relations (on sexual activity) is apparent in this situation, with Tim being concerned about being caught by the other boys. It’s a quite different notion of risk to that which predominates in sex education discourse (in formal school education), that, is, the risk of disease or pregnancy, neither of which is uppermost in either boy’s thinking here.

In regard to getting caught, the anticipation of what is to occur sexually is enough incentive for Tim to work out ways to reduce the risk. It’s also interesting to note that each boy has a different notion of risk. Rhys is quite prepared to initiate something (with Tim) in a room with other boys present whilst Tim is not.
Integrating Sex into Play and the Social

Part of Dowsett’s (1996) research relates to early sexual experience. He highlights (1996:259, 261) how early sexual experiences were integrated into boys’ or young mens’ play, and were “deeply social”. The following two narratives explore the social and playful dimensions of sex for young people.

Paul Monette (1992:51) describes how sex is a part of the clubhouse games played by five Little League jocks (and also by him on a number of occasions), in Becoming A Man. There are parameters though so as to avoid the consideration that they’re actually having sex. The sexual activity here is linked to dares. It is a means of transgressing, a means of gaining status with each other:

They’d waggle their dicks at each other, yet always under the guise of talking about girls…The game they played was called, ‘I dare you’ each of us taking a turn to dare the boy beside him. ‘I dare you to go take a leak in the mailbox. To lay a turd on the Dennings’ doorstep. To take Richie’s dick in your mouth. By keeping it kinky and slapstick, they somehow avoided perceiving it as sex. We all had boners, but nobody ever came. It was mostly raunchy talk, all very tough-guy, an indoor sport that only lacked a ball.

What counts (or doesn’t count) as sex is not just an issue in sexual health research (see chapter 4) it’s also an issue in these boys’ games. With homo sex obviously a taboo, and homosexuality stigmatized, the boys have come up with ways to render their sexual activity unintelligible as sex, or as evidence of homosexuality.

The theme of integrating sex into play or the social is further explored through the following narrative from Holding the Man (Conigrave 1995:66). Joe tells Tim (a school friend) about a sexual experience he’s recently had with another boy from school (Romeo). The story relates to his pursuit of sex, in particular, his taking advantage of an opportunity when their bodies are exposed after
swimming. It’s an example of a recreational situation being manipulated for sexual pleasure.

Joe says to Tim that he’s had a busy weekend, as Romeo Pietro came over to his place after music rehearsals and stayed all weekend:

He raised his eyebrows lewdly. “I’ve begun my experiment to prove my theory that we are all bisexual.”

Tim is dumbstruck as both Joe and Romeo have girlfriends. He asks,

“How did it happen?”

“During rehearsal we got talking about music. I told him about my synthesiser and he seemed interested. We mucked around with music, then we went for a swim. Pietro in a pair of boardshorts is worth seeing. I told him I thought he had a good body and that his girlfriend must like it, and he complained that she won’t do anything and that he was getting frustrated. Then we talked about wanking and one thing lead to another.” He smiled a satisfied smile.

Joe has agency in the above situation. He knows how to use specific discourses to facilitate sex with another boy. In a context where both boys have girlfriends, this requires knowledge of how to keep the overall situation referenced in relation to heterosexual norms (that is, the heterosexual couple – Romeo and his girlfriend). This he does through positioning himself as admiring but not desiring Romeo’s body. Romeo’s body is referenced to his girlfriend, keeping it the object of a girl’s desire. This keeps them both positioned as heterosexual, thereby avoiding suspicion and possible hostility from Romeo.

Where did Joe gain knowledge of discourses that could facilitate sex, especially discourses that minimized the possibility of conflict ensuing? It’s not something that formal school institutions would be seeking to teach. It would be seen as
particularly inappropriate in terms of youth development. Perhaps Joe’s been part of cultures (informally) where such discourses or variations of them circulate. Indeed, this conversation could be characterized as an exchange of sexual knowledge itself, with Joe sharing his strategy for facilitating sex with Romeo. Tim could then draw upon this knowledge in his own sex life.

Education-focused research/studies (including sexual health research) on young queers is largely uninterested in the sexual discussions that occur between them. Enquiring into this would be problematic since it would potentially render suspect the predominant notions of young queers as being ignorant (indeed the notion of them having skills in facilitating sex is particularly unintelligible in this sphere of study), lacking in accurate and/or appropriate knowledge about sexual matters and therefore requiring information from school authorities (see chapters 2, 4 and 5 for discussions in this area).

I draw upon the narrative involving Joe, Tim and Romeo above (as well as those below), not only to highlight the sexual knowledge, strategies and skills (in facilitating sex) of some young queers but to emphasize the role of peer cultures as an avenue where sexual knowledge is produced and circulates. I think it’s important that young queers have the opportunity to be part of cultures where they can freely interact, talking openly about sex in ways that are relevant to their interests, desires and experiences. For some young queers, this may occur informally through their peer groups at school, or through sexual cultures outside of school. It can also occur as a consequence of mixing with other young queers in queer youth support groups (see chapter 10).

**Learning Through Sex**

The following section is informed by the notion that young people gain sexual knowledge through sexual experience. It’s a notion that would be considered highly problematic (and risky or dangerous) in youth development discourse (see chapter 4), yet it’s intelligible, acceptable and not automatically equated with danger in HIV/AIDS research on gay and homosexually active men. In this field, there is a celebrating and exploring of the positive consequences of homo sex.
Dowsett’s life-history research (1996: 13, 92, 171, 259, 263-4, 2000:31) on gay and homosexually active men highlights that fondling of each others dicks, pulling or jerking each other off in pairs or in groups (‘circle jerks’), sucking off, licking, feeling, touching and also fucking occurs between same-sex immediate family members, cousins, friends, school peers, between boys, young men and older men. These experiences of sex can involve learning about new or unfamiliar sensations, techniques and forms of sex from those who are older and/or more sexually experienced. They can also involve the accessing of sexual knowledge. All of this is not something that can be readily taught in schools. It requires doing, trying out and experiencing in an embodied sense, seeing how the techniques work or feel for oneself.

The following narratives explore the theme of learning through sexual experience. In the first story, *Pagan Babies* (Johnson 1993:32-33) Clifford who is 12 learns about ‘beating off’ and cumming from an older boy, Ted. The setting is a tent, where Ted is ‘beating off’ while the crotch of Clifford’s white Jockey shorts stiffen then bulge. Clifford learns through watching, doing what Ted does to himself. This highlights the importance of seeing firsthand how to go about things sexually, seeing the techniques, the reactions of the person, the changes in the body, experiencing the turn on:

“I’ve heard about wet dreams at school,” Clifford said, “but I guess I haven’t had one. I guess I can’t-can’t come. Not really.”

“Yeah, but you’re only twelve,” Ted said, looking down at himself and stroking harder… “When I was twelve, I couldn’t either, I’d just get that tingly feeling when I beat off, but then one day it just happened.”

“Oh,” Clifford said.

“But you get the feeling, don’t you?” Ted asked. “That tingly feeling?”
“Yeah,” Clifford said, “yeah, I guess so…”

…The search light’s pure strong beam reflected off the orange canvas of the tent, glowed along Ted’s smooth hairless muscular chest and arms, his flat belly, his bent legs and the fist working busily between them, pumping, twisting, pulling, and Clifford realized he was hard again just at the moment Ted threw his head back, saying Oh, oh- and when he whispered, “I’m going to shoot, watch this,” Clifford’s eyes widened at the amazing milky spurt that flew like a slender rope in the air. It fell across Ted’s tensed thighs, his forearms, his fist…Ted whooped and pointed and said, “Look!” Clifford saw that he’d hit the canvas roof, there was a milky white spot just above Ted’s legs and abruptly Ted had laughed and wiped himself…and reached his sticky hand across to grab hold of Clifford.

“Now you,” he said.

Clifford hadn’t resisted and for the first time Clifford did come – Ted let out an even louder whoop when Clifford’s own head went back for a moment, his own legs tensed. He looked down to see the bit of liquid hovering like a bead, like a pearl at the tip of that pulsing flesh he scarcely recognized as part of himself.

“You did it, Cliff!” Ted cried, and they both laughed…

From this point on Clifford and Ted (for a period) have an ongoing sexual relationship, camping in Ted’s backyard every weekend. This is a collective, social and relational experience. It involves the acceptance and support of someone (Cliff) with less sexual experience, someone who is clearly in wonderment at what is occurring. Through the experiences of their bodies, there is a commonality, a spark and a sense of connection. There is also an honoring of Cliff’s first experience of cumming – as something to be proud of.
What’s missing from this story in terms of how young queers are usually conceptualized in education-focused research/studies? Neither boy is lonely or isolated at this point of time and nothing untoward happens to them as a result of having this early sexual experience. Here (like many of the other young queers in this chapter) they’re not ‘Other’, ostracized, put-down or harassed. It’s quite the contrary; (in this moment) they’re connected, and experiencing pleasure; they’re valued, with each having some importance to other. And the school has played no role in all of this.

Cliff has heard about wet dreams at school, but the firsthand experience with Ted is of much more use. Here he feels comfortable enough to seek answers to his concerns and is able to get answers in language that is relevant to him. Also seeing and experiencing firsthand obviously tells him much more than any book or teacher could.

Sexual knowledge, practices and techniques that are accessed/experienced through sexual experience and discussions, can be understood as “resources” that are taken into future sexual encounters with others or oneself (Dowsett 1996:265). An example of this can be seen in Holding the Man (Conigrave 1995:19-20). Tim is staying over at a male school friend’s (Kevin) place. Kevin invites him to sleep in his bed, as he goes off to the toilet. While Kevin is at the toilet Tim gets into the bed and pretends to be asleep. Yet “every cell of [his] body was suddenly alert.” Kevin returns from the toilet and gets into bed. He reaches around to feel Tim’s dick, which swells in his hand. Tim brings to mind a guy he’s seen in a changing room with pale blue jocks, building a fantasy (in his mind). Sex with Kevin is not an isolated incident, disconnected from the past. The past (the guy in the change room) is brought into the present, through his fantasizing. It is elaborated (in his mind) making it (the fantasy), along with the sex, hotter. All this occurs without words and without Kevin being aware of it, as the sex continues:

Kevin rolled me onto my back and climbed on top of me. I could feel he had a fat, he rubbed it against me through his pants. He
undid my pyjamas, slid his trackies down and lay back on top of me, our cocks flesh on flesh.

His warm breath smelled of cigarettes, banana, stale chocolate. His warm hand wrapped around my tool, tugging it gently. He undid my pyjama top. Hard chest and sweet burning skin.

Tim cum. However, he’s still not aware of the process of cumming and thinks he’s pissing himself.

This early sexual experience leads to Tim (Conigrave 1995:22) thinking/getting curious about other sexual possibilities with Kevin:

Wonder what it would be like to suck him off. To lick his balls.

Tim also draws upon various elements of the sexual experience (with Kevin) into his own wanking:

…I reversed my hand as though he were holding me. I played with my knob and put the pillow on top of me so I could pretend it was him.

This narrative highlights a number of aspects that would not be given attention in school-focused sexual health research (as it’s presently structured): the role of sexual fantasies (in terms of sex); the development of an aesthetic of bodies (that is, the types of bodies that capture one’s gaze and turn one on); and the role sexual experience plays in broadening young peoples’ sexual repertoire or techniques.

Karen Friedland (Friedland 1996:148-149) also draws upon aspects of a past experience for a sexual encounter – her first with a girl. In this situation however, it’s sexual story telling by other young people, not sexual experience that proves to be particularly beneficial to her.
When Karen was seven the older boys in the neighborhood (a diplomatic compound) used to describe in vivid detail “[the] sneaked viewings of pornography (much embellished, no doubt) to my contingent of easily-wowed elementary schoolgirls and we in turn, ate it up.”

And now I found myself using this inside knowledge for my first pre-pubescent seduction scene. Thanks guys.

The setting is a store, in which there is a “large-breasted woman” and a “sleazy male customer” (Friedland 1996:148). He asks her to get things that require her to use a ladder or bend down low. She is wearing a low cut and high riding dress, so whenever she gets things her tits or butt peek out. The man is aroused and says, “May I please see your tits?” Karen says, “the woman must have been aroused too, because she breathessly [sic] complied, and they ended up having sex on the counter.”

Karen describes the movie to another young girl and they begin acting it out. The other girl takes on the role of the “big titted woman” whilst Karen is the “dirty old man”:

I [Karen] suppose that was because I was a year older and I wanted to top. Or maybe it was the baby dyke inside me acting up for the first time. Who knows. In any case I [Karen] asked her to bend over so I could catch a good look at her tits. I used the phrase, “May I please see your tits?” And it turned me on immensely. I asked her to remove her clothes, one piece at a time. I too removed mine, like the dirty old man I was. Then I climbed on top of her smooth, skinny girl body and we thrust into each other like small slithery fish. I pretended we were there on the counter of that dusty shop. I imagined we were the sexy adult characters in the movie, not two small, hairless girls. I envisaged her as a luscious, large breasted blond, and accordingly caressed her, slamming into her and rubbing against her. It felt very, very
good, though I was not exactly sure how and why. (Friedland 1996:148-149)

Sex here is linked to the past. Previously, sexual talk had been an important part of the social activities of Karen and a group of girls and boys. It was a major form of entertainment, giving the older boys status and a way to impress the girls. It was also exciting and pleasurable for the girls.

Sexual talk, along with the imagining and fantasizing that goes with it, connects these children. It is a pleasurable activity that brings them together. Through sexual talk, they gain knowledge that can play an important role in later sexual encounters. Thus, Karen draws upon the porno storyline (she learnt from the boys), and the discourses within it, to provide a scenario for having sex with another girl. It’s a way to recreate what has occurred before, to bring back the pleasure and excitement. It’s also a way to have status and agency, just as she witnessed with the boys. Karen assumes control. She’s the “top” and appropriates the language for this role, such as “May I please see your tits?” She also brings her own imaginings (or fantasies) of the woman in the store to the sex, to make it much hotter and also transgressive (such as through having sex on a store counter).

Considering Karen’s story in terms of youth development discourse would provide quite a different perspective. Karen could be positioned as ‘at risk’, due to having a ‘dysfunctional’ home (with inadequate parental supervision) and social life (having friends who are ‘bad influences’). The boys meanwhile could be positioned as having inadequate parental supervision and poor role models (those who have pornography).

**Sex as a Means of Exploration**

Early sexual experience, for the men in Dowsett’s research (1996), provided a means of exploring, not only other guys’ bodies, but also their local area (see Dowsett 1996:260-264). It occurred in their homes, their street and their neighborhood (in changing rooms, shopping centers, construction sites), as well as within institutions such as boarding schools. Like Tim above, they often
brought their (existing) knowledge of the sensations and pleasures gained from exploring bodies (theirs and others), as well as their knowledge of private/secret locations for sex, to these sexual experiences (Dowsett 1996:261).

Knowing about private or secret locations for sex, whilst important for the young queers in the following stories, is not the sort of ‘knowledge’ that formal school institutions see as important for young people. Teaching about locations for sex would (according to youth development discourse) be problematic since it would be seen as encouraging sexual activity. It’s not surprising, therefore, that the knowledge young people rely on below is gained by their own initiative, through explorations and accessing the sexual knowledge of others.

The predominant focus on the hostile school and society, within education-focused research/studies on young queers, gives the impression that there are very few spaces where young queers can express themselves sexually (without the fears of being harassed or abused). This effectively keeps the queer subject contained and non-threatening to the sexual order in schools. The narratives in this section (like many others in this chapter and the next) provide different perspectives on queer lives. They don’t rely on the notion of unilateral power constantly bearing down on young queer subjects. Here the young queer subjects are not containing themselves sexually in accordance with youth development discourse. They’ve found spaces where they can (at these particular moments) connect with others, experience pleasure, access sexual knowledge and broaden their sexual repertoires. Here they’re agentic and not focused on danger, threats and/or fear of abuse or harassment. Certainly wider social relations exert some influence on them yet it is not all encompassing, or all-powerful. They’re still pursuing and getting into sex. These queer subjects are therefore not compatible with the dominant norms and values of education-focused research/studies and formal educational institutions.

Kite and Paul in *Becoming a Man* (Monette 1992:22) put their knowledge of secret and private places in their local area to good effect, having sex in various locations (such as a tree-house and tool shed). There is spontaneity, a taking advantage of opportunities when they occur:
Never a planned thing: Kite and I would see each other on the street and go off behind a barn, or up in the attic of our garage.

Stephanie in ‘Crush to Sex’ (Sims 1996:30-31) requires a private, secluded place to make sense of a wetness between her legs, the sensations in her genitals (when she rubs her clit) and the emotions she feels. All of these occurrences are a consequence of her attraction to an older girl, Mandy. Yet no one has explained to her about sexual arousal, attraction and masturbation. Consequently, she strategizes to find out more.

One evening she asks Mandy to come for a walk with her. She notices that the wetness is once again there, and is pleased that she has until dark to be home. Here the impact of wider social relations (on sexual activity) is apparent.

Stephanie’s previous experiences of wetness and sexual sensation are brought to this sexual experience. They ensure that the focus of her attention is Mandy’s pussy:

While I had never seen another girl or woman’s pussy, not even my mothers, I somehow had the image that hair grows there. I wondered if Mandy had hair and if she got wet like I did.

Our walk led us down to an old logging trail to an isolated pine forest…I rested my head on her breasts in complete silence. As I looked down, I had a close up view of her belly and her dress-covered pussy. Without thinking I ran my hand up her dress, touching her legs, then through her panties. She did not resist…Amid our laughter I pulled her dress up to her waist…pulled up my own dress and got on top of her. We kissed for the first time…Our pussies were pressing together in synchrony. After a bit, Mandy stopped, took off her panties, then mine, and pulled me back on top of her. My orgasm – my very first – hit like a bolt of lightening.
This first experience of sex with a woman leads to a desire for more. Sex is pursued on an almost daily basis with Mandy introducing Stephanie to other sexual activities like finger penetration and oral sex. This is consistent with Dowsett’s research (1996:146, 159, 123, 173, 205), which shows that sexual experience can lead to a broadening of one’s sexual repertoire. Sexual partners can suggest possibilities that may not have been thought of by the other partner. They can initiate activities that the other person is unsure of, or too nervous to initiate themself. They can demonstrate techniques with different forms of sexual activity. This notion – of sexual partners being integral in terms of one’s knowledge about sex – whilst recognized within fields such as HIV/AIDS research and education (on/for gay and homosexually active men – see chapter 10) is unintelligible within formal school education and the dominant strand of education-focused research/studies on young queers.

**The Body in Context**

Dowsett (1996:160) highlights that the “erotic attractions [of boys and young men] are far broader than just genitals”. He emphasizes the importance of not separating sexual activity from the contexts that they occur in, something that Australian sexual health research on young people, including SSAY, generally does (Lindsay et al 1997, Hillier et al 1998, see chapter 4). It is the “body in context that adds spice” to the sexual encounter according to Dowsett (1996:160). He discusses this in relation to nakedness. Young boys are aware that there are places where nakedness is ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’. Thus, there is (for some young boys) spice in stripping and being naked in a place deemed not appropriate for nakedness. It’s a way to transgress, but there is more to it than transgression. The eroticism of stripping and exhibiting oneself to others, along with being in a place not approved of, can also add spice to the situation. Dowsett (1996:160) says that children seek out secret places where such exhibitionism can occur.

The thrill of nakedness, along with having sex in a particular context can be seen in one of Paul and Richie’s sexual experiences in Monette’s *Becoming a Man*.
(1992:51). Richie decides to take advantage of both his parents working by having sex with Paul in his house. The possibility of sex here is connected to a wider social context, the full time working lives (outside the home) of his parents. Other children by contrast, whose mothers “stayed home” had to manage their sexual experiences around this, or had to find places outside of the home.

The illicit feel of the empty house was heady as we stripped naked and chased each other around the doily-covered tables, the Barcaloungers, and Ethan Allan repro of a staid white-collar ranch… We took turns lying on the floor, the one on top poking his dick between the bottom one’s legs and getting some friction going. That and a lot of sucking…

There is spice here and a sense of transgression not only in being naked in an empty house, but in being naked and chasing each other around various items of furniture along with the painting on the wall. It’s the contrasts that add spice – nakedness and chasing in the context of doilies on a table. The former (nakedness and chasing) could be seen to be naughty, illicit, out of control and spontaneous, the latter (doilies) perhaps representing respectability, order and tidiness. The naughtiness is also juxtaposed against the “staid white-collar ranch” in the picture.

It’s spicy for Paul and Richie to have sex in an environment that reeks of respectability and order – an environment that is devoid of sex, where (presumably) it’s seen as not appropriate to have sex. Even before they get into it, there is much anticipation and excitement as they imagine the transgressive possibilities of being alone in the empty house.

If I consider the sexual experience of Richie and Paul in terms of the National Sexual Health research (on secondary students) conducted by Lindsay et al (1997), a number of issues emerge. The context the sex occurs in wouldn’t be of interest. The rubbing of dicks between each person’s legs – isn’t penetration (that is, penis in vagina) and wouldn’t (from a normative perspective) fit the category of sexual touching (that is, petting). And even if it were considered by the young
person to be ‘sexual touching’ – then the actual practice they’re involved in (rubbing of dicks between each person’s legs) would not appear in the report. It simply becomes ‘sexual touching’ since the report does not allow for the young people to indicate the type of sexual touching they’ve been involved in. Similarly, their oral sex is out of bounds (in terms of the research), because it’s apparently too ‘sensitive’ a topic to talk about – and is not asked about in the research (see chapter 4). The *Writing Themselves In* (Hillier et al 1998) ‘protection’-focused approach (to sex) is also pretty much irrelevant to Richie and Paul’s sexual activities. By contrast, what counts as sex, and what is factored into research about sex is considerably broader in the field of HIV/AIDS social research (on gay and homosexually active men).

The following narrative is drawn upon to further illustrate the importance of considering bodies in contexts – in relation to sexual experience.

Billy-Boy in *50 ways of Saying fabulous* (Aitken 1995:110-112) fantasizes about a particular body in a specific context. In the following extract, he draws upon a fantasy involving himself and a boy (from school) he is attracted to (Stuart Hale). This leads to a pleasurable sexual experience with another boy (Roy) whom he considers to be far less attractive than Stuart.

Billy-Boy doesn’t reveal the fantasy to Roy. It is, however, actively playing out in his imagination while the sex takes place. It contributes to the sense of this being an event, providing a past (history), specific roles for each boy, a storyline and a particular power relationship (Billy-Boy in charge with Roy submitting).

The location (a disused old jail) is an important aspect of this sexual experience. Its design and former use fuel the sexual imaginings of Billy-Boy. Though he’d never considered it to be a jail, the “iron rings driven into the stone, with chains dangling off them” and the initials covering the walls of the gaol make it quite convincing to him. As he is cycling down there one day he starts to fantasize about the jail, inventing “a grander reason for [his] solitary circumstances” (Aitken 1995:110-111):
I decided I was a conqueror returning from my journeys in foreign lands, come home to inspect the contents of my personal dungeon where I had abandoned my enemies (various rugby playing local boys) to rot in chains years before. Only over Stuart Hale did I hesitate. Despite his treachery, I couldn’t bring myself to consign him to chains. Finally I decided upon the perfect punishment for his crimes: I would make him my personal slave, obliged to do anything I desired or he would be banished to the dungeon.

Billy-Boy is much more powerful in this fantasy than in other contexts of his life. In this context, he has agency and status. As the conqueror he’s the one who vanquishes his enemies to his personal dungeon, the one who determines whom mercy should be extended to and what actions they must perform to gain his mercy. Billy-Boy is so immersed in this fantasy that he flings open the door of the jail bellowing, “so you’ve been trying to escape have you?” He realizes to his embarrassment that there is someone in the jail (Aitken 1995:111):

For a moment I thought I’d somehow slipped back in time and this was an actual prisoner, for the person was slouched on the floor, one hand through one of the iron hoops scratching at the stone wall with a stick. I’d startled him with my sudden entry and he jumped to his feet. It was then that I recognised him. It was Roy.

They are both lost for words, and mutter sorry at the same time. Billy-Boy says he was playing a game and Roy says, “Yeah me too.” Neither knows what to do (Aitken 1995:111).

Billy-boy is nervously excited. It’s his first opportunity to be with Roy since he felt and grabbed Roy’s cock at a friend’s party. He is relieved that the light is dim so that he doesn’t have to look at Roy’s pimples. This way he can almost imagine that it’s Stuart (another boy he fancies) that he’s with. He resumes the fantasy (from before) with Stuart as his “personal slave” (Aitken 1995:112):
Stuart who I could do whatever I wished with. There was no need to ask permission. I sank my hands into the crotch of the boy next to me...He didn’t object. Instead he reciprocated, reaching between my legs for what was swelling in the confines of my underwear. We fondled one another both of us growing hard...He took my hand, clasped it for a moment before guiding it back to his cock. Then his hand burrowed beneath the elastic waists of my trousers and underwear, grasping my cock...The touch of his fingers upon it was a revelation. My cock pulsed as if it had developed a heartbeat. I closed my eyes. Everything was a sensation. I was in a drowsy, swooning state. It was easy to believe that it was Stuart pressed against me. Stuart ransacking my pants and murmuring his appreciation over what he had found there.

With Billy-Boy imagining himself as the conqueror once more, he doesn’t have to talk, he doesn’t have to ask permission of the other (the slave), he can initiate. With Roy being into and going along with what is occurring, it allows Billy-Boy to maintain the fantasy in his own head. Thus, he can read Roy’s actions as being that of a slave.

Billy-Boy is so immersed in the fantasy that when Roy gasps he is momentarily startled (and opens his eyes), thinking that there is someone else in the jail. He turns and looks but the door is still shut (Aitken 1995:113):

I turned back to Roy, puzzled but annoyed. The moment had been interrupted and ruined. I was disagreeably aware that it was Roy who was next to me, not Stuart.

It is a specific body (Stuart’s) in a particular context that is initially driving Billy-Boy in this sexual experience. The idea of Stuart’s body in the jail (as his slave) makes him horny. When a noise disturbs his imagining, and all he can see (as he opens his eyes) is Roy’s body, it’s no-where near as hot or horny. At least not until the following occurs (Aitken 1995:113):
He burrowed his face into my neck and pressed himself against me, clenching my cock even harder. ‘Rub it faster’ he said in a broken voice, a voice that didn’t sound like Roy. ‘As fast as you can.’

I obeyed. This didn’t seem like the Roy I knew at all. He was possessed by a forcefulness of spirit I could never have imagined.

With Roy behaving in a way that is so different to how Billy-Boy has previously known him, in a way that is desirable to him, he (Roy) is infinitely more sexually appealing. Thus the sex continues.

**The Thrill of Being Sexual in the Presence of Others**

The classroom (in relation to sex) is generally viewed (in terms of dominant norms in education) as a site for information transfer from the teacher to student. The notion of the classroom being a space where sexual activity occurs (especially with a teacher present) is unintelligible. It would be considered inappropriate, wrong and potentially dangerous. Thus, any teacher who was taking a class where sexual activity occurred would likely be positioned as lacking in effective classroom control and management strategies. They would potentially be ‘at risk’ of disciplinary action from educational authorities.

The authors of the *Writing Themselves In* report (Hillier et al 1998) maintain the notion of the non-sexual classroom, along with the notion of a non-sexual (in terms of same-sex sexual activity) school environment. They (Hillier et al 1998:43) position sex between boys for example, as occurring away from the “prying eyes of school, family and immediate peers.”

The following narrative shows a classroom environment that is (in this context) a sexualized space. In drawing upon it, I seek to show the agency of the boys involved, to show young queers who are transgressing the boundaries imposed by educational and heterosexual norms. I present queer subjects who are sexually active within the classroom context – highlighting this context as not being an
exclusively heterosexual domain. In so doing, I distance myself from the practice of positioning embodied homosexual desire and practice outside the school and classroom.

The narrative below highlights the pleasure and thrill that can come from transgressing the norms of ‘appropriate’ conduct – in this case being sexual in contexts where others are present, but are assumed to be unaware of what is going on (see Moore 1991:37 for a discussion of this theme). It points to the importance of focusing on the contexts in which bodies get together sexually – a practice that is generally unintelligible within school-focused sexual health research.

Tim (Conigrave 1995:94) sits beside John in class at school. He describes their turning each other on, their sexual teasing, whilst the class is taking place:

John and I were rubbing our knees together, caressing each other in long gentle strokes that became slower and more sensual. I wrote, ‘I’m getting turned on.’ John whispered, “Better check that.” His hand slid across the seat and up my thigh. He reached into my pocket. I nearly gasped.

In this scene there is the thrill of transgression, doing something sexual in an area deemed ‘inappropriate’ for such activity. Tim says:

Part of me was shocked, but the other part of me wanted to see how far we could get. John was holding my hard-on in a class of twenty boys and I had no sense of time or place.

Tim and John are immersed in the pleasure of the moment yet two incidents quickly return them to other matters. Father Bradford asks Tim a question. Tim wonders what he saw and has to ask what the question is again. John quickly shifts his hand. As two other boys are asked to read aloud, Tim begins to tease John (Conigrave 1995:94):
I thought I’d make him sweat it out so I kept making false advances, until my hand found its warm home in John’s pocket. There it sat in contentment, holding his hard on.

Later a boy behind them knocks his pencil case under his table. He bends down to pick it up. Tim and John jump, with Tim banging his knee under the desk. He’s sure they’ve been seen.

Tim and John initially appear to relax in the above situation, enjoying the pleasure, after John successfully makes contact with Tim’s hard-on. They tune into the sensual, and tune out from what is going on around them in the classroom. Neither is free of external constraints however, as many things in the classroom can affect how far they progress or how long they can continue. Sex here is contingent on many factors such as no one else noticing, or if they do, then not saying anything. It’s also contingent on the way the class is organized and how the lesson is structured (see p.189 of this chapter for further discussion about the contingency of sex). Thus the lack of overt, constant supervision of each and every student, on this occasion, works to their advantage. Their nerves (which are tested on two occasions here) also play an important part in the sexual experience. Consequently, there is some tenuousness that co-exists with the sense of being daring through transgressing norms of ‘appropriate’ conduct in a classroom.

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**Anti-Sex Discourses and the Pursuing of Sex**

**The Role of Adults in the Production of Anti-Sex Discourses**

Dowsett (1996:143) highlights how loud and generalized anti-sex discourses permeated the childhoods of men in his research. These anti-sex discourses were often incoherent to the boys (Dowsett 1996:260). The adults didn’t spell out in clear detail what their concerns were, possibly due to embarrassment as well as a disregard for childhood sexuality (Dowsett 1996). The discourses were also incoherent when considered from their (the young boys’/mens’) perspectives. Knowing of the many pleasures of sex, they actively sought it out (see Dowsett 1996:260).
For some of the men anti-sex and/or anti-homosexual discourses were a source of conflict for them as young men. Some began to associate wrongdoing with their sexual desires and their sex. Yet this didn’t stop them pursuing sex (Dowsett 1996:259-260). For most of the men, the sensation and pleasure of sexual activity provided the incentive to “bypass, override or ignore” these negative discourses (see Dowsett 1996:146-147, 265) and/or the chance of punishment from adults. These discourses served to highlight the need for increased secrecy and covering of their tracks. Homosexuality in this context then was rendered a “silent domain of pleasure and transgression”(Dowsett 1996:260). It was an adventure, a seeking and exploring of the forbidden.

Unlike heterosexual activity, there was a “profound silence on homosexuality”, at least until adolescence, for the men in Dowsett’s research (1996:142-143). Even then, the discourse tended to remain non-specific (Dowsett 1996:142-143). Many boys then (early on at least) actively pursued sex, exploring each other’s bodies, experiencing various pleasure and sensations “wildly oblivious” to the negative views and prohibitions about same-sex sexual desire and sexual activity (Dowsett 1996:261). Later on – their “bodily experiences of physical pleasure”, their experiences of “collective transgression”, their gradually developing discursive frameworks with which they used to understand their experiences and desires – “offer a more than adequate position from which to bypass, override, or ignore (rather than refuse or resist) their gradually intensifying definition as deviant, as homosexual” (Dowsett 1996:265).

The following extracts highlight contexts where young queers are aware of negative discourses about sex. Some are only aware of generalized anti-sex discourses, while others are aware of negative discourses about same-sex sexual activity. Common to all of them is an overriding or ignoring of these discourses (at least for a period of time) and the seeking of what is pleasurable to them.

Kit in Now & Then (Corlett 1995:34, 35, 151) is well versed in many of the negative discourses relating to same-sex sexual activity. They readily come to
mind when he thinks about sex with Stephen. However, they do not deter him in his pursuit of sex with Stephen.

Initially Kit and Stephen don’t go through with having sex due to concerns about being caught. Kit begins to think about this, weighing up the pro’s and con’s of going through with sex:

He’s right, there is no one here to discover us. It would be safe. But is that the only reason why I refused him. What about religion for heavens sake? What about what it does to you? I never believed all that nonsense about going blind…but all the same doing it with another boy is unnatural, and there must be consequences.

And yet, sexual desire draws him back to Stephen:

Maybe if he really wants to – if it will make him feel better – then we could do it. Just once. To see what it’s like.

I only know I want to go back. I want to find out what it is that is so forbidden, that is so sinful. I want to feel his hand on me again.

Anti-homosexual discourses readily come to mind for Kit. Yet these must compete with the strong pull of desire and the sense of connection (relationality) he feels with Stephen. The anti-homosexual discourses also serve to designate something for Kit to check out. That is, if homosexual sex is so forbidden and so sinful, what is it that makes it so? Rather than relying on what others say, Kit decides to find out firsthand.

On another occasion with Stephen (Corlett 1995:151), Kit is drawn to him, eager for sex. An array of anti-homosexual discourses comes to mind but once again they’re dismissed, as his sexual desire for Stephen is compelling:
We move round behind the tree...I feel his hands tearing at the buttons of my trousers. I know all the reasons why we shouldn’t do it here, do it now, even do it at all. But I don’t listen to the reasons. ...[I] start to unfasten my flies [sic]. In the half-light I can see him releasing his hard cock from his open trousers. I hold it in my hands. It is as big as I remembered but now it seems more eager, more demanding. I remember the feel of his mouth around mine. I want to give him the same pleasure.

Jacqui Walter in talking about her first sexual experience (in ‘The bluehouse unplugged’) with another female student, illustrates how the thrill of the experience coexists with a sense that it is wrong (Carroll et al 1999:113). The desire to pursue it further, however, is particularly strong:

It was a real mixture – a lot of guilt – but the danger aspect was exciting. I was doing something that was a complete No-No. It was exhilarating but I didn’t think how short my life would be if we got caught. And at the back of my mind was the awful thought: ‘This is not OK.’

For Jacqui it is “exhilarating” and “exciting” to transgress, to do what is considered to be dangerous. It’s not clear how much Jacqui’s been told about same-sex sexual activity but she has a sense that it’s wrong. The desire to transgress, however, provides her with enough incentive to override the anti-sex discourses. The sense of wrongness does not go away though. She says, “I was trapped in a confusion of feelings – I had to hide”. The confusion (in this context) does not rest with “the emotional and physical side of [the experience].” Jacqui says, “there was no doubt in my mind that this was exactly where I wanted to be, where I needed to be.” The confusion appears to be the result of trying to make sense of the fact that what works for her, something that is “exciting”, “exhilarating” and “so incredibly different” from being with a boy, something that she has “no doubt” about – is a “complete No-No” for others.
The Role of Sex Education and Sexual Health Researchers in the Production of Anti-Sex Discourses

School sex education, along with school-focused sexual health research (such as Hillier et al and Lindsay et al 1997), are also implicated in the production of anti-sex discourse through their predominant focus on the dangers of sex (such as pregnancy and disease) and their obscuring of sexual pleasure. In respect to school-focused sexual health research the anti-sex line is usually not explicit, but is implicit (naturalized and taken for granted) in the design of their research (in what is and is not asked about), the predominant focus taken in their reports (the risk of disease, pregnancy, abuse and ostracization), and the absence of a focus on sex as pleasurable or important for gaining of agency and accessing sexual knowledge (see chapters 4 and 5).

The Contingency of Sex

‘Tolerance’ – Feigning of Ignorance from Others

The possibility of boys or young men having sex with each other can be contingent on a “certain tolerance” from some people (Dowsett 1996:260). They may choose not to notice, or feign ignorance about sex that is occurring. Education-focused research/studies on young queers, with its homogenizing of society (including school) as overwhelmingly negative and hostile towards young queers effectively discounts the possibility of this occurring, however. Thus narratives such as those included in this chapter, are not brought to bear on understandings about young queers and the adults around them.

In the following narrative from Holding the Man (Conigrave 1995:92-94), an adult pretends not to notice that sex is occurring between Tim and John. The other male students meanwhile don’t have an issue with Tim and John having sex. Some have an interest in their relationship, as well as an interest in sex with each other. It’s quite a different picture to the dominant notion in sexual health research such as Writing Themselves In (Hillier et al 1998) or in masculinity research directed at schools (Glynn 1998, Martino 1997a, c, Plummer 1999) where the peer culture (particularly boys in masculinity research) is generally
conceptualized as hostile or negative to those who are (or perceived to be) homosexual. Little attention is given in these fields to those subjects who are not negative or hostile (towards queers), or who are supportive of the same-sex sexual activities of their peers.

The setting here (Conigrave 1995:92) is a school religious retreat. The possibility for sex (between Tim and John) is facilitated by another student’s (Joe) suggestion that they all sleep on the floor:

John and I could sleep together without looking sus, so we agreed.

Tim and John lie head to toe, with John holding Tim’s feet close to his cheeks and kissing them:

‘You’d better stop’ [says Tim], ‘I’m cracking a fat.’

‘Good so am I,’ John said seductively.

Another guy (Joe) in the dorm who is watching them says:

‘What are you two up to? A bit of foot fetish, John?’

There appears to be a certain amount of pleasure for Joe, in his watching of Tim and John. Similarly, another boy (Biscuit) appears to be quite interested in the sexual possibilities that may occur between the boys. Earlier (Conigrave 1995:92) as the boys had put the mattresses on the floor, Biscuit had winked at them saying, “Never know what might happen.”

Later that night, Tim and John kiss and explore each other’s bodies (Conigrave 1995:93):

Lips caressing lips. Exploring. Our lips slightly parted, exchanging breath. Hands slipping into each other’s sleeping-bags. His warm body in cotton PJs. Running my hand up his
spine, feeling the muscles in his back. His hand going in under my pyjama shirt. Skin of his hand against the skin of my back. My hand slipped into his pants and stroked his downy bum, pulling his hips closer to mine. I wanted to reach around to the front and hold his sex, but was scared that it might spin him out. I moved my hand to his stomach and slowly worked it down to play with his bush of pubes, occasionally brushing his erection.

His eyes were shut and his breathing was getting faster. I took hold of his cock in one hand and his cool balls in the other. He started to groan...He was coming in my hand.

He took my cock and held it against his body, undoing his pyjamas. I pumped it against his belly till I came on his stomach. John touched my semen. ‘Wow.’ He smeared it over his chest and stomach. ‘Can you touch me again?’

The next morning they are lying together. The other boys are already up, but nothing has been said to Tim and John about their sleeping together. It’s not an issue for the other boys. As Tim and John lay there kissing and caressing, Father Wallbridge walks in:

He mumbled good morning, crossed the room, and went out through the sliding doors. We looked at each other, wide eyed. ‘He was more embarrassed than us.’ We burst into laughter.

(Conigrave 1995:94)

On this occasion, embarrassment on the part of Father Wallbridge means an avoidance of talking about what was happening. John and Tim can therefore continue to have sex without any intervention from him.

**Availability of Space for Sex**

Dowsett’s research (1996:260-261) highlights that the possibility of sex is also contingent on the availability of spaces to have sex, and operations of power. The
latter relates to boys’ or young men’s wider social relations with teachers, welfare workers, police, local gangs, parents, and also from the boys or young men involved in the sexual activity.

The following extracts relate to the availability of space to have sexual experiences. They illustrate occasions of ingenuity, agency and spontaneity, along with the influence of wider social relations.

In the first extract (Friedland 1996:149), Karen (who is in sixth grade) pursues sexual activity with another girl, her best friend (“D”). This occurs whilst her parents are at home. She’s aware that there’s a risk of getting caught but this doesn’t stop her – and they’re not checked up on:

We were both artistic, and one summer evening found us painting at my house, in my room. Suddenly for no apparent reason we decided to get naked and paint each other instead of the paper. Fortunately, my parents never once decided to check in on us. We spent hours of what, in retrospect, amounted to great foreplay, stroking each other’s pink girly bodies with soft, hugely exciting paintbrushes…I…took special care to dot D’s soft budding nipples with pretty colors and to do lots of swirls and curlicues around her pubic mound, which was just starting to sprout a hair or two. I stroked the tip of the brush right between D’s puffy pink vaginal lips. I loved how she wiggled when I did this. I loved that I could see her naked and excited, in all her glory… She painted me too and I remember feeling joyous, but strange, squishy and ecstatic. It was an artistic endeavour, to be sure, and I couldn’t altogether make sense of the heady wetness I felt.

Here, the lack of supervision is a positive thing for the girls. It’s an important part of gaining sexual experience. This experience could be viewed quite differently however, if considered in terms of youth development theory. It would likely be positioned as a particularly inappropriate consequence of ‘bad’ parenting, in terms of inadequate parental supervision.
Another possible view on the situation, which would be quite unintelligible in terms of dominant notions of ‘good’ parents, is that the parents are not necessarily unaware of what could occur, or is occurring between the girls sexually. They may not have an issue with them being involved in sexual activity. Thus, they could have decided to allow them some privacy, not checking up on them.

In the following extract, parents exert some degree of regulation that affects the possibility for sexual experience within the house. Yet, it is not unilateral power. Tim and John (Conigrave 1995:95) actively seek the pleasure of sex in their homes, working out ways to circumvent the regulation, covering up any evidence of them having sex:

> We were staying at each other’s houses at every opportunity. We’d fix the room so it looked like we were sleeping in separate beds, but we’d both be on the mattress on the floor doing the wild things.

When their sexual relationship is discovered Tim’s parents initially forbid John sleeping over. Tim and John get around this by finding places outside the home. Eventually Tim’s parents relent on this decision. They still seek to maintain some measure of regulation, yet this regulation is easily overcome:

> Mum and Dad had relaxed their stand on John staying over, as long as he slept in the front room. So we’d wait until everyone was asleep, then he’d sneak down to my room and we’d get naked and sexy.

(Conigrave 1995:117)

**Summary**

The queer subjects in this chapter (and the next chapter) are not (in contrast to the queer subjects that predominate in education-focused research/studies) ‘other’,
bad, damaged, harassed, lonely and/or isolated, in the contexts being focused upon. Their lives are not exclusively or predominantly about repression, self-monitoring and self-censoring of their talk and behavior. These queer subjects are positive, agentic and connected (in particular contexts). Queer sex is something that they’re into, something they actively seek out. They experience pleasure, gain knowledge, and develop skills and strategies through having sex. Sex enables them (in particular contexts) to connect with others, gain status, experience power and/or transgress the dominant norms.

In order to understand what young people are into sexually, then the concept of pleasure (as an important dimension of sex) needs to be taken into account. This notion (informed by HIV/AIDS research on gay and homosexually active men) informs the design, structure and analysis of this chapter, and also chapter 7.

The conceptualization of sex within sexual health research is narrow and limiting. Informed by youth development discourse it is mainly focused upon risk whilst pleasure gets little, if any, attention. Given that pleasure is an integral aspect of sex (as illustrated in the narratives in this and the next chapter) the absence of pleasure from sexual health discourse contributes to an inadequate representation of young peoples’ sexual interests. This has been recognized in HIV/AIDS research on gay and homosexually active men, which has turned away from a predominant focus on risk. The notion of sex as pleasurable is an important part of HIV/AIDS education and prevention (for gay and homosexually active men) initiatives in Australia (see Leonard and Mitchell 2000 and also see chapter 10).

School authorities and sexual health researchers, who rely on youth development discourse to inform their programs and research/studies can’t bear to think about anything that threatens the legitimacy and authority of schools as providers of sex education. The notion of formal school education being incidental, irrelevant and/or peripheral for young people in relation to sex is therefore unintelligible. Yet, this is the case for the queer subjects explored in this chapter and the next. They learn about sex through participating in sex and through accessing the
sexual knowledge that is produced and circulates within the queer sexual cultures they’re a part of.

The spaces and/or environments examined in this chapter (and the next) are not exclusively oppressive for the young queers. Where there is negativity and attempts at regulation, these are not insurmountable barriers for them. Unilateral notions of power are not apparent here. By contrast education-focused research/studies on young queers have generally offered little beyond society or cultures homogenized as threatening and hostile towards queers, and the non-agentic, ‘at risk’ queer subject who is struggling against the might of this oppression.

The next chapter continues to explore the theme of sex – through focusing primarily on sex at beats. Beats have been shown to play an important (and positive) role for many gay and homosexually active men (including when they’re young) yet they’re given little, if any, attention in school-focused sexual health research (in Australia).
In the previous chapter I discussed the significance of pleasure in the choreography of sex, and examined some of the ways in which pleasure might be explored so as to gain a broader and more complex understanding of young queers’ (same-sex attracted young men) lives than is evident in educational or sexual health research. This marks a departure from the traditional, or ‘business as usual’ approach (in educational and sexual health research) where sex is conceptualized primarily in relation to risk – especially when it involves young people, and in particular, young queers. This chapter continues to explore the themes of casual sex and pleasure, and examines one of the most often mentioned sites for queer sex in gay literature and HIV/AIDS research, namely beats.

**Background: Differing Perspectives on Beats**


Beats are also important sites for many homosexually active men who don’t identify as gay. In reviewing Australian social research on this topic, Dowsett (1994:45, working within the field of HIV/AIDS research) writes that “[B]eats emerge as a central sexual context” for homosexually active men. In relation to homosexually active youth he says that an Australian study “noted the central importance of beats in the induction of homosexually active youth not only in (homo)sexual practices but also into homosexual subcultures in their local area.” Sexual history research on homosexually active Australian men has also shown
Chapter 7  Casual Sex and Beats

the attraction of beats for these men “dating back at least to the founding of the first penal colony” (Dowsett 1994:48, see also Fogarty 1992, French 1992).

Within most education-focused research/studies on young queers, however, beats are either not mentioned, or alternatively, are ultimately portrayed in a negative way. For instance, The Writing Themselves In report (Hillier et al 1998) includes a narrative from one participant (discussed later in this chapter) who talks of their a positive experience in a beat, but the authors themselves do not comment on this aspect of the narrative, and moreover, do not specifically discuss beats in the report. The lack of attention, or elaboration on beats doesn’t appear to be a reflection of a lack of interest in beats from gay or homosexually active young men. As indicated above (and discussed further later in this chapter) beats assume particular importance for many gays and homosexually active men. So why aren’t the positive discourses on beats being represented and examined in this area of research? One of the key factors contributing to this absence is the notion of risk, which (in line with youth development theory) underscores the dominant conceptualization of sex in sexual health research (directed at schools). Within this discursive framework then, it would appear as self-evident that beats are, above all else, (assumed to be) highly risky sites for sex.

At times beats are stigmatized as places of danger in terms of the risks of unsafe sex and being physically attacked. This is evident in the report Working It Out: A Needs Analysis of Sexual Minority Youth in Tasmania (Hogge 1998) which is directed at youth service providers (including, but not limited to, schools). Working It Out (Hogge 1998) is predominantly influenced by youth development theory. This is particularly evident in its preoccupation with risk. In talking about “risk behaviours”, Hogge (1998:26) mentions risky sexual encounters, and in particular, beats. Many of the young gay men in the Working It Out research had participated in sex at beats. The main reason given for this, according to Hogge (1998:26), was companionship rather than sex.

In examining how beats are discussed within Working It Out (Hogge 1998), it becomes apparent that beats are considered (by the author) as dangerous and risky, and young queers as non-agentic. Here, beats are rendered totally
unsuitable places for young people. Beat use (by adolescents) is linked with being uninformed, emotionally unstable and lacking “appropriate support”. Hogge (1998:26) argues that:

[a]n adolescent who has appropriate support is less likely to participate in risk behaviors such as substance abuse, and risky sexual encounters are less likely to occur. The more informed and emotionally stable a person is, the more likely they are to avoid such dangerous encounters.

It is quite criminal…that our young people are so isolated that they are more likely to put themselves in physical danger (both from the possibility of being bashed at beats, and from unsafe sexual encounters) simply in order to be in situation where they might meet another homosexual person with whom they can form a friendship.

Quite different perspectives of beats can be found within the field of HIV/AIDS research (on gay and homosexually active men). In this field, there is an elaboration on beats and beat sex, and beats are not characterized primarily in terms of danger and risk. In Dowsett’s (1996) documentation of the life histories of gay and homosexually active men in Australia, beats feature prominently. For some men they offered entry to “social networks and sexual networks of men” (Dowsett 1996:264, see also p.92, 122). These sexual communities Dowsett says (1996:264) “provided relational bases for explorations of homoex and preliminary discursive practices in which to refine a sexual identity and consolidate other aspects of an emerging sexual subjectivity.” Beats are therefore shown to be an important and valuable experience for some gay and homosexually active men, including when they were young. Here, the sexual and social dimensions are interrelated, not disconnected and mutually exclusive.

Some HIV/AIDS research problematizes the equating of beats with unsafe sexual practices (see Dowsett 1994:47, Warner 1999:209). Research such as Dowsett (1996) also recognizes that there is more to consider than danger when talking
about beats. There is the pleasure and the “sexual skilling” that occurs through encounters in beats, through learning about the “physical possibilities of the body” and “the choreography of sexual encounters” (Dowsett 1996:143). The men in Dowsett’s research (1996:146-147) received negative messages from parents, police or other adults (when they were young) about toilet blocks or other beat sites, yet this negativity was “subverted by the potential pleasures to be had [with]…the pay-off [being] regarded as greater than the risks.” Similar discourses about beats can also be found in gay literature and research on young queers (as can be seen in the narratives in this chapter).

Within the field of HIV/AIDS education/prevention (see chapter 9) targeting gay and homosexually active men (in Australia) there is a rejection of strategies that rely on the stigmatization of particular sexual practices and sites of sex (such as beats) since this can alienate/marginalize particular men. This makes it particularly difficult to get safe sex messages through since it can discourage men from talking openly about their sexual practices and any issues relating to safe sex. It also discourages the circulation of strategies, knowledge and techniques that men have relating to (safe) sexual practices and the negotiating/managing of risks (at beats for example).

The Australasian College of Sexual Health Physicians and Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO) produced a sexual health guide for young gay men, which has a section on beats (Donohue 1998:86-87). They acknowledge that there can be dangers but offer practical strategies in terms of “using beats safely” (Donohue 1998:86).

**Organization of This Chapter**

The following sections of the chapter are predominantly framed around Dowsett’s life-history research (1996) on gay and homosexually active men. The first part documents some of the key understandings about beats and casual sex coming from Dowsett’s (1996) research. At times young queers’ accounts of their experiences at beats are included to illustrate the point under discussion.
This chapter also draws upon material from Warner (1999) relating to casual sex, sexual cultures and sexual knowledge.

The second part of the chapter examines the importance of beats and the pleasures, knowledge and skills gained from them in one young male’s life (Hugo). Hugo is the main character in the book, *A Matter of Life and Sex* (Moore 1991). Though written more than a decade ago, the discourses are still consistent with more recent academic and autobiographical literature relating to homosexual activity (Dowsett 1996, Goldenberg 1999, Jim quoted in Hillier et al 1998:44, Warner 1999).

**Sex at Beats**

The “positioning and importance of beat sex” in men’s lives varies, whilst the “relations and practices of casual sex differ” according to Dowsett (1996:153). For some men beats were just one part of the “array of sexual relations constituting [their] sex life” (Dowsett 1996:153). For others beats were their predominant avenue for sexual activity. Thus, Dowsett argues (1996:153) that it is “important not to deduce a singular conceptualization of enacting desire in casual encounters on the beats.”

Beats introduced many of the men in Dowsett’s (1996) research to more diverse sexual possibilities than those encountered in their early sexual experiences. Dowsett (1996:143) wonders whether early sexual experiences provide training and easier transition for later sexual activity in beats:

> It is but a small step for a sexually inquisitive boy to proceed from sex with peers in the changing shed to exploring sex with older men in public toilets.

Young men take a variety of resources gained from their early sexual experiences to their sexual activity at beats. These resources include their experiences of bodily pleasure, a “recognition of collective transgression”, the beginnings of a discursive framework for understanding their sexual experiences, pleasures and
desires, along with experience in seeking out sexual pleasures (Dowsett 1996:265). It is these resources that can lead them to seek out sexual outlets beyond their local area. They enable easier transition to the sexual subcultures of beats (Dowsett 1996).

**Finding Out About Beats**

Young men find out about the existence of beats through various means. The men in Dowsett’s research (1996) spoke about consciously seeking out places for sex, when they were young, and coming across beats. Some had friends who told them of places they could go for sex. Some had men approach them for sex while they used toilets; others witnessed sex occurring and some read about sex or saw illustrations of sexual activity between men on the toilet walls. Some also saw groups of men hanging around toilet blocks and investigated what was happening. Adult warnings about toilets (or particular areas) also served to attract some young men to these sites where they witnessed and took part in sex (Dowsett 1996:146, see also Hillier et al 1998:44 and Crowhurst 2001:39).

The following extracts provide some examples of how young queers find out about beats, notably schools do not figure as important in their acquisition of knowledge about beats. In the first extract from *Holding the Man* (Conigrave 1995:104) Tim highlights how he found out about “gay pick up places”:

> It was a warm evening. Halyards rattled against the masts of yachts. There seemed to be people walking around the canal, among the fig trees. I realised they were all men. *This must be one of those gay pick up places I’ve heard about.* A man stopped near another man. They looked at each other, said a few words and walked off together. *I wonder where they do it?* I leaned on the rail watching, wondering what it must be like to pick someone up like that, excited by the knowledge that these were gay men.

In the following two extracts, both boys find out about beats whilst using toilets. In the autobiography ‘Alec Farthing’ (Zoates 1986), Alec is sitting in a cubicle with no doors when a tall man turns from the urinal:
…to reveal an enormous erect phallus with bushy red hair as halo over it all, a beautiful cryptic grin and a beckoning finger. Gulping down his disbelief, and desirous, Alec trailed after the man with the magic wand…there in a shopping centre toilet he was sucked off.

In contrast to some research (Hogge 1998:26) that puts down beats and alludes to the exploitation of young men by older men at beats, Alec says he felt “a great sense of personal power, not just over an adult, but as an adult himself, a peer of this big man, a partner” (Zoates 1986:156). For Alec, this event is a marker of maturity, of adulthood.

John in the autobiography ‘John’s Story’ (O’Donnell 1986:40-41) plays in the park with his school friends. He finds out about the beats located there through walking in on two men at a urinal. He doesn’t see what they are doing as the two men quickly stop. The younger man however, stays there, watching John:

He was watching me, and I wanted to have a look at him. He moved back from the urinal and took his hands away and I could see his erection. I knew I wanted to get to know him and to feel and play with his erection.

John is aware of anti-sex discourses. He knows he shouldn’t be doing such things. But this doesn’t stop him. The notion of unilateral power that is so prevalent in education-focused research/studies on young queers is not evident here. He moves towards the younger man:

I had just put my hand on his erection when another man accompanied by a boy, came in…

John and the other guy leave the toilet. Before they have sex, they chat. John is able to find out various things relating to sex, and also learns how to “blow” (O’Donnell 1986:42). This highlights the importance of sexual cultures in terms
of providing access to information that may not be readily, comfortably (due to embarrassment) or safely accessed elsewhere (such as at school). In this context, John has found someone that he’s fairly confident will be okay with being asked about sex.

For Jim in the *Writing Themselves In* report (Hillier et al 1998:44), warnings about a toilet block appear to function as a form of enticement to a beat. Apart from the pleasure of the head-job, pleasure can also be gained in transgressing; doing what he is warned not to. That this experience is so positive, can highlight the incoherence of warnings of adults (about toilet blocks):

> My first sexual experience [with a guy] was when I was 14. I had been warned never to go near the toilets at the park close to the railway station…At these toilets I’d meet an older guy, 17-18, I guess, who gave me a head job. It was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me.

Matthew Goldenberg (Goldenberg 1999:150) was also warned about a toilet block by an adult. His mother had said that “strange” men hung around the toilets. This isn’t what attracted him to the toilet though. It’s the guys’ sun baking in their speedos in the middle of the park that get his attention:

> I thought, ‘how unusual…but how cute.’ I couldn’t keep my eyes off them.

Matthew then sees a guy standing at the entrance to the toilets:

> My heart was beating wildly. When I looked closer, he was rubbing a big bulge in his speedos. I nearly dropped dead on the spot. I quickly ran around the corner to compose myself. My head was spinning out of control and I had to calm down. I casually strolled back to the toilet block. He stepped up beside me. One thing led to another and not only did I experience my first sexual encounter, but my first same-sex encounter.
There is an extremely high level of excitement here, which has powerful effects on Matthew. It affects his heart, his thoughts and this is just at the anticipation stage. This situation could be described as an “overall event” (see Dowsett 1996:146). It's not just the sex itself, but the build-up to it, the anticipation, the dealing with nerves and excitement that make it exciting and horny. They're an integral part of the pleasurable experience, and as such are important to document. Sexual health research (directed at schools) is often focused just on sex acts (albeit in an extremely limited form) without consideration of the lead up to the sex, the social, collective and relational dimensions of sex, or the motivations and meanings attached to sex.

**Understanding the Importance of Beat Sex From the Perspective of Beat Users**

Beat sex, according to Dowsett (1996:147) has been characterized (by some writers) in recreational terms, as “art”, a “pastime”, a “sport” and a “hobby” for some men (Dowsett 1996:147). He points out that beat sex plays an important and positive role in some mens’ lives.

Dowsett’s (1996) research highlights that young men actively pursue sex at beats after they experience what they have to offer. There is agency here – determination, perseverance and initiative – none of which are usually associated with young queers in education-focused research/studies. The preoccupation with risk in this sphere of study to the exclusion of notions of sexual pleasure, happiness and connection (with other queers) means that little is offered beyond the wounded, suffering queer subject, that is non-threatening to the sexual order.

Some of the men in Dowsett’s (1996) research described searching for the location of other beats using their bicycles. An example of this, from another source (Moore 1991), can be found in the second part of this chapter (see p.209). Other men said that once they got their car license they would go out searching for other beats. Some described how they worked out the best times to go to beats for sex, times when there were usually more men present, or times when the types of men they desired frequented them. Here, young men are learning
(through embodied experience) about one aspect of the “choreography of sexual encounters”. They’re gaining familiarity with “the local sexual economy” (Dowsett 1996:144, also see p.219 in this chapter). Casual sex in these contexts is described by Dowsett (1996:147) as “not only a sex practice, but also a learned set of sexual relations [which] takes practice, intuition, experience and skill”.

**Social – Relational Dimensions of Sex**

Sex does not exist only as an individual experience (as it is predominantly conceptualized in school-focused sexual health research); it is also social and as such is constituted in relational and contextual domains (Dowsett 1996:153). Dowsett (1996:173) says that the “accepted wisdom” about male sexuality is that it’s “selfish and alienated”. His research reveals quite a different picture – showing the relationality within sexual encounters. Men talked of emotional connections, closeness and communication, the presence of the other person not just themselves, and of reciprocity in sexual exchanges. There was interest in pleasuring another and learning what pleasured another, along with ‘getting off’ and knowing what turned them on.

Warner (1999:179), informed by queer theory, talks of the “intimacy” in casual sexual encounters between men along with the sense of “belonging to a sexual world” that can come through casual sex. Through casual sex, queers find that there are places for what they’re into sexually. They connect with others who are not only into these things but actively seek them out. These people can introduce them to other sexual possibilities. Through this, queers find that they are indeed not alone but are part of a sexual subculture:

Contrary to myth what one relishes in loving strangers is not mere anonymity, nor meaningless release. It is the pleasure of belonging to a sexual world, in which ones sexuality finds an answering resonance not just in one other, but in a world of others.

(Warner 1999:179)
For a number of the men in Dowsett’s research (1996:122, 264) there were other social benefits gained through having sex at beats. They were able to tap into the specific and localized forms of knowledge and experiences of other men they had sex with. Some men described how (as young men) they developed friendships and/or relationships with sexual partners, as well as with the friends of sexual partners, through doing beats (see also Connell et al 2000). A young queer in the Working It Out report (Hogge 1998:26) highlights how he used beats to gain knowledge of, and to access, social worlds involving other gays:

The beat was the place where I would go to find friends. While sitting on the beach, waiting for mostly married men to approach, I could suss out the other gays and hopefully get invited to a party or something.

**Learning Through Doing**

Having sex at beats or in other casual contexts involves learning about the “choreography of sexual encounters”. This refers to:

the subtle and nuanced movement of bodies in sexual encounters,
the stalking of partners, the shifting of attention from the general possibility of sex to the specific opportunity for sex, the inviting glance, the suggestive movements of the bodies, the first contact, the sequencing of exploring bodies….

(Dowsett 1996:143-144)

Another aspect of the choreography of sexual encounters involves gaining familiarity with sites for sex. (This is briefly discussed in a previous section, see p.202. Also see p.219 in the second part of this chapter).

The men in Dowsett’s research (1996:146) learnt about the choreography of sexual encounters through participating in sex (as young men and adults) and talking about sex with others. Sexual beings are created in and through these collective contexts (Dowsett 1996, also see Connell et al 2000). The predominant understandings of sexuality (relied upon in formal school institutions) take quite
a different view, relying on a presumption that “sex is simply an inborn instinct” (Warner 1999:177). Warner (1999:178-9) links this to “the dominant culture of privacy”, which he says:

…wants you to pretend that your sexuality sprang from your nature alone and found expression solely with our mate, that sexual knowledges neither circulate among others nor accumulate over time in a way that is transmissible.

The dominant culture does not recognize or acknowledge that sexual knowledge circulates and accumulates (over time) among gays and lesbians and/or queers. Yet as Warner notes (1999:177, original emphasis):

…most gay men and lesbians know that the sex they have was not innate nor entirely of their own making, but learned-learned by participating, in scenes of talk as well as of fucking.

Queer men and women swap stories about sex, and sex partners talk about sex, including particular aspects of sex. They take part in new scenes through the suggestions and enticements of sex partners (Warner 1999:178). Elaborated codes of subcultures are also learnt from others with more experience (Warner 1999:177).

Through being part of sexual cultures queers can gain awareness and familiarity with technologies that contribute to sexual autonomy, such as condoms, vibrators, lubricants, nipple clamps and other apparatus (Warner 1999:10). Circulation of knowledge in these sexual cultures enables people to learn “some anatomical possibilities that were always there, such as anal pleasure and female ejaculation” according to Warner (1999:10-11). People also “develop new repertoires of fantasy and new social relations”.

**Accessing Positive Discourses**

Sexual subcultures also provide access to a range of positive discourses about queer sexual desire and queer sex. These discourses can provide a counter to
negative discourses, or a lack of discourses about queer desire and sex in other parts of their lives. They (along with sexual experience) contribute to the development of preliminary discursive frameworks, through which young queers begin to understand their desires and experience. These discursive frameworks also assist in the refining of their sexual identity and in the consolidating of other aspects of their emerging sexual subjectivity (c/f Dowsett 1996:264).

**Learning to Improvise**

It’s not just a matter of talking or listening to others talk about sex or sexual cultures or communities. Sex at beats (as well as in other contexts) can also contribute to the development of skills in improvisation. Skill in improvisation is critical to the development of a sexual being, as well as being critical to negotiating sex and negotiating/managing safety and risks relating to sex. A person can’t know it all, or can’t work it all out in advance, since unpredictable situations can occur in sexual situations (Warner 1999:178). This may be the case in sexual situations where the other sexual partner/s aren’t known beforehand. In contrast, sex education curricula in schools generally rely on knowledge being the antidote to ignorance. Skill in sexual improvisation is usually not seen as important. It’s as though once you’ve learnt the necessary ‘knowledge’ you just need to apply it. There is no accounting for varying sexual contexts, changes in circumstances, and the unforeseen. There is also no accounting for differences between people.

**One Young Queer and Beats: A Detailed Exploration**

Oscar Moore’s, *A Matter Of Life And Sex* (1991) focuses on the life of one teenage boy, Hugo. It illustrates how his sexuality is actively constructed and the predominant role that beats play in this. The story focuses on Hugo’s discovery of a beat in his local area and his subsequent bicycle journeys beyond his local area, exploring and experiencing a network of beats that he spends much time in. This section draws upon some of Hugo’s experiences, considering them in relation to Dowsett’s research (1996). Hugo’s experiences are not exceptional, nor out of the ordinary. Similar experiences can be found in Dowsett’s life-
history research (1996) on gay and homosexually active men, and in (Australian) gay autobiographies such as Hay (1986), O’Donnell (1986), and Zoates (1986).

The first part of this section examines Hugo’s growing interest in boys and other men and his trying to make sense of this. The second part focuses upon Hugo’s discovery of beats.

**The Attraction of Men**

As he watches the older boys stripped to the waist or stares at the bottoms of men that show above their bathers, Hugo gets a “funny feeling in his stomach that mixed up pleasure, just out of reach, and pain, from the pleasure being out of reach.” (Moore 1991:9). Hugo’s limited experience, as well as lack of access to discourses about such feelings, means that (at this time) he doesn’t really understand what’s happening to him.

Through further experience Hugo learns that the pleasure he feels, is to do with seeing men without clothes on. Hugo’s dreams center around this. In one of his favorite dreams, Hugo is a small naked boy who is surrounded by naked muscular, smooth bodied, men who are throwing and catching him (Moore 1991:9). There is awareness here (from Hugo) of the types of bodies he’s interested in; there is sensation and pleasure in the “tender and loving” way they pass him around and in their “caressing hands”. There is also a pleasant atmosphere with the men “laughing” (Moore 1991:9).

Hugo is aware that he shouldn’t enjoy watching a friend’s brother strip off and have a shower. “He knew that his favorite dream [see previous paragraph] shouldn’t be his favorite and he shouldn’t be in a bad mood when he woke up and found it wasn’t true” (Moore 1991:10). There is some guilt here, along with a feeling that eventually he’ll get in trouble. Yet he isn’t sure what the problem is since no one spells it out for him. As Dowsett notes (1996:260), adults are often not specific about the issues that they have with same-sex sexual experience. Hugo also lacks access to discourses that sanction what he’s into, discourses that enable him to make sense of his desires.
Consistent with Dowsett’s argument about boys and young men’s sexual experiences, Hugo’s pleasurable experiences are more than enough to bypass, over-ride or ignore the negative reactions from others (Dowsett 1996:265). The dominant discourses of what a ‘good’ boy should and should not do, cannot compete with the fierce pull of attraction and desire, the sensations of his mouth being dry, his heart racing and the feeling of losing direct control of his actions (Moore 1991:10). He actively seeks out more men, standing on a toilet in a cubicle to spy on the men in the showers (Moore 1991:10). Additional dimensions of his sexual desire become apparent, in terms of the parts of men’s bodies that receive his gaze:

…he peered into an adjacent shower where a hairy Belgian was rubbing himself, the water lining up the hairs of his legs, the water dripping from his penis…

Hugo wants to join the man in the shower. There is an awareness of how looking at this man affects his own body, in terms of getting an erection. He knows that this is where he wants to be and has no desire to leave sexual sites such as this when he’s there (Moore 1991:10).

**Erections and Masturbation**

Erections (or hard-ons) become a source of interest for Hugo. He wants to know why he gets them and what they’re for. As in other issues relating to sex however, no one has talked to him about erections. As he gets older erections are linked to being “naughty”, yet again there is a lack of detail as to why they’re naughty (Moore 1991:13). It doesn’t make sense to him since they feel so good for him. This highlights an example of what Dowsett (1996:260) terms the incoherence of adult discourses about sex.

Hugo mentally compiles the different situations in which he gets a hard-on, such as watching the men in the shower, or when lying on his tummy in bed, or riding on the bus, or when watching the workmen that the school bus passes. His interests focus on specific parts of their bodies, their being stripped to the waist,
their tattoos, their “tanned muscles glistening under sweat” (Moore 1991:13). Here can be seen the development of an “aesthetic of sex”, in terms of the specific bodies and body parts he desires/appreciates (see Dowsett 1996:170). Through all of this, Hugo begins to develop an awareness of what situations and which bodies lead to hard-ons. Yet he doesn’t know what to do with them (the hard-on), where they are supposed to go and what happens when they get there (Moore 1991:12-13).

Hugo has sex education books at home, and has sex education lessons at school. Yet they’re particularly inadequate for him. He’d much rather see his male teacher without his shirt on, than have the sex education lessons (Moore 1991:13). What is offered at school is pre-packaged. It doesn’t tap into or account for the sexual interests and experiences of youth like Hugo, nor does it account for their active pursuit of sexual pleasure. It doesn’t provide a space where youth like him can freely engage in discussion about their sexual experiences or sexual desires. He instead gains the sense that what he is into is wrong. Parents too are seen to be of little use in relation to sex. He’s too embarrassed and/or frightened to ask them questions that specifically relate to his sexual experiences, such as “why he got an erection when he stared at the hairy Belgian men in the shower and watched the water running down their legs.” (Moore 1991:12) He thinks that his parents won’t have the knowledge he seeks or will be too embarrassed about sex.

Hugo seeks answers to his questions about masturbation in porno magazines (Moore 1991:16-19). Here he accesses discourses about sex through the stories that are placed with the photos. He already knows the term ‘masturbation’ but hasn’t made the connections between this and hard-ons. The magazines don’t provide specific instructions about masturbation, yet some of the sex stories offer some clues about how to give himself a hard-on (Moore 1991:18). This is new knowledge to him, since his hard-ons to this point have occurred without him doing anything to his cock.

Hugo still lacks knowledge of what to do with his hard-ons. He plays with his cock in various ways trying to work things out, but isn’t yet at a stage of shooting
cum. His lessons at school and the discourses of boys around him provide some vocabulary such as spunk and sperm. Yet, he doesn’t know how spunk or sperm is produced, how they’re linked to hard-ons, and how they push into his hard-ons (Moore 1991:19). Hugo also experiments with putting various substances from the kitchen over his cock. Though this provides him with knowledge of what does and doesn’t feel good on his cock, it still doesn’t lead to him cumming. Plus, he is nearly caught (Moore 1991:20-21).

**Discovering Beats**

Some time and many magazines later, Hugo realizes that masturbation must end with an “emission” but he’s unable to achieve this (Moore 1991:19). This is where his experiences at beats start to exert an important and integral influence in his discursive frameworks about sex. Hugo discovers beats and sexual communities through explorations beyond his local area on his bicycle. On one of these journeys, rain leads him to seek shelter in a toilet block. Inside a cubicle he notices graffiti, which consists of naked pictures of men with “towering erections” and stories of seduction linked to “policemen, boy scouts and lorry drivers” (Moore 1991:22, see also Dowsett 1996:128). Further parts of the puzzle about hard-ons are revealed through the discourses he encounters here.

Hugo notices a hole in the wall (glory hole) between the cubicles. He looks through and sees a man with what he describes as a “great cock”, a “glory” (Moore 1991:22). Conflicting discourses come to mind. There’s the discourse about being a nice schoolboy who gets his homework done on time, the schoolboy who gets good marks. There’s the discourse about being a polite boy and the consequences of staring. Yet, no negative reactions ensue from his staring. The man looks back at Hugo while “working” his cock (Moore 1991:22). There is no tirade. This could be seen to contribute to some shift in his understandings of risk, danger and/or punishment in this context. As for being a nice and polite schoolboy, such discourses are easily put aside when there are such pleasures in front of him (Moore 1991:23):

Hugo with lust in his mouth and hunger in his eye squatted on the grimy floor of a roadside toilet and gazed like a child with his
nose pressed to the sweetshop window at the mouthwatering delights within. All caution and fear had gone. Hugo was craving. But since when did a boy’s craving make the sweets come through the window?

Here, the ‘sweet’ (the “big fat penis”) comes through the glory hole to Hugo. He’s “beside [himself] with desire, “squeez[ing] and hold[ing] and lick[ing] and squeeze[ing] the cock (Moore 1991:23). This offers far more than his school education and his sex education books. Caution is thrown aside and Hugo finds that danger isn’t the obligatory outcome of the pursuits of his desires. Hugo goes into the cubicle with the man, “[h]is fingers strain[ing] to feel all they had been stopped from feeling for so long.” (Moore 1991:23)

The man asks him if he wants to see some spunk and cums in front of Hugo. Along with the pleasure and excitement, this adds to his knowledge about hard-ons. There are still gaps though in Hugo’s knowledge; for on this occasion he hasn’t witnessed the actions that preceded the shooting of spunk by this man.

On another occasion, a man wanks Hugo (Moore 1991:25-26). For the first time he experiences what masturbation is and what it feels like. Focusing on the details here highlights the important role that sexual experience plays in the creating of a sexual being. In this sexual situation, Hugo learns about the actions that lead to him shooting spunk, along with the range of sensations that go with this:

The foreskin tickled the knob and the knob swelled and swelled until Hugo could feel the blood pushing through his penis so hard he thought one pin prick would make a fountain of red spurt out into the trees. Then something turned in his stomach... his penis began to glow and tickle but not an itch-tickle. It was a tickle as if he needed to piss but couldn’t.
Hugo is so immersed in this sexual experience that he doesn’t want to stop. Indeed the pleasure well and truly overrides a thought that he should stop (Moore 1991:26):

He thought he should tell the man to stop but the tickle had him in its grip and Hugo couldn’t move.

Hugo experiences the feeling of the sensation building or what he calls “the tickle” (Moore 1991:26). It moves between his cock and balls. He notices changes to his balls, which rise, tighten and squeeze. He’s aware of his cock flickering and then twitching before he has a sensation, a feeling that he is going to piss. Here he learns that it’s not piss but is instead a clear liquid that explodes from his cock (c/f Moore 1991:26):

It was the long unrestrained sperm of a body desperate to release itself, but unable to find the catch, to spring the lock, to send the spray flying into the trees.

I’ve yet to come across education-focused research/studies (focused on young queers) that offer detailed accounts or elaborations on the sorts of sexual pleasures and sensations experienced here, or the meanings taken from such. Some research/studies in talking of beat sex or casual sex, emphasize the danger and risks of such sex (see p.198 in this chapter). They can be seen as examples of what Dowsett (2000:35) calls, a “politics of the improper” in relation to beat or casual sex. In relegating beat sex or casual sex to the realm of the ‘improper’, they must ignore the substantial amount of pleasure that is gained from such sex and the possibilities that it opens up for young and older men, in terms of sexual knowledge, sexual techniques and practices. They must ignore how integral beat sex is to the lives of some young queers like Hugo. They must avoid the body, the pull of desire or hunger for bodies and the sensations of “hold[ing] and lick[ing] and squeeze[ing]” of cocks (Moore 1991:23). By contrast, Dowsett’s research (1996), which this and the previous chapter draws upon, maintains attention on the bodies of the boys, young men and older men along with the sexual sensations, feelings and pleasures they actively seek. It documents how
these sexual experiences, along with the meanings attached to them, may remain stable or change over time.

**Anti-Sex Discourses and Secrecy**

Hugo (in line with Dowsett’s research 1996:142, 260) realizes the importance of keeping his sexual experiences secret. He knows that adults at school and home will see it as wrong. The pleasure of sex however, far outweighs the injunctions against getting into cars with “strange men”. These negative/cautious discourses are “drowned by the voices of lust. ‘You know what you’re doing. You can run fast if things get nasty. This is fun.’ And the voice of the groin saying, ‘Go for it, go for it, go for it, go for it.’” (Moore 1991:25). Hugo’s experiences also show him that “strange men” aren’t necessarily dangerous. The man who showed him about masturbation for example, didn’t “stab and strangle him as all the old ladies in life say strange men will.” (Moore 1991:25) This man facilitates his first experience of cumming. He opens the door to other sexual possibilities for Hugo. Consistent with Dowsett (1996: 146; 2000:32) and Warner’s arguments (1999:177), Hugo didn’t just know how to do these sexual things (as if it were innate), he learnt through participating in sex with men.

Hugo is aware that adults (such as parents and teachers) are against what he is into sexually. Yet they don’t spell out in any detail what their concerns are. In line with Dowsett’s arguments (1996:260) embarrassment about sex appears to be a contributing factor in relation to this. An example of the reluctance of adults to specifically talk to what he is into (sexually), is shown when his parents find out about his sexual experiences in public toilets. This occurs after his mother reads his diary, which details his sexual adventures. He describes the features of men he’s had sex with. Bellies and chests are a particular interest of his. He describes them in terms of their curves, shadows and contours. He also talks about their hair and how hot the sex was (Moore 1991:98).

Hugo knows something is wrong when he rings his mother to ask if he can stay late after school. From the start, his mother is reluctant to state what the problem is (Moore 1991:103):
“I think you’d better come home.” Her voice sounded flat, choked. Suppressed.

“Why?” asked Hugo.

“I just think you ought to come home now.” She hung up. Hugo went white.

Even without specifics, Hugo is concerned. He knows that what is doing and what he desires is wrong in other’s eyes. Many things could contribute to this, including the “loud and generalized anti-sex discourse [that] permeat[ed his] childhood”, along with all that is unspoken in relation to sex (Dowssett 1996:142). He begins a “[walk] of terror” home, with a “sick sinking [feeling] in his stomach and his heart beating through his skin” (Moore 1991:104, 103). At home though, contrary to his expectations, he doesn’t get in trouble immediately. He hears his mother and his sister whispering in another room, saying they’ll wait till his father comes home. This doesn’t make sense to him since his father didn’t punish them for things. Later when his father comes to his room Hugo knows that his father is too embarrassed about what he’s been doing to be specific:

Hugo knew he was standing there in confusion, too embarrassed by the nakedness that had happened to be explicit.

(Moore 1991:105)

Hugo’s father only says about Hugo doing “some bad things” and telling lies. This doesn’t make sense to Hugo. What did they expect? Did they expect him to tell them about his sexual experiences, let alone in any detail? Hugo “is more embarrassed for his father than ashamed for himself” (Moore 1991:105).

Hugo knows that his father will soon run out of things to say, if he only has the line about lying to use. He draws upon a discourse that satisfies his father saying that he’ll “turn over a new leaf”. He believes this himself, if only for a few days or a week (Moore 1991:106).
Hugo’s mother continues with the lack of elaboration re: her opposition to his sexual activities. Instead, she strongly signals her disapproval through hitting him on the head, telling him not to say good morning to her anymore, and calling him a “filthy prostitute”. There is also the silence at breakfast the next morning (Moore 1991:107).

The shaming by Hugo’s mother here relies on Hugo sharing the assumptions and morals that she has. What she is speaking to can be seen as naturalized, so she doesn’t need to go into detail. She need merely mention ‘prostitutes’ and he should know that it’s shameful to be called one. Yet Hugo thinks prostitutes have style and is proud to be called one. It also doesn’t make sense to him to be called a prostitute since he “hadn’t even really worked at being one yet” (Moore 1991:108).

Shaming plays a predominant role in these various incidents. It can be seen through the use of terms such as prostitute and lying, through the use of violence (without any detail as to what the issue is), through the use of whispers (between the mother, father and sister), through his being sent to wait in his room and having others talk or whisper around him (his exclusion from discussions about the issue). All of these actions or approaches are means of avoiding explicitly dealing with what Hugo is interested in, and actively seeks out, whilst still seeking to shame him. Hugo knows how to be appropriately shamed however by staying quiet and keeping his head down. That’s the way to get through it. He is far from being ashamed though. He is “unrepentant and reliably devious, [getting] on with the sex…[whilst cover[ing] his tracks with more ingenuity” (Moore 1991:109). This concealment of sexual activity is consistent with what occurred for many of the men in Dowsett’s research (1996:142, 260). For Hugo it serves to keep a distance between him and his parents.

**Sexual Skilling**

Hugo’s sexual experiences skill him in sex. Dowsett (1996:146) argues that “sexual beings, capable of judging what pleasures oneself and others, who know how to make both happen in an encounter, must be created.” The story about Hugo highlights the active creating of a sexual being through sexual experiences.
It involves a “learned set of sexual relations [and] takes practice, intuition, experience and skill” (Dowsett 1996:147). For Hugo this involves learning about what attracts him, that is, the aspects of men’s bodies that draw his attention, that lead to him getting a hard-on. It is also about learning of the “physical possibilities of the body; what hands, mouths, penises, and anuses can achieve” (Dowsett 1996:143). This occurs as he tries out different things with his cock, seeking to understand his hard-ons. It occurs as he learns about the different sensations in various parts of his body including his cock – as he wanks or is wanked. It occurs as he tries different substances on his cock and experiences how the different parts of his cock are involved in pleasure. Finally, it occurs through the feel of another’s body, the use of his hands, mouth and tongue for pleasure, and the sensations of a touch of another. Thus Hugo’s sexual skilling can be seen to occur through “practice and pleasure led by the body, with discursive imperatives running a ragged second” (Dowsett 1996:183). The family and the school, often positioned in educational-focused research/studies on young queers as the most important and appropriate sources of information about sex (see chapters 4 and 5), were of little benefit to him, sexually.

Through beats Hugo learns about “the choreography of sexual encounters” which refers to the “subtle and nuanced movement of bodies in sexual encounters.” (Dowsett 1996:143). It also refers to the moments of seeking to attract the attention of potential sex partners. This involves learning about the “local sexual economy” in terms of finding out which toilets are likely to be good sites for sex (Dowsett 1996:144). For Hugo sexual graffiti on walls played an important role in indicating if a toilet block had much action. It also provided access to discourses of sexual possibilities with particular people and objects not thought of before. Other aspects, which impacted on his choice of toilet, were his mood, the types of men who went there and the facilities available there (Moore 1991:27-28). Knowledge of the peak times for sexual activity and how the sexual possibilities changed with different times of the day were also important considerations (Moore 1991:38-39).

The choreography of sexual encounters (as previously mentioned) also involves the shift “of attention from the general possibility of sex to the specific
opportunity for sex, the inviting glance, the suggesting movements of bodies, the first contact, the sequence of exploring bodies and so on” (Dowsett 1996:144). Hugo had to learn to distinguish those who were interested (in sex) from those who were not. He learns about the quick furtive glances along urinals that signal interest. He picks up on the body language of men who are after sex; their wariness, their shoulders hunched over, the pretense of finishing to pee while stroking once too many times (Moore 1991:39). Hugo also learns about the behavior, body language and lack of eye contact from those youth/men not interested in sex. He notices that their presence can have a marked effect on the men seeking sex. They’d stop masturbating, push down their hard-ons and shake their dicks as if to show they’d finished peeing. He also notices how some men stare at their dicks as if to signal to others their astonishment at not being able to pee (Moore 1991:40).

There is also much to learn about glory holes. Hugo finds that glory holes (like beats themselves) have specific protocols. For example, wiggling a finger in the glory hole signals to the man next door to stick their dick through the hole (Moore 1991:34). He learns about negotiating holes that are inconveniently placed low (so they can be easily seen through) (Moore 1991:34). Much learning occurs at the beats without words being spoken. Hugo observes those who are experienced with glory holes, to see what can be effective.

The collective of men at beats (past and present) plays a significant role in Hugo learning about sex – whether he has sex with them, pervs on them, reads about them on the toilet walls, talks with them, or communicates with them non-verbally. Sex is as Dowsett says (1996:268), a “collectively structured pursuit”. This collective of men contribute to his learning about sexual cues or invitations, the role of body language, the choreography of encounters, the possibilities of the body and sexual experience itself. They are also involved in the meanings that are attached to particular sexual experiences or practices, as Dowsett says (1996:268):
Attention is drawn to the particular activities, body parts, sequence of events, images and language and these help mold the experience of sex in ways often transparent.

Dowsett (1996:146) says that the “frisson” of such sexual encounters “derives from the overall event not just the sex.” Certainly for Hugo the sex itself is a powerful part, but so is the lead up, the planning where to go, and the excitement of fantasizing about what is to occur as he rides his bike to the next beat (Moore 1991:24):

His thoughts were in a frenzy of imagined possibilities as his feet pounded the little pedals round all the way down the A1 towards perdition.

There is also the choreography of the encounters and afterwards the desire for more, along with the pleasure of recalling the sex (in his mind), the taking from these (sexual) experiences of what he wishes to try again and the variations/techniques he’s learnt. Dowsett (1996:146) also says that part of the ‘frisson’ in casual sex is to do with its transgressive qualities. This is certainly evident in terms of Hugo’s sexual experiences.

**Summary**

The second part of this chapter has attempted to pursue and explore the collective and experiential construction of homosexuality, through various aspects of Hugo’s life. The extracts utilized here represent just a couple of the experiences he has in beats. *A Matter of Life and Sex* (Moore 1991) details many more of his experiences of sex at beats and other sites.

Dowsett (2000:41) says, “sociality is built through the sexual, and through the enactment of desire”. Hugo’s story is described here in some detail to illustrate this. In order to understand the social world of young queers there is a need to tap into their sexual knowledge and sexual experience. The sexual experiences, sexual desires, sexual agency explored here, along with the firsthand experiences
of sexual sensations and changes to the body (during sex) are what Hugo’s sex education books and sex education lessons failed to account for. Such details are also usually unaccounted for in education-focused research/studies on young queers. Some may seek to dismiss, warn against, or seek to censor the sexual experiences of young people like Hugo. To do so is to miss out on the powerful impact of sexual experiences for young queers. It avoids sex and its range of meanings, pleasures and sensations.

Hugo’s life is a far cry from the commonly depicted non-agentic, lonely and isolated young queers in education-focused research/studies. His sexual experiences place him outside the presumptions of sexual naiveté, ignorance and sexual inexperience that sex education curricula tend to presume of young people. Positioning young queers in these ways contributes to a silence about what they are into sexually, what they’re experiencing and what they desire. It means the vital role that sexual cultures play in their learning about sex and in the creating of a sexual being is not factored in, it’s not considered important. Pre-packaged information, from the source seen as legitimate (the school), can be delivered instead; information that (if it is delivered) may just not ‘cut it’ in comparison to what is going on in young queer’s sexual lives – as Hugo found.

In the next chapter, I discuss and analyze the positive consequences that ensue from young queers’ socializing with other young queers. I do this through drawing upon narratives from young queers.
In this chapter, I examine the ways in which young queers actively construct their social lives and expand their social networks through their participation in queer youth groups and queer community events. I explore this theme from the perspective of young queers (predominantly gays and lesbians), drawing on their discourses to emphasize the importance that they attach to (opportunities for) meeting other queers, and how their experiences in meeting other queers have impacted (in a positive sense) on their well-being and self-esteem.

In this chapter, I seek to highlight some of the ways in which queer centered group settings and events can contribute to the queer individual’s empowerment. In particular, I focus upon the shift in self-identity that occurs for these young queers after joining a queer group, as they come to take up new ways of being/doing queer. That is, their shift away from feeling abnormal, lonely and isolated, towards making queer friends, having fun (as queers) and conceptualizing their future (as a queer) in more positive and expansive ways.

This shift that occurs for young queers is important to focus on. It offers us an insight into how young queers are able to overcome their feelings of loneliness and isolation. Education-focused research/studies on young queers have given little attention to this shift among some young queers. Issues such as isolation and loneliness have often been mentioned in these fields of research/studies yet there has been little interest in agentic young queers who have constructed social/sexual lives for themselves. This thesis takes a different approach. I believe that a better understanding of how young queers overcome problems such as loneliness and isolation is key to the formulation of more effective educational strategies for young queers (see chapter 10).
The chapter begins with a brief summary of research/studies relating to queer youth support and social groups. Following that, the main body of the chapter examines (in detail) young queers’ discourses on queer support and social groups in Melbourne and Perth, Australia.

**Existing Research/Studies on Queer Youth Support and Social Groups**

Although a large body of research/studies exists relating to young queers, very little of this documents the experiences of young queers who participate in queer youth support and social groups. A review of the available research and literature about queer youth support and social groups reveals the ways in which young queers can benefit from participating in these groups. The following list summarizes some of the benefits that are spoken about; either by the facilitators of queer youth groups, researchers/academic writers, or young queers themselves:


- Young queers realize that they’re not the only one who is gay or lesbian. They realize that they’re not alone, and feel less isolated (Crowhurst 2001, Goldflam et al 1999, Herr 1997, Plummer 1989, Treadway and Yoakam 1992, Trenchard and Warren 1985, Woog 1995);

- Young queers find others that can relate to their issues and/or problems (as queers) since they have been through similar things themselves (as queers) (Herr 1997, Schneider 1989, Plummer 1989, Trenchard and Warren 1985);
• Young queers declare (for the first time) their sexuality to themselves (Gerstel 1989, Kola: Birmingham Black Lesbian and Gay Group 1994, Schneider 1989);

• Young queers explore their sexual identities (in safe environments) without having to worry about the negative reactions of others (Hogge 1998, O’Conor 1995, Singerline 1995);

• Young queers gain support and advice relating to questions they have (such as safe sex questions) and problems they’re dealing with (such as harassment, homophobia, depression and thoughts of suicide) (Crowhurst 2001, Donohue 1998, Goldflam et al 1999, Witthaus 1998, Woog 1995);

• Young queers gain an awareness of, and begin to access, other health or support services or groups that cater for queers (Goldflam et al 1999, Treadway and Yoakam 1992, Uribe 1995);

• Young queers gain confidence in their sexuality, accept themselves, improve their self-esteem, and/or feel empowered (Goldflam et al 1999, O’Conor 1995, Schneider 1989, Treadway and Yoakam 1992, Uribe 1995, Woog 1995);

• Young queers gain a sense of community, a sense of belonging (Hogge 1998, O’Conor 1995);

• Young queers reconceptualize themselves, their position in relation to society, and their future in more positive ways (Gerstel 1989, Singerline 1995, Treadway and Yoakam 1992);

• Young queers begin to participate in forums relating to queer sexuality (Woog 1995) and/or become volunteers in peer based programs (Goldflam et al 1999);
• Young queers (in peer education groups run by AIDS organizations) develop skills in negotiating gay sex (Treadway and Yoakam 1992) and gay relationships (Goldflam et al 1999).

This chapter (as well as chapter 10) examines a number of the benefits highlighted above.

**Young Queers’ Experiences in Queer Youth Support and Social groups**

To anyone who is reading this and isn’t sure about your sexuality. You are normal. The world is not against you and when you open your eyes and see what is waiting for you your life will be so much easier. Other people out there are going through the same things that you are going through. Consider going to a support group like YAP [Young And Proud – Frankston Youth Resource Centre]. You can’t spend the rest of your life in hiding about what you are. Many people have tried to do it and it doesn’t work. But the best thing that I can say is, no matter how your parents or your friends or even how you feel about yourself, there ARE people out there who are loving and accepting of what you are.

(Zane, Frankston Youth Resource Centre website)

**Making That First Step to Connect with Other Queers**

It’s not easy, for some young queers, to take that first step towards connecting with other queers. Many have not (knowingly) had contact with other queers (especially their age). Thus, it can be a step into the unknown, involving a confronting of fears (of negative repercussions), an array of ‘what ifs’.

A young lesbian (Goldflam et al 1999:69) talking about a retreat for young bisexual and lesbian women in Western Australia illustrates this confronting of fear:
I’m facing my worst fear (spending time with strangers!!) I have had some success. I have learnt a staggering amount about people, lesbianism and women.

Similarly, Robert (1999:10) talks about the efforts he made to contact a gay university officer:

But I did make that phone call. Finally, after dialling and hanging up on so many occasions, I made the call. I cried. I talked. I cried again…It was one of the most difficult moments of my life but I survived and I knew from that point on, there was no going back. I had made the decision to be me. With that decision, my world changed suddenly and completely.

Though Robert tries and hangs up on many occasions, this doesn’t stop him. He persists until he finally completes the phone call. With contact made and no negative consequences ensuing, this moment is considered to be a turning point (in his life). He’s taken a chance which results in his moving beyond isolation and loneliness, as he begins to meet other gays. In addition, he hasn’t (on this occasion) let his fears overwhelm him to the point of inaction. He’s well aware of the consequences of such inaction (Robert 1999:9):

For my entire life, I shouldered this one deep secret that no one could know, isolating me from all those around me

Robert’s narrative (along with a number of other narratives in this chapter) illustrates that there is more to consider than negative consequences when making a decision about one’s sexuality. Young queers who have had little access to positive discourses about queer socialization may assume that any association with other queers will have negative consequences for themselves. Yet the alleviation of any sexuality-related issues or problems (such as loneliness), along with gaining access to positive discourses about being/doing queer, requires taking a step into the unknown. It requires dealing with uncertainty.
Gina Lambropoulos (1999:18) writes about the amount of nervous energy she invested in making contact with other lesbians. Similar to Robert, the courage and determination is seen to have been well worth it. In a sense, it’s life changing:

Joining this group [support group for young lesbians] was pretty nervewracking at first. I got the number for the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard from a magazine. After a month or so of building up the courage, I called the group.

Going to the group was one of the hardest but most rewarding decisions I’ve made so far. I was finally able to be my true self. I believe that the worst thing about being in the closet is that you have no-one to share things with. Through the group, I developed wonderful friendships with strangers who would soon become my second family.

Facing one’s fears, taking a chance – doing something they normally wouldn’t do; that’s what’s involved for some young queers as they reach out to connect with other queers. Some like Craig Coleiro (1999) devise strategies to reduce their sense of fear. He takes along some straight friends to his first Minus18 Dance Party (drug and alcohol free events for same-sex attracted young people under 18 in Melbourne). For Craig, (in the text below) taking the first step was scary but well worth it. He suggests a strategy for other young queers:

To anyone out there who is contemplating attending Minus18, but maybe (like I was) too scared to do so, I urge you to put your fear aside for just one night, and see what it’s like. I guarantee that you will have a great time, even if you don’t know anyone. Just say ‘hi’ to someone and I am sure that they will introduce you to others.
Meeting Other Young queers for the First Time

Queer youth support and social groups and events can play a significant role in the lives of young queers, especially for those who have felt lonely and isolated. Given that many young queers are not open about their sexuality at school – and have little opportunity to meet or become aware of others – it’s not surprising that they may feel that no one else like them exists, at least not in their area.

The following comments relate to young queers meeting other young queers for the first time:

The first time I went to a Minus18, it was held at the old 3 Faces on Commercial Road, South Yarra. It was amazing. I didn’t know there were young people like myself out there in Melbourne.

(Guy Stevens 15, quoted in Creagh 2000)

At each Minus18 there are new faces, some arriving alone, perhaps meeting their first gay peer. I know that without Minus18 I would never had the privilege of meeting so many of the beautiful friends I have today.

(Geoffrey Lamble 2000)

I made two friends from a group of about 15. Besides Nathan it was the first social contact I’d had with people who identified as gay. Once I got to know everyone I realised that they were just as human and unique as the people already in my life. Over a few months, my network of gay friends expanded. The two guys from Young & Gay [A Victorian AIDS Council peer education program] are still at the core of my bunch of friends.

(Adam 1999:39)

For the first time in my 17 years, I was able to be myself, with my peers and people of my own sexual orientation…

(Craig Coleiro 1999, talking about Minus18)
In all of these situations, the positive feelings that the young queers have experienced have not come about simply because someone (such as a teacher) has given them safe sex information, or because they have heard about homosexuality in their school classes – approaches commonly advocated in education focused research/studies on young queers (see chapters 4 and 5). The positive feelings have come about through meeting other queers and socializing with them. Within research/studies targeting school education there is little emphasis placed on trying to facilitate or support what Geoffrey Lamble, Adam, Guy or Craig Coleiro talk to here. Yet, these friendships and relationships with other young queers are instrumental to young queers overcoming isolation and loneliness:

I think it’s been the opportunity to meet new people and get a good friendship network going. I’m certainly more happy now.

(Guy Stevens talking about Minus18, quoted in Creagh 2000)

I decided to go to a Young & Gay support program. In no uncertain terms, it changed my life. I met people, started to go out more and developed the most amazing peer network.

(Kieran McGregor 1999:57)

Although the actual party [Minus18] only lasted 5 hours, the fun didn’t stop there. I have stayed friends with all the people that I met. I even dated a few of them…It is so cute to see people coming up to the cloakroom later in the night and asking for pen and paper so they can exchange contact details with someone special they have just met.

(Craig Coleiro 1999)

Young queers, having spent (most of) their life in heteronormative contexts, may think that no one will be friends with them if they know they’re queer. In queer support and social groups, and at queer events, however, many social possibilities open up for young queers. As Adam, Craig, Geoffrey, Guy and Kieran highlight
above (along with a number of other queers quoted in this chapter), the friendships developed here can become an integral part of young queers’ social networks. A glance through the Minus18 guest book (http://www.minus18.org/guestbook/) also indicates this. Here, young queers talk of the friendships and relationships they’ve formed through Minus18. They talk of flirting and ‘checking out’ each other (at Minus18). Some first-timers (to Minus18) talk of their hopes of making friends and/or forming relationships with other queers.

Developing Friendships with Older Queers

Friendships with older queers can also be important for young queers. As well as being someone with whom they can talk openly about their sexual desires, experiences and feelings, they can receive advice and support from them. Amy, who is 17 and bisexual, writes about the importance of an older bisexual friend in her life. Her narrative is located in the Writing Themselves In report (Hillier et al 1998:60):

I have a really close older male friend who is bi, and he has guided me towards making decisions for myself, regardless of other people’s views on being gay. He was one of the first people I told.

Rowan, who is 18 and bisexual, also highlights the importance of older queers in his life, in the Writing Themselves In report (Hillier et al 1998:40):

I have found that by making friends through other gay friends I have built up a supportive and very important ‘queer family’ of people aged between 17 to 40. I have found older friends have been able to provide invaluable information on relationships, sex, and operating within the gay community…This family has been the main reason for why I feel good about myself and empowered by my sexuality.
There is an accumulated body of knowledge (including sexual knowledge) that circulates among queers and their subcultures (see Warner 1999). Interaction with other queers is critical to gaining access to this (queer related) knowledge, as can be seen with Rowan above (also see chapters 6, 7 and 10). Through their firsthand experience, queer friends can provide advice, resources and information about being/doing queer. In particular, they can let young queers know about queer social/sexual spaces and opportunities, queer sex, as well as queer services, activities and resources. Sam Harley (Carroll et al 1999:118) for example, talks about the importance of her older sister’s gay friend and all her friends in respect to finding her way around gay venues:

My elder sister knew someone gay and all her friends took me out. And that made me feel safe. I could find my way around. Perhaps we should institute the Gay Big Sister Program!

Sam (Carroll et al 1999) suggests that a Gay Big Sister Program may be useful. There are a number of mentoring initiatives for queers in Australia. These initiatives recognize that queers have knowledge and experience that is particularly useful for newly identifying queers. Further details about some of these initiatives can be found in chapter 9.

Being with queer friends can also contribute to young queers feeling confident in and proud of their sexuality (as can be seen with Rowan above). The memories of the queer social/sexual activities participated in, the feelings of ‘being out’ with other queers, the positive discourses (about queer sexuality, desire and pleasure) that circulate among queer friendship networks, along with the strategies and advice shared, can be taken with them and drawn upon when they’re not with queer friends.


**Feeling Normal**

It’s a place where I feel normal and can be myself.

(A Not Quite Straight participant – Boroondara Youth Services)

Queer youth support and social groups are spaces where young queers can reconceptualize notions of identity and normalcy. For some, it’s the first time they’ve considered themselves normal. Here, the frame of reference is queer (in particular, other young queers), in contrast to school where heterosexuality is the hegemonic sexuality. Here, other queers acknowledge and/or value what they’re feeling, desiring and experiencing, as well as what they’ve been through:

It is imperative that Minus18 continues to be available for others growing up gay so that they to, can have the privilege of being able, for at least one night per term, to feel perhaps a little more normal than they do on the average day.

(Geoffrey Lamble 2000)

Geoffrey Lamble (2000) highlights just how significant one night per term can be for some young queers. Through participating in Minus18 or queer support and social groups, young queers at least know that there are spaces where they can have fun socializing with other young queers; spaces where they can develop friendships and relationships; spaces where they can feel normal. As two young queers say, reflecting on their participation in queer youth spaces/projects (Goldflam et al 1999:64, 69):

You don’t feel so ‘different’ when you are there
[Freedom Centre, Western Australia].

It showed me that I’m not the only one that’s different.
[A retreat for young lesbian and bisexual women in Western Australia]

For many young queers, life in school involves hiding their sexuality through the self-monitoring and self-censoring of their behavior, mannerisms and speech.
With dominant norms positioning homosexuality as deviant, unnatural and undesirable – concerns about abuse, harassment or other negative repercussions are a significant influence here. Thus, for some young queers, their first opportunity to openly express themselves as queers – and find commonality with others (in a sexuality sense) occurs in queer youth support/social groups or events.

In queer support/social groups and spaces, it’s okay to be queer – it’s safe to be queer. Repression/hiding of one’s sexuality is therefore not necessary. Young queers don’t have to pretend to be straight in order to gain the approval of others in these contexts. KuRt and Kellie, who are members of Young And Proud (YAP) in Frankston, speak to some of these issues. Their developing of close friendships with other queers would appear to be linked to their being able to talk openly about their sexuality:

Since joining the group I cannot think of anything better that has happened in my life, I have met a lot of people in the same situation as myself and also people that I can be myself around and not have to hide the fact that I like girls instead of boys. I think that the friends I have made at YAP are the closest to my heart that anyone could be…

(KuRt, Frankston Youth Resource Centre website)

YAP is like my second family I guess, everyone is so easy to talk to and I don’t have to be someone else in front of them.

(Kellie 2000, Victorian Gay and Lesbian Youth Resource Directory website)

Within spaces where it’s ‘normal’ to be queer, young queers (like Kellie and KuRt) can let go (over time) of a lot of the restraint associated with their sexuality. As one young queer said in relation to The Freedom Centre (for same-sex attracted youth) in Western Australia, “I had the opportunity to talk about things I hadn’t been able to talk about before” (Goldflam et al 1999:64). The shift away from a sense of restraint can be likened to the loss of a tremendous weight or burden that young queers have (previously) carried with them everywhere. I
briefly explore some of the situations, issues and feelings that are implicated in this sense of weight or burden below.

As they talk to other queers, (some) young queers begin to sort through the confusion that results from the hiding of their (sexual) feelings, thoughts and experiences, and from trying to work things out within environments where negative discourses about homosexuality predominate and queer culture is largely invisible. As a young gay male said in relation to an Escape Explore retreat [for same-sex attracted young men under 25], “I feel less confused because I had a chance to talk and tell stories on the issue [of being young and gay]” (Goldflam 1999:71). Taking action – that is, expressing one’s thoughts and sexual desires, hearing oneself use such discourses, being challenged by other queers, and gaining feedback and support from them – is an important part of dealing with confusion relating to one’s [homo]sexuality.

There is another important dimension of sharing sexuality-related experiences with other queers. That is, the experience of seeing others nod in acknowledgement (because they’ve been through similar things themselves as queers), or hearing others make comments like ‘I’ve been through that too’, or ‘that happened to me’. This is important in respect to moving beyond isolation. Young queers may have previously thought that they were only one who felt this way, and did (or experienced) these things. It can be a huge relief to know that their sexuality-related feelings and experiences are shared by others. Robert (1999:10-11) highlights many of these issues in relation to a gay youth support group:

> Although it was awkward in the beginning, it was not long before I started to feel comfortable talking to other gay people. You will probably know just how relieved I felt to be in the company of others like myself after all those years of isolation and loneliness. I hate to use clichés but it really was as though a very big burden had been lifted off my shoulders and it was a great feeling. I still remember the sudden exhilaration and joy that engulfed me as I looked around the small dingy room in the basement of the union
building, with the realisation that all the people there were gay. They had struggled through their secondary schooling, kept their feelings to themselves and had even stolen the same furtive glances at others of the same sex, just as I had done. They were just like me.

Andrew, (Frankston Youth Resource Centre website) a member of Young And Proud, also writes about the experience of ‘letting go’ of that which he’s been hiding or holding in. His willingness to “empty [his] guts” about his sexuality is related to having other young queers to talk to – others who can relate firsthand to what he’s talking about:

Joining up with them [YAP] gave me the chance to meet other people in my area who were in the same circumstances. It’s easier when you can go and empty your guts to someone else your age and who knows what you’re on about. Not that it’s all group therapy. None of it is. We headed out and got into the places and activities that were out there for us.

Re-conceptualizing Oneself and One’s Future

Queer support and social groups or queer youth events can also contribute to young queers reconceptualizing possibilities for themselves (as young queers). Liam in the Writing Themselves In report for example (Hillier et al 1998:32), describes the concerns and fears he had in his life. These were: others finding out about his sexuality or asking “Where’s your girlfriend?”; his thinking/wondering – am I “the only one going through this”; “Who can I tell?”; and “Why can’t [G]od make me normal?” Through a gay youth support group however, he is able to conceptualize a life where he will be okay:

The next most important thing [having sex with a guy was most important thing] for me was a support group for gay youth…Once the support, education and information was layed [sic] out in front of me and I met other gay people, I realised that…I was going to ‘come out’ of this OK…Cheers!
Participation in queer support/social groups or events can also lead to young queers reconsidering the notion that queers don’t exist in their school, in their area or in their city/town. The idea that they are doomed to a life of loneliness, isolation and unhappiness is also rendered suspect as they begin to develop friendship networks and find out about (and later participate in) queer groups/services and events. They come to know through direct experience that they are not alone – that others do exist. This can be a source of tremendous excitement, as the following comment from Jess Langley (1999:75) indicates:

When I went to my first young lesbian support group, I remember going home on public transport and just splitting at the seams to tell someone… “I’m a lesbian and I just met all these great women and I’m so happy, and everything’s great.”

With young queers (in schools) often not knowing other queers it can be a real buzz to be in a space packed with ‘open’ young queers. Geoffrey Lamble (2000) describes such a situation, referring to his first experience at Minus18:

As I entered [Minus18], I looked around and saw something that I'll never forget. I saw people just like myself. For the first time in my life, other gay kids, many as unsure as I was, surrounded me.

It is obviously a moment of significance to Geoffrey, knowing that there are others like him that he can socialize with. Here he has queer reference points. He can therefore see that it’s okay to be unsure. Geoffrey could draw upon his memories of this experience (at Minus18) on later occasions – when he’s in spaces where young queers aren’t visible, where heterosexuality is the norm. He would know (because of Minus18) that there is much more for him (as a queer) outside these heteronormative spaces. He would know that there are queer social contexts for him and that he has queer friends. It’s quite a different situation to those young queers who feel alone but have had no firsthand experience of interacting with other queers. Unlike Geoffrey Lamble, they only have a heterosexual frame of reference from which to understand themselves.
Through being involved in a queer support/social group, young queers can also find out about other queer groups/services. Initially, they may not be aware that there are services or organizations that cater for ‘people like me’; a notion that can contribute to feelings of loneliness, isolation and pessimism about the future:

I am still working out exactly how the weekend changed me. I feel that it did. I am so proud of the decision I made in going. I could not have imagined self-discovery like I achieved. Not only do I have a more realistic view of being gay, I now view my potential very differently. I do not feel so alone. There is no reason to be. I know better the services available to me and intend to participate in some of them.

(Owen, quoted in Goldflam et al 1999:72)

Owen (Goldflam et al 1999:72) is the subject of a case study in the Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project Evaluation and Final report (Goldflam et al 1999:72-73). In the extract above, he is talking about a weekend retreat (Escape Explore) for gay and bisexual men under 25. It’s offered by the Western Australia AIDS Council in conjunction with The Freedom Centre (see Appendix 9). Finding out about queer services in this context can be much more than the receiving of group names and contact details. Other queer youth (in the group) or the facilitators may have firsthand knowledge of these groups – through participating in them, through helping to set them up or run them, and/or through knowing people who have done either. This ‘insider’ knowledge can be shared with the group and discussions can ensue – allowing a broader range of discourses about the queer groups/services to emerge.

Owen indicates that he intends to participate in these other groups (he’s heard about at Escape Explore). Though it’s not stated, it would seem that a key factor here is his enjoyment of the weekend retreat. That is, he’s made the effort to reach out – and it’s worked for him. He says it’s changed him. Owen has also made other queer friends who could participate in these other queer groups with him.
The Significance of Meeting Other Queers for the First Time

Owen (as indicated in the narrative above) considers his first extensive experience with other young queers to be quite special or significant. This is similar to other young queers quoted in this chapter who characterize their first experiences at queer support/social groups or queer events as defining moments in their lives. They effectively become a point from which to say, ‘that’s when things got much better for me. That’s when my life changed. That’s when I saw, felt and experienced something that is unlike anything that has happened to me before.’

It’s not surprising that Owen is ‘so-taken’ with his first extensive experience of socializing with other queers. In the prelude to Owen’s account (Goldflam et al 1999:72) of the retreat it says:

Owen was 20 and had come to the project feeling extremely isolated, insecure and depressed. He reported that he had previously attempted suicide and had accessed counselling.

Owen at that time had not met any other young queers and says he “had nothing to gauge his expectations on and that was scary.” He’s had to ‘pluck up’ some courage to go on the weekend retreat – to participate in something he’s never been part of before. He says he’s proud of himself for doing so.

Owen says he has a more realistic view of being gay through participating in Escape Explore. Having gay and bisexual people to relate to and mix with is likely to be a key influence in this regard. Being gay on this weekend does not equate to isolation, and no hope or prospects for the future. The negative preconceptions that have dogged him before in relation to his sexuality and his life come under pressure here (through interaction with other gay and bisexual young men) and gradually begin to give way. He advises (Goldflam et al 1999:73) other guys who “feel alone and afraid and would rather not be” to do a retreat too:
I feel that if you do go, you will meet at least one face that you will connect with. I met over twenty.

Zane’s (Frankston Youth Resource Centre website) first experiences with other young queers at Young And Proud (YAP) are also significant to her. It seems that this is when things start to improve in her life – in relation to her sexuality:

I haven’t looked back since that day. YAP means the world to me now and I look forward to every one of our meetings. I have met so many sweet, happy young people who go through all of the same problems that I go through. I think that I would be an empty shell had I not gone to YAP. It is good to have a support group to go to when life seems to be getting me down.

Zane considers what her life had been like before YAP, in this text. She can see that what is occurring (since then) in YAP is markedly different. It offers many more positive possibilities for her – including other queer people to confide in when she is getting down. They can support her, offering strategies they’ve utilized in their lives. All of this can be particularly important for young queers, especially for those who have hidden their sexual thoughts, feelings, desires and problems – thinking that no one else will understand or that others will react negatively if they openly discuss them.

Zane says that the other young queers in YAP have problems like she does and describes them as being “sweet, happy young people”. Being around young queers who are happy is important, particularly for those young queers who think that queers can’t have happy, enjoyable lives. Through interacting with young queers who have worked through and/or dealt with problems; through seeing young queers who have emerged happy after all their experiences; through socializing with others who have a positive attitude about being/doing queer, they may begin to feel more confident about their own future as a queer. Angela and Peter highlight this below. Both have met other gays and lesbians through The Freedom Centre in Western Australia (see Appendix 9 for a list of groups offered at this centre):
I didn't know who or what I was about. I didn't think there was any point to my life. Then I found some info, and met other lesbians and gay guys who felt good about themselves. I could talk about my feelings and my questions with other young people who felt the same.

(Angela, quoted in Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service (WA) and WA AIDS Council 1999-2001)

For young queers who are hiding their sexuality, have not met any other young queers, and are frequently encountering negative discourses about queer sexualities – feelings of confusion and/or a sense of futility about life (as a queer) are common. For Angela, moving beyond this negative situation involved meeting other self-confident gays and lesbians. It enables her to access a range of positive discourses about her sexuality; she’s able to talk freely, and is able to ask sexuality-related questions.

Peter’s life has also taken a more positive direction through meeting gays and lesbians who are happy:

I felt really alone and afraid for so long. I tried to ignore my feelings and pretend to be someone else. Then I met other gays and lesbians who were happy, successful, and were achieving their dreams. I knew I could too!

(Peter, quoted in Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service (WA) and WA AIDS Council 1999-2001)

Peter highlights that ignoring his feelings and pretending to be someone else didn’t work for him. It’s been a life of constraint, loneliness and fear. Through The Freedom Centre, however, he meets other gays and lesbians who are “happy, successful, and… achieving their dreams”. Thus, Peter is able to see that being/doing gay can work for him too.
Finding Commonality and Difference with Other Young Queers

Sexuality can be a basis of commonality among queers in queer support and social groups, and at queer youth events. Queers are not, however, a homogenous group. A number of the young queers in this chapter are aware of this. Through mixing with other queers, they come to realize that though they do have some points of commonality there are also differences, which can be positive. Owen (mentioned above, Goldflam et al 1999:72) for example, describes the elation of finding commonality with others, along with the positives of recognizing that differences also exist:

I was floating for the whole bus ride…Guys stood up and mingled, swung from the hand rails, chatted. I had three deep and meaningfulls in the first hour, my quota usually for a month or two. I was surprised how much these guys were like myself. Similar goals, fears and experiences…

The diversity in the group of guys was apparent from the first minute. I perhaps made this journey to find copies of myself. By the end I appreciated differences and realised I didn’t have to live up to any image except my own.

Commonality is key, in this context, to a type of discussion (“deep and meaningful”) that Owen obviously enjoys, yet hasn’t had much experience of. He says, “the experiences we unknowingly shared before we met, united as during our time together” (Goldflam et al 1999:73).

Owen is surprised at finding others who are similar to himself. It appears that he’d gained the impression that he was the ‘only one’ who felt and desired as he did. This is consistent with the experiences of a number of young queers quoted in this chapter.

The environment created on the weekend retreat is central to Owen’s connecting with the other young men (Goldflam et al 1999:72):
Every effort was made on this camp to make a safe environment so we could express ourselves. I told members of the group things I have never told anyone.

I was able to talk about my attraction to other men and have this acknowledged by other guys.

Being able to talk about his sexual desires for men without ‘copping flack’ or being put down or ostracized is significant to Owen. He says “[i]f only this had happened just once in high school – how different my life would have been.” This moment of finding out (through actual experience) that other guys are turned on by guys, is possibly a moment of realization that he’s not alone and that he’s not ‘abnormal’ or ‘deviant’ after all. If this had happened just once at school, (or even just once outside of school during his school years) it could have been quite empowering for him. He could have taken this experience and knowledge with him, rendering suspect the notion that heterosexuality is all there is.

Owen initially thinks that sameness is the key to his life improving. He says, “I perhaps made this journey to find copies of myself”. Difference may have been a problem for Owen in the past. This would resonate with research/studies showing that many young queers do not reveal their sexuality to others due to fears that their difference/s will not be accepted (Crowhurst 2001, Epstein and Johnson 1994, Flowers and Buston 2001, Glynn 1999, Harris and Bliss 1997, Herr 1997, Hillier et al 1998, Hogge 1998, Kendall 2001, Khayatt 1994, Plummer 1999, Plummer 1989, Quinlivan and Town 1999, Ross 1989, Uribe and Harbeck 1992). By the end of the weekend however, Owen says that he “appreciated difference”. Here, difference is not something that leads to conflict or being put down; nor does it lead to people hiding their homosexual interests or pretending to be ‘strait’. Owen therefore develops a different relationship to the issue of difference (in this context):
…[I] realised that I didn’t have to live up to any image except my own…I felt supported in the discussion groups, the only confrontations I had on this trip were with myself…

**Feeling Safe**

Heterosexuality is the norm at mainstream under 18 drug and alcohol free events such as Blue Light Discos. Consequently, many young queers feel that it is unsafe not only to be ‘out’ at these events but to take along queer friends or partner/s. Lamble (2000) recalls how another young queer said to him that the Blue Light Discos “proved themselves to be unsafe for people like us”. The Minus18 Committee (which is mostly made up of Minus18 participants) has made a similar point:

> Many of our patrons have attended mainstream underage events where they have been verbally and physically attacked because of their sexuality.

*(Minus18 Committee 2000)*

Minus18 provides a safe social space where young queers can be ‘out’ – with their queer friends and partners.

In heteronormative contexts (such as schools, or mainstream underage events) young queers may be wary of approaching someone they suspect to be queer due to fears of negative repercussions. This can lead to some young queers remaining lonely and isolated due to fears of ‘what ifs’. Cassee Sheard who is 17 (Corr 1999) highlights the importance of Minus18 in relation to this issue:

> More events like Minus18 would be good. You meet people in normal places and you’re not sure if they’re ‘that way’ and you feel bad about asking them.

In Minus18 and queer support/social groups, young queers at least know that the other young people (the overwhelming majority, if not all) there are queer. They can therefore gain confidence and social skills (as queers) in approaching and
talking to other young queers at a friendship level. They can also gain experience in initiating and responding to signals of sexual interest in/from others.

**Becoming Aware of the Wider Queer Community**

None of the practices commonly advocated in education focused research/studies on young queers can compare with the experience of being part of a major queer community event like Pride March in Melbourne. For KuRT (Frankston Youth Resource Centre website), a member of Young And Proud, her first experience of Pride March is especially significant:

By going to YAP I have found out about all sorts of wonderful things for gay people and without YAP I would never have been to Minus18, an underage dance party for gay and lesbian youth, also I would never have been able to take part in Pride March 2000 and march through St Kilda holding a big banner showing how proud I was to be a lesbian. I think that becoming involved with all of the social activities has helped me a lot to see that there is more than just my group out there that is gay, for example I think there was about 50 000 people at pride march. The atmosphere was something I had never ever felt before, I became hyperactive and had the best time dancing and singing away all night.

KuRt’s knowledge of what is out there for queers has been broadened through participating in YAP. She not only finds out that there are “all sorts of wonderful things for gay people” beyond her support group, but connects with a broader range of queers, through taking part in YAP’s social outings. At Pride March she finds that she is part of something much bigger; that being/doing queer has importance for many other people; that being/doing queer is joyful, pleasurable and exciting for these people. KuRt herself experiences euphoria and a sense of elation through being among the huge numbers of queers. Here she can be an ‘out and proud’ lesbian. She can let go and be “hyperactive”.
Through being part of queer events (like Pride March or Midsumma Carnival), young queers can observe, interact with and experience queer culture firsthand. They can access a range of discourses about queer desire and queer sexuality. They can check things out themselves, pursuing that which interests them.

Finding Places Where They Belong – Queer Community and Networks

In this final section on communities and networks, young queers draw upon differing notions of ‘community’, or ‘networks’ (predominantly involving queers) when writing about what is important to them.

Some young queers (below) refer to communities of queers that are quite small and local, formed within queer support and social groups. A participant in the Common Ground peer education group for young gay and bisexual men (in Western Australia), for example, said that it gave him a “sense of community”. This community offers him “friends, information, support [and] fun activities to relieve [his] depression” (Goldflam et al 1999:71). These aspects are prominent in many of the communities described below.

Some queer support and social groups facilitate the development of communities through their structures and approaches. Owen (Goldflam et al 1999:72) highlights this in relation to the weekend retreat (Escape Explore) he participated in:

The strength of the group was aided by our communal lifestyle. We ate, swam, laughed and even meditated as a group. I really enjoyed the togetherness. As part of our formal workshops, we discussed AIDS, safe sex, homosexual identity, myths about our feelings. We were told about the services available to gay and bisexual men in Western Australia and how we could participate. Every effort was made on this camp to make a safe environment so we could express ourselves. I told members of the group things I have never told anyone...I was able to talk about my attractions by men and have this acknowledged by other guys.
The facilitators of this weekend retreat aim to create a sense of community among the young queer men. Group activities and a safe environment where young men feel comfortable expressing their feelings and thoughts about their sexuality and sex, are key features of this community. Another aspect of this community is the focus on the future, with the young queers being told of the queer services that exist for them (as discussed earlier in this chapter). Through being part of this queer positive environment, Owen expressed what he had kept hidden before. And since it’s okay to be queer in this environment, the other young men acknowledged his desire for men, showing that they too are into men. Thus, social connections are built between the participants.

In the Australian documentary, *Out in the Bush* (Willison 1997), a young gay male highlights how he became part of a community of other gays through falling in love with a gay man. It didn’t occur through a structured queer support/social group:

> Well I was ready to pack up and move and go to the city when all of a sudden I fell in love with a man, something I didn’t think was possible.

He had all this information, all these friends, all these outlets basically and so I went from being ‘straight’ to all of a sudden being surrounded by this family and this network of support. Finally, I thought well hang on I’m not different, I’m not abnormal, all I am is gay. And after that I was fine you know. Like fine, fair enough, there’s heterosexuals and there’s homosexuals. So, big deal I was gay. And it was fine then because I had a network, I had a community.

The community or network spoken of here is not necessarily recognizable as a community to others. It involves the love, support and friendship of his boyfriend and his boyfriend’s friends, some of whom, it would seem, are gay too. Thus, there is commonality in terms of their sexuality. There is information about being gay or homosexual and outlets relating to it. In this community, the young gay
guy is open about his sexuality and openly interacts with other gays. He feels ‘normal’ with them and has a sense of optimism for the future.

The young guy spoken about above was going to leave the rural area where he lived, to go to the city, before he met these other gays. His schooling had involved much abuse, relating to his sexuality. He didn’t know anyone who was gay. His eventual connection and forming of close relationships with these gays however, assists him in finding spaces within (and probably beyond) his local area where he can fit in or belong as a gay man. Through having these gay frames of reference (in contrast to only heteronormative ones), he is able to see that he’ll be okay as a gay man – in his local area.

Jess Langley (1999:76) talks about a much larger community – the gay and lesbian community. Coming out facilitated her connection with this community:

> Coming out brought me into a whole new life, full of ideas and people I never would have met in my home town. Our community has its own newspapers, plumbers, radio stations, streets and towns as well as fashion sense. There’s a huge variety of people. You can be a lesbian, a dyke or a gay woman. You can be a hippie, a punk, a separatist, a lipstick chick or a nerd – we’re all there.

In a narrative primarily directed at young lesbian women, Jess points a range of possibilities within the gay and lesbian community. She illustrates the importance of coming out, in terms of seeing and experiencing the possibilities that are out there, in the gay and lesbian community. In describing this community she seems to assume that the young lesbian readers (like herself initially) are unaware that there are gay and lesbian community infrastructures (such as media outlets and services); areas (streets, suburbs and towns) where many gays and lesbians live; gay and lesbian fashion; and a range of ways of living as a lesbian, dyke or gay woman.
Jess Langley’s narrative highlights that there are alternative frames of reference to heterosexuality – gay and lesbian ones. Queers do have cultures, they do organize and develop institutions, and they do this collectively with other queers. Queers are agentic in her narrative, not alone, isolated and oppressed, waiting for others to help or protect them. Her firsthand experience of coming out and participating in the gay and lesbian community has led to her knowledge in these areas.

In these various communities and networks there are visible queer cultures, accessible queer knowledge, and open queer people. It’s safe to be openly queer and to interact with other queers. Here, queer desire and queer sexuality are valued, sanctioned and celebrated. Here, queers have fun as queers. Here there are other queers who have been through problems that the young queers are facing. They can offer support and strategies (in relation to sexuality related issues), and access to queer organizations and services.

**Summary**

Discourses of young queers overcoming isolation and loneliness are a common feature within, and in relation to, support and social groups for young queers. These discourses reveal that the shifting away from isolation and loneliness involves, at the same time, a shifting towards establishing queer friendships and social/sexual relationships *with other queers*. Thus, social interaction (with queers) is essential in this critical shift. This key point is often overlooked or discounted within education-focused discourse on young queers since it’s incompatible with the norms of formal school institutions.

The strategies produced within education focused research/studies work to legitimate the school as the most appropriate institution for dealing with the issues of homosexuality and young people. Thus hierarchical information flow (through curriculum) and disciplinary mechanisms (through anti-harassment policy or measures) are the favored means of achieving better outcomes for young queers – not facilitating social interaction between them (see chapters 4 and 5). The narratives in this chapter reveal these taken for granted approaches to
be particularly problematic, since the improvement in their lives (as queers) are not attributed to school but predominantly occur through social interaction with other young queers. However, I am not suggesting that it’s simply a matter of researchers/academic writers producing better strategies. The formulation of strategies is not independent of institutional norms. Institutional norms work to regulate and contain in advance the strategies that are produced by researchers/academic writers, purportedly for the benefit of young queers.

The harassed, at risk, isolated and ignorant young queer subject, that education focused researchers and academic writers are invested in, is compatible with the traditional strategies of anti-harassment measures and information provision. By contrast, narratives of agentic young queers who have queer friends, and a generally positive outlook on life (like those found in this chapter) are generally not found, not elaborated or not influential in respect to recommendations, within education focused research/studies on young queers. They aren’t particularly useful subjects in terms of making the case for curriculum or policy.

The narratives in this chapter highlight the importance of socialization between young queers. Socialization is critical to these young queers realizing that life doesn’t have to be about feeling abnormal, lonely or alienated – or about constant vigilance of their words or actions. Through interacting with other young queers they begin to re-shape (along more positive lines) their attitudes and assumptions about being queer, queer desire, sex, and possibilities for themselves (as queers). They therefore gain more confidence in themselves as queers. These various discourses about the importance of queer socialization, whilst not recognizable or intelligible within education-focused research/studies on young queers, circulate within HIV/AIDS social research on gay and homosexually active men (see chapters 5 and 6) and gay, lesbian or queer cultures. This highlights the need to move beyond a school-centric focus, in studies focusing on young queers.

Much of the socialization that occurs for young queers in this chapter has occurred because of their participation in queer support and social groups. Queer youth groups (like those focused upon in this thesis) generally recognize the importance of socialization between young queers. They seek to facilitate and
support it. In the final part of this thesis (Part 3), I specifically focus on queer support and social services in Australia (chapter 9) and more particularly Melbourne (in chapter 10). I examine the models that inform their approaches (chapter 9) along with their strategies and programs (chapter 10).
Support Services for Young Queers:
Organizational Models, Strategies and Programs
Health Promotion Models Informing Queer Support Services

In Australia, the number of support services that specifically cater for young queers has grown substantially over the last decade. Many of these services have been set up in response to health-related initiatives (sexual health, mental health, physical health, social health and well-being). These include local government queer youth support groups (see chapter 10), the Working It Out support service (Tasmania, see this chapter), and the Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project (Western Australia, see this chapter).

Given the emphasis that is placed on health it is important to understand the dominant health models that inform these initiatives. Traditionally it has been the Health Belief Model, which has focused on the individual and information provision (and is therefore often referred to as the Information Model) that has dominated in the mainstream health and education sectors. This model is briefly described in the early part of this chapter. Various concepts, which underpin this model, are also examined in other parts of this thesis (see chapters 2 and 5).

There are alternative models of health promotion (at a broad level) that have gained prominence within community-based health organizations and have achieved some degree of recognition within government health agencies. These models could be characterized as “social model[s] of health promotion” (Leonard and Mitchell 2000:5) since they advocate the factoring of the social, cultural and communal dimensions of peoples’ lives into health promotion initiatives. These social models of health promotion include, The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization et al 1986), The Community Development model and Social Action model (also referred to as Community Mobilisation approaches – Rothman and Tropman 1987), The Health Outcomes
and Health Promotion Conceptual Model (Nutbeam 1996) and The Jakarta Declaration (World Health Organization 1997).

Social models of health promotion have been utilized extensively within gay health organizations, particularly in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention – where they’ve been found to be particularly effective.

This chapter examines at a broad level – some of the significant differences between social models of health promotion and the Health Belief Model. It focuses on some of the key principles that have informed the social models – examining these in relation to specific health initiatives targeting queers. Where relevant, implications for school education are also raised. At the end of this chapter, key themes emerging from the exploration of social models of health promotion are identified. These themes underpin the enquiry, undertaken in the next chapter, into the strategies and programs of queer youth support services (in Melbourne).

**The Health Belief Model**

The Health Belief Model (also referred to as the Information Model approach) is one of the earlier biomedical health promotion models (Nutbeam and Harris 1998, Rhodes 1996). It is influential within the formal school education system, and school-focused sexual health research/studies (such as Hillier et al 1998 and Lindsay et al 1997).

Health initiatives, informed by this model, are often directed (exclusively) at the individual – in terms of their knowledge, attitudes and beliefs (Hart 1996, Kippax et al 1993, Rhodes 1996, Patton 1996, Rhodes and Quirk 1996). Information (originating from the ‘experts’) is delivered by the presumed knowledgeable, trained and legitimate providers of information (such as health-workers/authorities, teachers), to the presumed ignorant and uninformed
individual. In this respect, the Health Belief Model can be characterized as a top-down approach to behavior change.

Unhealthy behavior ‘choices’ are the effect of an individual’s ignorance, according to the Health Belief Model. Consequently (according to this model) an individual will be likely to take action to improve or protect their health if:

- they perceive themselves to be at risk of a particular health condition;
- the (potential) consequences of that condition are seen to be particularly serious or threatening;
- they’re aware of practices or actions they can take that will reduce or minimize the risks to themselves;
- the benefits of adopting these practices or actions are seen to outweigh any barriers or costs to taking action.

(c/f Nutbeam and Harris 1998:19)

Some refinements have been made to the Health Belief Model in recognition of limitations or gaps in the original model. These include the acknowledgement of a number of modifying factors – in relation to the four main areas listed above. They are factors associated with an individual’s personal characteristics, including the belief that they’re capable of taking the action that is recommended by authorities (self-efficacy), and an individual’s social circumstances. There has also been recognition that media publicity and personal experience can provide cues for action in relation to health (c/f Nutbeam and Harris 1998:19-20). These later refinements could be described as ‘add-ons’ since they haven’t led to a revamping or re-structuring of the original model – whose basic premise essentially remains the same.
The Shift Towards Social Models of Health Promotion

Since the mid 1980’s, alternative approaches to health promotion have developed which are social rather than individualist in focus. These “social model[s] of health promotion” (Leonard and Mitchell 2000:5) seek to overcome the limitations and problems of the Health Belief Model, departing from it in a number of respects.

The individual, in social models of health promotion, is no longer seen as separate or distinct from society (as is presumed within the Health Belief Model). Instead, the individual is understood as being constituted through the social. The cultures and communities that an individual is part of are understood to impact on their identity and the behaviors that they engage in, particularly those which affect health and well-being (Hart 1996, Leonard and Mitchell 2000, Nutbeam and Harris 1998, Rhodes 1996). Health promotion therefore (it is argued) needs to focus on these cultures/communities (in order to bring about behavior change) rather than focusing exclusively on the individual, as the Health Belief Model does. The notion of focusing on communities rather than the individual has been particularly influential in the field of HIV/AIDS (in relation to gay men). There has been a focus here on gay communities, in order to impact on norms relating to safe sex (Dowsett 1996, Hart 1996, Kippax et al 1993, Patton 1996, Rhodes 1996, Smith and Van De Ven 2001). This is discussed later in this chapter, and also in chapter 10.

Social models of health promotion also differ from the Health Belief Model in respect to:

• advocating the active involvement of communities in health initiatives directed at them;
advocating multi-faceted approaches to health promotion (of which information provision is just one part).

The main body of this chapter is devoted to these two key principles – examining how they inform queer health initiatives in Australia.

**Active Involvement of Communities in Health Initiatives**

It is communities, not health authorities, who need to take charge of health initiatives affecting them, according to social models of health promotion. Communities are understood to have a range of skills, knowledge, resources and strategies (also described as “human and material resources” – World Health Organization et al 1986:358) for dealing with health issues that affect them. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization et al 1986:358), a particularly significant ‘social model’ that is still influential today, emphasizes the importance of “community action”:

> At the heart of this process is the empowerment of communities, their ownership and control of their own endeavours and destinies.

Further to this, it highlights the importance of:

> …acknowledg[ing] people as the main health resource; to support and enable them to keep themselves, their family and friends healthy…. [and] accept[ing] the community as the essential voice in matters of its health, living conditions and well-being.

> (World Health Organization et al 1986:358)

The notion of communities owning and controlling initiatives relating to their health has informed a number of queer health-related initiatives in Australia – including HIV/AIDS prevention/education and research targeting gay men, and
mental health initiatives (encompassing suicide prevention) targeting queer youth. I focus on these two areas in the following section – examining why queer involvement is seen as important, and how queers are actively involved in particular health initiatives that target them.

**HIV/AIDS Initiatives Targeting Gay Men**

The cornerstone of Australia’s preventive approach has been the principle that, for HIV/AIDS education to be successful, affected communities themselves must adopt the challenges posed by HIV as their own and work together to find solutions and approaches that are appropriate to them.

(Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services 1996:15)

The gay community has been central to the development, design, delivery and evaluation of HIV/AIDS education and prevention initiatives targeting gay men in Australia. This has been the dominant approach (supported and advocated by governments, AIDS organizations and HIV/AIDS research units) in respect to HIV/AIDS prevention since the early days of the AIDS epidemic in Australia (Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services 1998a, b, c, Leonard and Mitchell 2000).

Active involvement of gay communities in HIV/AIDS prevention (in Australia) has taken many forms. Within HIV/AIDS organizations and government health departments and agencies, gays – including those living with HIV/AIDS – are involved in decision-making relating to HIV/AIDS policy and strategy development. Within the sphere of HIV/AIDS social research, researchers have regularly engaged with gay and homosexually active men to find out about:

- what they’re into sexually;

- the meanings and contexts of their sexual activities;
• their social lives – especially in relation to the gay community.


HIV/AIDS social research has been used to create relevant and sexually engaging HIV/AIDS education campaigns and programs (for gays) that have mostly focused on how gays can continue the sexual activities they enjoy, safely. It has also informed the development of conceptual frameworks relating to gay men’s social and sexual worlds.

Gay community involvement has also meant the adoption of peer support and education programs around HIV/AIDS (led by gay men) – so as to impact upon the norms of gays and gay communities. This is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

There is a historical frame of reference that goes some way to explaining why gay communities have been seen as integral (by gays) in respect to HIV/AIDS initiatives. Of most significance is the lack of trust or confidence that some gay men have had in the health system to sensitively, willingly and/or effectively deal with their health issues (Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services 1998, Rofes 1996, 1998, Kayal 1993). A number of factors have contributed to this lack of trust and confidence in the health system. They include: the heteronormativity of the health system (reflected in the presumptions of heterosexuality by health workers, for example), experiences of prejudice and discrimination from health workers, and breaches of confidentiality by health workers.

Before the advent of AIDS, gay activists within Australia (and also in other countries such as the USA and England) had recognized that social action by gays (for gays) was critical to dealing with health issues that affected them (Kippax et al 1993). These activists (with experience in different fields such as
health, welfare, education and media), in conjunction with gay communities locally and internationally, drew on the expertise that existed among them and their communities in order to develop approaches to gay health issues (Kippax et al 1993, Dowsett 1996).

Before AIDS became well known (in the mainstream) gay activists were already well aware of illnesses occurring among gays, through direct experience in the local context, as well as through contact with gays overseas (Dowsett 1996, Kippax et al 1993, Willett 2000). They had a body of knowledge, an array of skills and resources, and well-established connections with gay communities (both locally and overseas) through their activism. This not only gave them some credibility but also a support base for what they were doing. Through the gay press (locally and internationally) they had an avenue to rally further support (as volunteers, for example), a means to keep informed with what was occurring in gay communities elsewhere (in the world), and a medium to provide health information to gays (particularly AIDS related information) that wasn’t being covered by the mainstream media (Dowsett 1996, Kippax et al 1993, Willett 2000). These activists also had connections into mainstream health institutions and departments (which was useful for later lobbying) through the various gay health workers that worked with or comprised their groups (Willett 2000).

This range of expertise among gays, along with their support base, was quickly put to use in the development of infrastructures and support systems relating to HIV/AIDS. Initially they took the form of AIDS Action Committees. Later these became AIDS Councils and organizations, recognized and supported by Federal and State Governments (Dowsett 1996, Kippax et al 1993, Willett 2000). This was the beginning of gay communities (in Australia) taking charge or ownership of HIV/AIDS prevention initiatives relating to them.

A key premise in relation to early HIV/AIDS initiatives, for gay men, was: if the affected communities (such as gay communities) were to take seriously messages relating to safe sex, if safe sex was to become part of the culture of gay
communities – then issues of trust and credibility were critical. Thus a top-down approach emanating from ‘experts’ or ‘professionals’ not familiar with, not connected with, and/or not supportive of gays and their communities, was not considered an effective means of changing gay men’s sexual behavior. Instead, health promotion initiatives (relating to HIV/AIDS) in line with earlier gay activist efforts, and social models of health promotion, focused on bringing about change through directing efforts at the gay community level. This necessitated actively involving the gay community in HIV/AIDS initiatives targeted at them (‘gay community mobilisation’) (see Nutbeam and Harris 1998:37). This was seen as being particularly important in respect to changing the norms of sexual behavior in gay communities (Dowsett 1996, Hart 1996, King 1993, Kippax et al 1993, Patton 1996, Rofes 1996).

Various HIV/AIDS literature (in Australia) has highlighted how ‘gay community mobilisation’ initiatives succeeded in establishing ‘safe sex’ as a norm within the gay community during the early years of the epidemic (Dowsett 1996, Leonard and Mitchell 2000, McInnes 2001, Smith and Van De Ven 2001). In recent times, however, it has been recognized that having safe sex as a norm within the gay community is not sufficient in itself to ensure safe sex practice (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care 2000, Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services 1998b, Smith and Van De Ven 2001). In addition, contemporary Australian HIV/AIDS reports (such as Smith and Van De Ven 2001) have highlighted the ways in which safe sex guidelines for health educators have worked to limit their ability to actively engage with sexual practices (of gay or homosexually active men) that are contrary to the prevailing safe sex guidelines (which rely on the use of condoms). Emerging trends of gays fucking without condoms have proved problematic for HIV educators (in Australia) since they don’t have sanctioned strategies to address such practices and they lack epidemiological data as to the relative risks of some of these practices (being insertive versus being receptive in fucking, for example) (Smith and Van De Ven 2001).
HIV/AIDS research has also highlighted that the sense of crisis – the sense that we (as a gay community) needed to act to protect our own and our communities – which was critical to the establishment of a safe sex culture within gay communities, has largely diminished in Australia and the USA (Rofes 1996, 1998, Smith and Van De Ven 2001). It’s also been argued that the sense of crisis was felt largely within major cities rather than in smaller cities (such as Adelaide or Brisbane) or regional areas (Smith and Van De Ven 2001), and that younger gay men do not relate to notions of crisis in respect to HIV/AIDS (Rofes 1998, Smith and Van De Ven 2001). Gay men, it is argued, have “disengaged” from “HIV related issues”, as well as from AIDS organizations (Smith and Van De Ven 2001:7, 16-17). Many gay men in Australia and the USA no longer see AIDS as a central or defining aspect of their lives. It’s no longer considered an overwhelming threat (Rofes 1996, 1998, Smith and Van De Ven 2001). The terms ‘post-AIDS’ (Dowsett 1995) and ‘post-crisis’ (Murphy 2001) were coined to reflect these changes in gay mens’ sexual cultures since the early to mid 1990’s (also see McInnes 2001).

There is a concern (among some writers in the field of HIV/AIDS, as well as HIV educators) that HIV/AIDS and AIDS organizations will become irrelevant unless new approaches and frameworks are developed; approaches which enable movement beyond having condom use as central in HIV/AIDS prevention strategies – and which situate HIV/AIDS within a broader health context that reflects the shifting health values and priorities of gay communities (Smith and Van De Ven 2001). This effectively requires a shift away from the ‘crisis’ mentality within the AIDS sector – and HIV/AIDS researcher/writer, Eric Rofes (1998), has shown that this shift is proving to be particularly difficult to effect in the USA.

In a number of respects (in Australia) there has been a movement (at governmental/AIDS sector level) away from a bottom-up approach to HIV/AIDS initiatives to an increasingly top-down approach that is proving to be increasingly out of touch with many gay men and their sex lives (see Smith and Van De Ven...
2001, also see Rofes 1996, 1998 in relation to the USA context). It has also been argued by McInnes (2001) that the moves towards the professionalization of HIV/AIDS education (targeting gay men) and the HIV/AIDS (gay) peer educator workforce in Australia threatens to degay HIV/AIDS prevention initiatives. Similar arguments have been made in earlier times, in relation to Australia (see Dowsett 1996, King 1993). In addition, various HIV/AIDS writers have spoken of HIV/AIDS as having been degayed in the USA and England (Herek and Greene 1995, King 1993, Patton 1993).

Whilst there are concerns about the direction of HIV prevention initiatives (in relation to gay men), Eric Rofes (1998:23) has documented gay community-based initiatives (in the USA), among HIV positive and negative gay men, that no longer position AIDS as the “central part of their identity”. Rofes (1998:22) says that whilst the AIDS sector remains locked in ‘crisis’ mode, increasing numbers of HIV positive gay men have “made a conscious decision to move on, to exit the state of emergency”. He makes similar points about gay men who are uninfected (with HIV). ‘Grass roots’ action among gay men, in these contexts, is proving to be beneficial to their health and well-being.

Edward King (1993) also documents the emergence (in 1992) of a gay community-based initiative in England. The organization, Gay Men Fighting AIDS (GMFA) was founded in response to the degaying of HIV/AIDS organizations and prevention initiatives (including those set up by, and run by, gays). This organization returned to the earlier forms of gay community-based (HIV/AIDS) education efforts pioneered by gays. According to GMFA’s founders, the knowledge and strategies from this time had been instrumental in contributing to the adoption of safe sex among gay men. These strategies however had not been recognized for their success (according to GMFA’s founders) and with the processes of professionalization (of AIDS organizations) had largely disappeared from the HIV/AIDS education landscape in England. GMFA sought to rectify this situation.
Recent events relating to HIV/AIDS (briefly discussed above) illustrate that issues relating to HIV/AIDS are continually changing. There is a need to constantly re-assess existing approaches, and to develop new initiatives and strategies in order to keep pace with developments within gay communities. However, this is proving to be quite difficult to achieve, and there are no easy answers to this problem facing HIV/AIDS educators and organizations.

**Mental health Initiatives Targeting Queers**

In this next section, I continue to explore the principle of actively involving queers in health initiatives relating to them. Here I focus on three mental health initiatives (in Australia) – that rely on this social model of health principle.

Mental health has increasingly become a focus of attention for gay and lesbian health initiatives in Australia (Bfriend 2000, Goldflam et al 1999, Vichealth 1999, 2000b, 2001a, b, also see chapter 10). This parallels the increased availability of funds (from government health authorities) for this area of health in the mainstream (see Vichealth 2001a, b).

The mental health of gays and lesbians is (at times) adversely affected by the stigmatization of homosexuality in the general society. This stigmatization manifests itself in discriminatory laws, silence about homosexuality, harassment, discrimination, abuse, condemnation and rejection. It is implicated in isolation, alienation, depression, low self-esteem, despair, secrecy (about one’s sexuality), confusion (about one’s sexuality), suicide (in terms of ideation, attempts and suicide completion), drug and alcohol abuse, and self-harming (to name just some of the negative consequences) among some gays and lesbians (Bfriend 2000, Brown 2002, Goldflam et al 1999, Hillier et al 1998, Hogge 1998, Macdonald and Cooper 1998, Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health 2001d, Ministerial Committee on Lesbian and Gay Law Reform 2001, Nicholas and Howard 1998, Suicide Prevention Task Force 1997).
One key component of a number of mental health initiatives targeting queers (in Australia) is social interaction between queers (and queer communities) – through peer education and support, or peer mentoring (or buddy) programs. It’s seen as particularly important in respect to queers developing positive attitudes towards their sexuality, forming friendships and relationships (with other queers), and finding spaces where they feel comfortable and valued (as queers).

This section examines two peer-mentoring projects for queers (hereafter referred to as Bfriend projects or initiatives): Bfriend in Adelaide and Working It Out in Tasmania, along with a peer support and education program for SSAY in Perth – The Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project. All of these initiatives can be characterized as social models of health promotion, in respect to:

- actively involving queers and/or queer communities (the affected communities)
  - as the founders (or co-founders) of the projects, as the volunteer base, as employees;
  - in decision making relating to their health and well-being;
  - in interactive activities designed to improve their health and well-being (such as peer education);

- facilitating access to, or developing supportive queer environments or spaces;

- fostering knowledge, as well as skills and strategy development that benefits queers individually, and queer communities.

**Bfriend Projects – Adelaide and Tasmania, Australia**

Adelaide Central Mission’s (ACM) Family Services division in alliance with gay, lesbian and bisexual communities in South Australia, runs a Bfriending
project (that is, a peer support or buddy program) for people newly identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, as well as for people who are questioning their sexuality (for those under 18 to those 50 plus). It was originally funded by ACM (1995-1998); since July 1998 however, it has received Community Health funding from the South Australian Department of Human Services (Bfriend 2001b). It is now a permanent program in ACM (Bfriend 2001b) and has led to a similar venture being adopted in Tasmania (through the organization Working It Out).

Bfriend (in Adelaide) started through the efforts of a lesbian worker (in the Family and Counseling Team) at ACM (Bfriend 2001b). For a number of years she had been trying (unsuccessfully) to gain funding for such a program. Her experiences with clients (at ACM) newly identifying as gay or lesbian, however, made her determined to pursue the idea. She found that there was a gap between clients ‘coming to terms’ with their same-sex attraction and finding friends in the gay and lesbian community. She wanted to close this gap, to connect them with other gays or lesbians (and their communities) much earlier in the process. That way they could gain peer support, and overcome the isolation from other gays and lesbians that they spoke of (Bfriend 2001b). One young lesbian client, in particular, was influential on this health worker (Bfriend 2001b):

It was Louise’s isolation and need for contact with the lesbian community outside the gaze of her family and culture, which made me determined to revive an idea [a buddy system]…

Since its beginnings Bfriend has expanded to provide additional forms of support (to queers) such as workshops on coming out, relationships, homophobia, health and sexual issues, sexuality and spirituality, as well as various forms of peer support groups (Bfriend 2001a).

Working It Out, a Tasmanian LGBT community-based support service (based in Burnie and Hobart), also offers a Bfriending program for people newly
identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (Working It Out 2002). It is one component of its counseling and suicide prevention work, which received federal funding in 2000 (McKenzie 2000).

Working It Out originated from a recommendation in a report entitled *Working It Out: A needs analysis of sexual minority youth in North West Tasmania* (Hogge 1998). This report was a response to a number of suicides by young gay men in the north west of Tasmania. An alliance was formed to investigate the issues facing young queers, or those questioning their sexuality. This alliance comprised gay community organizations (Tasmanian Council on AIDS and Related Diseases and the Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights Group), a gay affiliated community group (Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays – PFFLAG), Tasmanian Aboriginal Health Service, and Youth and Sexual Health Service Organizations (Devonport Youth Accommodation Services and Sexual Health Tasmania) (Hogge 1998).

**Bfriending Projects Alliances with Queer Communities**

Both the Tasmanian and Adelaide based Bfriend projects have strong links to queer communities. Queers and/or queer community groups have played an important role in respect to: initiating the projects, volunteering for the projects, and participating as workers on the project. Both projects, responding to what was happening with same-sex attracted people in their area, recognize the importance of queers connecting with each other and queer communities. This is considered especially critical during the early periods when a person is just beginning to identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

Gay people can, according to the *Working It Out* report (Hogge 1998), link GLBT young people into gay communities – communities where they can receive “positive messages about what being homosexual means” (Hogge 1998:18). Connecting and interacting with gay people and their communities can let them know that “they are not alone” and can have a “healthy social existence” according to Hogge (1998:21). It can also assist them in moving beyond negative
attitudes and outlooks about their life as a gay person. These views on gays and gay communities are consistent with other academic literature on queer youth (Flowers and Buston 2001, Lipkin 1999, Troiden 1989, Warwick et al 2001, also see chapter 8).

Young GLBT people in the Working It Out research (Hogge 1998:34) also acknowledged the importance of connecting with gays. They “agreed unanimously that a service [in their area] which could provide a safe and confidential environment in which they could make some contact with other gay identifying people…was an absolute necessity”. The development of the Working It Out support service and its Bfriending program is a response to this view.

Bfriend (Adelaide) and Working It Out (Tasmania) also acknowledge that LGBT communities are critical to their ongoing operation and success (Working It Out 2001:1, Bfriend 2000:5):

Working It Out [in Tasmania] enjoys strong community support both within lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities and the broader community…

There has always been an enthusiastic response to requests for volunteers [from gays, lesbians and bisexuals]. This has resulted in a large and diverse pool of volunteers…This aspect of the Project is particularly heartening and reflects the significant support from broader Lesbian, Bisexual and Gay communities for Bfriend [in Adelaide].

The notion of acknowledging (and valuing) the role played by gay communities (in HIV/AIDS initiatives) has become common practice in the field of HIV/AIDS in Australia (Australian National Council on AIDS and Related Diseases 1999,
Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care 2000, Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services 1998a, b, c, Dowsett 1996, Kippax et al 1993). As seen above, it also occurs (at times) in mental health fields that target young queers. There is, however, far less prevalence of such acknowledgement in this sector. It seems that heteronormative notions of older queers as predatory and a threat to young people, and conceptualizations of young queers as vulnerable, confused and, ‘at risk’ may be an issue here. This is even more apparent in the field of education where gays and gay communities (both within and outside the school) are rarely visible or acknowledged as important in respect to young queers’ well-being (see chapters 4 and 5).

**Involvement of Queers in Bfriend Initiatives**

A Bfriender offers many things to a newly identifying GLBT person (the Bfriendee). Of critical importance is their firsthand experience of being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. The newly identifying GLBT person can tap into the Bfriender’s knowledge and experience as a queer, asking questions of them and finding some common ground as they share what they’re going through. For those unfamiliar with, or unsure about GLBT communities, and what is out there for them, a Bfriender can draw upon their knowledge (as a GLBT person, also assisted through further training from the Bfriend organization) to introduce them to particular GLBT community services or venues that relate to their (the Bfriendee) interests or needs. The Bfriender can also accompany them to particular GLBT events they’re (the Bfriendee) interested in checking out (Bfriend 2001a).

The Bfriend initiatives (in line with social models of health promotion) actively work to remove barriers that impede queers connecting with other queers, and accessing services provided by queer organizations or groups. A newly identifying GLBT person may remain isolated (from other queers and queer organizations) for a number of reasons. They may be unaware of where to access queer information or support. They may also be nervous about making contact (independently) with other queers or their organizations/group due to a lack of firsthand knowledge about, and/or familiarity with, queers and queer
organizations. A lack of access to positive discourses about queers and queer organizations may also contribute to concerns/fears in these areas. This is where the Bfriender is of particular importance.

As someone who is also gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, a Bfriender can support and encourage the newly identifying GLBT person in reaching out into (what is at that time) the unknown. They’re a companion for them, someone who’ll actually be with them (in person) as they start to make connections with queers and queer communities. They’re likely to be aware of the various concerns a newly identifying GLBT person may have – and can provide positive discourses (drawn from their own firsthand experiences as a queer) to counter them. The Bfriender can also share useful strategies or tips that they or other queers have utilized to deal with issues affecting them (as queers). They (along with, and supported by, the support personnel at Bfriend) can provide information and support that is particular to the needs and issues of the newly identifying GLBT person. There is an interest then in moving from where the newly identifying GLBT person is at – at their pace, in language relevant to, and valuing of, their sexuality and sexual desires.

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Before moving on to examine another mental health initiative that relies on active involvement of queers and queer communities (the Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project) – I wish to draw upon some of the key points emerging from my exploration of the Bfriending initiatives – in order to make some comparisons with the school sector.

I have previously highlighted (in this thesis) that knowledge, skills, resources and strategies relating to queers and their issues, are produced by, and circulate amongst, queers in queer cultures and communities (Warner 1999). Bfriending programs, with their peer support approach, recognize this. They value what queers and queer communities have to offer – through encouraging the Bfriender to draw upon and share their life experiences, and knowledge (as queers) with the
bfriendee, and also through facilitating and supporting connection with queer communities. In addition, the organizations that run the Bfriending projects publicly acknowledge the critical role queer communities play in their operation and success.

Queers and queer communities are generally characterized in a very different way within research/studies focused on the school-education sector. Here, queer teachers, queer students and queer communities and subcultures are assumed to play a peripheral, rather than central, role in initiatives focusing on queers and homosexuality (see chapter 4). The notion of a queer teacher using their firsthand experience, as a queer, to provide advice or support to a young queer is, for the most part, unintelligible. Indeed, it could be construed as seeking to unduly influence impressionable young people – through discourses of ‘pushing the gay bandwagon’ or ‘promoting’ homosexuality. There are also various barriers which effectively work to preclude queers assuming any significant role in young queers’ lives (in formal school institutions). These include: laws (relating to the education sector, or more generally occupations that involve work with, and care of, children) which rely on notions of gays as a threat to ‘vulnerable’ or ‘impressionable’ young people (see p.292 in this chapter, also see Chapman 1996, Morgan 1996, Telford 1998, Warwick et al 2001), expectations that queers will remain invisible in an embodied sense (in formal school education), and education-focused research/studies on young queers (including school-focused sexual health research) that are compliant with hegemonic heterosexuality in many ways (see chapters 4 and 5).

The Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project – Perth, Australia

Queer community organizations, along with members of queer communities, played an integral role in the Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project in Western Australia. This project was funded under the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, from 1997 to late 1998, and involved an alliance between various queer community organizations (the Western Australian AIDS Council – WAAC and the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service of Western Australia – GLCS, along with The Freedom Centre). This alliance, along with support from/collaborations
with other queer community (or queer community affiliated) organizations, and funding from other sources, has enabled the continuation of various queer initiatives that were developed, improved and/or expanded during the Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project (see Goldflam et al 1999, The Freedom Centre et al 1999-2001a, b, c).

A safe queer community space (or drop in centre) for same-sex attracted youth and those with gender identity issues was a key aspect of the Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project. The space they focused on was The Freedom Centre. It had been in operation (through the Western Australian AIDS Council) for a number of years before the project started, catering for gay and bisexual young men. The submission for funding highlighted its importance to young people with same-sex attractions (The Freedom Centre et al 1999-2001b). Queer youth support groups in this research (see chapter 10) also rely on the notion of queer community spaces being critical for young queers’ well-being. By contrast, this notion remains unintelligible within formal school institutions and education-focused research/studies on young queers.

The Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project (Goldflam et al 1999) aimed to broaden the focus of The Freedom Centre (to include young same-sex attracted women and also those with gender identity issues) and to increase access to it (see The Freedom Centre et al 1999-2001b). This involved targeting queer youth, encouraging them to get actively involved in The Freedom Centre and its various initiatives (Goldflam et al 1999, The Freedom Centre et al 1999-2001b). The Victorian Suicide Task Force Report (1997:66) highlights the importance of young people having a stake in, or feeling that they belong in, their communities. It is apparent that the Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project initiatives were based upon the principle of young queers having a stake in queer communities – to counter their feelings of isolation and alienation. For example, they sought to:

- value young queers and their sexualities within The Freedom Centre (and its associated peer support and education groups);
• make use of the knowledge, experience and skills (among young queers) that could benefit or assist other queers (both within and outside the centre in the broader queer community);

• facilitate and support (meaningful, fun, enjoyable) social interaction between young queers and queer communities;

• value and/or celebrate queer communities – showing that queer communities are worth having a stake in.

(see Brown 1999, Goldflam et al 1998, Mitchell 2000, also see chapter 8)

The Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project employed a range of strategies to foster a sense of belonging to, or connection with, queer communities. Peer support and social groups were recognized as being a significant component of the overall initiative (see Goldflam et al 1999). Young queers’ discourses relating to some of these groups are discussed in chapter 8, whilst peer support and education (as a strategy) is discussed in chapter 10. Encouraging queer youth to take on volunteer roles in The Freedom Centre (including leadership positions in peer support and education groups) and utilizing queer youth focus groups for the development of queer youth resources was also seen as important. In addition, efforts were made to publicize and discuss what queer communities (their groups, events and organizations) have to offer young queers, with young queers being linked into these queer groups and events (Goldflam et al 1999, The Freedom Centre et al 1999-2001a, b, c).

One thread running through all these components (of the Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project) is visibility (in a corporeal sense) of queers and queer communities, along with visibility of queer culture. Thus, queers and queer culture are integral to, and highly visible within The Freedom Centre and its associated groups (for young queers). I believe that this point needs to be highly
emphasized, as this constitutes a major departure from the school-centric approaches (to improving visibility) that rely on representations of queers, rather than queers becoming visible through doing queer. Saying ‘it’s okay to be gay’ can seem pretty hollow to young queers if there are no queers to interact with, no queer communities to immerse oneself within, no queer culture to engage with – and no initiatives to foster and support the visible presence of queers in that context.

The concept of “community action” described in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization et al 1986:358) is evident in the Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project in Perth. The Ottawa Charter says that “community action” involves the “empowerment of communities [in this case queer communities of which queer youth are a part], their ownership and control of their own endeavours and destinies…[It also] draws upon existing human and material resources in the community [in this case those of queer youth and the wider queer community].”

The Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project (in Perth) is positively acknowledged in the report, Valuing Young Lives: Evaluation of the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy (Mitchell 2000:73), as an example of Community Development (which is a social model of health promotion). Here ‘community’ doesn’t just refer to an overall community, in contrast to much education-focused research/studies on young queers. There is recognition of communities of “sub-populations with special needs” (Mitchell 2000:73). The Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project can be categorized as “community development”, according to Mitchell (2000:73), in four major respects. Firstly, it’s “based in community organisations [WAAC, GLCS and The Freedom Centre] belonging to the particular [queer] communities concerned”. Second, it “provid[es] support services directly to members of their community [queer youth]”. Third, it “engag[es] [queer] community members as voluntary contributors to the work of the organisation.” Finally, it provides “training and community network development [for queers] to facilitate this involvement.”
In the next section of this chapter I focus on another key principle of social models of health promotion – that of adopting multi-faceted approaches to health promotion. I examine what a multi-faceted approach could encompass, and why a multi-faceted approach is seen as important. Following that, I examine one key component of multi-faceted approaches in the field of queer health initiatives – that of overcoming/circumventing barriers to health and well-being. This forms the major part of this section.

**Multi-faceted approaches to health promotion**

A multi-faceted approach to health promotion moves beyond an exclusive focus on the individual and information provision. In seeking to impact on the social, cultural and communal – it works across a variety of levels. It could therefore entail a combination of the following aspects:

- active involvement of affected communities in all aspects of health programs. This requires partnerships between affected communities and government and health departments;

- improvement of, or changes to, environments, policies or laws that adversely impact on the health and well-being of individuals and their communities;

- creation of environments that support the health of individuals and communities.

There are a number of reasons for the move toward multi-faceted approaches to health promotion. In particular, the “provision of information on its own [is recognized as] not [being] effective in achieving sustained behaviour change” in terms of health (Leonard and Mitchell 2000:9). This is a reflection of two key understandings. Firstly, desire doesn’t always align with rational decision-making (Davies 2000). Secondly, various factors can affect the ‘choices’ one makes in relation to health. These include the norms and values of cultures, communities or environments that one lives, works, plays and participates in (Leonard and Mitchell 2000, Nutbeam and Harris 1998, Patton 1996, Rhodes 1996, Rhodes and Quirk 1996), social determinants such as socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation (Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health 2001b), power relationships (Hart 1996, Nutbeam and Harris 1998, Rhodes and Quirk 1996), and policies and laws (as discussed later in this chapter). This understanding underpins approaches to HIV/AIDS education/prevention in Australia – as can be seen in the Third National HIV/AIDS Strategy, *Partnerships in Practice, National HIV/AIDS Strategy 1996-1997 to 1998-99* (Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services 1996:7):

A strategic response to HIV cannot depend on traditional education approaches to influence behaviours. An individual’s complex interactions with the physical, social, legislative and economic environments must be taken into account.

A reliance on the notion that ‘knowledge equals behavior change’ without factoring in desire and social contexts has also been shown to have a range of negative consequences for some minority groups. It underpins attacks that are made from time to time on gay men (within mainstream contexts) when there are rises in HIV infections. Gay men who fuck without condoms whilst being informed about HIV transmission and prevention are often characterized as irrational, recalcitrant, compulsive, irresponsible, lacking in self control and/or self indulgent (Altmann 2000, Dow 2000, Patton 1996:126, see also Dowsett 1996). Fault is therefore located in (or attributed to) the individual, or at times the
group (through homogenization or stereotyping) whilst the Information Model approach remains (largely) unexamined, unquestioned and untroubled in the mainstream. In many ways, it’s reinscribed through such attacks.

HIV/AIDS researcher/writer Cindy Patton (1996:126) highlights particular consequences for those who don’t comply (at all times) with advice given by health authorities. She says that “[a]t some point those who fail to respond to information are “declared hard to reach” whilst “traits stereotyped as characteristic of the group” may lead to the group being declared “expendable” (by authorities). It can also go much further than this. Patton (1996:126) says the “information model by denying the role of community norms, rationalises punitive action against the very people the model has failed.”

This chapter has already examined a number of practices and strategies that could form part of a multi-faceted approach to health promotion – in particular the active involvement of communities in health initiatives that target them. I turn now to another key component of multi-faceted approaches to health promotion in respect to queers – that of overcoming/circumventing barriers to health and well-being. This is considered particularly important in respect to creating environments that support and enhance health and well-being among queers.

**Overcoming Barriers to Health and Well-Being**

Social models of health promotion are informed by the understanding that environments (physical, social, economic), services, organizations, and laws and public policies impact on the health of individuals and communities, and that these variables can be changed or modified in ways that lead to better health (Leonard and Mitchell 2000, Nutbeam and Harris 1998, Rhodes 1996, World Health Organization et al 1986).
Queer health literature (in line with social models of health promotion) has identified a number of key factors that contribute to the health and well-being of queers, along with the barriers (in environments, services, organizations, laws and policies) to their realization. It has also documented the initiatives aimed at overcoming or circumventing these barriers.

This section focuses on three key issues in terms of the health and well-being of queers: Being open about one’s sexuality, confidentiality, and access to queer affirmative materials/resources. It examines some of the major barriers in relation to each of these issues – as well as queer community-based initiatives that have been developed to overcome/circumvent these barriers.

**Being Open About One’s Sexuality**

A recurring theme in queer health-related research/studies is the importance of environments where queers can be open about their sexuality, their HIV status, and receive support in terms of their health (as queers) (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care 2000, Goldflam et al 1999, Kendall 2001, King 1993, Kippax et al 1993, Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health 2001c, d, e, f, Parnell 1989, Rofes 1996, 1998, Turner and Anderson 2001). A number of factors have been identified which constitute barriers to achieving this. These include harassment, discrimination, age of consent laws and (lack of) confidentiality. This section focuses on just two of these barriers (in respect to young queers) – age of consent laws and confidentiality.

**Age of Consent Laws**

In April 2002, the Western Australia parliament passed the *Acts Amendment (Lesbian and Gay Law Reform) Bill 2001* (Gay and Lesbian Equality, WA 2002). Part of the reform package was a reduced age of consent for homosexuals, from 21 to 16. This brought it into line with the heterosexual age of consent.

There were numerous forms of objection to the previous age of consent laws. It was argued that some same-sex attracted young men (under 21) were not
accessing support and advice about HIV/AIDS and safe sex, or making use of sexual health services/programs offered by organizations that specialize in gay men’s sexual health (such as the Western Australia AIDS Council – WAAC) due to concerns about being reported and charged for any same-sex sexual activity they may have disclosed:

Many young gay men are terrified of seeking our services, worried that they will be charged with criminal offences for admitting to having sex.

(Trish Langdon, Executive Director of WAAC 2001)

…using 21 as the age of consent for homosexuals resulted in discouraging young males from “seeking information from appropriate sources, as they are unsure whether they will be ‘dobbed in’ for sexual offences if they disclose any sexual activities”.

(WAAC, quoted in Ministerial Committee on Lesbian and Gay Law Reform 2001:114)

Gay community organizations, including the Western Australia AIDS Council (WAAC), also highlighted (see below) how age of consent laws negatively impacted on their ability to carry out sexual health education work with young gay and homosexually active men under 21 (Brown on behalf of WAAC 2002, see also Kendall 2001). Similar points have been raised by gay community health organizations in New South Wales, where (at the time of writing) the age of consent for heterosexual sexual acts is 16 and 18 for homosexual sexual acts (Roberts and Maplestone 2001).

Reticence, among same sex attracted young men, to talk about their same-sex sexual activities or desires makes it particularly difficult for health-workers to tailor sexual health advice and support to these young men’s particular needs, experiences, attitudes, knowledge, and desires. Youth-workers and their
organizations have also been concerned about criminalization (as well as possible reductions of funding) in respect to themselves for being party to, or being seen to encourage, a potential criminal offence (Roberts and Maplestone 2001, King 1993). This has led to the curtailing, restricting, sanitizing and/or avoiding of discussions about same-sex sexual activity and safe sex outreach work with same-sex attracted young men under the age of consent:

The AIDS Council’s public health educative duty of care to young gay men is made impossible because of accusations that we are recruiting.

(Langdon, on behalf of WAAC 2001)

Workers from the AIDS Council of NSW [were] legally advised not to supply condom use instructions along with free condoms which they were to distribute at an under 18 Gay and Lesbian dance party.

(Roberts and Maplestone 2001:55)

Workers from a gay and lesbian youth support organisation [in NSW] [were] unable to discuss sexual issues with 16 or 17 year old male clients in all but the most abstract and hypothetical terms…

(Roberts and Maplestone 2001:55)

Lack of directness, frankness and explicitness by health and welfare professionals in discussions about gay sex with their underage clients has, at times, been interpreted by young gay men as insinuating that their sexuality is somehow dirty, shameful and pathological.

(Roberts and Maplestone 2001:56)
Other arguments relating to the age of consent center around its potentially negative impact on the mental well-being of homosexually active young men (under 21). The differentiation between homosexual activity (deemed criminal) and heterosexual activity (deemed legal) for those under 21, it is argued, conveys negative messages about, or stigmatizes, (male) homosexuality, which is detrimental to the health and well-being of gay youth in a range of ways. This argument has been made in a report commissioned by the NSW Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (Roberts and Maplestone 2001). It was also utilized by numerous parties to the law reform in Western Australia including the Ministerial Committee on Lesbian and Gay Reform (2001) and gay community organizations such as WAAC and Gay and Lesbian Equality (WA) (Kendall 2001, Meyer 2001, Pereira 1999):

To have an unequal age of consent, whatever the age set, is discriminatory and unfounded. It presents a message to our gay youth that they are somehow less than their straight counterparts. It causes confusion and guilt and can contribute to a loss of self-esteem, leading to depression and sometimes suicidal feelings.

(Damian Meyer, Convener of Gay and Lesbian Equality – WA, 2001)

Age of consent laws are seen to encourage secrecy – when openness about one’s sexuality is considered pivotal to improving the sexual health and well-being of gay and homosexually active young men. The 1997 Woods Royal Commission into the NSW Police Force highlighted that a discriminatory age of consent could drive underground those who needed access to safe sex, education services and condoms (see Kendall 2001:14). The National HIV/AIDS strategy in 1989, influenced by the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations’ (AFAO) position, adopted a similar line of argument in relation to the penalization of homosexual activity in particular states of Australia. It said that the penalization would “impede public health programs promoting safer sex” by “driving underground many of the people at risk of infection…[who will be] deterred from presenting for testing, counselling, support and treatment” (quoted in Morris 1995:111). These understandings relating to secrecy or the driving
underground of those who need access to health advice, support and services havn’t (for the most part) been picked up within education-focused research/studies on young queers. They weren’t seen as particularly important either during an earlier (1989) period of lesbian and gay law reform in Western Australia.

In 1989, the Gay Law Reform Group (GLRG) was the major gay and lesbian lobbying group in Western Australia. They were concerned that decriminalization of homosexuality wouldn’t be achieved so they agreed to a number of concessions; concessions that discriminated against young people under 21. From originally arguing for an equal age of consent of 16, GLRG agreed to 18 and finally to 21. They also agreed to a negative preamble about homosexuality, and laws that prohibited the promotion and encouragement of homosexuality in primary or secondary schools (Willett 2000). The Gay Law Reform Group therefore effectively participated in making the legal framework for young queers worse. They agreed to the introduction of new structural barriers that disadvantaged young queers, in order to benefit older queers.

A gay youth group, Breakaway, contested the line that the Gay Law Reform Group was adopting, urging them to not move from an equal age of consent. Willett (2000:230) in a book reviewing gay and lesbian activism in Australia, quotes Breakaway representatives as saying, “‘As a community’…we need to support all its members and this includes the young members’.” They also said (Willett 2000:230) that agreeing to an age of consent of 18 would be “discriminatory and unsupportive of our own.” The Gay Law Reform Group effectively ignored Breakaway’s views. Young queers were therefore not only excluded from the benefits of law reform but were also more affected than other age groups of queers by the new restrictions agreed to by GLRG. Willett (2000:231) is particularly critical of the actions of the Gay Law Reform Group (in respect to the 1989 reform):
Western Australia law reform is one of the few unequivocal failures of the Australian gay movement. Laws that had rarely been enforced were struck down, it is true, but large numbers of gay people – including the young, those most vulnerable to both the symbolic and actual effects of such laws – were in effect recriminalized, with the endorsement, however reluctant of the movements leaders.

The approach taken by Gay and Lesbian Equality (WA) in the 2001-2002 period of reform was quite different to its predecessor – GLRG. Gay and Lesbian Equality (WA) didn’t shift from its original position of seeking to remove the various barriers potentially affecting young queers’ health and well-being – that is, the discriminatory age of consent, the negative preamble, and the anti-promotion and encouragement laws (see p.292 in this chapter).

**Confidentiality**

One issue that has often been raised in relation to queer health (outside the school system) is the importance of confidentiality – especially in respect to queers’ sexualities, their HIV status, and issues relating to either of these areas (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care 2000, Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services 1998b, Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health 2001a, Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby 2000). Confidentiality is seen as particularly important due to concerns (among some queers) about harassment, discrimination, penalization, or other negative repercussions.

**Confidentiality and Queer Youth Support Groups**

Young queers generally do not trust youth-workers and other health care professionals, in relation to their sexuality. The *Writing Themselves In* report (Hillier et al 1998) highlights that SSAY rarely disclosed their sexuality to professionals such as youth-workers, doctors and counselors. This is consistent with other queer youth research (Hogge 1998, Sears 1992). One issue of concern for young queers, in this matter, is betrayal of confidence.
A number of studies of young queers have highlighted the importance of confidentiality from those working with young queers, along with the negative repercussions of breaches of confidentiality (Bochenek and Widney Brown 2001, Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State 1999, Woog 1995). Confidentiality, as an issue though, is generally given far less coverage than harassment and discrimination in education-focused research/studies on young queers.

Organizers of a number of queer youth support services, in Melbourne and Tasmania, have recognized that concerns/fears about breaches of confidentiality can lead to young queers not accessing their services, or not being willing to openly discuss sexuality-related issues. They’ve advertised their services as being confidential and have shown that this is not just a matter of words, by implementing practices to protect young queers’ confidentiality.

It’s not particularly surprising that confidentiality has been a significant item of interest in queer youth support groups. With these groups often structured around the discussion of personal feelings, experiences and interests relating to sexualities, SSAY may be apprehensive about breaches of confidence in these areas – especially in relation to their parents, families or peer group. Academic literature on queer youth highlights that negative repercussions can (sometimes) ensue from disclosures about sexuality in family or peer groups (Harris and Bliss 1997, Hillier et al 1998, Hogge 1998, Jordan et al 1997, Khayatt 1994, Lipkin 1999, Malinsky 1997, Plummer 1989, Uribe and Harbeck 1992, Warwick et al 2001). Confidentiality has therefore come to be seen as a key aspect in the relation between queer youth services and young queers – in order (partly) to reduce the possibility of negative situations occurring.

The Working It Out Bfriend service in Tasmania has established numerous practices to protect the confidentiality of their queer clients. One component of the compulsory volunteer training for Bfrienders specifically focuses on ethics and confidentiality. Bfrienders are alerted (in training and organizational
materials) to the various ways that confidentiality of Bfriendees can be breached. They are given a range of things to think about in relation to their own actions such as:

Is it ok to telephone? Are there times when it’s not ok? What about mail? If we are out socially, is it ok to acknowledge you? Does this depend on where we are? Do I really need to wear my “I’m a dyke and I’m ok” t-shirt today?


Bfrienders also learn about practices that must be employed in relation to possible contact with family members. What is highlighted as key here, is that maintenance of confidentiality requires on-going thought and attention; it must be structured into their volunteer work with their Bfriendee.

Bfrienders must also sign a confidentiality agreement. This highlights that confidentiality is a “crucial element in the success of the services provided by Working It Out and that failure to maintain [it] can have serious implications for those concerned.” (Working It Out 2002:23). It also specifies the only situations in which personal and confidential details may be disclosed, such as where a failure to share information could result in self-harm (to a Bfriendee) or harm to others. They are also alerted to the fact that Bfriendees are entitled to sue them for a breach of confidentiality – which Working It Out (as an organization) doesn’t indemnify them from (Working It Out 2002:24). Working It Out also highlights that it will take action against any compromises of confidentiality. Confidentiality then is treated as a serious matter in this organization. It’s critical to them maintaining credibility as a queer youth support service.

Another confidentiality-related issue for some young queers, in relation to queer youth support/social services, is the possibility that their parent may be consulted about personal issues they raise (in relation to their sexuality) – or that their parents may need to give consent to their participating in queer youth
support/social services. This notion of parents as key decision makers (in relation to their children) – and as people who must be kept informed about any issues relating to their children predominates within the formal school system. Some queer support services have sought to remove this particular barrier to their viability. The Working It Out Bfriend brochure (Working It Out 2001), for example, (indirectly) acknowledges queers’ concerns in these areas. It recognizes the agency of queers; it understands privacy to be a right and recognizes that queers themselves need to independently make decisions about their lives:

We respect your right to privacy and believe the best person to make decisions about your life is you.

Along similar lines, Boroondara Youth Services highlight (in their Supporting Adolescents Questioning Sexuality: Protocol Document (Boroondara Youth Services Working Party 2000) that parental consent is not required for young people (14-18 years old) to participate in their Not Quite Straight program. This, it argues, is in line with “legal advice from the Youth Advocacy and Legal Service” (Boroondara Youth Services Working Party 2000:3). Youth-workers do, however, need to ensure that young people have a sufficient level of maturity to understand their participation in the program, and the consequences of any decisions they make (Boroondara Youth Services Working Party 2000:3).

Boroondara Youth Services Protocol Document 2000 (Boroondara Youth Services Working Party 2000) also details their procedures relating to confidentiality. Similar to the Working It Out organization (in Tasmania), it assures clients of confidentiality (this is one of the “Rights of the Client” – Boroondara Youth Services Working Party 2000:2) and has the same exception where confidentiality may need to be broken. Youth-workers must also take new clients through the procedures relating to confidentiality.
Schools and Confidentiality

Young queers (generally), in addition to not trusting youth or health care workers, do not trust school-teachers, school welfare personnel or other authorities in schools sufficiently to disclose their sexuality to them (Hillier et al 1998, Hogge 1998). Concerns about breaches of confidentiality are one factor affecting this, according to Hillier et al (1998:56):

School counsellors and welfare officers who are officially there for this type of support, and other adults in the school system generally had the reputation of not keeping a confidence.

There is an implicit assumption in the Writing Themselves In report (Hillier et al 1998) that it would be better for SSAY if they could confide in professionals (such as youth and health care workers along with school personnel) about their sexuality. In contrast to support services for queers outside the school system however, there’s been little effort directed at initiatives to ensure confidentiality for queers within the school system. To establish confidentiality procedures for queers in schools could be seen as encouraging disclosure of queer sexualities. This would conflict with the dominant aims and practices, in formal school institutions, of not encouraging disclosure by queers.

Access to Queer Affirmative Health Materials

Another theme commonly encountered within queer health promotion literature relates to the accessibility of health promotion materials that are affirming of queer sexualities, that are cognizant of the particular needs and interests of queers, (and) that utilize language queers are familiar with. One of the factors that works to impede or obstruct access to such materials are censorship regimes – in particular laws relating to censorship (or obscenity), and laws prohibiting the promotion or encouragement of homosexuality.
**Censorship Regimes and HIV/AIDS Initiatives**

Censorship laws that restrict the distribution of information materials on the basis of what are purported to be “public or community standard[s] of decency” have a significant impact in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention initiatives (targeting gay men) in Australia (Leonard and Mitchell 2000:14, Dowsett 1996).

Underlying the notion of ‘community standards’ is the idea of a “single and seamless … community” (Leonard and Mitchell 2000:14). This fails to recognize the existence of different communities with varying norms, values and interests. Also, ‘community standards’ are likely to be aligned with heterosexual norms thereby working against the interests of homosexuals (Leonard and Mitchell 2000, King 1993). This can be seen in cases involving the use of sexually explicit HIV/AIDS materials to promote safe sex among gay men (Leonard and Mitchell 2000).

HIV/AIDS education materials for gay men often rely on the use of sexually explicit images and language since they have been found to facilitate more effective behavior change in respect to safe sex (c/f Leonard and Mitchell 2000:3, also see Dowsett 1996, King 1993). Sexually explicit materials are also designed to counter the notion that safe sex is boring (Leonard and Mitchell 2000).

This approach of using sexually explicit materials reflects a shift away from an Information Model approach (to health promotion) involving do’s and don’ts about safe sex in clinical, ‘neutral’ language, to a social model approach that has sought to work at a gay community level, seeking to generate and maintain a safe sex culture among gay men and gay communities. Consequently, the target group (gay men) are involved in focus groups to ensure the development of materials that are meaningful, and sexually appealing and engaging to gay men (in terms of images, style and language). The use of clear and explicit materials to show gay men how to continue enjoying particular sexual activities they’re into – safely – starts from where they’re at, it encourages and supports them to take control, and recognizes them as having the agency to do this.
Censorship regimes are a significant barrier to the distribution of sexually explicit HIV/AIDS education/prevention campaigns in Australia. From time to time state government health ministers have banned campaigns targeting gay men due to claims that they promote homosexuality and are pornographic. At times opponents of HIV/AIDS campaigns have claimed that they are contrary to state health policy relating to HIV/AIDS prevention – arguing that they promote homosexuality rather than seeking to prevent HIV/AIDS (Leonard and Mitchell 2000). In effect, they’ve argued that *promotion* and *prevention* should not be linked and are relatively autonomous concerns. However, proponents of sexually explicit HIV/AIDS materials have argued (in line with social models of health promotion) that positive, public affirmation of homosexuality is desirable and plays a key role in HIV/AIDS prevention strategies (Leonard and Mitchell 2000).

Those involved in the development of HIV/AIDS prevention materials (in Australia) have directed their efforts towards minimizing the likelihood of becoming embroiled in censorship controversies rather than seeking reform of censorship laws per se. Their approach has centered on restricting distribution of, and access to, HIV/AIDS materials so that they’re only likely to be seen by the target group and not the general population. The need for sexually explicit materials (in HIV/AIDS related health promotion) has also been incorporated into the Fourth National HIV/AIDS strategy (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care 2000:14). This provides a degree of legitimacy for the use of sexually explicit materials:

> Materials designed to help prevent the transmission of HIV and sexually transmissible infections must be presented in such a way as to have maximum effect on the risk-related behaviour of specific groups. From time to time the use of explicit images and language in education programs may be warranted.
Although there are ways to reduce the impact of censorship – censorship still remains as an ever-present threat in relation to HIV/AIDS education initiatives, with real consequences. This creates a climate of uncertainty and can be quite disruptive for those developing HIV/AIDS campaigns, and for those workers (in the fields of HIV/AIDS) seeking to utilize particular resources that have been developed.

Censorship Regimes and Schools

Another form of censorship is the prohibition of the promotion and encouragement of homosexuality. This has been a problem in various countries, including the USA, England and Australia. Anti-promotion laws in Australia have largely been an issue at the state government level. In Western Australia for example, anti-promotion and encouragement laws (in relation to schools and initiatives seeking public funding) have recently been contested and subsequently repealed.

The main arguments relating to the repeal of anti-promotion laws centre around the provision of information and support to young queers. It has been argued that these laws obstruct safe sex education relating to gay men, as well as suicide prevention initiatives targeting young gays (Kendall 2001, Pereira 1999). These laws are also said to impede the provision of information about homosexuality in schools (Epstein 2000, Hewitt 2001, Kendall 2001, McGinty 2001, Ministerial Committee on Lesbian and Gay Law Reform 2001, Redman 1994, Warwick et al 2001, Watson 2002):

Mr. McGinty [WA Labor Attorney-General] said that there was a fear among teachers that giving information about homosexuality breached the law and stopped them teaching balanced sex education.

(Hewitt 2001)
…section [23 of the Decriminalization of Sodomy Act – in Western Australia] may have impeded beneficial activities such as safe sex education campaigns and the information about safe sex practices in schools since 1989 as it relates to young gay men. It is important that all young people receive information about safe sex practices, support and appropriate health education…This should not be denied to them simply because of their sexual orientation.

(McGinty, WA Labor Attorney-General 2001)

Section 23 of the Decriminalization of Sodomy Act makes any frank and open discussion of homosexuality potentially very difficult. Safe sex education and suicide prevention campaigns aimed at gay youth (all of which require some degree of public funding if they are to have any substantial effect) could fall victim to this section. Indeed campaigns of this sort, aimed as they are at presenting the realities of lesbian and gay sexuality and giving confidence to lesbian and gay youth through the promotion and distribution of positive images of same-sex sexuality, could be seen as contravening the anti-proselytising element of this section…

(Kendall 2001:10-11)

In Western Australia, anti-promotion and encouragement laws were introduced as a result of an earlier gay and lesbian law reform initiative (as previously discussed in this chapter). The recent repeal of these laws was part of a broader reform agenda pursued by gay and lesbian community organizations such as Gay and Lesbian Equality (WA), the Western Australia AIDS Council and gay and lesbian media, along with gay affiliated organizations such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).
Key Themes

Several key themes have emerged from the preceding examination of social health initiatives targeting queers. These themes will be explored further in the final chapter of Part 3 – which focuses on specific strategies and programs of queer youth support and social groups in Melbourne.

The themes, in relation to young queers, can be summarized as follows:

• Young queers should be actively involved in decision making pertaining to queer youth health initiatives;

• Peer education and support are crucial components of health initiatives for young queers;

• Health initiatives targeting young queers need to focus on the social contexts of their lives, rather than being centered around information provision;

• It is important to have, or to provide access to, queer spaces so that young queers can be open about their sexuality, and can discuss sexuality-related issues in confidence;

• Health initiatives targeting young queers need to challenge the stigma and shame associated with homosexuality – in terms of being homosexual, homosexual practices, venues, organizations and events.
In many ways, the approaches and strategies of the queer support and social groups involved in this research are compatible with key principles of social models of health promotion (as discussed in the previous chapter). This chapter examines a number of queer support and social groups (situated mostly in Melbourne), drawing on material from interviews I conducted with youth-workers, as well as personal experience. It analyses four key themes: peer education and support, the challenge of stigma and shame, active involvement of young queers in decision making, and queer social interaction.

**Background**

Many of the queer youth support groups set up in recent years in various Melbourne suburbs are linked to mental health initiatives (in relation to suicide prevention). The 1997 Victorian Suicide Prevention Task Force Report (Suicide Prevention Task Force 1997) led to funding being made available for various suicide prevention initiatives, including queer youth support groups. This report (Suicide Prevention Task Force 1997:38, 40) identified gays and lesbians as being one of the ‘high-risk groups’ for suicide, and briefly mentions some possible factors for this – factors that are consistent with Australian research/studies on homosexuals and suicide (MacDonald and Cooper 1998, Nicholas and Howard 1998). These factors include alienation, isolation, community violence (towards gays and lesbians), rejection and/or lack of support from friends, family and school, stigmatization of homosexuality within society, lack of recognition (from society) that young people may identify as gay or lesbian, the stress of not being ‘out’ and living in rural areas.

Queer youth support groups, as will be seen in this chapter, address many of these mental health issues, through connecting young queers with other queers
(around their age group) and with queer communities. A key emphasis in this regard is providing or finding spaces where it’s okay to be openly queer.

**Peer Education and Support**

Health promotion programs for specific communities are best delivered by the communities themselves, through peer-based initiatives and in partnership with governments, health professionals and researchers.

(Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services 1998b)


Peer education and support is also employed within queer youth support groups in Australia. There’s been comparatively little research however, on the practices utilized. The *Here for Life Youth Sexuality Project* in Western Australia (Goldflam et al 1999, see previous chapter) is one of the few documented gay community-based initiatives (in Australia) involving peer education and support for young queers. Its focus was mental and sexual health.

HIV/AIDS and other STD’s (sexual health) are points of attention within the queer youth support and social groups involved in this research. They’re not the defining issues however – isolation, alienation and internalized homophobia are. This ties in with the mainstream focus (in recent years) on young people’s mental health – particularly relating to suicide (see Education Victoria 1998a, b, Vichealth 1999, 2001a, b).

**Why Peer Education and Support?**

Peer education and support involves the gay community taking charge of education relating to its health and well-being. It is collective, rather than
individualist in focus. The notion often invoked (particularly in the field of HIV/AIDS) is that of the gay community “acting to protect itself” (Kippax et al 1993:16, Dowsett 1996:70, see also Australian National Council on AIDS and Related Diseases 1999):

There is also an interpersonal dimension to this collective effort, where men with differing patterns of attachment to gay community life are providing information, support and encouragement to one another.

(Dowsett 1996:80)

Given the need to bring about some changes in gay men’s sexual behaviors (such as the use of condoms for fucking) it was recognized that information, advice and support coming from gays (in peer education groups, for example) was more likely to be seen by gays as credible and trustworthy (see Parnell 1989). By contrast, initiatives coming from those outside the gay community, particularly from government and health authorities with reputations for discrimination and hostility towards gays, ran the risk of being seen as attempts (by non-gay authorities) to curtail or control gays’ sex lives, or to impose solutions on gays (King 1993, Parnell 1989, Rofes 1996).

Gay communities, in countries such as the USA, England and Australia took a stance against efforts to control their sex lives. As Dowsett (1996:79) notes, the international gay community led the way in terms of recognizing that “uniform strategies of prohibition and regulation [would] not work” in terms of preventing HIV/AIDS:

Safe sex was, at one and the same time, a demand by gay communities for sexual rights in the face of anti-gay forces and an intelligent reading of gay sexual activity and the necessary modifications that would make it “safe”.

Similarly, Kippax et al (1993:13) point to gay men as leaders in respect to safe sex:
It is important to remember that gay men first invented the idea and practices involved in ‘safe sex’...Australian gay communities had already been developing preventive education materials in 1983 before any government assistance was provided, just as they developed the first volunteer care and support programs for people living with AIDS.

Peer education and support, in AIDS Councils, is a means by which gays maintain some degree of ownership of issues relating to gay sex. As will be seen in this chapter, they’re active players, openly discussing the pleasures and ‘turn-ons’ of gay sex, along with sexuality-related issues. Thus, peer education (in these contexts) is an avenue whereby the centrality of sex in gay men’s lives and the pleasure of gay sex is acknowledged and embraced.

In relation to queer youth – peer education and support has been recognized as a means of fostering positive attitudes (among young queers) towards queer sexualities, facilitating social connectedness with other young queers, and improving health and well-being (see Goldflam et al 1999). This is especially important given research on young queers (and young people in general) that shows a lack of trust in health and school authorities (Goldflam et al 1999, Hillier et al 1998, Hogge 1998, Moore 1996). Also, (as discussed elsewhere in this thesis) education-focused research/studies continue to point to schools and mainstream health services as being implicated in discrimination and harassment (of queers) as well as being key sites for discrimination and harassment. For the most part, there is a lack of interest in the health and well-being of young queers in both these sectors. Thus, as HIV/AIDS activism and gay and lesbian law reform has demonstrated, if positive change was to occur for queers, if they were to improve their situations, then queers needed to take action.

The following section focuses on two key aspects of peer education and support groups (for queers): the practice of having open queer facilitators who are encouraged to disclose details about their lives as queers, and learning from others (queers) in the peer group – through interactive activities.
Open Queer Facilitators

The Victorian AIDS Council’s (VAC) peer facilitators come from queer communities. They’re recruited through previous VAC peer education groups and advertisements in the gay media. Queer employees of VAC also work as peer facilitators. There is an expectation, within VAC, that peer facilitators (in the peer education groups) will give something of themselves as gay men – that they will draw upon their *gayness* – in terms of *being* gay and *doing* gay. Gayness, in this context, encompasses their first hand awareness and/or experience of gay cultural norms and values, politics and history, aesthetics of male bodies, gay sex and fantasies, gay relationships, and gay-related issues such as coming out or disclosure, harassment and homophobia (McInnes 2001). It (gayness) may be conveyed to participants (in peer education groups) through (the peer facilitator’s) body language (nods, gestures, laughter, mannerisms) as well as through the slang (or ways of speaking), images and experiences peer facilitators use, invoke or reflect upon (Leonard and Mitchell 2000, McInnes 2001).

Gay facilitators establish their personal awareness of (some of) the issues facing the gay participants, showing that they can relate from firsthand experience – as gay men – through drawing upon their gayness. It can give added potency to what they’re saying – contributing to a connectedness with the group – to a sense that they’re onside with the participants. Also, as sharing of personal feelings, desires and experiences forms a significant component of the AIDS Council programs – a gay facilitator is able to encourage this by their own actions.

In one VAC peer education program I participated in, the gay facilitators readily shared their experiences of issues being explored. In a discussion of sexual ‘turn ons’, for example, a facilitator spoke about his interest in, and experience of, beats. It was the first time I’d heard talk about beats where it wasn’t associated with being dirty and disgusting, or with losers who couldn’t get sex elsewhere. This facilitator didn’t seek to distance himself from beats. They were shown to be an important, pleasurable and exciting aspect of his sex life, not something to be ashamed of, or put down. This candid sharing (from the facilitator) encouraged
other men (in the group) who were also into beats. They began to speak of the pleasures of beats, along with issues pertaining to the use of beats.

The VAC facilitator, in the context above, led by example. He showed that it was okay to talk about our sexual passions, whatever they may be. They weren’t something to be ashamed of, something to be hidden away. This is an important strategy particularly with those sexual practices that are condemned and labeled as unnatural, wrong and deviant in heteronormative contexts. It means that which is usually locked out or rendered unsuitable for discussion (in schools for example) is opened up and explored.

Frankston Youth Resource Centre’s Young And Proud (YAP) group also draws upon a peer education and support approach. Long-time members are encouraged to become (after training) ‘peer support educators’ – a role in which they draw upon their own experiences as queers to assist and support other young queers – in a range of ways.

The youth-worker involved with YAP discussed (in an interview for this research) a number of benefits of the peer support educator role. She said that it contributes to the development of new skills (for the peer support educator) – in particular, leadership skills and support skills. The peer support educator role also (according to the youth-worker) enables the establishment and maintenance of a strong support network for SSAY that is not restricted to, or dependent on, the Frankston Youth Resource Centre (FYRC). This is considered particularly important given FYRC’s limited hours of operation and limited resources. Young queers, who come into contact with (or mix with) peer support educators, outside YAP, are able to benefit from their knowledge and skills. This may include young queers who are members of YAP, as well as the peer support educator’s queer friends. It may also include young queers who have sexuality-related issues to sort through and/or want to meet other young queers but don’t feel comfortable approaching queer youth services or queer venues.

Peer support educator’s names and contact details (where appropriate) are passed on to SSAY who contact Frankston Youth Resource Centre wishing to talk to
another SSAY about their feelings and sexual attractions. This provides another opportunity for peer support educators to draw upon their firsthand experience of being queer. Here, it helps to establish a connection and/or commonality with the caller. They come to know that the peer support educator is onside with them – that they have direct experience of what they’re talking about. Consequently, they may be more willing to open up about their issues or concerns (see also Goldflam et al 1999, Moore 1996). Peer support educators, in this context, act as a link between the caller and the queer youth support service. They can assist the SSAY in making contact with other queers, through the queer friendly services and groups they’re part of.

Peer support educators also meet up with newcomers to YAP, prior to their first meeting. That way, the newcomers know someone in YAP and may feel more confident attending the group. At YAP itself, the peer support educator acts as a buddy for the new person, introducing them to others, connecting them into the group (and other services), and generally making them feel more comfortable.

Being a peer support educator (at YAP) can positively impact on a young queer’s health and well-being, in terms of validating their sexual desires and experiences, developing their skills, and showing them that they have an important and meaningful part to play in the queer community (see Goldflam et al 1999).

**Problems and Issues With Facilitators Drawing Upon Their Gayness**

Organizational structures, norms and values in AIDS organizations (in Australia), which are based in, and run by, gay communities encourage and support facilitators drawing upon their gayness (see McInnes 2001). However, gay facilitators, in recent times, have spoken of a tension between their gayness (experience and identity as a gay person) and professional conventions and requirements of AIDS organizations (see Smith and Van De Ven 2001). McInnes (2001) highlights that the practice of drawing upon gayness is threatened due the ever-increasing professionalization of the AIDS sector. Professionalism – with its emphasis on qualifications (over the personal), as well as binaries such as neutral/impartial and personal/private, in many ways conflicts with the practice
of gay facilitators actively sharing their experiences, feelings and desires as gay
men (see McInnes 2001).

Drawing upon gayness is also limited in some respects. It has been highlighted
(for example) that AIDS organizations value particular forms of gayness over
others. A Community Education Manager (a position now labeled in the more
mainstream and ‘professional’ guise of ‘Health Promotion Program Manager’) at
the Victorian AIDS Council (interviewed for this research) said that peer
education groups can tend towards a manufacturing of a style of gay (in terms of
language, style of dress, and venues they visit) which can alienate some gays who
may not feel that they fit this style. Similarly, Dowsett (1996) has drawn
attention to the gay community-centric basis of models and exemplars of safe sex
drawn upon by gay community organizations. This can lead to them being seen
as irrelevant, unappealing and/or inappropriate by some gay or homosexually
active men.

In relation to peer education facilitators – there are various issues, problems
and/or limitations in respect to drawing upon gayness. Some gay facilitators do
not have the knowledge or experience of particular aspects of gayness – in terms
of gay life, culture or sex. Some may no longer be in-touch with gay community
life (McInnes 2001). Facilitators may also generalize or make incorrect
assumptions about participants from their own experiences as gay men (Smith
and Van De Ven 2001).

Dominant norms and values in AIDS organizations can also mean that some gay
men are not seen as appropriate for the role of peer facilitators or outreach
workers. This may include those whose sexual behaviors don’t accord with
HIV/AIDS guidelines, and those whose ways of speaking and interacting differ
substantively to those working in AIDS organizations. That is, they’re seen as
inappropriate and/or unprofessional (Dowsett 1996, also see Connell et al 2000).
And yet, some gay or homosexually active men may feel that they have more in
common with these men who don’t fit the usual mould of HIV educators.
Learning From Each Other: The Circulation and Production of Knowledge and Strategies Among Queers

Peer education and support is informed by the notion that gays and gay communities have knowledge, skills and strategies pertaining to (homo)sexuality-related issues. Gays are conceptualized as agentic – not as wounded, ignorant and dependent on knowledge from the ‘experts’. Thus, peer education and support does not revolve exclusively around the peer facilitators. It encompasses learning from, and being supported by, one’s peers (in the group).

Peer facilitators (in VAC peer education groups such as Young & Gay) spend much of their time initiating, encouraging and supporting activities that enable discourses relating to queer-related topics (such as sex, coming out, safe sex, relationships, harassment and discrimination), to not only circulate but also to be produced within the group. These discourses are explored, built upon, re-worked, challenged and debated. Participants are able to draw upon them outside the group – trying out, for example, strategies they’ve discussed in the group. They’re also able to report back on, and gain further support and advice (from the other queers) in relation to particular strategies they’ve tried outside the group (between the weekly meetings).

Strategizing

‘Coming out’, or disclosure, is one issue that young queers get ideas or support from others (queers) about in queer youth support and social groups. At the Action Centre, for example, young queers (in the support groups offered) are encouraged to talk about the possibilities relating to disclosure: considering consequences, assessing risks, weighing up options and planning for different scenarios that may eventuate. The approach employed here enables young queers to gain knowledge about, and develop skills in, evaluating situations and planning for decisions relating to coming out. Hearing from other young queers – interacting with their discourses about coming out – and gaining support from them, are integral to this skill and knowledge development. This approach factors in risk – yet young queers are conceptualized as agentic – as they discuss how to negotiate and manage risks.
Participants in the Young & Gay program (at the VAC) also talk about experiences of disclosure or non-disclosure. They discuss their reasons for coming out or not coming out to particular people (such as parents and friends). Related issues such as self-acceptance and comfort with one’s sexuality (as well as the varying periods of time it may take to achieve this), societal attitudes, difficulties in facing negative reactions and the obstacles that ‘prevent them being who they want to be’ are also canvassed (see Victorian AIDS Council 2001:7-8).

In these programs for young queers, coming out (or disclosure) is represented not only as being a common or collective experience for queers, but also as an experience that varies among queers. That is, there are different contexts, people, situations, issues and feelings to consider (in relation to coming out), and one approach does not fit them all. The strategies employed here (by VAC and the Action Centre) leave choices (about being out) up to young queers. Importantly too, they’re alerted to the practice of selective disclosure. That is, disclosure need not be an ‘all or nothing’ situation. They can pick and choose who they disclose their sexuality to, drawing upon the knowledge and skills they’ve accessed/developed in the group, to make these decisions.

Young queers (in queer support and social groups) also benefit from the tips, insights and experience of fellow queers in relation to harassment. In queer support and social groups, young queers find that there are others who have been through harassment. They are not alone, and are not unusual in this regard. In these groups, young queers devise ways to deal with harassment, drawing upon the expertise of others in the group. Some gain the confidence to try particular strategies (to deal with the harassment) due to the support that they have received in the group.

In queer support and social groups there is an emphasis on what the young queer can do to work through sexuality-related issues or to make decisions in their life. Here, as has been found to be critical in HIV/AIDS prevention for gay men, (Kippax et al 1993, Dowsett 1996) there is an encouragement of social processes between queers. This socialization fosters a connectedness (countering the
isolation that some may have felt before) as they work together – sharing strategies, advice and knowledge. It also fosters greater self-confidence in themselves as queers as they access positive discourses about queer sexualities.

**Access to, and Exchange of Queer Related Discourses**

The queer related discourses which circulate (and are produced) in peer education groups don’t (for the most part) have currency in mainstream contexts (such as schools). They’re incompatible with dominant norms and values that privilege heterosexuality and subordinate homosexuality. That information, purportedly about gays, which does make its way into the mainstream is likely to be normalized – rendered intelligible, according to heterosexual norms and ideals (see chapter 5).

In the VAC peer education groups that I’ve conducted and participated in (see also chapter 8) there were often moments when gay men spoke of their immense relief at finally hearing someone express or describe a feeling or experience they could relate to. Before joining the group, many had thought they were the only one who felt, desired or did the things they did (see Goldflam et al 1999:21). They thought they were abnormal, a freak. In the context of interaction with other queers however, that which had previously been a source of alienation, confusion, loneliness, self-loathing or unhappiness (in mainstream contexts) is now a point of connection. It’s validated or affirmed by other queers.

Interaction with embodied queers is key to understanding oneself as a queer – to valuing oneself as a queer – to transforming oneself as a queer – to dealing with issues relating to being or living queer (Crowley 2001, Rofes 1998, Warner 1999, Weeks 1999, also see chapter 8). It is through this interaction that the accumulated body of queer related knowledge, skills and strategies that are pivotal to each of these areas, is accessed (Warner 1999). This occurs (in part) through the public elaboration (by queers) of queer social and sexual worlds – as is encouraged and supported in peer education and support groups (see chapter 1 and Warner 1999 for a discussion about public elaboration).
**Challenging the Stigma and Shame Associated with Homosexuality**

To seek out queer culture, to interact with it and learn from it, is a kind of public activity. It is a way of transforming oneself, and at the same time helping to elaborate a commonly accessible world.

(Warner 1999:71)

One of the most significant aims of the queer youth support groups and services, involved in this research, is to challenge the stigma and shame associated with homosexual identities and sex, along with gay communities, organizations, venues and events.

Stigmatization of homosexuality and its sexual and cultural/communal dimensions is a reflection of dominant norms that position homosexuality as unnatural, deviant and undesirable. It contributes to *constraint* and *denial* among some gays and lesbians – in terms of their ways of moving and being. Hiding of one’s sexuality and self-censoring of one’s discourses and mannerisms – so as to not be recognized as homosexual, and distancing oneself from the ‘Other’ (homosexuals and homosexuality), are common manifestations of this (see chapter 8). Stigmatization of homosexuality is also implicated in two other key issues facing (some) young queers: alienation – that is, the sense that one doesn’t fit in or belong (as a queer), and internalized homophobia (Flowers and Buston 2001, Herr 1997, Lipkin 1999, Malinsky 1997, Plummer 1989, Uribe and Harbeck 1992).

The most significant means of challenging the stigma associated with homosexuality (at least in respect to young queers’ experience of it) are encouragement and support for young queers to be out, and direct experience of, and interaction with, that which is stigmatized in mainstream contexts – queers and queer cultural life. Indeed, the notions of feeling comfortable and secure enough to be ‘out’, and having confidence in one’s sexuality are often linked, in queer youth support groups, with the creating (and maintaining) of queer spaces, and the introducing of young queers to a range of queer venues,

Many of Melbourne’s queer youth support and social groups actively participate in queer community life. This occurs in a range of ways. Visits are made to gay and lesbian areas of the city to investigate and socialize in the queer cafes, shops, and bookshops that are located there. Some groups attend Minus18 dance parties and Y-GLAM theatre performances, and some get together with other queer youth support and social groups. There is also a keen interest in queer community events. Young And Proud, Minus18, Bit Bent, and Kaleidoscope support and social groups (for young queers) have all been a visible presence in the annual Pride March (in St. Kilda). Knox Youth Services SSAY Support Group, Youthworks SSAY Recreation Group, and Minus18 have run stalls for their groups/programs at Midsumma; Young And Proud has run a stall at the Midsumma Street Party; and Y-GLAM Performing Arts Project has performed at Midsumma as well as having one of their videos shown at the Melbourne Queer Film Festival (Queer Film Festival 2001).

In queer contexts or spaces, young queers can be expansive (as open young queers) in their ways of interacting (talking, moving, relating, gesturing and touching), finding commonality and experiencing connectedness (through friendships/relationships/sex) with other queers. As they socialize, ‘check out’ others, and engage with the queer bodies and materials (books, newspapers, fliers, brochures, posters, artwork) that fill these spaces, they’re able to broaden their frames of reference in relation to homosexuality. That is, they access and utilize a more extensive range of discourses relating to homosexuality, including the various possibilities or opportunities that exist for them as queers.

Participation in queer cultural life also affords ongoing opportunities to critically assess the myths, stereotypes and/or negative discourses (relating to homosexuality or homosexual cultural life) that they’ve accumulated from mainstream contexts. This can occur through the juxtaposition of the negative perspectives with their firsthand or embodied experience. The emphasis here is
on young queers weighing things up, determining what does and doesn’t work for them, not others.

At queer community events (such as Midsumma) young queers can investigate queer groups and organizations through face-to-face contact or interaction with the people involved in these groups. These groups or organizations may be structured around young queers’ interests, as well as around interests or issues they’ve never contemplated before. Warner (1999: 8-9, 7,11) says that there may well be things we come to enjoy that we never had contemplated before or that we never knew was possible. Participating in queer community events can assist in this, since sexual knowledge, and discourses relating to queer cultures, issues, history and politics circulate both within and across the subcultures present at these events. Also, a variety of fetishes and sexual desires are enjoyed and publicly celebrated at some of these events. This is less likely to occur in mainstream contexts (including in schools) – where dominant norms generally mean that queer groups along with their knowledge, skills and strategies are unacknowledged (see Warner 1999) or marginalized (as is discussed in chapter 4).

The expertise and resources of queers are drawn upon and celebrated at queer community events. Here queer sexual desires are celebrated, affirmed and sanctioned – as are the variety of queer groups present. Young queers can find that there is much (history, politics, sexual knowledge, sexual practices) that is not spoken about in mainstream contexts. They can become part of these queer cultures not only through supporting and assisting other queers at these events (i.e. through running their queer youth support stalls), but also through their communal celebrating with other queers. Queer events can therefore become an important part of a young queer’s life, providing opportunities for them to experience pleasure and pride in their sexuality, as well as a sense of belonging – as they openly connect with other queers. This can provide a strong counter to the feelings of isolation, alienation and pessimism (about the future) that some young queers may feel through spending most of their time in heteronormative environments such as schools (see Goldflam et al 1999) and ‘traditional’ families.
Some queer youth support and social groups visit gay community organizations (such as the ALSO Foundation and the Victorian AIDS Council). These visits enable young queers to see firsthand what queer services and resources exist for them, in the safety of the group. They are also able to establish points of contact with people who work for the organization. This puts a human face to what may otherwise be an unfamiliar and possibly stigmatized organization listed in a phone book or on a brochure.

The Victorian AIDS Council is likely to be stigmatized because of its AIDS focus. Thus, young people may be reluctant to access its services. Young people may also perceive this organization to have little relevance to them – unless they have HIV/AIDS, not recognizing the multitude of support groups (not specifically centered around AIDS) it offers. Visits to organizations such as VAC (as YAP has done) are an important means of acknowledging their legitimacy, importance and relevance. It puts young queers in touch with spaces where homosexuality is not stigmatized – but acknowledged and valued. Overall, it is hoped (by YAP’s youth-worker, interviewed for this research) that these visits contribute to young queers feeling confident enough to independently access services offered by these organizations.

Some young queers do not know of the existence, or locations, of queer venues, organizations/groups or events (as is discussed in chapter 8). The heteronormativity of mainstream institutions and some media, along with concerns about inquiring into the existence of queer spaces/events (due to stigmatization of homosexuality) contributes to this lack of knowledge. Immersion in queer cultural life (as a consequence of participation in queer support groups) is particularly important for these young queers. It is important to note however, that these problems are not necessarily all pervasive. Some young queers do find ways to ascertain what is out there for them (as queers) via a range of means such as the internet (Hillier et al 2001), explorations by themselves, and contact with other queers (whether as friends, acquaintances, teachers). The predominant focus on the ‘wounded’ young queer subject in much education-focused research/studies has meant that relatively little is known about
such young queers. And yet their strategies and ‘know-how’ are valuable in respect to what they can offer to other young queers (who are lonely and isolated, for example).

Ian Seal (a youth-worker at the Action Centre) described some situations that relate to young same-sex attracted men taking a chance to connect with other SSAY (through a queer youth group). Some of these young men had experienced much negativity and hostility in their schools and home life – in relation to their sexuality. They didn’t know any other gays (personally) and their knowledge about gays was limited to negative stereotypes. Consequently, they were worried about the type of people they would meet at the group for same-sex attracted young men. There was a transformation however, when the young men realized that others at the support group not only had similar feelings and attractions to them, but were also supportive of them. They realized that they no longer had to self-censor what they said or self-monitor what they did. Many, according to Ian, said that it had been the best day of their life. In these contexts, young queers ultimately took what was for them (due to the influence of mainstream values or norms), a risk. This ‘risk’ (contact with queers), was necessary to cut through the myths, the stereotypes and the crap. It enabled them to see that their fears were ill-founded – at odds with their firsthand experience with other queers. Contact with queers was therefore a significant factor in their social life and well-being (as a queer) improving.

**HIV/AIDS Initiatives – Challenging the Stigma and Shame Associated With Gay Sex**

AIDS activists learned quickly that effective prevention cannot be based on shame and a refusal to comprehend; it requires collective efforts at honest discussion, a realism about desire and a respect for pleasure.

(Warner 1999:51)

HIV/AIDS initiatives (research/programs) targeting gay men in Australia take a *sex positive* focus (Leonard and Mitchell 2000:9-10, see also Kippax et al
Sex is recognized as being an integral part of a person’s life, playing an important role in queer men’s social relationships and influencing how they understand themselves in relation to others. Sex as a practice is understood to contribute to the development of specific sexual skills and knowledge (Dowsett 1996, 2000, Rofes 1996, Warner 1999). By contrast, Britzman (1998:70) notes that within the field of school education “educators have yet to take seriously the centrality of sexuality in the making of life and in the having of ideas.” The influence of youth development theory (which formal school education is largely premised upon) would appear to be critical here. It provides a rationale for denying young people’s sexuality since sex is predominantly considered in relation to risk. This is discussed in further detail in chapters 4 and 6.

As part of a sex positive focus, HIV/AIDS educators and researchers (in Australia) recognize the importance of honest and explicit discussions with and between gay men about their desires and sexual experiences (Dowsett 1996, Parnell 1989). This involves (among other things) tapping into the “various processes of gay socialization, including gay visual cues, styles and images and gay cultural slang” in order to gain the trust of (and be seen as credible to) gay men, and to sexually engage them (Leonard and Mitchell 2000:11). It therefore contributes to the development of more effective HIV/AIDS campaigns and educational programs (Leonard and Mitchell 2000:1, 3-4).

Open and honest discussions about gay sex are also important given the taboos, prejudices and notions of offensiveness that lead to the invisibility and/or subordinating/putting down of gay sex and sexual desire. As Rofes (1996:106) argues, “[t]he suppression of the erotic has been widely and successfully used to dominate people.”

HIV/AIDS initiatives or educational approaches (targeting gay men) in Australia, challenge the shame associated with gay sex, and challenge the stigma associated with being gay (Leonard and Mitchell 2000). For the most part, they seek to remain open to the broad range of sexual practices that men are into, “listen[ing] to and work[ing] with the experiences [gay men] bring with them”, regardless of whether they are safe or unsafe (Silin, quoted in Rofes 1996:128). There is
recognition here that criticism of men who engage in unsafe sex, or criticism of particular sexual practices, is likely to be counterproductive to open and honest dialogue. It is understood to contribute (further) to the stigmatization of particular sexual practices, which may lead to some men disengaging from HIV/AIDS initiatives.

This next section details some of the sex positive practices utilized in some of VAC’s peer education and support programs. It’s perhaps useful to note (at this point) that the safe and supportive environments created in VAC groups, including the levels of trust, and respect for others’ boundaries that develop – (generally) helps to dispel any nervousness that people may feel through taking part in the sex-related activities described in this section.

The third week of the Young & Gay program (for men aged 18-26) is focused on sex. One activity entitled, “Group Declaration” involves the facilitators asking questions such as “[w]ho knows what a ‘Beat’ is?” or “[w]ho is aware of what ‘Rimming’ is?” With the room divided into three zones, ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘don’t know/maybe’, participants move to one of these zones, in response (Victorian AIDS Council 2001:10). The content of the questions here, indicate an interest in raising sexual practices/activities that are often stigmatized outside the group and therefore generally not raised by participants. This approach supports and encourages participants to be more explicit in what they’re talking about. It’s part of a process of broadening the scope of discussion so as to reach more of the sexual interests, ‘turn ons’ and fantasies of the young men participating. There is an awareness here that if the discussion is kept too general it may not connect with the sexual interests and experiences of some men.

Another activity (in week three of Young & Gay) encourages the young men to speak explicitly about specific sexual interests. In groups of 2-3 (and later shared with the whole group) they brainstorm sexual ‘turn ons’ and ‘turn offs’. For some queer men, this may be the first time they have shared their sexual thoughts, feelings and experiences with others. It can be both a buzz and a sense of relief as they find, (possibly for the first time), some commonality with others, realizing they’re not alone in what turns them on. This activity is also important for a
number of other reasons. It provides practice in being sexually explicit, which is useful for negotiating sex. It also enables a circulating of sexual knowledge as the group exchange sexual experiences and techniques. This can be particularly useful for their sex lives. It provides access to:

- sexual techniques that could help with particular sexual issues they have or enhance the pleasure/enjoyment of sex;
- practices, techniques or sexual contexts that some young queers may never have thought of;
- positive discourses with which they can frame their sexual desires, experiences and fantasies.

This approach, in Young & Gay, fosters and supports sexual autonomy. It also contributes to the development of a horny, sexy atmosphere that (from my personal experience of VAC’s programs) is not only pleasurable and fun to be part of, but is a powerful antidote to the shame normally associated with gay sex.

**Valuing (Homo)sensuality**

Sensual touching, or sensuality (in other forms) between males is generally viewed as inappropriate, deviant and/or disgusting in many mainstream contexts. The Young & Gay program challenges this stigma through a number of activities that involve sensuality.

At the start of the session focusing on sex, participants form pairs. One person massages the other’s neck, back and head, with the person being massaged talking about something positive that has happened to them during the week. In another massage activity that follows the discussion of sexual likes and dislikes, the young men talk about the emotions and frustrations that may have come up through talking about sex. They are encouraged to massage each other’s upper body, back and neck with massage oil. In a VAC peer education course I attended, various props were provided, such as feathers and silk material. We
were encouraged to try out (or experience) the different materials. This was useful in terms of broadening our range of experience in terms of touch.

The importance, pleasure and sensuality of touch is highlighted through these massage activities. Verbal and non-verbal communication is encouraged, as is the trying out of different forms of touch and massage. Through the sharing of knowledge and skills, participants may be alerted to pleasures and forms of touch that they’ve never experienced before. They may discover areas of the body that are particularly sensitive and pleasurable to touch, thereby broadening their sexual/sensual repertoire.

These sensual massage activities are a non-threatening way to experience the touch of other males, especially for those who’ve not been in sexual relationships with other guys, for those who’ve not had much physical affection from others, and/or for those who’ve experienced physical violence or harassment from other males. They’re also useful for gay men who have negative attitudes (internalized from mainstream norms) about being sensually touched by another man, or sensually touching another man themselves.

**Gay Sex: Keeping it Real – NOT Clinical and Depersonalized**

Gay community groups [are] able to rely on an existing culture of considerable open discussion of sex among gay men.

(Dowsett 1996:69)

We were active participants (not talked at, or about), in the VAC peer education programs I participated in. We talked about the pleasures, ‘turn ons’ and joys of sex, as well as the horniness of it – using language we were comfortable with. Being ‘explicit’ was encouraged, valued and sanctioned in this context. This is a contrast to schools where young people are generally urged to use clinical, professional language in respect to sex. Clinical terminology is a means by which sex is colonized by health educators. It effectively characterizes the language people themselves use (in relation to sex) as inappropriate, immature and/or disgusting. It is a mechanism of stigmatization and control – a means of imposing
parameters – depersonalizing sex so as to keep discussions in line with dominant norms.

In one of the VAC programs I participated in, clinical terminology could be drawn upon if/when a context/situation necessitated it. However, for explicit, open discussions (as desired by the VAC) to occur, people needed to feel okay calling a dick a dick and a fuck a fuck. This is especially important given the taboo and stigma around homosexuality and gay sex. In this regard, I recall a facilitator urging more explicit language early on in the program. At that stage, some of us (including myself) were keeping our discussions dispassionate and clinical due to discomfort, and a lack of experience speaking openly about sex. What was important here, was a recognition that we were among other gays who were ‘into’ sex, who liked hearing about it and talking about it, in ‘dirty’, horny ways. It was this explicitness that brought us together – that contributed to a connection – a buzz – a sexual atmosphere amongst us.

**Gay Sex = HIV/AIDS?**

The practice of only talking about gay sex in relation to HIV/AIDS (or other STDS) is one means by which gay sex (along with homosexuality in general) is stigmatized. In keeping with dominant norms, this is generally the scope afforded to gay sex in sex education in schools (Boulden 1998, Buston and Hart 2001, Epstein and Johnson 1994, Eyre 1997, Seal 1999, Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby 2000). There is little chance of moving outside frameworks of HIV/AIDS or STDS whilst youth development discourse predominates, and notions of gay sex as undesirable, deviant and unnatural remain unchallenged. The notion of young queers being actively engaged in discussions about their sex lives and interests therefore remains unintelligible in the school sector – and in education-focused research/studies on young queers. Moving outside the sphere of school-education however, into the AIDS sector (targeting gay men), it’s a very different situation.

In the VAC peer education programs that I took part in, our erotic desires and pleasures were not reduced to “simple products of HIV discourse” (Rofes 1996:285). HIV/AIDS discourse and do’s and don’ts about sex weren’t invoked
whenever sex was mentioned (as in an Information Model approach). Rather, we discussed how we could continue doing what we were into (sexually) safely. This involved tapping into the range of sexual knowledge and strategies in the group.

This emphasis (in the VAC) on working with the sexual activities gay men enjoyed – showing how to make them safe – has been a key emphasis of HIV/AIDS initiatives targeting gay men in Australia (Kippax et al 1993, see also King 1993). It is (in part) a reaction against the stigmatizing of gay sex, which led to suggestions that particular sexual practices (such as fucking) be avoided, that numbers of sexual partners be reduced, or that monogamous relationships be adopted (Dowsett 1996, King 1993, Kippax et al 1993, Rofes 1996). These notions were considered (within gay communities) to be attacks on gay sexual cultures. Consequently, HIV/AIDS educators (targeting gay men in Australia) have, for the most part, recognized that if they were to be seen as credible and on-side with gay men, they needed to engage with the sexual practices enjoyed by gay men. Thus, rather than taking a stand against fucking, for example, HIV/AIDS education (targeting gay men) has promoted ways gay men could continue fucking safely (AIDS Council of NSW 1994, AIDS Council of NSW and Victorian AIDS Council Inc/Gay Men’s Health Centre 2000, Donohue 1998).

Our sexual discussions in the VAC peer education programs ranged across a very broad or expansive field. We explored how our sexual desires and interests could shift depending on (such things as) context, the men we were involved with sexually, and our feelings at the time. We talked about when we felt good and confident (and conversely lacking confidence and self-esteem), as well as when we felt powerful (and powerless). We discussed how these variables impacted on the sexual practices we engaged in, and on our readiness to verbally negotiate sex with others. The supportive, sex positive environment created by the facilitators and ourselves (the participants) was particularly helpful in encouraging us to open up and talk quite explicitly. It wasn’t about being right or wrong, put downs or shaming in these programs. Our speaking honestly and explicitly was valued not only by the facilitators, but by other men in the group – the nods of recognition, the emergence of similar storylines after someone had told a
particular story, the questioning and lively discussion that often took place attested to this.

The broad range of opportunities for sexual discussions in the VAC peer education programs (as discussed above) are enabled through norms that value and encourage gays being ‘out’ and being explicit about their sexuality, their desires and experiences. Stigma, relating to both of these areas, has been something that HIV/AIDS initiatives (targeting gay men in Australia) have tackled head-on – since a (gay) sex positive environment is considered integral to the health and well-being of gay men and their communities (Leonard and Mitchell 2000).

**Stigmatization – Schools and Education-Focused Research/Studies on Young Queers**

As discussed in earlier chapters, education-focused research/studies on young queers – including school-focused sexual health research, generally doesn’t (explicitly) advocate challenging the stigma and shame associated with homosexuality and homosexual sex. Whilst some may argue that the dominant strategies (advocated) of providing information about homosexuality through curriculum (and sometimes, through gay and lesbian guest-speakers) are a means of challenging stigma – I question this insofar as invisibility of embodied queers in schools remains taken for granted. As illustrated in the previous sections of this chapter, I consider visibility and interaction with embodied queers and their cultures – to be essential to challenging the stigmatization of homosexuality along with its sexual and cultural dimensions.

**The Active Involvement of Young Queers in Decision-Making**

In the last chapter I highlighted how important it was to have affected communities actively involved in health initiatives targeting them. This section discusses some of the ways in which young queers’ views and interests shape the direction of the queer support and social groups/initiatives they’re a part of.
Young queers’ opinions impact on two main areas in queer youth support groups (examined in this research). They help decide the topics of discussions within the groups, and where they go on social outings as a group.

Young queers’ views have also impacted upon the structure of some groups, such as Frankston Youth Resource Centre’s Young And Proud (YAP). YAP members were instrumental in broadening the group’s focus. They indicated to the youth-worker that they wanted to do more than participate in discussions about sexuality-related issues, which had been the main focus of the group up to that point. In particular, they wanted to do things together – to go out and socialize.

As a consequence of YAP members’ views, YAP became increasingly focused on recreational activities. Group discussions and activities around particular topics were therefore alternated with social outings (determined by young queers). Their term one program for 2001, for example, offered rock climbing, gay skating, charter fishing on Westernport Bay, a sausage sizzle and visits to the movies, Luna Park and the Minus18 dance party. They also had banner-making sessions for the upcoming Pride March (in St Kilda). On alternate weeks they had discussions on topics such as ‘Who am I?’, ‘Let’s talk about Sex Baby’, ‘Know your rights’ as well as a Parents night (see the Frankston Youth Resource Centre website for the current term program – [http://youth.frankston.vic.gov.au](http://youth.frankston.vic.gov.au)). In more recent times, there has been an expansion of the queer youth programs offered and/or supported by Frankston Youth Resource Centre. Alongside YAP, there is now a separate queer social group, GLOSS, that is run by young queers.

Active involvement of young queers (as discussed above) is important in a number of respects. It enables the group to be more relevant to, or in tune with, the needs and interests of young queers. This is essential if the group is to attract and maintain interest among young queers. It demonstrates that they’re taken seriously, with their views influencing what happens in their group. This can foster a sense of belonging in the group.

Active involvement of young queers, in relation to YAP, also led to a shift in understanding on the part of YAP’s queer youth-worker. She said that her
expectations of what the YAP participants would be interested in, were different to what eventuated. She didn’t expect, for example, the level of enthusiasm for social events. There are a number of key points to be made in relation to this. Firstly, queers are not a homogenous group – thus it can be problematic to assume in advance, what they need or want. Second, it is important that young queers can be ‘out’ – so that they can express their opinions about services/programs purported to be catering for them. Finally, it is important that queer youth services (like YAP) are structured in such a way that young queers’ views lead to change.

Another means by which young queers are actively involved in initiatives targeting them is through majority representation on organizational and management committees. This occurs with the Minus18 Dance Parties (for under 18 same-sex attracted youth). Before discussing this particular aspect of Minus18’s organizational structure, it is important to note that young queers’ views led to Minus18 being set up in the first place. A member of The ALSO Foundation (a gay community-based organization), Colin Billing, highlights that young gays were seeking a nightclub space where they could socialize. The sorts of comments that were being made to him included:

We wish that we were old enough to go to a nightclub! We wish that there was a place for us gay kids!! We wish that someone would be able to do something for us.

(McGregor 1999:1)

Colin Billings in conjunction with PFLAG (Victoria) responded to the interests of young queers. With the support of a (now defunct) gay nightclub (3 Faces) and initial funding and office support from The ALSO Foundation, Minus18 was founded:

[Minus18] was conceived to give [q]ueer youth a safe environment to enjoy themselves and feel comfortable amongst their peers of similar sexual identity.

(Minus18 2000a)
During the early years, Minus 18 was organized by Colin Billings (who was the convener of Minus18) and PFLAG (Victoria). They were the key decision makers. In 2001 however, (three years after Minus18 started) the organizational structure was changed, with young queers assuming some measure of control over their events. A past participant of Minus18 became the convener, and Minus18 participants (past and present) became the majority on the organizational committee, alongside PFLAG representatives and observers, a youth-worker and the Police Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer. Minus18 participants (on the committee) have roles encompassing aspects such as event and entertainment management, advertising and public relations, catering, website design and maintenance and accounting. Why did this structural change occur at Minus18? One of key reasons appears to be a strong push from some Minus18 members, though the way this played out behind the scenes (not surprisingly) hasn’t been spelt out. It would seem however, that the ongoing viability of Minus18 necessitated greater involvement of young people in an event purported to be catering for their interests:

[MacKenzie McGregor [President of PFLAG – Victoria] said change for the group was inevitable and to be embraced now that it was clear many of the minus18 members wanted a shot at running their events.

(MCV – Melbourne Community Voice 2001:3)

The notion of young queers being ‘in charge’ of Minus18, has been promoted by a number of Minus18 representatives in the gay press:

Minus18 will now be organised, facilitated and run by the committee itself, which is comprised of a group of gays and lesbians under 18 and those ‘distinguished older people’ who have recently become ineligible to attend events because they have turned 18.

(MCV – Melbourne Community Voice 2001:3)
The future of Minus18 events is now in the hands of the young people themselves, [it’s] the next logical step to take…
(Nan McGregor – PFLAG, quoted in MCV – Melbourne Community Voice 2001:3)

[Minus18] is an organisation run by young people for young people.

(Anquillano 2002)

It is important to acknowledge that young queers’ ‘control’ of Minus18 is provisional on them working within the parameters (or policies) set by PFLAG (Victoria) in conjunction with the key funding partner, the Victorian Government (through the FReeZA drug and alcohol free events initiative for youth). For example, one of the rules of the Minus18 dance parties is: “no sexual activity” (see Minus18 website – http://www.minus18.org/html/rules.htm). Similarly, in an article on Minus18 appearing in DNA – a gay magazine – (Creagh 2000), the author states: “[a]s for sex, only light kissing and holding hands is permitted”. In this regard, it would be more appropriate to say that young queers have some measure of control (over Minus18) rather than outright control.

I now turn to the final theme in this chapter – queer social interaction. I examine why queer socialization is seen as important, the benefits that result from it, and how queer youth support groups foster and support social interaction between queers.

Focusing on the Social Contexts of Queers’ Lives

Loneliness and social isolation among young queers was a significant area of concern for all the youth-workers involved in this research. A number of them drew attention to negative consequences that are commonly associated with loneliness and isolation. Vicky Guglielmo (Not Quite Straight) said that some young people “present to the group with limited social skills” because they have
hidden aspects of themselves at schools (self-censorship). Ian Seal (from the Action Centre) spoke of some SSAY being fearful of meeting other gays since they’d never (knowingly) met any gays before (stigmatization of homosexuality was also a contributing factor here). Shelley Walker (Knox Youth Services SSAY Support Group, and SSPLAY) highlighted SSAY’s lack of opportunity to talk about people they’re attracted to, or other sexuality-related issues. Queer youth research/studies also link the following problems with loneliness and isolation: confusion and guilt about one’s sexuality, depression, suicide, and suicide ideation and attempts (Brown 2002, Hillier et al 2001, Hogge 1998, MacDonald and Cooper 1998, Nicholas and Howard 1998).

All of the youth-workers involved in this research emphasized the importance of social interaction and connectedness, between queers, as a means of overcoming isolation and loneliness. It is a significant focus of attention in all their queer support and social groups. One youth-worker (who chose to remain anonymous) said:

…a change would occur [in SSAY] once they believed there were others [SSAY] around. They wanted to meet with them…[M]eeting and forming friendships/relationships with [same-sex attracted] peers marked the biggest shift and change in every young person. A project could do whatever it wanted, but the overwhelming shift always (!) came after interactions with peers…

**Queer Socialization: Considering the Benefits**

One of the most significant outcomes (given issues of isolation and alienation) of social interaction between young queers is that friendships (as well as relationships) develop (Donohue 1998, Gerstel 1989, Goldflam et al 1999, Treadway and Yoakam 1992, Trenchard and Warren 1985, Witthaus 1998). These friendships provide opportunities to: talk about who they desire, lust after or get horny thinking about; engage in the collective perusal of hot, sexy bodies; talk about the aesthetics of bodies; to rehearse ‘pick-up’ lines and strategies; to brag about experiences, to share feelings, problems, ‘horror-stories’ and
excitements relating to relationships they’re involved in. There are also non-verbal opportunities (in relation to sexuality-related issues) – in terms of laughter, touch, eye contact, hugs and gestures.

Casual social interchange (as described in the previous paragraph) relating to desire, attraction and relationships is generally assumed to be a normal part of life for young heterosexuals. It can occur in school, in the home and in various recreational arenas. It’s affirmed and celebrated within popular culture (media, movies, television, radio, literature). Though participation (by young heterosexuals) in such pursuits may be problematic in some contexts, the institutionalization of heterosexuality along with the stigmatization of homosexuality and homosexual sex within spheres such as the family, the education sector, law and religion (see Warner 1999), generally mean that heterosexual social interaction/exchange is more likely to be approved and sanctioned by parents, teachers, authorities, peers and researchers/academic writers (in mainstream contexts) than queer social interaction/exchange.

There are a number of other key points of difference, between young queers and heterosexuals, in relation to social interchange. Young queers face the possibility of harassment, discrimination and abuse for participating in such activities, in heteronormative contexts. Also, the heterosexual hegemony within schools has meant that encouragement and support for social-sexual pursuits among young queers has (generally) not been on the agenda of education-focused research/studies on young queers, or school educational authorities.

In this section, I have pointed to a range of factors that contribute to young queers remaining hidden, secretive and isolated. Young heterosexuals by contrast continue to be encouraged and supported to live, express and act upon their desires in expansive ways. In the next section, I examine some of the strategies employed by queer youth support groups – that seek to encourage expansiveness among young queers.
Promoting Social Interaction Among Young Queers

Queer youth support and social groups facilitate and support social interaction (between queers) in a range of ways. An earlier section of this chapter discussed the role of peer education and support. Recreational activities are another means by which socialization (between young queers) is encouraged. The various queer youth groups involved in this research offer a range of recreational pursuits, which enjoy popularity within youth cultures. These include arcade activities (dodgem-cars, lazer-force), movies, video nights, indoor rock-climbing, bush walking (and bush activities), visits to amusement parks, sailing and go carting. It’s important to acknowledge here that the queer youth support and social groups, generally, don’t distance themselves from recreational contexts where heterosexuality predominates. This would be sending a negative message to young queers about their possibilities for participation within the broader straight community. It would also limit the range of pursuits they could pursue as a group.

One initiative, which has had a significant impact on the queer social lives of some young queers, is Minus18 (Dance Parties for under 18 SSAY). This PFLAG (Victoria) based initiative is said to be the first of such initiatives in Australia (and also in the world), and similar ventures have been set up in other states of Australia. Its most recent event (at the time of writing), for its fourth birthday, attracted over 170 young queers (MCV – Melbourne Community Voice 2002). Minus18 also receives strong support from the gay community (organizations, media, groups, businesses, performers) and other queer support and social groups (McGregor 1999, Minus18 Committee 2000).

Minus18 offers something that is unavailable elsewhere in Melbourne (for young queers under 18) – established nightclub spaces where queer sexualities are valued and affirmed. Here young queers are among their own – and are able to socialize and dance (with other young queers), check out each other, flirt and form new friendships and relationships with other young queers. Young queers are also able to enjoy and celebrate their sexuality with existing queer friends and partners (see chapter 8 for young queer’s discourses about Minus18). These
social activities may be problematic in heteronormative contexts, due to concerns about/experiences of abuse, harassment or violence. For example, some young queers (at Minus18) have reported feeling unsafe at under 18 mainstream disco events (McGregor 1999, Coleiro 1999).

Some young queers are nervous about going to Minus18 on their own because they don’t know anyone else going along. Minus18 offers and suggests a number of strategies/initiatives to combat this barrier to queer social interaction. It encourages such people to leave a message in the guest book on the Minus18 website (Minus18 2000a). That way, others who live near them can contact them and they can go along to Minus18 together. A glance at Minus18’s guest-book shows a number of young queers using it for this purpose. Minus18 organizers (Minus18 2000a) also suggest that GLBT young people check with local SSAY support groups in their area (which they provide contacts for) to see if they’re organizing transport to Minus18 (as a number of queer youth support/social groups do). For those newcomers who arrive at Minus18 on their own, Minus18 committee members and/or volunteers help them to settle in and feel comfortable by introducing them to other young queers, and showing them around the venue (Minus18 2000a).

Artistic pursuits are another means by which social processes between queers are encouraged in some queer youth support and social groups. They’re an opportunity to utilize and extend skills in particular fields of creativity, as well as an opportunity to gain a sense of achievement as queers (both individually and collectively). In these groups, young queers are able to use their sexuality, along with sexuality-related experiences, feelings or issues, as topics or points of attention in their creative work. It’s not only legitimate to do so – it’s encouraged and supported. It’s seen as something that can enhance young queers’ well-being, as well as something that can benefit and enrich: other queer lives; queer cultural life; and mainstream cultural contexts (at times). This is a contrast to heteronormative contexts such as schools where young queers may fear a raft of negative consequences for incorporating sexuality-related topics/issues into their creative work.
In the next section of this chapter, I examine a number of artistic/creative initiatives for young queers in Melbourne.

The combination of creativity and group affiliation is what makes involvement in Y-GLAM such a deeply fulfilling process…It’s where the minority becomes the majority, where I can express myself and feel more normal.

( Naomi – Y-GLAM member, quoted in Williams 2002:10)

Y-GLAM (Young gays and lesbians around Moreland) is a Performing Arts Project for 14-25 year old GLBT young people. It’s run by Moreland Community Health Service (in Brunswick, Victoria). Y-GLAM’s establishment indicates an awareness that one approach (in terms of queer support or social groups) does not suit all young queers. There is diversity in interests and needs, and these may change over time and circumstance. Vicky Guglielmo (Jacobs 2001), one of the co-coordinators of Y-GLAM said:

Not all same-sex attracted young people want really intensive counselling or group chat style stuff…we felt the creative outlet was a great way to explore issues in a non-threatening manner.

Theatre, drama, music and art are the means through which young queers (in Y-GLAM) work through sexuality-related issues, feelings and interests – as well as affirm and celebrate their sexuality. In this sense, Y-GLAM could be characterized as a queer friendly or queer affirming ‘creative outlet’. Here, young queers are able to gain support and encouragement from peers, develop or build upon their creative/artistic skills (see Williams 2002) and have an enjoyable time. They’re actively involved (and supported) in many aspects of the production and performance of their creative works.

Another creatively focused initiative for young queers is Purple Bus. This Knox Youth Services initiative involves GLB young people producing a queer youth zine entitled Purple Bus (online at http://www.geocities.com/purplebusstop). There are a number of benefits of participating in the Purple Bus venture. Firstly,
young queers (at Purple Bus) are able to discuss, reflect upon, and/or work through sexuality-related feelings, attractions and issues; they’re drawn together socially, as they write, compile, edit and/or publish their zine. Second, young queers are able to connect with other queers who contribute to the zine, or who respond to articles written in it. Third, they’re able to develop their zine writing and production skills – skills that are employed here in relation to queer sexualities. Finally, young queers’ sexualities are affirmed in and through this venture.

**Loneliness and Isolation: Key Differences between Schools and Queer Youth Support Groups**

Loneliness and social isolation are frequently mentioned in education-focused research/studies on young queers (Blumenfeld 1995, Boulden 1996, Bustron and Hart 2001, Butler 1996, Hillier et al 1998, 1999, Hogge 1998, Mac an Ghaill 1994, Malinsky 1997, Nickson 1996, Woog 1995), but the notion of facilitating social interaction between queers is only a minority discourse – taking a back seat (in education-focused research/studies – including school-focused sexual health research) to top-down strategies revolving around information provision (by the teachers) and policy initiatives that don’t tackle structural frameworks.

By contrast, in queer youth support and social groups, socialization between queers is understood to facilitate a range of positive possibilities for young queers. It is therefore prioritized. This is not to say that information provision doesn’t occur in queer support and social groups. It does, and yet this practice is not privileged over others. There are also significant differences (to schools) in terms of contexts and norms, which alter how information provision occurs. In queer youth support and social groups, homosexuality is not stigmatized. Young queers are therefore (generally) ‘out’, and are able to openly work with the information provided by queer youth-workers. They do this with other young queers. Also, as discussed in a prior section (on peer support and education) young queers are often recognized as having knowledge and strategies that other young queers can benefit from. Thus, learning from each other is encouraged and
supported. Top-down approaches like information provision (from authorities) do not therefore, predominate, like they do in schools.

**Implications for Further Research**

As stated earlier (in this research) there has been very little research into queer youth support/social groups. This research has provided an overview of some of the groups that exist in Australia. However, more detailed studies need to be undertaken in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these groups. Two key themes for further study, arising from this research, are:

- policy/practice around discussions of sex with adolescents (under 18’s);
- policy/practice around facilitators drawing upon their ‘gayness’.

It would also be advantageous to pursue research into young queers’ perspectives of queer support/social groups. This would enable an identification, and elaboration, of the issues and concerns of young queers themselves. It is important to recognize (in this respect) that the issues raised by young people are not necessarily the same as those raised by service providers.

**Summary**

The education, support and social programs for young queers described in this chapter are able to help young queers in ways that are deemed far too problematic in schools. This has been achieved through the targeting of young people who are same-sex attracted, and importantly by not seeking to address a generalized audience. This targeted approach is essential in enabling young queers to develop self-confidence and social skills without the fear of being rejected because of their sexuality.

It is important that institutions catering for young queers provide spaces where they can be open about their sexuality – and where they can meet other queers. In this chapter, I have shown that queer youth support services provide these spaces.
Through interaction with other queers, they’re able to learn skills and strategies that directly relate to their own experiences and circumstances, form friendships and relationships, and develop confidence and pride in their sexuality.

Queer youth support groups also foster a sense of connection between young queers (within the group) and various queer communities. I have argued that this strategy is an effective way of countering the stigma associated with homosexuality. It enables young queers to see the range of possibilities that exist for them. It also affords opportunities to: celebrate their sexuality with other queers, access alternative discourses about their sexuality, and establish or develop connections with other queers.
Conclusion

Numerous researchers/writers have called on schools to instigate measures to improve conditions for young queers. This has proved to be a particularly difficult task given that queers are (generally) not seen as being an ‘appropriate’ group to support (within formal school institutions). Their sexual practices and desires are often considered abnormal, inferior and undesirable.

The approach generally taken by education-focused researchers/academic writers has been to try to present young queers or same-sex attracted young people as a group deserving of better treatment. This usually involves the emphasizing of their suffering, portraying them as victims (‘wounded’ subjects) in the hope that school authorities will act (out of empathy or a duty of care). At the same time, there has been a distancing from aspects of homosexuality (such as sex and desire) that are considered to be shameful (within a heteronormative culture).

The attempts at producing a more palatable queer subject, in education-focused research and articles, have come at a cost. Firstly, young queers have (for the most part) been conceptualized as non-agentic, ‘at risk’ of harassment (or homophobia) and/or health-related problems. Second, queer social worlds have been rendered dangerous, unimportant or invisible. Third, queer sexual behavior has been portrayed as putting young queers ‘at risk’. Finally, positive discourses about queer sexual desire and practice have largely been excluded from education-focused research and articles.

The dominant educational strategies advocated by researchers/academic writers over the last decade or so have called for the inclusion of homosexual topics into the school curriculum, and measures to deal with harassment. These strategies have largely been designed to be compatible with the institutional norms of the school sector. This means that they are framed to operate within a heteronormative space, which imposes severe restrictions on their aims and scope. Consequently these strategies do not bring about a greater visibility – in a
physical or corporeal sense – of queers in schools; they do not include and/or elaborate on measures/programs that assist young queers to connect with each other (and the queer community); and they do not challenge the shame associated with queer sex and desire (thereby leaving intact the stigma of being queer). These strategies have also been widely critiqued and problematized within the fields of queer pedagogy and queer studies.

**Changing Direction**

Education-focused research/studies on young queers are generally informed by the notion that schools and teachers are central to young queers’ lives improving (consistent with a top-down approach). As a former school teacher, I initially felt that I could play a small, but important part in the project of sexuality reform in schools – through this research project. My life as a gay person didn’t, at that point in time, have the significance in the research that it does now. In addition, queer sexual desire, queer sexual practice, and queer communities didn’t seem to be relevant or appropriate themes for the school context.

Over the course of the research changes occurred in my approach and thinking. A significant turning point occurred when I realized that I was reiterating the same old prescriptions (found in education-focused research/studies on young queers) and relying on a limited conceptualization of young queers (as lonely, isolated or wounded). I realized that I was so wrapped up in the problems, rationales and issues of teachers that young queers (and their sexual desires and practices) had taken a back seat in my research. I was dissatisfied with what I’d come up with, the approaches I’d taken, and where I was heading. Consequently, I found myself turning away from a politics of sexual reform in schools. I shifted away from the idea that schools and teachers are central to improving the lives of young queers. I recognized that my ‘gayness’ was important to this research and began to draw upon my knowledge and experiences as a gay man. I turned to the fields of gay/lesbian/queer writing, and found that others had also taken this path:
The refocusing of scholarly attention away from the school towards the culture at large seems well underway among a number of straight and queer scholars (Pinar 2000:x)

The shift of focus that Pinar (2000:x) mentions is especially significant in the context of this research. My attempts at refusing to constitute queer subjects as wounded (see Haver 1997:278) has required turning away from institutionalized school education since respectability within this sector demands the constitution of queers as wounded. Two questions proved to be particularly useful in suggesting alternative research paths to take, “What worked for me as a gay man?” and “What’s working for young queers in Melbourne today?” Considering these questions led to my focus on queer support and social groups (for young queers) along with queer literature and studies that elaborate queer social and sexual worlds. Through this, I located materials in which young queers (predominantly gays and lesbians) spoke about how they moved beyond isolation, loneliness, and other problems commonly attributed to young queers. In these materials queer sexual desire, practice, knowledge and socialization were valued and were prominent (in contrast to education-focused literature/research).

**Refocusing Attention: Queer Culture, Sex and Education**

It is common practice, within education-focused research/studies on young queers, to talk of young queers as being part of the family, the school and society in general. They are rarely considered to be part of, or becoming part of, the *queer community*. The failure to position young queers in relation to the queer community (or communities) has meant that the queer community – its institutions, social fabric, community support programs and services, and its extensive body of queer knowledge – has been largely ignored or relegated to a minor role. The practice of ignoring this critical relation (between young queers and the queer community) has, I believe, contributed to the failure of educational strategies to produce effective outcomes for young queers.

This research has illustrated that sexual experience is important in the lives of many same-sex attracted young men. It is the primary means by which they gain
sexual knowledge and skills, rather than through their formal school education (the normative discourse within education-focused research/studies on young queers). Through sex, these young men gain access to wider social and sexual networks. This is particularly important in the context of them feeling isolated and lonely. Thus, I have adopted a *sex positive* approach in this research, elaborating on discourses of sex and sexual desires. This is an important part of a politics that seeks to challenge the stigma and shame of homo sex.

AIDS Council support groups (for those 18 and over) appear to have a greater emphasis on gay sex than local government queer youth support groups (for under 18’s). They adopt a sex positive stance, enabling frank and explicit discussions about homo sex and desire. In so doing they challenge dominant notions of homo sex as unnatural and shameful.

Socialization between queers is also emphasized in this research. It is a key means by which young gays and lesbians gain confidence and pride in their sexuality, develop friendships and relationships, and receive peer support. Over the past five years or so (in Australia), there has been a noticeable increase in the number of organizations/services that have set up support/social groups and programs to facilitate and support socialization between young queers (of secondary school ages). These groups, which operate outside the school setting (in particular within the youth-sector and in gay and gay affiliated organizations) specifically target young queers, rather than a (presumed) heterosexual, or generalized, group of young people. Importantly, they bring together young queers *as a group* – a practice seen as too problematic or inappropriate for schools.

Through their participation in queer support/social groups many young queers come to re-conceptualize *being, doing, or living* queer – in positive, expansive ways. These groups provide safe and supportive spaces where young queers can talk openly about their sexuality and exchange strategies for dealing with sexuality-related issues (such as disclosure and homophobia) with other queers – including the facilitators. They work to de-stigmatize homosexuality and provide a gateway into queer communities and subcultures that young queers may be
unaware of, or reluctant to participate in (on their own) because of the stigma attached to queer groups, organizations, events and cultures.

This research has shown that queer support/social groups are better able to meet the needs of young queers than are schools. A significant factor in this regard has been the structuring of these groups around key principles of social models of health promotion. Social models explicitly reject the traditional top-down approach to health promotion (which predominates in schools and education-focused research/studies on young queers). Instead, they adopt a bottom-up approach, recognizing that individuals and their communities are best placed to deal with the specific issues that confront them. Many of the practices of queer support/social groups are compatible with this notion – for example, the adoption of peer education and support models, the active involvement of queers (including young queers) in decision-making and leadership roles, and the connecting of young queers with queer communities. In this way, queers are recognized as having agency – which is key to overcoming isolation and loneliness.
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Appendix 1

Ethics Approval Form

20 May, 1999

Associate Professor J Wyn
Education Policy & Management

Dear Associate Professor J Wyn

Re: Homosexuality (Gay and Lesbian) within the School Environment: Teachers’ Perspectives
Associate Professor J Wyn & G Curran
HREC No. 980243

I am pleased to advise that the amendment to your project dated 12 April, 1999 was approved by the Arts and Education Human Ethics Subcommittee at its 4/99 meeting on 13 May, 1999.

Yours sincerely,

Kate Murphy,
Executive Officer,
Human Research Ethics

e-mail: k.murphy@research.unimelb.edu.au

c.c. G. Curran

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Telephone: +61 3 9344 7114 Fax: +61 3 9347 6739
URL: http://www.unimelb.edu.au/research
Appendix 2

General Information Sheet for Teacher Participants

INFORMATION SHEET

FOR TEACHERS

My name is Greg Curran and I am currently working on a Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD), entitled "Teachers' perceptions of diverse sexualities at school: Exploring the implications for interrupting heteronormativity within the classroom and school environment", through the Youth Research Centre which is part of the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. My Supervisor is Assoc. Prof. Johanna Wyn, Director of the Youth Research Centre at Melbourne University.

I am seeking to develop case studies of a small group of primary and/or secondary teachers who recognise, support and explore sexual diversity within their classroom and/or school environment. There is little documented research that documents the experiences of such teachers. Your perspectives will be of benefit to a range of people such as educators, researchers studying sexualities, education departments, pre-service educators and resource designers. Issues may be raised that would benefit from further research. Ultimately though it is hoped that the stories and the issues raised will provide a stepping stone for some schools or individual teachers to recognise sexual diversity among their students and to address their needs in curriculum, policy and daily practice.

It is hoped that a broad range of attitudes, knowledge, perceptions and experiences can be represented in this research, so an initial one to one phone discussion or meeting (1/2 - 1 hour duration) is required to gain some knowledge of your background. During this discussion meeting any areas of confusion or doubt, as well as any general queries can be raised.
INFORMATION SHEET

In order to gain greater depth of exploration of the issues, and a better knowledge of you and your teaching context three to four interviews are required over two to three terms. These interviews will be audio-taped, and notes will also be taken.

Following each interview you will be sent two copies of the transcript. You are able to keep one copy yourself while the other copy will have questions relating to:-
- areas raised in the interview;
- areas of the interview that require some clarifying, or further examples.

These questions can be answered in writing or followed up at subsequent interviews.

If you agree to participate in the research you will be asked to sign a consent form. Participation in this project is confidential (subject to legal requirements). You are able to withdraw your involvement and any unprocessed data at any time.

You will be asked to choose a pseudonym for yourself and other people or schools likely to be discussed in the interviews or narrative.

If you would like to be involved or require further information, please contact:

Greg Curran
Assoc. Prof. Johanna Wyn
Director Youth Research Centre
University of Melbourne
Appendix 3

Case Study Information Sheet for Teacher Participants

INFORMATION SHEET

CASE STUDY

My name is Greg Curran and I am currently working on a Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD), entitled "Teachers' perceptions of diverse sexualities at school: Exploring the implications for interrupting heteronormativity within the classroom and school environment", through the Youth Research Centre which is part of the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. My Supervisor is Assoc. Prof. Johanna Wyn, Director of the Youth Research Centre at Melbourne University.

For teachers interested in addressing sexual diversity in their classrooms and/or school environment there can often be a great deal of fear associated with it. They may be fearful of the reactions of other staff, parents and students, fearful for their job security and fearful of being labelled gay or lesbian themselves. Given these perceived constraints they may not see how they can address sexual diversity.

I am therefore seeking to document the experiences of teachers who, despite the obstacles and constraints are working pro-actively in their classrooms and/or within their school environment to recognise, support and explore sexual diversity. You may be working quite openly with the knowledge of your school leaders, or you could be working in a less obvious manner. Your experiences, attitudes, feelings and strategies will provide valuable case study material which could be used as models for other teachers, particularly since there is little documented material in this area.

In documenting your feelings and thoughts it will provide validation, and reassurance for other teachers. It will enable these teachers to realise that they are not the only one with these feelings and tensions. It will also show practical means of working with fears and tensions in order to create space within classrooms and/or school environments to address sexual diversity.

This research will also document the pressures that you face in order to address sexual diversity. In this regard it will be useful for teacher training courses, curriculum development and education departments.
INFORMATION SHEET

CASE STUDY

What is involved

Taking part in the research will involve writing letters to me when significant events or moments occur relating to your recognising, supporting and exploring diverse sexualities in your classroom and/or school environment. This will occur over a three month period. In these letters you can record:

- your thoughts and feelings;
- your ideas and strategies;
- your experiences in class and also within the school environment;
- how others (students/colleagues/parents) respond to what you’ve spoken about, or taught;
- experiences outside of school that assist you in your pro-active work (eg. attending conferences, meeting up with others, doing research or reading on the area).

I will respond to the letters posing questions and seeking clarification or further details of particular events, feelings or ideas that you describe. It therefore becomes an interactive communicative process.

If you agree to participate in the research you will be asked to sign a consent form. Participation in this project is confidential (subject to legal requirements). You are able to withdraw your involvement and any unprocessed data at any time.

You will be asked to choose a pseudonym for yourself and other people or schools likely to be recorded in the letters.

If you would like to be involved or require further information, please contact:-

Greg Curran
Assoc. Prof Johanna Wyn
Director Youth Research Centre
University of Melbourne
Appendix 4

Information Sheet for Youth Groups / Organizations

INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Greg Curran and I am currently working on a Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD), entitled "Teachers' perceptions of diverse sexualities at school: Exploring the implications for interrupting heteronormativity within the classroom and school environment", through the Youth Research Centre which is part of the Faculty of Education at The University of Melbourne. My Supervisor is Assoc. Prof. Johanna Wyn, Head of Department of Education, Policy and Management, at The University of Melbourne.

This research focuses on teachers who recognise, support and explore sexual diversity within their classroom/s and/or school environment. It also focuses on the same-sex attracted youth (SSAY) support groups/services that are available for teachers to refer their students to.

I am seeking to talk to youth workers/educational consultants/service providers who are:

- involved with same-sex attracted youth support groups/services;
- working with teachers around issues relating to same-sex attracted youth.

Some topics I am particularly interested in finding out about are:

- how the support group/service originated;
- how the support group/service is promoted;
- the numbers of participants;
- how the participants found out about the support group/service;
- the types of activities and support offered;
- the involvement of gays, lesbians and bisexuals (eg. development of the support group/service, facilitating the support group) in the support group/service;
- how the support group/service links with schools.

If you agree to participate in the research it involves taking part in 1 or 2 phone discussions, in which I will ask questions relating to the topics above. Notes will be taken during the phone discussion, these will be typed up and sent to you to check for accuracy.

If you agree to participate in the research please sign and return the attached consent form.
If you or your service wish to remain anonymous in this research, please complete and return the following section.

I __________________________ (Your full name) wish to remain anonymous in the research entitled, 'Teachers' perceptions of diverse sexualities at school: Exploring the implications for interrupting heteronormativity within the classroom and school environment', conducted by Greg Curran.

AND/OR

__________________________ (Your service name) wishes to remain anonymous in the research indicated above, conducted by Greg Curran.

__________________________ (Your signature) Date: __________________

NOTE: Only complete this section if anonymity is required.

Please note that you are able to withdraw your involvement and sections of unprocessed data that directly involves your contribution (spoken and/or written) at any time.

If you require further information, please contact:

Greg Curran
Email: gcurran@iname.com

Assoc. Prof. Johanna Wyn
Head of Department of Education, Policy and Management
University of Melbourne
Appendix 5

Research Participants: Support / Social Groups

Local Government and Church based Support/Social Groups

Vicky Guglielmo from Boroondara Youth Services (Boroondara City Council, Camberwell) was interviewed in relation to ‘Not Quite Straight’. This is a weekly social support group (during the school term) for young people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or unsure (14-18 years).

Shelley Walker (at the time of writing) from Youthworks (Shire of Yarra Ranges, Lilydale) was interviewed in relation to ‘Youthworks SSAY Recreation Program’ (for 15-18 year olds). At that time, it was a collaborative project between Youthworks, Yarra Valley Community Health service and Eastern Access Community Health Service. More recently, Youthworks and Knox Youth Services (in association with Yarra Valley Community Health) have combined to offer ‘SSPLAY’ (Same Sex attracted People Leading Activities for Youth) – a recreation program for gay, lesbian, bisexual young people, and those questioning their sexuality (15-24 years).

Shelley Walker was also interviewed in relation to ‘Knox Youth Services SSAY Support Group’, which she was involved in setting up. This group was no longer in existence at the time of writing. Knox Youth Services now offers ‘Purple Bus’ – a zine production project for gay, lesbian and bisexual young people (under 25 years).

A youth-worker [anonymity requested] from Frankston Youth Resource Centre (Frankston City Council, Frankston) was interviewed in relation to ‘Young And Proud’ (YAP). They wanted the interview data credited to Frankston Youth Resource Centre. ‘Young And Proud’ is a weekly social and support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people (14-21 years).
A youth-worker from a Church-based, non-government agency (in the western suburbs of Melbourne) was interviewed in relation to a LGBT social/support group for young people [anonymity requested].

A youth-worker from a metropolitan area (in Victoria) was interviewed in relation to a SSAY support service [anonymity requested].

**Victorian AIDS Council Support Group**

A Community Education Manager [anonymity requested] from the Victorian AIDS Council (Sth. Yarra) was interviewed in relation to their programs and services for same-sex attracted young men – in particular, ‘Young and Gay’. This program runs once a week over a six week period. Ten programs are offered per year. In addition to interviewing this manager, I reviewed the ‘Young and Gay’ course materials.

**Family Planning Victoria (through the Action Centre)/Victorian AIDS Council Support Group**

Ian Seal was interviewed in relation to the Action Centre’s support/social group for under 18 gay and bisexual males. This group (which had no name) is no longer in existence.

**PFLAG (Victoria) Social Group**

Nan McGregor was interviewed on behalf of PFLAG (Victoria), in relation to Minus18 dance parties. The Minus18 concept is owned by PFLAG (Victoria) – who receive all money raised from the ventures. The Victorian Government’s ‘FReeZA’ initiative (Drug and alcohol free events for 12-25 year olds – with a focus on 14-18 year olds) provides its major source of funding.
Appendix 6

Gay and Lesbian Literature Utilized in Chapter 6

(for further details see the Bibliography)

Aitken, Graeme (1995) 50 ways of Saying fabulous

This novel is set in rural New Zealand and covers a year in the life of twelve-year-old Billy-Boy.

Carroll, Bernadette, Harley, Samantha & Walter, Jacqui (1999) ‘The bluehouse unplugged’

This chapter is in Erin Shale’s Inside Out: An Australian Collection of Coming Out Stories (1999). It involves an interview with the Australian band, ‘bluehouse’.

Conigrave, Timothy (1995) Holding the Man

Starting in the mid 1970’s, Holding the Man tells the story of Tim, from the age of nine years. It focuses on his early sexual experiences, the development of his long-term relationship with John, and issues around being HIV positive. Tim and John both attend the same school, an all-boy exclusive Catholic school in Melbourne.

Corlett, William (1995) Now & Then

Part of this novel is set in an English exclusive boarding school. The extracts relate to Kit’s (15 years old) sexual relationship with an older boy at school, Stephen Walker. Stephen is a prefect who is down to attend Cambridge University. Their relationship begins when Stephen invites Kit to his study, to rehearse the lines of a play they’re in.

This is a short story, from an edited collection about first lesbian experiences (Elder 1996). A number of sexual experiences are described in this story. The first is set in the early 1970’s, in Yugoslavia, where Karen’s dad is stationed, as is the dad of the other girl, in the extract. Both girls live in a diplomatic compound, along with other children, including a number of boys who feature in the first extract utilized. Karen is seven, and the other girl is six. The second story (utilized in chapter 6) is set in the USA several years later when Karen is in sixth grade. The other girl in this story is Karen’s best friend (‘D’), who is also in sixth grade. They both spend a lot of time at each other’s homes.

Johnson, Greg (1994) Pagan Babies

This novel is set in the USA and covers three decades (up to the time of AIDS) in the life of a gay man and a straight woman.

Monette, Paul (1992) Becoming A Man

Becoming a Man is set in New England, USA. It covers Paul’s life from his childhood in the 1950’s through the 60’s, 70’s and beyond. Some of the extracts utilized (in chapter 6) involve another boy – Kite. He is the local ‘ruffian’ who picks fights and swears. His father, it is rumored, whips him with a razor strap – though the children at school have never seen him cry. Paul is quite different to Kite. He gets better marks at school and is fairly quiet and introspective. Other extracts utilized (in chapter 6) relate to Paul’s sexual experiences with other boys at school.

Sims, Stephanie (1996) ‘Crush to Sex’

This is a short story from an edited collection about first lesbian experiences (Elder 1996). It is set in the USA in 1959, with Stephanie 12 years old. The other girl in the extract is Mandy, a neighbor of Stephanie. Mandy is 17 years old, her family is of lesser means than Stephanie’s, and they are of a fundamentalist religion. Both girls sit together on the school bus. Stephanie finds herself becoming more attracted to Mandy.

This is a short story from an edited collection about first lesbian experiences (Elder 1996). No time period is indicated in this story. The other girl in the extract is Christa, who had always lived next door to Alexandra. They’re both fourteen and are close friends. The extract utilized (in chapter 6) focuses on their first sexual experience.
Appendix 7

Support and Social Groups for Young Queers in Melbourne

(Last updated 20/7/02)

‘Bit Bent’ – City of Darebin (Preston)

Fortnightly social/support group for gay, lesbian and bisexual young people, and those questioning their sexuality (14-21 years)

Call: Viv Ray (Darebin Youth Resource Centre) 9462 5166 (Thurs only)

or Noam Perl (Anglicare Family Services) 9478 9499

Email: vivrobin@aol.com or noam.perl@anglicarevic.org.au

‘Egg’ – Nillumbik Shire Council (Nillumbik and Banyule)

Fortnightly social and support group for young people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or unsure (14-18 years)

Call: Vassi Bouzalas (Nillumbik Shire Council Youth Services) on 9433 3190

Email: vassi.b@nillumbik.vic.gov.au

‘Fresh’ – Positive Living Centre (Sth. Yarra)

Social and Support Group for young people with HIV (18-30 years)

Call: Gina Greco (Positive Living Centre) 9863 0444

Email: gina_greco@vicaids.asn.au

‘Generation Q’ – Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service (St. Albans)

Weekly social/support group for those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, or who are questioning their sexuality or gender identity (12-18 years)

Call: Jemma (Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service) 9364 3200
‘GLOSS’ – City of Frankston (Frankston)

Fortnightly social group for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people (16-24 years)

Call: Lori (Frankston Youth Resource Centre) 9784 1868

‘Kaleidoscope’ – Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, in partnership with the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council (Mornington Peninsula)

Fortnightly activities based group for gay, lesbian and bisexual young people, and those questioning their sexuality (14-18 years)

Call: Viv Ray (Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service) 5979 4443 or 0408 483 980

Email: kaleidoscope@infoxchange.net.au

‘Melbourne Bisexual Youth’

Support/social group for bisexual young people and those who think they may be bisexual

Meets fortnightly (Saturdays) – 1st Floor, Union House, Melbourne University Student Union, University of Melbourne, Parkville.

Call: Catherine 9687 8115

Email: m.venn@pgrad.unimelb.edu.au

‘Minus18’ Dance Parties

For gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people (14-18 years)

Fully supervised and alcohol/drug free

Call: PFLAG (Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays) 9827 8408

Email: info@minus18.org

Website: http://www.minus18.org/home.htm
‘Not Quite Straight’ (NQS) – Boroondara City Council (Camberwell)

Weekly (during school term) support/social group for young people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or unsure (14-18 years)

Call: Kate Clark (Boroondara Youth Services) 9882 2621

Email: kclark@boroondara.vic.gov.au

‘Pride & Diversity’ – Monash City Council (Glen Waverley)

Peer Support and recreational group for gay, lesbian and bisexual young people, and those questioning their sexuality (14-20 years)

Meets once a week

Call: Shlom Eshel (Youth Resource Centre) on 9561 7359 or 0402 208 070

Email: shlome@monash.vic.gov.au

‘Pride and Prejudice’- Moonee Valley City Council (Moonee Ponds)

Support/Information/peer mentoring/school workshops/professional development for SSAY (14-25 years)

Call: Daniel Witthaus (Moonee Valley Youth Services) 9243 8793

Email: dwitthaus@mvcc.vic.gov.au

‘Purple Bus’ – Knox City Council (Knox)

A zine production group for gay, lesbian and bisexual young people (for those 25 years and under)

It produces the zine – Purple Bus for gay, lesbian and bisexual young people

Call: Knox Youth Services 9298 8465

Website: www.geocities.com/purplebusstop
‘SSPLAY’ (Same Sex Attracted People Leading Activities for Youth) – Shire of Yarra Ranges (Lilydale), Knox City Council (Knox) and Yarra Valley Community Health

A recreation program for gay, lesbian and bisexual young people, and those questioning their sexuality (15-24 years)

Call: Zeph (Youthworks) 9294 6717, Aishling (Knox Youth Services) 9298 8304 or Louise (Yarra Valley Community Health) 5962 3681

Website: [http://216.87.29.8/youthworks/resources/index.html](http://216.87.29.8/youthworks/resources/index.html)

Victorian AIDS Council/Gay Men’s Health Centre (VAC/GMHC) offers:

- Regular peer education programs for gay and bisexual men 18 years and over including ‘Greek & Gay’, ‘Italian & Gay’, ‘Arab & Gay’, ‘Gay Asian Proud’, ‘Momentum’ (covers a range of issues), ‘Relationships’ and ‘Young & Gay’ (18-26 years);
- ‘Boyant’ – a drop in social group for gay and bisexual young men (18-27 years);
- Support groups and forums for people living with HIV/AIDS;
- Counselling services;
- A range of resources relating to HIV/AIDS/STD’s.

Call: 9865 6700 or 1800 134 840

Address: 6 Claremont St. Sth. Yarra 3141

Email: YouthProjectTeam@vicaids.asn.au

‘Victoria Network’ – A social support group for young lesbians

For women who identify as bisexual, lesbian, not sure, queer or not-quite straight

Meets 2\(^{nd}\) and 4\(^{th}\) Saturday of the month

Call: Gemma 9551 6301 or Shannon 0409 076 595

Email: vicienetgrls@hotmail.com
‘YAK’ – Action Centre (Family Planning Victoria, Melbourne)

Support/information/social group for young queers (Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, curious or questioning their sexuality) (up to 25 years)

Meets 1st and 3rd Friday evening of each month

Call: Tim or Ian 9654 4766 or 1800 013 952

Email: yakaction@hotmail.com

‘Y-GLAM Performing Arts Project’ – Moreland City Council (Brunswick)

Weekly theatre, dance, movement and visual arts project for gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer and transgender people (14-25 years) in the northern suburbs

Call: Jemma, Vicky or Chris (Moreland Community Health Service) 9350 4000 (Mondays)

Email: jemimam@mchs.org.au or vicky@thepush.asn.au

‘Young and Proud’ (YAP) – Frankston City Council (Frankston)

A weekly (during school term) social/support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender young people and those with questions about their sexuality

Call: Lori (Frankston Youth Resource Centre) 9784 1868

Email: yap@frankston.vic.gov.au

Website: http://youth.frankston.vic.gov.au
Further Contacts/Support Relating to Young Queers

Eastern Region Gay and Lesbian Youth Project Worker (Melbourne)

Shelley Walker – (Knox Youth Services, Victoria) 9298 8858

Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations

Website for same-sex attracted young men:


National SSAY Information/contacts

Website: http://www.youthgas.com/topics/ssay.htm
Appendix 8

Queer Youth-Related Organizations and Groups in Victoria

(Last updated: 20/7/02)

Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society (Melbourne)

Links to Same-Sex Attracted Youth (SSAY) websites:


‘BGLAD’ – Ballarat Gay and Lesbian Awareness and Diversity Group

Call: 5334 7849
(includes information about youth services)

‘Diversity’ – Cutting Edge Youth Services (Shepparton)

A support group for same sex attracted young people
Call: Cutting Edge Youth Services 5831 6157

‘GASP’ – City of Greater Geelong (Geelong)

Support/Information/Referral for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and straight young people (14-25 years)
Call: David Burke (Youth Services) 5227 0699
Email: dburke@geelongcity.vic.gov.au

Gay and Lesbian Switchboard (Melbourne)

Call: 9827 8544 or 1800 631 493
Offers free telephone counselling
Able to provide details of (queer) support services, social groups and venues
Operates 7-10 pm six days, 2-10pm Wednesdays
‘Gippsland Gay and Lesbian Network’ (GGLN)

Run a monthly youth group

Website: ‘ok2 bgay’ – www.ggln.com.au (has a section targeting young people)

Email: gglnyouth@ggln.com.au

Hares & Hyenas – Queer bookshop

Address: 135 Commercial Road, Sth. Yarra 9824 0110

Website: www.hares-hyenas.com.au

‘PFLAG’ (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

Meets once a month (4th Tuesday)

Call: 9827 8408

Website: www.pflag.org.au

Email: pflagvic@pflag.org.au

Rural SSAY projects – funded by Vichealth


Victoria Gay and Lesbian Youth Resource Directory

www.geocities.com/ssay_vic

‘ZARQUE’ – City of Ballarat (Ballarat)

A support group for SSAY (14-24 years)

Call: Isabelle Gennari or Brendan Sartori (Ballarat Youth Services) 5320 5645

Email: brendansartori@ballarat.vic.gov.au
Appendix 9

Western Australia Support and Social Groups, and Other Organizations for Young Queers
(referred to in this thesis)

The Freedom Centre

Drop-in centre for young people with same-sex attractions and gender issues

Offers the peer education programs – ‘The Young Women’s Course’ and ‘Common Ground’ (see below)

Call: (08) 9228 0354


‘The Young Women’s Course’

Six week course, one night per week for women attracted to women

Facilitated by trained peer educators (volunteers)

Call: Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service of Western Australia (08) 9420 7201 or The Freedom Centre (08) 9228 0354

‘Common Ground’

Six week course, one night per week for guys attracted to other guys (under 26)

Facilitated by trained peer educators (volunteers)

Call: Western Australia AIDS Council (08) 9429 9900 or The Freedom Centre (08) 9228 0354
Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service of Western Australia (GLCS)

Offers counselling and a number of social and support groups/retreats for young men and women attracted to the same sex (such as ‘Groovy Girls’, ‘Breakaway’ and ‘GirlFusion Retreat’)

Call: (08) 9420 7201

Website: www.glcs.org.au

‘Groovy Girls’

A social and support group for young women attracted to other women

It has a mailing list and bi-monthly newsletter

Meets fortnightly at The Freedom Centre

Call: GLCS (08) 9420 7201 or The Freedom Centre (08) 9228 0354

‘Breakaway’

A social group for young guys attracted to other guys

Meets fortnightly at The Freedom Centre

Call: GLCS (08) 9420 7201 or The Freedom Centre (08) 9228 0354

‘GirlFusion Retreat’

Weekend retreat for young women attracted to other women (held once a year)

Call: GLCS (08) 9420 7201 or The Freedom Centre (08) 9228 0354
Western Australia AIDS Council (WAAC) offers:

- a range of programs and support services for gay and bisexual men;
- weekend retreats (‘Escape Explore’) for same sex attracted young men under 25 years.

WAAC works with The Freedom Centre on the ‘Common Ground’ course for same sex attracted young men. It is also linked to The Freedom Centre for the ‘Escape Explore’ retreats for same-sex attracted young men.

Call: (08) 9429 9900

**Other Queer Support Organizations**

(referred to in this thesis)

Working It Out (Tasmania) offers:

- support for GLBT people of all ages – in relation to sexuality and gender issues;
- Bfriend peer mentoring program for GLBT people.

Working It Out – South (Hobart) Working It Out – North West (Burnie)

Call: (03) 6234 6122 Call: (03) 6434 6474

Email: wio_south@bigpond.com Email: wio_nw@bigpond.com

Bfriend – (Adelaide Central Mission, Adelaide) offers:

- Peer mentoring program, workshops and groups for GLBT people

Call: Des (08) 8202 5192 Truffy (08) 8202 5805

Email: bfriend@acm.asn.au

Website: [http://www.acm.asn.au/Bfriend/default.htm](http://www.acm.asn.au/Bfriend/default.htm)
Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
Curran, Greg

Title:
Young queers getting together: moving beyond isolation and loneliness

Date:
2002-07

Citation:

Publication Status:
Unpublished

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/38834

File Description:
Young queers getting together: moving beyond isolation and loneliness

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